Identifying the root causes of terrorism

ON THE FRONTLINE
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CRUCIAL: *In a multi-ethnic and multifaith country like ours, it is the preservation and celebration of thins very diversity that will buttress our resilience to terrorist threats*

AT this time last year, authorities had arrested nearly 75 individuals in Malaysia suspected of involvement with Daesh (the Islamic State terror group). Two months later, some 30 more were detained. Home Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi informed Parliament in May last year that of the 107 arrested, 75 per cent had been recruited through social media with a majority of them having been "clean skins", or first-time offenders. Police investigations found that 95 per cent of the Malaysians;-who were already fighting in Syria or who were looking to do so, had been recruited through social media.

Technology has no doubt intensified the speed and reach of radicalisation but this phenomenon - unseen and unprecedented with terror groups of the past - is only symptomatic of deeper undercurrents that take place offline. Terrorists are not created overnight. It takes an ecosystem to foment radicalism and extremism, and it usually starts at home. Because the drivers of terrorism are complex and varied, "home" could be a reference point for the family unit, friends and colleagues, or the state. Detainee profiles from around the world show that foot soldiers of terrorist groups are spurred to action, among others, by personal setbacks, a sense of injustice, or a desire for redemption or adventurism. Leaders of terrorist groups, on the other hand, are driven by larger political ideals.

Long before Daesh captured the imagination of recruits, repulsion of others, and preoccupation of governments around the world, there were militant groups like Irgun, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the New People's Army, Darul Islam and al-Qaeda. All these groups sought to change the political status quo because their leaders either thoroughly rejected the form of governance in their original countries or capitalised on a failure of governance there and elsewhere. Osama bin Laden's enmity with the United States began not with Washington per se but with Riyadh and the House of Saud. His successor, Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri, railed against the government of Anwar Sadat first before he did at the rest of the world.

Like Daesh today, al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiah before it, were able to successfully appeal across borders because the vision of restoring a stable, just, political entity reminiscent of a lost, glorious past resonates amid despairing protests of corruption, collusion, repression and marginalisation. It is why even as Daesh, Jabhat-al-Nusra, and their cohorts, fight a self-interested, sectarian conflict in a gang-infested wasteland, they are able to sell a paradise lost.

It is why, despite the gruesome realities of corpses, rapes and racism, hundreds of fighters flocking from the West, women and girls, and even whole families with toddlers are buying that promise. Just read the social media commentary by sympathisers and supporters. Religion adds a convenient, inviolable sheen of purity in a world of desecration.

The state is the ultimate arbiter of its nation's safety, security and prosperity within its borders. The most effective bulwark against radicalism, extremism and terrorism begins with effective, equitable policies at the domestic level. It is reinforced by a balanced projection of these domestic interests in the international arena, that is, the conduct of a state's foreign policy.

In the days of al-Qaeda, "root causes" was the catch-all phrase to refer to the structural, developmental policies of a state that, drawn and administered correctly, would minimise the appeal of violence as an avenue of political change. These policies would include but not be limited to meaningful access to political participation, transparency and accountability in governance, quality education promoting critical thought, even the public space to voice dissent within reason.

The aftermath of a Daesh (Islamic State) suicide bombing near a Shia shrine in Sayyida Zeinab outside Damascus. Groups like Daesh abuse religion for their own interests. AFP pic

Groups like Daesh abuse religion for their own interests. Responsible states and their agents must not. Religion only solves the woes and ills of society when it is internalised and practised, not when it is parroted and compelled. Certainly not when it is used to label and divide between genders, communities, or sects.

In a multiethnic, multifaith country like Malaysia, it is the preservation and celebration, in speech and in action, of this very diversity that will buttress our resilience to a terrorist threat and in the aftermath of a terrorist attack.

The government's role - indeed, that of all Malaysians - at the domestic level is to ensure that this prevails.

Since foreign policy is an extension of domestic policy, there must also be consonance of Malaysia's national interests at home and abroad. This has been preserved at the international level by a careful approach of non-alignment; pragmatic, diplomatic finesse; and a disavowal of foreign embroilments, especially on the grounds of religion. From a strategic counterterrorism perspective, it is crucial this holds. If not, we could be entrenching ourselves in far greater complications in the long term that we can conceive of right now.

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