

# ISIS focus

INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (ISIS) MALAYSIA

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## Project Mausam: India's Grand Maritime Strategy (Part II)

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*This paper is the second part of an essay on India's Project Mausam. While Part 1 focused on the nature of Project Mausam, this paper seeks to examine its impact on ASEAN and Malaysia in particular.*

### A recap: Project Mausam

The previous essay on India's Project Mausam examined the potential nature of the Indian maritime initiative that aims to revive the country's ancient maritime links across the Indian Ocean. It should be noted that the project is still in the early stages of cultivation. Beyond its official mention by Prime Minister Modi, there have been only several general indications by bureaucrats, indicating the still vague scope of the



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Contents:	Project Mausam: India's Grand Maritime Strategy (Part II)	1
	Radicalisation, Extremism and Militancy	5
	UNSC Challenges and Opportunities	10

initiative. Indeed, the opacity associated with the project has led to speculation by the media and analysts that Project Mausam could be India's response to China's growing maritime influence — a counterbalance to the latter's Maritime Silk Route (MSR) and increasing presence in the Indian Ocean.

Despite no official confirmation either way, Project Mausam looks set to be a major tool in India's foreign and trade policies for the wider Indian Ocean region, expanding and conceivably regaining what India sees as its rightful influence. Should such an initiative come to pass, it would undoubtedly have an impact on the ASEAN region that borders the Indian Ocean and sits in the middle of various maritime trade schemes. How will Project Mausam impact India-ASEAN relations? More specifically, how would key members, like Malaysia, engage with the initiative while keeping in mind wider national and regional interests and sensitivities?

#### Winds of change towards ASEAN?

It would be safe to say that any rollout of Project Mausam will take into consideration the strategic importance of ASEAN. Several ASEAN member countries — Myanmar, Indonesia and Thailand — share borders with the eastern Indian Ocean while Malaysia and Singapore are key stakeholders. The India-ASEAN relationship itself has grown significantly since initial sectoral and full dialogue partnership talks in 1992 and 1995 respectively. Elevated to a strategic partnership in 2012, the relationship now covers a wide spectrum of fields including political and security cooperation, economics and socio-cultural issues<sup>i</sup>. Generally, India has good relations with the organisation as a whole and its individual members, with varying degrees of economic and security engagement with different members.

Nevertheless, when compared to some of ASEAN's other partners like China, the European Union, Japan and even Taiwan, the depth of India's relationship with ASEAN, especially in economics and trade has been rather dismal<sup>ii</sup>. There has always been a gap between India's strategic promise and its performance. As is often the case with grand initiatives from New Delhi — and to a lesser degree ASEAN — the problem is not the lack of ideas but the inability to follow through on them. The new proactive administration in Delhi however seems keen to boost cooperation and achieve substantial results. At the 2014 ASEAN Summit in Nay Pyi Taw, Modi himself stressed that a new, rising India which is serious in engaging the wider East Asia, was keen to deepen its relationship with ASEAN, advancing balance, peace and stability in the wider region<sup>iii</sup>.

Project Mausam, with its action oriented aims to further forge economic, cultural, strategic and security cooperation with states in the region, represents a significant opportunity to add further depth and substance to the India-ASEAN relationship. The project can and should complement contemporary initiatives like the Act East policy — itself a proactive enhancement of India's nearly quarter century old Look East policy — which is geared specifically towards ASEAN and more generally towards East Asia. As Project Mausam rolls out, India will likely engage with ASEAN, bringing new opportunities for collaboration in economic, security and possibly cultural sectors.

It would be impossible to ignore the issue of maritime security in the South China Sea (SCS) when examining a potential major Indian maritime strategy that will be of importance to ASEAN. Maritime security, territorial disputes and a growing Chinese presence in the SCS are a growing concern for its member states. It would not be conjecture to state that some members of ASEAN might be keener than others in welcoming such an initiative by India, perhaps buying into Project Mausam as a

*There has always been a gap between India's strategic promise and its performance.*



#### INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (ISIS) MALAYSIA

The Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) was established on 8 April 1983 as an autonomous, not-for-profit research organisation. ISIS Malaysia has a diverse research focus which includes economics, foreign policy, security studies, nation-building, social policy, technology, innovation and environmental studies. It also undertakes research collaboration with national and international organisations in important areas such as national development and international affairs.

ISIS Malaysia engages actively in Track Two diplomacy, and promotes the exchange of views and opinions at both the national and international levels. The Institute has also played a role in fostering closer regional integration and international cooperation through forums such as the Asia-Pacific Roundtable, the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS), the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC) and the Network of East Asian Think-Tanks (NEAT). ISIS is a founding member of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) and manages the Council's Secretariat.

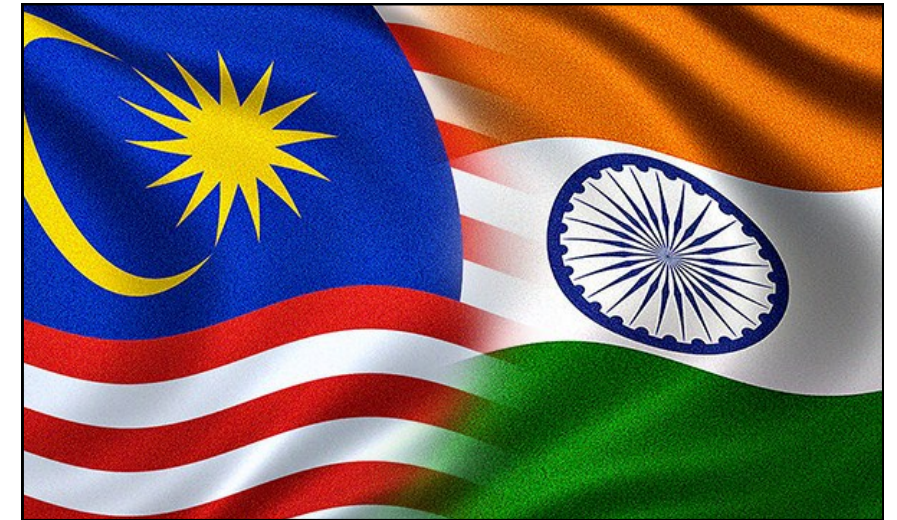
As the country's premier think-tank, ISIS Malaysia has been at the forefront of some of the most significant nation-building initiatives in the nation's history. It was a contributor to the Vision 2020 concept and was consultant to the Knowledge-Based Economy Master Plan initiative.



## Special Edition



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*India-Malaysia Relations*

counterbalance to China. India's strategic cooperation with Vietnam — including defence cooperation and visits — and interest in pursuing joint resource exploration in the SCS have seen the disapproval of China. More recently, Singapore has urged India, as a 'big and influential country' to play a bigger role in confidence building in the SCS. Officially, India supports the peaceful resolution of the disputes and the implementation of a Code of Conduct in the SCS and has been careful to appear as a neutral party<sup>v</sup>.

### Malaysia and Mausam — managing engagement

Sitting smack in the middle of Southeast Asia and straddling the Strait of Malacca and the SCS, Malaysia is likely to see itself involved in some capacity should Project Mausam come to pass. Malaysia has longstanding diplomatic relations with India — especially economic and cultural relations. Due to concerns over its influence and sovereignty in the Strait of Malacca, Malaysia had been somewhat reluctant to see a more prominent Indian security presence in Southeast Asia. Defence relations, however, have always been cordial and are steadily growing<sup>vi</sup>. There may be indications that this reluctance is changing with increasing contact and training among the defence establishments of both countries. Additionally, as strategic and security realities evolve in the SCS, Malaysia could find itself more accommodating to a more active and maritime focused India.

Concurrently, China's MSR proposal has been well received in Malaysia with both political and business leaders voicing their support of the initiative. Under the MSR umbrella, there is already ongoing development of the Kuantan port on the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia to handle larger vessels with more tonnage in collaboration with its 'sister' Qin Zhou port in China's Guangxi province<sup>vii</sup>. Malaysia has always valued its relationship with China and the trade relationship between the two is significant. It is likely that Malaysia will continue in this direction as it could leverage on the MSR, not only for economic benefits, but also as a means of minimising the likelihood of conflicts with China, stemming from ongoing territorial disputes in the SCS.

While it is still early days, one can make an educated guess that the advent of Project Mausam, coupled with China's MSR and Indonesia's Maritime Axis, have given the folks at Wisma Putra something to think about. Three major maritime initiatives by three important states that have longstanding relations with Malaysia — all of which affect Southeast Asia with Malaysia located at its dead centre — are more than

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*Hence the challenge for Malaysia is to ... keep in mind the larger best interests of a region that Malaysia is inexorably tied to.*

enough to cause some sleepless nights. Malaysia has long maintained a hedging approach in regard to big power presence in Southeast Asia. Hence the challenge for Malaysia is to not only balance her involvement in these maritime initiatives while looking out for its interests but also keep in mind the larger best interests of a region that Malaysia is inexorably tied to. As Project Mausam and the other maritime initiatives take better shape, Malaysia should work through bilateral and multilateral frameworks to try to ensure that these initiatives do not ultimately compete with each other, risking further tension and polarisation of the wider region, but rather seek to complement each other creating a more peaceful and prosperous outcome for all.

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**Notes:**

i ASEAN (2014), Overview of ASEAN-India dialogue relations (Online), Available at: <http://www.asean.org/asean/external-relations/india/item/overview-of-asean-india-dialogue-relations>

ii ASEAN (2014), External trade statistics, ASEAN trade by partner country/region (Online), Available at: [http://www.asean.org/images/2015/January/external\\_trade\\_statistic/table24\\_asof04Dec14.pdf](http://www.asean.org/images/2015/January/external_trade_statistic/table24_asof04Dec14.pdf)

iii The Hindu (2014), India, ASEAN can be 'great partners': Modi, November (Online), Available at: <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-asean-can-be-great-partners-modi/article6590328.ece>

iv Bloomberg (2015), India should play bigger role in South China Sea, says Singapore, 16 March (Online), Available at: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-03-16/india-should-play-bigger-role-in-south-china-sea-says-singapore>

v Banlaoi, R.C. (2013), Challenges in India-ASEAN security cooperation, Speech delivered at the Delhi Dialogue V, 20 February, pp. 3–5.

vi Brewster, D. (2013), India-ASEAN defence relations, RSIS Monograph No. 28, pp. 144–145 (Online), Available at: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/india-asean-defence-relations/#.VLY3Xns8o80>

vii Yi, T.X. (2014), Enhancing two-way cooperation, *The Star*, 12 September (Online), Available at: <http://www.thestar.com.my/Opinion/Columnists/Check-In-China/Profile/Articles/2014/09/12/Enhancing-two-way-cooperation/>

*Malaysia should be ambitious and proactive in the UNSC agenda ... through active framing of the international security narrative ...*

of such crisis at home. Similarly, active involvement in the UNSC agenda would grant Malaysia technical expertise required to solve particular issues that Malaysia is not familiar with but may face in the future. By being proactive alone, Malaysia would not only meet the demands of its national interest but also win the approval from other member states, especially if the engagements succeed to alleviate the latter's predicament. In turn, higher reputation among international community would allow Malaysia to advance its interest agenda abroad.

Although being on the Council does not substantially change a nation's position on certain issues, the UNSC is an opportunity to improve relations bilaterally and with the UN in general. Malaysia could copy Australia's formula of proactive engagement to promote not only its national interest but also to drive the agenda of the UNSC in general, while helping countries inconvenienced with international security problems all the while.

*On 12 February 2015, we were privileged to host **Mr Jon Merrill**, Assistant Secretary, Head of UN Security Council Taskforce, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia, at our ISIS International Affairs Forum. Speaking from Australia's experience as an elected member of the UNSC (2013–2014), Merrill offered his take on some of the important issues and questions surrounding the viability of the UNSC, addressing contemporary challenges to as well as opportunities for the Council. His talk also covered what Malaysia could hope to gain from its UNSC non-permanent membership over the next two years. ISIS Analysts **Muhammad Sinatra** and **Puteri Nor Ariane Yasmin** report.*



### Not a new threat

Acts of radicalisation, extremism and militancy — especially in several Muslim countries — have been dominating the news and socio-political discussions over the last few years. However, while extremism and radicalisation is a burgeoning phenomenon, it did not happen suddenly. It is important, therefore, to identify the root causes of extremism and militancy. A careful examination of history reveals that extremism and radicalisation have always been a problem throughout history and know no religious, ethnic or national boundaries. Extremist-driven political, ethnic and religious ideologies have been responsible for mass deaths, displacement and general conflict in Africa, Europe and Asia — sometimes requiring the intervention of the international community. Hence, there is a need to properly identify the causes of extremism today and where the narrative of extremism finds the most traction.

The reaction against extremism today is largely a reaction to the symptoms and not the causes of extremism. This is an ineffective preventative measure. If the reaction of the state is largely confined to a violent response, extremists will fight back as they are doing today with deadly results. The fear that an adversary is accumulating too much power leads one to rush into conflict without actually understanding the adversary. Nervous reactions to misunderstood and overblown threats can lead to disastrous consequences. In combating extremism, states should avoid falling into a Thucydides Trap. Acts of extremism by some cannot be attributed to the whole community of faith. Such responses will only play into the hands of the extremists, enlarging the conflict and causing more misery and death.

### Radicalisation and Muslim communities

The advent of groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Boko Haram — which have become the poster boys of extremism and radicalisation today — has done tremendous damage to mainstream Islam and caused instability and chaos in regions where they operate. Besides transnational groups, extremism in the Muslim world today is also committed by elements of ‘Islamic governments’ through their warped understanding of the religion. The majority of the extremist actions though have political aims and thus political repercussions.

In addressing the role of Islam in extremist narratives however, some issues should be clarified. First, there are differences within the interpretations and practices of the various sects of Islam, which are at times in conflict with each other. The challenge is to find common ground, especially in espousing moderate ideals and practices. The strengthening of critical thought and analysis in reviewing extremist dogma by the religious intelligencia in Islam is critical in developing a counter-narrative. Second, unlike Christianity, there is no separation of the church and state in Islam and the amalgamation of power and faith presents another set of challenges. Muslims often look to the state for guidance on religious affairs. The failure of the state to play this role but instead espouses an extremist and narrow narrative of Islam further compounds the problem. Despite a separation of mosque and state being practiced by the Ottoman Sultanate, it did not last. Politics, power and faith are closely intertwined in Islam and this provides both opportunities and challenges in developing and implementing counter-extremist narratives.

Extremism begets extremism and as extremism spreads in the Muslim world, Islam and Muslims will be seen as responsible for extremist acts of violence. This, in turn, is and



Participants at the forum

resources from the UNSC itself. The example of UNSC Resolution 1973 on military intervention in Libya was raised as it had not only negatively affected the citizens of Libya by removing the power structure, but also portrayed the UNSC as an instrument of regime change as opposed to an organisation charged with the responsibility to protect. This also depicts the difficult position the UNSC is in where it has to continuously uphold international security without infringing the internal business of specific countries. Striking a balance between these two concerns is dilemma.

### To reform or not to?

Furthermore there are debates on reforming the Council, whether it is to allow greater democracy so that elected members may leave their mark, or to expand the P5 altogether in the form of new permanent members without veto power. Other suggestions include expanding the number of elected members and establishing a three-tier membership within the UNSC (an additional membership category to the current two). These issues are not without important considerations. Who should initiate a Council reform? Given the inequality in positions between the P5 and elected members, should the UN General Assembly be the one to initiate reform and see the process through? How big do we want the UNSC to be? Indeed, the bigger the Council the longer it will take for resolutions to pass (Resolution 2166 on MH17 took four days). All these concerns indicate that maintaining status quo is preferred over initiating institutional reform, which is likely to generate complex problems.

In order for constructive contribution to take place, members should embark on a gap analysis approach. This is to look for realistic opportunities that can strengthen the ways in which the Council does business. These include building bridges or enforcing greater partnerships with other regional organisations, or ensuring that peace missions encompass both peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

### A proactive agenda

Malaysia should be ambitious and proactive in the UNSC agenda so as to wrest opportunities from its position in the UNSC. One way to do this is through active framing of the international security narrative according to Malaysia's own national interest. By steering UN member states to undertake collective measures in dealing with international crisis, for example, Malaysia may curtail domestic manifestation

*... maintaining status quo is preferred over initiating institutional reform, which are likely to generate complex problems.*



Iftekhhar Ahmed Chowdhury

*... extremism and radicalisation have always been a problem throughout history and knows no religious, ethnic or national boundaries.*



Participants at the roundtable

will be matched by the spread of ill-feeling among communities and rising extremist Islamophobia. In the Western global media and general perception of non-Muslims, Islam and Muslims are often associated with terrorism and extremism. Even some Muslims are beginning to believe that their fellow believers are closely associated with such acts. However, studies in the US and Europe show that right up until 2005 and 2008, a very small percentage — below 9 per cent — of terrorist acts have been committed by Muslims. Hence, while Islamic extremism is a concern, it should not be a cause for hysteria. While radicalisation and violence is rife in the Middle East, it has much less appeal to the majority of Muslims in Southeast Asia, where a more moderate version of Islam is practiced.

#### Issues driving the narrative

A variety of reasons are behind the phenomenon of extremism. These include history, politics, sociology, ideology and economics. Included among them are historical landmarks like the Sykes–Picot Agreement of 1916 that carved up the Ottoman Caliphate, the Balfour Declaration of 1917 that led to the creation of Israel in Palestine, the continued occupation of Palestine by Israel, predatory Western interventions in the Middle East to guarantee its energy security, misguided regime changes in Iraq and Libya without adequate follow-up on long term political and governance solutions, the longstanding Afghan internal turmoil, incidents like Abu Ghraib, the atavistic worldview and nihilist fanaticism of the Salafist Wahhabism, the disaffection from the failure of the Arab Spring to generate true democratic or economic uplift and the socio-economic marginalisation of Muslim youth, whether in the Muslim world or in immigrant societies in the West.

Two key issues, namely the lack of good governance and citizen representation, are closely associated with the spread of extremism. While a small number of extremists exist in every society, social norms will normally curtail them. However, in some states — especially the majority of Muslim states — such norms are characterised by poverty, repression, corruption and unaccountable governance. Extremists are then able to successfully appeal to a disenfranchised population to strike out against the perceived injustices of life. Poverty, largely driven by the issues above, also plays a huge part in brewing extremism. Despite being rich in resources, large numbers of citizens in Muslim countries do not benefit from them and this leads to feelings of bitterness and disenfranchisement. Coupled with anger against Western offensive actions such as drone strikes and military interventions in some Muslim countries,

*Two key issues, namely the lack of good governance and citizen representation, are closely associated with the spread of extremism.*



Thomas Daniel



Bunn Nagara

international responses. The last few years have shown sovereign states in the Levant area, particularly Syria, employing NSA to fight their armed struggles. Such conflicts have led to broader regional instability and displaced numerous individuals to surrounding countries. Furthermore, in certain countries where power vacuum prevails — for example, Libya and Yemen — NSA are known to develop a shadow authority and institution which derive support from powerless people, either willingly or unwillingly. At face value, it might seem that the UNSC, with its traditional structure and security paradigm, would find itself in a difficult position to meet this irregular form of threat. However, this kind of uncertainty is exactly what it takes to get the UNSC to reach a consensus because such disproportionate threat endangers the very foundation of sovereign states and the precepts of many established orders. Such a range of crises indicates that the UNSC is not marginalised, but that its permanent members will always be looking to the elected ones to help.

#### Competing interests

The geostrategic interests of member states are roadblocks to progress within the UNSC as resolutions ultimately derive from consensus. This cannot be achieved if members have competing interests, or are unprepared to pull their weight equally. For instance, the capacity to enact change is always limited by what members are prepared to do. Issues may also be sidelined according to the interests of big powers, and there are fiscal and normative challenges to consider. There is more pressure on the permanent members of the UNSC (also known as Permanent Five, Big Five, or P5) to increase the costs of peacekeeping as the UN remains fiscally challenged in the current post-financial crisis period. Similarly, managing expectations is difficult as there is little understanding among the public on how the UN actually works, or on the constraints that are placed on the UNSC. These issues put the onus on members to demonstrate that the Council is an effective “captain of hard jobs”. Much more effort is also needed to communicate the work that the UNSC does.

Besides, some of the challenges are not inherently rooted in the clash of opinions among member states. Although the UNSC has managed to pass 90 per cent of its resolutions through consensus, it is fallacious to believe these resolutions could straightforwardly solve the problems they are responding to. Some of these actually established new sets of unintended problems that would drain more energy and

*The geostrategic interests of member states are roadblocks to progress within the UNSC as resolutions ultimately derive from consensus.*



## UNSC Challenges and Opportunities

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is a strategic asset to members despite doubts about its relevance. The Council brings greater legitimacy to members as its purpose is to shape international settings and set the norms on how states should behave. With regard to developing countries and those in conflict, the UNSC is the body in which peace is kept and built. Accordingly, its priority is the stability and reconstruction of states that either cannot or will not do so. While there are arguments to indicate that the Council is flawed in its institution and structure, its actions are ultimately a reflection of the will of its members.

### Less or more crisis?

The UNSC — if one were to consider it as a fractious debating chamber — encourages open discussion. Because the Council seeks to administer complex regimes, more dialogue is needed as opposed to statements that do not carry enough weight. The UNSC is ultimately a forum for ideas that influences policy in international peace and security. However, it runs the risk of becoming increasingly marginalised as the post-Cold War world has produced less conflict.

Nonetheless, we are also facing large-scale, intra-regional crises that affect multiple issues simultaneously. For example, the Middle East and North Africa alone have witnessed countless calamities in the last two years (2013–2014). Elsewhere, we have seen humanitarian concerns in the Central African Republic, tension in Ukraine and Crimea, as well as the rise of Ebola.

### The rise of non-state actors

The UNSC is especially concerned with the rise of non-state actors (NSA) as a new vector in armed conflicts. Not only do NSA leave a trail of high casualty in their engagements, their blatant disregard for international norms and unconventional strategies have also become such an enormous challenge to the UNSC in fashioning

*... NSA leave a trail of high lethality in their engagements, their blatant disregard for international norms and unconventional strategies have also become such an enormous challenge ...*



From left: Jon Merrill and Elina Noor

*... a distortion of the Islamic faith ... has been successfully used as a powerful strategic tool by the extremists.*

Muslims feel targeted and are lashing back against the perception of being under attack.

A culmination of all these has rendered radicalisation, in general, the narrative propagated by extremists like ISIL, which is attractive with its powerful emotive and historical emotive content. The disaffected are attracted to a narrative that promises rewards through sacrifice despite statements by Islamic scholars that such martyrdom is only achievable when the cause is just. The radical narrative is further justified by the use of Islamic symbolism and pseudo-religious propaganda that calls on the faithful to join in the battle to re-establish the Islamic Caliphate and prepare for the 'final Jihad'. While the actions of the 'Islamist Caliphate' are not Islamic but a distortion of the Islamic faith, faith has been successfully used as a powerful strategic tool by the extremists.

### An effective counter-narrative is needed

While military responses may delay the progress of extremist beliefs, they cannot eliminate the ideology behind the violence and will surely draw a retaliatory response, especially on soft targets in the West. New technologies and an adaptation of asymmetrical warfare have given militant extremists a further reach than ever before. What is needed is the formation of a counter-narrative that is designed to defang and persuade the extremists of the folly of their ways. Genuine grievances of those attracted to extremism should be addressed and disadvantaged minorities should not be further alienated as it could make the prospects of revenge more attractive.

Rehabilitation programmes, like those implemented in several Southeast Asian states, are key to bringing those who have strayed back to the mainstream. Here, one should note the lack of widespread appeal of extremism among Muslims in Southeast Asia as social conditions, including the practice of democracy, are much more favourable here when compared with the Middle East and other Muslim dominated states. The challenge, however, is to keep the influence of extremists at a minimum in favour of stability and peace through good governance and upholding the rights of all citizens, including minority rights.

Radicalisation is a complex, multifaceted problem that requires an equally complex, integrated strategy to defeat it. There is no silver bullet or magic solution. This requires the coordination of governments, civil society organisations and the private sector. In order to develop a successful counter-narrative, the following considerations should be taken into account:

1. Enhancing strategic communication by integrating de-radicalisation training via the media, drawing on national and local traditions to develop stronger counter-narratives, using sports, cultural and social media platforms.
2. Strengthening the rule of law mechanisms through community policing, supporting victims of radicalisation, appropriate training for enforcement and judicial officers and ensuring fair legislation.
3. Supporting civil society and private sector efforts on de-radicalisation.
4. Including a gender dimension in all aspects of de-radicalisation. Research indicates that a growing number of women have been attracted to radical groups in Syria and see it as a 'liberating experience'. Women, therefore, should be given a key



Elmira Akhmetova



Participants at the discussion

role in developing the counter-narrative and in law enforcement agencies besides inculcating gender sensitisation among front-line officials.

5. Better regional and international cooperation especially in capacity building for states that need assistance in combating extremism.
6. Introducing de-radicalisation curriculum in schools. This needs the concentrated efforts of the government, private sector and community organisations. Intellectual intervention must aim to change local cultures and values where necessary.

#### Combating extremism is a multifaceted, international effort

Another key element in the battle against extremism and militancy is proper coordination, to ensure there are no missteps that damage ongoing efforts. Hence, the role of multinational institutions like the United Nations (UN) is important not just in terms of coordinating responses but also as a safeguard against unilateral actions by nation states that could worsen the divide. This will ensure that the equilibrium between preventative actions and the rule of law is maintained. Unilateral military actions taken by the United States and Israel are often examples that come to mind.

While some alteration of the workings of the UN — especially the Security Council — is highly desirable to enable it to become more representative, it is still one of the best placed entities to support and guide, if not spearhead de-radicalisation efforts, on a macro scale. As political and social factors — rather than religious doctrine — are major driving forces behind extremism, the UN has the expertise and experience in matters of socio-economic development to make positive contributions to states and communities that require such assistance. The UN and other affiliated organisations could appoint respected elder statesmen and diplomats — a panel of ‘wise persons’ — to oversee the process and ensure no red lines are crossed. Thus, the importance and capacities of such international institutions should not be dismissed despite several perceived shortcomings.

#### The need to work towards peace

In opposing extremism, especially extremism influenced by religion and culture, one must always be mindful of the sensitivities and beliefs of others in this battle of ideas. In that regard, the strategy of decision makers in Southeast Asia, who have opted to

*... defeating extremism is not just a physical struggle but one against the wrong ideology and thinking to make sure that the radicals do not define the agenda with their narrative.*

confront radicalisation with soft approaches, should be commended as they rightly recognise that defeating extremism is not just a physical struggle but one against the wrong ideology and thinking to make sure that the radicals do not define the agenda with their narrative.

Ultimately, the success of all these efforts rests on the work done on a local level in addressing local grievances and perceived injustices. It is also important to remember that there is no single narrative in the Muslim world, both in promoting extremism and in combating it. Hence it is important to identify and act on the root causes of extremism to properly and effectively confront and contain it. Peace minded individuals, organisations, governments and communities must continue to work towards de-radicalisation, peace and reconciliation as the fallout of not doing so will be disastrous to all.

*In conjunction with a visit by a delegation from the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) in Singapore on 21 January 2015, ISIS Malaysia hosted a closed-door roundtable discussion on the evolving threat of extremism and militancy to South and Southeast Asia. Addressing this roundtable was Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, Principal Research Fellow from ISAS, and Dr Elmira Akhmetova, Research Fellow from the Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia. The issues raised in this article were taken from their discussions. ISIS Analyst Thomas Daniel reports.*

*Women ... should be given a key role in developing the counter-narrative and in law enforcement agencies besides inculcating gender sensitisation among front-line officials.*