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The Enduring Threat of Self-Radicalisation Amid the Ongoing Israel-Hamas War

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SYNOPSIS

The recent arrest of two individuals under the Internal Security Act (ISA) signals that Singapore is continuing to battle with the threat of self-radicalisation related to the ongoing Israel-Hamas war. Singapore must remain vigilant in its endeavours to counter this threat.

COMMENTARY

The Israel-Hamas war which began on 7 October 2023 and its unrelenting intensification has continued to fuel the threat of self-radicalisation for Singapore. Singapore remains a key target of extremists, making it crucial to be prepared for contingencies as the war approaches its one-year mark.

The recent cases of self-radicalised Singaporeans and the terrorist attack on the police station in Ulu Tiram, Johor Bahru, Malaysia, are reminders of the threat. The Israel-Hamas war and its humanitarian impacts could increase the number of sympathisers for the extremists and potentially divide multi-religious Singapore into an “Us” versus “Them” society. Hence, the threat of self-radicalisation remains significant to Singapore and should be actively prevented.

Recent Incidents of Self-Radicalisation

It was recently revealed by Singapore authorities that a 14-year-old Secondary 3 student and a 33-year-old public servant fell victim to self-radicalisation. Although they were unsuccessful in radicalising others around them, it is worrisome that they radicalised themselves through extremist narratives about the Israel-Palestinian conflict propagated online, to the extent of willingness to spread extremist propaganda on armed violence and to mount terrorist attacks on Singapore.

Earlier in May 2024, two Malaysian police officers were killed in the attack on the Ulu Tiram police station. Investigations into the incident revealed that the attacker's father was suspected of being a member of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). He and other immediate family members were arrested and charged at the Johor Bahru Sessions Court for inciting terrorism among other offences.

The attack in Ulu Tiram has significance for Singapore, not only because of its proximity but also because the attacker and his family have close ties with the JI network. The JI had previously used an Islamic boarding school, the Madrasah Lukmanul Hakim in Ulu Tiram, to recruit members before it was closed by the Malaysian authorities in 2001. Although senior leaders of JI recently announced the dissolution of the group, extremists may still take advantage of ethno-religious-centric conflicts like the Israel-Hamas war to incite hatred and hostility.

Moreover, the narrative positioning the Israel-Palestinian conflict as one between Jews and Muslims is of utmost concern. As there has been active reproduction and circulation of anti-Semitic ideas online and in print, the potential for vulnerable individuals to be radicalised is a deep concern.

Preventing an “Us” Versus “Them” Mentality

Having a binary view of the world can lead to an “Us” versus “Them” mentality where “Them” are treated with animosity and distrust. This could result in violence and a fractured society when individuals think that they can only remain as an “Us” by eradicating “Them”.

The 14-year-old student and 33-year-old public servant who were detained by the Internal Security Department (ISD) had exhibited this mentality and harboured feelings of hatred toward “Them”. When individuals who are vulnerable to extremists' ideologies identify strongly with one side of a conflict, they are more susceptible to being inflamed further by propaganda. Such individuals could feel justified in supporting or engaging in violent actions against the perceived “enemy”.

Former Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in one of his speeches earlier this year, said that it is imperative for Singapore, as a small nation, to focus on the shared Singaporean identity, mitigating potential politically exploitable divisions in society and ensuring that social cohesion is a constant work in progress amid the changes in geopolitics. While this is true, not everyone in society can be prevented from acquiring an “Us” versus “Them” mentality.

It is therefore important to focus on community campaigns to educate the public on how to avoid falling for extremist narratives. These could serve as wake-up calls for those at the nascent stages of self-radicalisation. The “Us” versus “Them” mentality is a major threat to social cohesion, which is vital to Singapore's national security.

Remaining Vigilant

The threat of radicalisation that is attributable to the Israel-Hamas war is not peculiar to Singapore. Countries in Europe have found the war in Gaza a primary incentive for the recruitment of sword-bearers for Islamist militants. There has also been an

increase in calls for attacks in Europe. The main danger Europe faces now is lone-wolf attacks by self-radicalised individuals.

It is crucial for Singapore to remain vigilant and to avoid complacency in efforts to prevent self-radicalisation. Sensitivity and care when addressing the issue should be maintained as self-radicalised individuals tend to be victims of extremist propaganda at a time when they were vulnerable and their sentiments shaken. We should therefore remain vigilant, be attentive to our loved ones and the people around us and be cautious of the media we get information from.

Conclusion

The Israel-Palestinian conflict has been going on for decades, igniting time and again sentiments of understandable anger and sympathy for the oppressed. Singapore needs to bolster its immunity against the persistent threat of self-radicalisation by helping citizens and other residents at the community level manage their sentiments about the war. This needs to be done not only through educational institutions but also by promoting interfaith collaborations and facilitating moderated community dialogues and public forums.

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