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RADICALISATION REDUX: BIGGER, BADDER, BOLDER?

by

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-Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury

It gives me an enormous pleasure to be here in Kuala Lumpur interacting with such fine minds as are gathered here. I should be remiss were I not to begin without stating how beholden I am to my old and dear friend, Tan Sri Rastam Isa, for making this possible by inviting me to this event. He is a dear friend and we have interacted with each other as fellow diplomats for decades. Neither he nor I aspired to grand goals like making the world better and peaceful, but like the concept of 'Justice' in Plato, we do believe we played our own small parts required of us by society. It is great to be in his country. Malaysia is rapidly emerging as a key player in the region. It is also undergoing a huge transformation for the better domestically. That enormously gladdens the hearts of its friends like me.

Now to cut quickly to the chase. Radicalization is in our times a burgeoning phenomenon. Yet we all know it did not happen suddenly. Those familiar with the motto of the London School of Economics, and many present here must be, a motto that was borrowed from the Roman historian Tacitus, would know the importance of 'root causes'. The exact words of Tacitus were: 'Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas', meaning 'happy is the man who knows the causes of things'. The British political analyst and writer E H Carr, in his book 'What is History?' had stressed the importance of causation. For instance today, the world is grappling with the rising tide of the so-called 'Islamist caliphate'. The term 'Islamist' is advisedly used, because I would strongly argue its actions are not 'Islamic' - far from it - yet undeniably it is a socio-political phenomenon, that has used faith as a powerful tool as a part of its strategy, however distorted its interpretation. There is a tendency to attack the symptoms of the disease, rather than address the causes and adopt preventive measures. If one confines the fight to military methods, as one, particularly the West is wont to do, they will fight back, with ever greater skill and capability, as we see happening. It is an incontrovertible axiom that violence begets violence.

So back to causes of this phenomenon. What has brought it about? This is a mixture of history, politics, sociology, ideology and economics. Included among them is the Sykes-Picot Secret Agreement of 1916 whereby the imperial French and British powers divided up the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Caliphate between them, the Balfour Declaration of 1917 that created the Jewish State in the Arab heartland, the occupation of Palestine by Israel with no end to it in sight, the relentless predatory interventions of the West in the Middle East driven by the quest for, among other things, oil, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 that destroyed the Shia - Sunni equilibrium (a footnote here, when western forces rushed into Iraq where angels should have feared to tread I said at the UN, 'This war will not finish long, long after it is over!'), the misguided regime-changes in Iraq and Libya without adequate follow-up policy as to who should fill the vacuum, the Afghan turmoil or 'mushkila Afghani'

beginning with the use of the Muhajeddin to drive the Soviets out and then NATO itself seeking to beat a retreat clearly opening the door for the militants' unimpeded advance, the terror perpetrated by the French 'pied noire' in Algeria-I refer you to Simone de Bouvoir's book 'Djamila Boupacha'-,the horrors of Abu Graib, the atavistic world –view of the Salafist Wahabism, the nihilistic fanaticism of Syed Qutb the intellectual father of the Muslim Brotherhood,the failure of the Arab Spring to generate democratic pluralism or economic uplift of the common man and the resultant disaffection in the Arab Street, andthe marginalization of the ever growing numbers of youth socially and economically, not just in the region, but also where they have relocated as diaspora in the West driven by unrealized aspirations, as reflected in the life-style in the decrepid Parisian 'banlieux' inhabited by the indigent, unemployed North Africans.

A combination of all these have rendered radicalization in general and the caliphate of Abu Bakr Baghdadi (who has assumed the name of the first of Islam's 'Khulafa-e-Rashidin, or the successor of the Holy Prophet, a noteworthy symbolism) in particular, redolent with historical and emotive content. Furthermore, these have served as a huge attraction for recruitment to their ranks, of both the disaffected ,as well as the persuaded. They are responding to a narrative that promises a modicum of fulfilment through sacrifice, often illogical but more often than not, powerful.This radical narrative is also theologically justified by the use of Islamic symbols and propaganda. They view Syria as the epicentre of the 'Last Caliphate', to prepare for the final struggle or JIHAD, somewhat akin to the Biblical Armageddon.. These pseudo-religious arguments buttress the political motivations and the urgings upon the 'true believer' to join battle.This, despite what Islamic scholars have held about martyrdom not being achievable if the cause is not clearly just.

Military response can slow down the progress of the process, but cannot eliminate it. It will also invite retaliation as inevitably as night follows day. Small wonder militancy is on the rise, and its getting from bad to worse.. Modern technology and evolving strategic and tactical thinking, such as asymmetric urban warfare, has provided the perpetrators of extremism the wherewithal to take their fight to distant places like the streets of New York, or Paris. This capability can only increase,not decrease, with the passage of time.

What is,therefore, needed is the formulation of a counter-narrative. This must be one designed to intellectually de-radicalize and defang the extremists by persuading them of the folly of their ways. Those of their demands, desires and aspirations that are rational must be listened to, and heard, and their genuine grievances addressed. They must be shown that their return to the mainstream in consonance with the timeless tenets of their faith is possible. Offending minority culture should be avoided, particularly if that culture is already marginalized, and sometimes, for the alienated, revenge has a premium.It is unwise o kick the already downtrodden, for at some point, the latter will rise and react. Rehabilitation programmes for those who have strayed temporarily, like for the militants returning home, would be key. n this connection, I might add there are some interesting initiatives in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. One positive move is the setting up of the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (AIPR) which has been mandated to undertake sustained research and policy analyses on the phenomenon of militancy and extremism. We

at ISAS are engaged in a collaborative partnership with the New York and Washington based Global Center on Cooperative Security, to try and collate 'best practices' in the framing of this counter-narrative, and come up with a set of definitive proposals. Though South Asia is our primary focus, we are certain that our output would have wider global relevance. The leaderships in our region have wisely opted for the 'hard' 'approaches to counter radicalization with 'soft' ones. In Naypidaw last November Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said, and I quote: "When you fight against terrorism, it is not just fighting the physical arm battle. It's also the ideology, it's also the wrong thinking, it's also making sure the radicals don't control the agenda and define the narrative, and you're able to counter them and to bring back to the true path those who have gone wrong". At the same time there are red –lines that the so-called champion As Prime Minister Najib of Malaysia has recently warned, unlimited freedom would give rise to extremism, reiterating that 'religious sensitivities' of all must be respected. Pope Francis has echoed similar sentiments in the Philippines recently. The two leaders are spot on, In other words, the idea is to give battle to ideas with another set of ideas, while respecting one another's feelings and sentiments. Perhaps their proposal can be complemented by the setting up a Regional Panel of Wise Persons to continually monitor developments and offer policy prescriptions in this area, a suggestion that I should like to place on record here.

It is my view that the United Nations and other international organizations must at all times be involved in overseeing the de-radicalization processes. The underscoring of the role of global bodies like the UN is to preclude the kind of unilateral action we saw in Iraq in 2003 supposedly on behalf of the international community. The UN should be able to ensure that the equilibrium between preventive actions and the rule of law is scrupulously maintained. All counteractions must be based within the framework of the rule of law. These must not be rendered into tools to constrain liberty. Balance is key, there should be no tilt away from freedom. Most civilized legal systems incorporate this ideal one way or another. Otherwise, the credibility of the decisions of the international community will erode. Their actions, such as given expression through the Security Council, will be rendered meaningless. These will run the risk of increasingly like a flock of sheep passing resolutions in favour of vegetarianism when the wolf remains of another opinion.

Actually, we cannot claim to any silver bullets, nationally, regionally, or globally. What we can be certain of is that radicalization is a complex, multifaceted, hydra-headed phenomenon that will require a comprehensive and integrated strategy to try and counter it. This effort must involve governments, civil society organizations and the private sector working in a coordinated manner. I shall not attempt to provide a menu to feed the need immediately, but should like to note some elements that come to mind. One is enhancing strategic communication. This would include integrating de-radicalization training into professional development opportunities for media practitioners: drawing on national and local traditions to developing stronger counter-narratives; engaging the traditional and non-traditional, including social, media; and using sports, arts and culture platforms. We are all aware of on-line radicalization through the internet. There is need to counter it both on-line, and off line.

Two, strengthening criminal justice and rule of law mechanisms. This would include community policing approaches; supporting victims of radicalized violence: training for frontline officials with a follow-up mentorship programme: appropriate legal training for judges, magistrates and prosecutors, and ensuring just and fair legislations.

Three, supporting civil society and private sector partnerships, combined with facilitation of regional multi-sectoral dialogue on de-radicalization.

Four, including gender-dimension in all phases of de-radicalization activities. This is important, for the support of either gender is critical. I was in London recently and was apprised of a just concluded research-result at King's College that has shown that a bewildering number of female fighters are joining the militants in Syria, particularly drawn from the UK, France, Germany and Australia. Women are said to be viewing this as a liberating experience, an opportunity to fight shoulder to shoulder with their men-folk. Gender –mainstreaming does have its flip-side! Particular emphasis must be according to the inclusiveness of women in all efforts. This should include their greater recruitment in law – enforcing agencies, supporting networks of women practitioners to engage on de-radicalization issues, and integrating gender sensitization for concerned front-line officials.

Five, promoting regional and international cooperation including among and between the United Nations, SAARC, ASEAN, GCC, the European Union and the African Union. This should include common legislations, workshops and training programmes for officials, 'capacity-building' for those countries in need in related areas, and inter-state interactions at Track 1 and Track 11 levels.

Finally, introducing de-radicalization-related syllabi in educational curricula, in schools, colleges and Universities. Academic research in these areas should be encouraged to feed government policies. Think Tanks must be encouraged to focus and reflect on the issues with a view to coming up with solutions.

This is by no means a comprehensive list. Nor are the points placed in any pecking order of importance. But these are some thoughts that may help us along the path in what we are seeking to do.

Sometimes, we rush into a conflict because we fear the adversary is acquiring too much power and strength. Nervous reactions from overblown threat perceptions of the adversary's growing clout can lead to disastrous consequences. We must always avoid what is known as the 'Thucydides trap'. In explaining the reasons for the Peloponnesian war, that Greek historian famously observed: "When Athens grew strong, there was much fear in Sparta".

Some of our mind-sets vis-à-vis those who believe differently need to be changed. I am not persuaded as to the Huntingdonian thesis regarding the inexorability of the 'clash of civilizations'. I believe much good will come of greater understanding between the great Abrahamic faiths of Islam and Christianity. Actions of some cannot give all a bad name. There are 'nay-sayers' and recalcitrant among every set of human belief. I need but point to the growth of right-wing extremism among the Buddhist monks in Myanmar, resulting in the

crisis related to the Rohingas, which has great potentials for attracting ISIS attention which might bring the Myanmarese to what would have been avoidable grief!! Unless the issue of their tragedy at sea is properly address, a dire situation would be created.

Unlike the Christian dichotomy between what is to be rendered unto Caesar and those to be rendered unto God, Muslims often see State institutions in assisting the just community. It would help if this was better understood. Let me quote a relevant passage from Karen Armstrong. She writes: "It has never been more important for Western people to acquire a just appreciation and understanding of Islam... We now realize that we in the privileged Western countries can no longer assume that events in the rest of the world do not concern us. What happens in Gaza, Iraq or Afghanistan today is likely to have repercussions in New York, Washington, Or London tomorrow, and small groups will soon have the capacity to commit acts of mass destruction that were previously only possible for powerful nation states... To cultivate a distorted view of Islam, to view it as inherently the enemy of democracy and decent values, and to revert to the bigoted view of the medieval crusaders would be a catastrophe". Written in 2002, these words have proved prophetic at the present times.

The time for action is most certainly now. Some of this responsibility must be picked up by our region, from such deliberations among ourselves such as this one. I would strongly recommend that we set up a 'Group of Wise Persons' to examine the problem threadbare, take into account the contents of our views and make recommendations as to the next steps,, which would be applicable not just to the region, but if found acceptable to the international authorities, to the world. This can be one upshot of our present event..

No, war is not inevitable. But as the American analyst Joseph Nye has reminded us, yes, thinking that it is may be a cause for it to happen. There is a flip side of the coin. No, peace is not inevitable either. But yes, thinking about it can also cause it to happen. So let us keep thinking about it and do the best we can to make it happen. We cannot always bring about what we aspire to in terms of noble goals, but our failures should not be for want of trying. In all that we do, we would do well to bear in mind the wisdom embedded in the Latin proverb: "Fortier in re, suaviter in modo": 'Be tough in your aims , be smooth in the way you put them into practice'. I thank you.