

Focus on the family to fight Radicalisation

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Surabaya Center Pentecostal Church, in East Java, Indonesia, was one of three churches targeted by the suicide bombers in May

SINCE 2014, affected countries across Southeast Asia have introduced multiple layers of policies and legislation, as well as improvised operational strategies in defence against the rise of Daesh.

While a handful of these counter-efforts are re-adapted from existing plans built against predecessor groups, such as al-Qaeda, Jemaah Islamiyah, Al-Maunah and Abu Sayyaf, Daesh's relevance to its sympathisers remains a major challenge for governments in the region.

The bloody siege of Marawi in Philippines in May 2016 came as a rude awakening to the seriousness of Daesh's threat in the region. Daesh's strategies in Marawi, which have catapulted from traditional warfare to sophisticated urban warfare, consequently exposed the region's lack of preparedness in dealing with unfamiliar strategies.

The recent Lamitan suicide bombing in July is also reportedly the first of its kind in the Philippines — a stark contrast to the country's traditional terrorism modus operandi, which has never steered away from conventional armed clashes.

These shifts, coupled with the recent reframing of Daesh's global affiliates, do not only gesture a new projection in Daesh's operational trends, but also a sense of desperation in reviving its dimming influence after the fall of the Islamic caliphates in Iraq and Syria in 2017.

Time and time again, the region witnessed and experienced attacks and violence, but nothing has ever stirred the box as hard as the recent Surabaya bombings.

In what many deemed as the world's first family suicide bombing, the tragedy in May this year signals yet another unprecedented shift from the traditional mindset of terror warfare.

Dita Oepriarto and Puji Kuswati, the two main perpetrators of the Surabaya bombings, were well-to-do business partners, relatively quiet, but were never perceived as atypical parents to their children or abnormal friends to their neighbours and acquaintances.

It was Dita's upbringing, however, that encouraged his descent into such a radical path. Dita, who had spent most of his childhood and teenage life surrounded by highly radical individuals with extreme ideologies, was among the prominent faces of the pro-Daesh Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) and headed the group's Surabaya branch prior to his death.

Likewise for the Maute brothers of Marawi siege, their motivation rebuts the typical understanding of one's pathway towards radicalisation. Growing up in a wealthy and well-connected family, these brothers became entangled in radical environments incited by the never-ending insurgencies and continuous inter-clan fights in the Southern Philippines.

Will this shift in the modus operandi and diverse profiles give rise to a new normal for terrorist attacks? Is the region prepared if this were to be the case?

For many years, our continuous effort in forging effective cooperation at the working level has resulted in hundreds of successful foiled terror attempts. But we should remain cognisant of the fact that our inherent nature to be more reactive as opposed to taking preventive measures may pose a greater problem in the future.

Regrettably, terrorism and violent extremism awareness in the country is still lacking. This requires more attention by the government. We must acknowledge that although our counter-terrorism efforts are laudable, efforts in countering violent extremism are less effective.

The Surabaya bombings present a new conundrum to the region altogether. It is akin to violent extremism rearing its ugly head, highlighting the gaps in our deradicalisation efforts.

It is a wake-up call to Southeast Asian nations that such extreme ideologies have spread to family units, especially among children who have assumed a larger and more active role as fighters.

We need to take a more proactive approach to deradicalisation and countering violent extremism. Tightening security may be the natural response to terrorism, but environments with heightened security may propel extremists to turn to family units as recruits. This in turn will present difficulties in effective detection and monitoring efforts.

A family unit plays an essential role in the success of countering radicalisation as it could either be a softening or hardening factor in the spread of such extreme ideologies. There needs to be a greater emphasis that women in the family unit can be drivers of peace, just as much as they can be drivers of violence. Deradicalisation programmes should now be focused on the entire family.

At the root of it all, the normalisation of violence and terror in conflict-ridden areas provides a fertile ground for extremism to flourish — furnishing larger push and pull factors in the likes of poverty, political disenfranchisement, displacements, as well as social and wealth disparities.

More often than not, these factors are analysed and treated separately in silos, rather than from one single lens.

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