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Deterring Online Radicalisation: Strengthening the Family Institution

By Mohamed Bin Ali and Ahmad Saiful Rijal Bin Hassan

SYNOPSIS

The recent detention of a self-radicalised youth under the Internal Security Act (ISA) heightens the need for more robust family intervention and community vigilance. There is a need to strengthen the role of family-based community networks to safeguard youths against online radicalisation.

COMMENTARY

Muhammad Irfan Danyal, a post-secondary student was arrested under the ISA for supporting the Islamic State (IS) and planning to commit violence locally and abroad. The teen had absorbed extensive IS propaganda online and became convinced of the terrorist group's legitimacy. His radical activities included the planting of a self-made flag inspired by Al-Qaeda on Coney Island on National Day last August and calling it the "Islamic State of Singhafura (Singapore)." Irfan also intended to kill non-Muslims, Shia, and Sufi Muslims.

Irfan is the third self-radicalised youth detained since 2020. This trend of self-radicalisation points to the need for long-term strategies and robust holistic responses, particularly ones that are community-based, to deal with the problem of online radicalisation. As the smallest and most intimate unit of a community, the family institution is key. It is the most important of the many social networks for shaping and modifying individual perspectives on behaviours, values, and norms. Often an under-utilised partner in efforts to counter violent extremism, a recognition of the critical roles that parents can play will pave the way to empower the family as the first line of defence against online radicalisation.

Strengthening the Family-Based Network

Family-based interventions can be part of a preventive policy instrument to provide the first line of defence against the radicalisation of youth and their subsequent recruitment into violent extremist groups. The family has the potential to inculcate into their young, positive values and attitudes regarding non-violence and peaceful coexistence. It is centrally-placed to monitor their young for early signs of radicalisation, and if there are any, to prevent the problem from becoming deeply rooted.

According to Daniel Koehler, an expert on radicalisation and deradicalisation, family members and peers are important resources or partners in early interventions. They can support interventions by police and other representatives of the state, or to assist them in identifying early signs of radicalization, vulnerabilities, or needs. As such, stakeholders need to re-affirm the role of family-based social networks as vital pillars in building societal resilience against radicalisation.

Unfortunately, families are often considered insufficiently equipped with the knowledge or tools needed to deal with radicalisation. This is attributed to the current age of rapid technological advances, which, combined with dual-income families, have meant that adults have less time and energy to build their knowledge and skills to prevent radicalisation, and to supervise or monitor their children effectively.

Therefore, a public institutional model approach involving law enforcement agencies, schools, and religious organisations working together with families is needed to develop a series of early-stage interventions. Empowering families with meaningful and appropriate education would help to address child development issues, particularly those arising from the onset of adolescence as they collide with uncontrolled use of social media, hence making young people more susceptible to violent extremism.

In the case of Irfan, his family members were unaware of his plans to perpetrate violence. What is evident was that he had made clear his extremist beliefs and his support of IS on social media platforms. As this is how radicalized youths often behave, members in the community, including friends, neighbours, and the extended family should be roped in to help in monitoring children's internet usage and to assist in detecting attitudinal or behavioural changes.

Identifying Early Signs of Radicalisation

Understanding that the family unit is the first line of defence, efforts must not be spared to mitigate the challenges faced by parents. For a start, a structured framework to equip all families with tools to identify tell-tale signs of radicalisation must be implemented. This is so as family members are more likely to spot the tell-tale signs given their familiarity and close proximity to their loved ones.

The important warning signs of radicalisation that family members should look out for include:

- (1) justifying the use of violence to defend a cause;
- (2) expressing intent to take part in acts of violence locally or overseas, or inciting others to do the same;

- (3) idolising terrorist personalities;
- (4) expressing support for terrorist groups on social media; and
- (5) frequenting radical websites or trying to establish contact with radical ideologues.

If radicalisation is suspected, parents and other family members must realise that they will be helping their child if they were to report the case to the authorities as early as possible. Research has shown that immediate families are the ones who play a key role in preventing a child from further radicalization. Hence, reporting is to be encouraged and understood as an action taken in the interest of their loved ones.

Empowering families with a correct understanding of the religion will enable them to detect and counter any irregularities in their children's behaviour and understanding of the religion. Extremists often hide their true intentions behind a religious veneer. Hence, adherents of the religion should be nimble and savvy enough to uncover the truth and not succumb to their violent ideologies.

Empowering Families

The family as an institution has always been the cornerstone providing for the stability of communities everywhere. Therefore, any effort to strengthen the resilience of the family unit is a giant step in the right direction, particularly in the context of countering extremism and mitigating its influence in the community. Hence, the importance of government and community initiatives to provide dedicated support for parents to help get them off to a good start to nurture their children from an early age to be good citizens. This is the best way forward to build future generations that are cohesive and strongly immunized against radical influences.

In Singapore, community organisations such as the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) and Inter-Agency Aftercare Group (ACG) conduct regular outreach efforts through personal engagements and forums to sensitise members of the public to the terrorism threat and to strengthen the community's resilience against extremist ideas. The most recent occasion was a seminar conducted on 11 February 2023 by Taman Bacaan in collaboration with RRG and ACG. The seminar, entitled "Role of Youths in Countering Extremism and Strengthening Social Cohesion," was attended by students from Madrasah Alsagoff Al-Arabiah.

To conclude, family units are the single most powerful tool for reaching out to youths in the community. They must be empowered to lead their families into the future with confidence armed with an understanding of the challenges and pitfalls of the online world. Strong family institutions are the building blocks of community-based initiatives as they offer lasting immunity and a first-line solution in the fight to eradicate the threat of online radicalisation in the long term.

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