IS Ideology:
Debunking its Pseudo-Religious Character

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Synopsis

The recent arrest of two Singaporeans under the Internal Security Act (ISA) highlights the pivotal role IS ideology plays in current radicalisation processes. The key to effectively challenge IS propaganda is to invalidate its claim of religious legitimacy.

Commentary

THE SELF-PROCLAIMED Islamic State (IS) has proven its technological prowess to extend its ideological reach and impact. Though reeling from physical losses in Iraq and Syria, IS ideology has gained ground globally, driving self-radicalisation initiatives and inspiring lone wolf attacks. Singapore is not immune to this as recent arrests have shown.

There is strong correspondence between those arrested and their acceptance of IS as the only qualified Muslim religious authority. This belief is manifested in unreserved allegiance to the group's leader and the active promotion of IS propaganda online. This worldview of an exclusive religious authority drives IS supporters' acceptance of its politico-religious objectives including a global Islamic Caliphate. This translates to acceptance of the group's chosen means to achieve it, including the use of violence on specific groups.

Challenging IS Claims to Religious Legitimacy

Recognising that religious legitimacy is at the heart of the IS propaganda machinery, the key to deconstruct IS ideology is therefore to invalidate its religious legitimacy.

IS gains its religious legitimacy by espousing absolutist positions across religious and political issues with selected and distorted use of Islamic scriptures. These absolutist

positions advocate two things: the physical act of 'letting go of worldly affairs', and associating 'immersing oneself with the Hereafter' with participating in the objectives of the group.

Additionally, IS has claimed for itself as the absolute unit of governance that will take on the 'religious responsibility' of establishing an Islamic Caliphate. These ideas of a Caliphate and committing to moral uprightness are powerful pull factors for many Muslims worldwide, although not in the IS sense.

It is through these elements that IS managed to pull individuals into the pathway of radicalisation and to convince the radicalised individuals to take action in its name.

How IS Translates Its Ideology

The IS approach in doing this is best demonstrated in its Dabiq magazine. Articles are written by IS members whose chain of knowledge is unknown. Their religious content can be characterised by having Sunni-versus-Shiite rhetoric, circular discourses on religious concepts and the extensive use of eschatological or "End Times" narratives.

In comparison, traditional scholars gain their legitimacy through scholarship and strictly abiding by the Islamic chain of knowledge. The invalidation of IS' religious legitimacy comes from contrasting the IS' "shotgun" approach to religious scholarship with the long, rigorous process of conventional Islamic scholarship.

Efforts can focus on educating Muslims generally with the skills to separate superficial religiosity from the rich wisdom of the Islamic traditional knowledge. While one stokes the emotional faculties and is devoid of the values of the religion, the other is steeped in the proper etiquette of knowledge acquisition (*adab*) and requires the active engagement of reasoning faculties.

IS Politico-Religious Objectives

IS materials use religious concepts to justify a political end. For example, to establish a caliphate as governance, the group packages the narrative of a collective conspiracy of the West against Islam. This is characterised by narration of global injustices against Muslims thus presenting the establishment of the Caliphate as its strongest retaliation.

Hence, unquestionable obedience to the Caliph is demanded as part of its pursuit in 'avenging' the religion. This 'unquestionable obedience' is to be offered in the form of religious obligations like making *hijrah* (migration), executing *jihad* (fighting) and pledging allegiance.

What needs to be emphasised is that IS propaganda instructs violence and destruction – something that is antagonistic to Islamic teachings. From this, IS clearly cannot be regarded as either a legitimate religious entity or a political one.

Strong Red Flags: Hate Spin Messages

A key feature of IS propaganda is its hate spin messages. Hate spin refers to the strategy in which political entrepreneurs use incitement and offence-taking to mobilise

supporters and coerce targeted groups. IS propaganda contains hate spin messages for a range of specified groups which it defines as its political enemies.

This is particularly relevant to the Singaporean community whose social fabric is diverse in its religious and political beliefs. This makes Singaporean society particularly vulnerable to hate spin messages propagated by IS, where the Muslim minority population can be influenced to take on the victim role. Socio-economic woes can also be easily weaved into this narrative, thereby increasing the likelihood of radicalisation.

One approach that can be taken in Singapore is to tap into the cultural assets of the nation, namely the total defence mechanism. It must be made a part of Singapore's social defence to resist hate speech and hate spin mindsets against the characters of fellow Singaporeans. Not only will it strengthen the nation's social defence, it will also aid in the national effort to prevent the spread of intolerance.

In the final analysis, IS propaganda will continue even if IS ceases to exist. To confront it, there is a need for robust tools to critically and continuously invalidate the heart of the IS ideology, namely its questionable religious legitimacy, especially amongst its adherents. Religious scholars must step forward and guide the community against misguided religious views.

It is only with acute understanding of the religion that the wisdom of Islam's various nuances can be realised. Contextualisation ability can then be strengthened from within, thereby making it less likely for the radicalisation process to take root, irrespective of the ever-changing political and social climate facing the community.

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