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The Jemaah Islamiyah and its Afterlives

By Shashi Jayakumar

Synopsis

The Internal Security Department (ISD) operation interdicting the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) network began 15 years ago. What have we learnt in the years that have followed? What is the future trajectory of terror?

Commentary

ON 9 DECEMBER 2001, the ISD arrested six Singaporean Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) members, with a further 15 others detained within a month, thwarting plans to attack Yishun MRT and several foreign embassies. Not many knew that it began with a tip-off from within the local Muslim community. It is worth reflecting, 15 years on, how far we have come as a state and society in the journey against terrorism, and what the future might hold.

From the start, the government realised that arrests can only be one part of the story. This has seen the threat narrative turn over the years from prevention to resilience. There has been emphasis, too, on the need to build trust between communities. The Inter Racial Confidence Circles (IRCCs, set up in 2002) helped entrench these efforts, as did the Community Engagement Programme (2006), with the latter now receiving an important refresh through the SGSecure movement. For every visible success story, there are those that exist, equally successfully, just below the radar. These have included efforts to engage the Malay/Muslim community through behind the scenes dialogue, which has been crucial in ensuring that the JI arrests did not fray communal relations. Also critical have been the efforts by the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) working with detainees, in turn complemented by the work done by the Inter-Agency Aftercare Group, which assists the families of detainees. Over time, all these efforts when put together are coming together to assume the form of a national movement.

Social Media and Identity Politics

The JI was responsible in the last decade for a litany of terror acts (Bali 2002, 2005), Jakarta (2005, 2009). JI and its splinter groups remain a threat notwithstanding the fact that its leadership ranks have been decimated through arrests and its most skillful operatives killed. In 2001, however, we could not have known what the sheer scale of the problem would turn out to be, and the sheer multiplicity of threats that would develop quite apart from the JI.

Security practitioners and academics failed, until later on, to appreciate the full radicalising force of social media. It is no accident that homegrown terrorism began to enter security lexicon at the same time as social media really began to take off - around the middle of the last decade. Social media has not in the end turned out to be the greater denominator for some communion of humanity. Instead, it has cocooned us within echo chambers of reinforcing, and in many cases intolerant, identity.

As Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan commented in April this year at the Asia-Pacific Conference for Senior National Security Officers: "We now live in a world where no matter how crazy you are, you can find someone crazier than you to affirm your views on the Internet. So it should not surprise us that in fact it has led to a sharpening of radicalism, a sharpening of exclusive identities, and a reaffirmation of the temptation to resort to violence, both physical violence or even political violence, as people search, emphasise and reaffirm identities, imagined or real."

The JI though extant is diminished. So too is the Islamic State (ISIS), fighting for the territory of its caliphate in Syria and Iraq. Some experts posit that ISIS' atrocities and wanton violence have sown the seeds of its own eventual rejection. This is a simplistic view. Intolerance, with new media as its rocket fuel, is in fact the real legacy and afterlife of JI and ISIS.

Terrorism as hate crime shows signs of becoming commonplace. An example is the March 2016 murder of an Ahmadi shopkeeper in Glasgow, Asad Shah, known for wishing his customers Happy Easter. His murderer, Tanveer Ahmad, travelled 200 miles from Bradford specifically to confront and kill him. There have been many similar random murders carried out not by IS members, but individuals whose mental make-up had been shaped and reinforced by social media. Intolerance is the new radicalisation, abetting senseless acts of violence within the routine fabric of our lives. This is what we have to be prepared for.

This should not solely be seen as a problem with Islamist extremism. There are many galvanising creeds apart from Islamist terror - white nationalists for example. What will come next? Anarchists? Individuals drawn to the conflict in Rakhine state, attempting to help their co-religionists - potentially even on both sides - Muslim and Buddhist - of the conflict?

Way Forward

Fifteen years after 9/11, we still do not fully understand what radicalises someone -

this is a failure not simply on the part of security services, but also the increasing numbers of academics and psychologists who have turned their minds to the issue. Not all radicalised individuals were angry young men from depressed ghettos. But many radicalised individuals were integrated in their societies, with good jobs and prospects. Understanding their trajectory is not so simple.

What we do know, however, and what senior officials from the security establishment have repeatedly told CENS, is that "you can't arrest your way out of the situation".

We should not shy away from borrowing the best of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) practices from other countries. Some nations have decided that it is vital to go very far upstream in the CVE stakes. They are trialing pilots in critical thinking skills in schools - when confronted by IS propaganda and recruitment matter, youths are being schooled in the ability to rationally interrogate the source material. In other countries, there have been attempts in diversion (through seed money for sporting or cultural activities for example), in terms of deflecting the trajectory of people who might become at risk down the line.

This kind of resilience is important. For their part, policymakers worldwide will need to accept that these embryonic methods do not lend themselves to a straightforward cost benefit analysis or control groups. But the stakes are too high not to try.

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