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Fight terror with ideas, not just armies

Militant Islamic terrorism is to the 21st century what communism was to the 20th - a global ideological battle that needs to be fought both off and on the battlefield. This is why absolute, unsentimental clarity is needed, not political correctness that fudges the seriousness of the threat, says Prime Minister GOH CHOK TONG

THE terrorist attacks in Madrid in March this year could become a turning point in the war against terrorism. Unless we make the right moves, I fear the turn could be for the worse.

The choice of the target and the timing of the attack were strategic. The Spanish Socialist Party had made the withdrawal of troops from Iraq part of its election platform. Attacking Madrid just before the election was obviously calculated to achieve a strategic effect, as indeed it did when the new government so quickly confirmed its intention to pull out of the United States-led coalition in Iraq.

This will only encourage the terrorists to exploit political differences within countries, and divisions between the US and Europe. We must not let them succeed.

Any lingering doubts about the terrorists' strategic intentions should have been put to rest by a statement attributed to Osama bin Laden in April wherein he offered a 'truce' to Europe if it stopped 'attacking Muslims or interfering in their affairs including participating in the American conspiracy'.

And, notwithstanding what some critics of the war in Iraq have alleged, this statement also demonstrates that Osama bin Laden himself sees the war in Iraq as part of the larger struggle against terrorism. He pointedly said 'the killing of Europeans came after their invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan'.

The war against terrorism could shape the 21st century in the same way as the Cold War defined the world before the fall of the Berlin Wall. To win, we must first clearly understand what we are up against.

Terrorism is a generic term. Terrorist organisations such as the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka or the Basque separatists in Spain are only of local concern. The virulent strain of Islamic terrorism is another matter altogether. It is driven by religion. Its ideological vision is global. The communists fought to live, whereas the jihadi terrorists fight to die, and live in the next world.

My perspective is formed by our own experiences in South-east Asia, which post-9/11 has emerged as a major theatre for terrorist operations. In December 2001, Singapore arrested 15 people belonging to a radical Islamic group called the Jemaah Islamiah (JI). They were plotting even before 9/11 to attack American and other Western interests in Singapore. In August 2002, we arrested another 21 members of this group. Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand have also made many arrests of terrorists.

The JI regional leadership spanned Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and the southern Philippines. Its tentacles even probed into Australia. JI's objective was to create a Daulah Islamiah, an Islamic state in South-east Asia. This was to be centred in Indonesia but would include Malaysia, southern Thailand, southern Philippines, and, inevitably, Singapore and Brunei.

But the most crucial conclusion our investigations revealed was this: the existence of a trans-regional terrorist brotherhood of disparate South-east Asian groups linked by a militant Islamic ideology to each other and to Al-Qaeda. Whatever their specific goals, these groups were committed to mutual help in the pursuit of their common ideology: They helped each other with funds and support services, in training and in joint operations.

In 1999, JI formed a secret caucus called the Rabitatul Mujahideen, meaning Mujahideen Coalition, to bring together various militant South-east Asian Islamic groups. Between 1999 and 2000, Rabitatul Mujahideen met three times in Kuala Lumpur. It was responsible for the bombing attack against the Philippine ambassador to Indonesia in Jakarta in August 2000. The brain behind the attack was Hambali, the link man between South-east Asian terrorism and Al-Qaeda. Fortunately, he is now under arrest.

But the threat remains. It stems from a religious ideology infused with an implacable hostility to all secular governments, especially the West, and in particular the US. Their followers want to recreate the Islam of seventh century Arabia, which they regard as the golden age. Their ultimate goal is to bring about a Caliphate linking all Muslim communities. Their means is jihad, which they narrowly define as a holy war against all non-Muslims whom they call 'infidels'.

The Arabs call this religious ideology Salafi. Our experience in South-east Asia is not without wider relevance because of what the Salafis themselves believe. This is what one of them, an Algerian named Abu Ibrahim Mustafa, has said: 'The war in Palestine, in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Algeria, in Chechnya and in the Philippines is one war. This is a war between the camp of Islam and the camp of the Cross, to which the Americans, the Zionists, Jews, their apostate allies and others belong. The goal of this war, which they falsely called a War on Terror, is to prevent the Muslims from establishing an Islamic state...'

Likewise, JI's ultimate goal is a Caliphate, by definition not confined to South-east Asia. The dream of a Caliphate may seem absurd to the secular mind. But it will be a serious mistake to dismiss its appeal to many in the Islamic world, though the majority do not believe in killing and dying for it.

But there are radicals and militants who do. The terrorist brotherhood in South-east Asia and its links to Al-Qaeda were first forged through the struggle against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Ibrahim Maidin, the leader of the Singapore JI cell, underwent military training in Afghanistan in the early 1990s. His encounters with the Mujahideen deeply impressed him. Ibrahim wrote several letters to the Taleban supreme leader Mullah Mohammed Omar and to Osama bin Laden. He asked whether Mullah Omar was to be regarded as the Caliph of the Islamic world. After returning to Singapore, Ibrahim arranged for JI members to visit Afghanistan and to undergo training there.

When one of those convicted of the October 2002 Bali bombings was sentenced to death, he thanked the prosecutors and said that this would bring him closer to God and 'the death penalty would mean

nothing except strengthening my faith'.

Islamic militancy is not new to South-east Asia. But what is new is this type of fanatical global ideology (including the phenomenon of suicide bombers) that has been able to unite different groups and lead South-east Asian groups to subordinate local interests to the broader struggle.

Ibrahim has confessed to a senior Singapore intelligence officer that in retrospect, he made the mistake of moving too quickly and should have waited for Malaysia, Indonesia, the southern Philippines and Singapore to become an Islamic state before acting against US interests. But he still believes that his side would ultimately win. He also said that as long as the US was 'doing things against the Muslims', the JI would continue to attack the US.

From our experience in South-east Asia, I draw three principal conclusions that I believe have a wider relevance.

NO COMPROMISE

FIRST, the goals of these terrorists make the struggle a zero sum game for them. There is no room for compromise except as a tactical expedient. America may be the main enemy but it is not the only one. What Osama bin Laden offered Europe was only a 'truce', not a lasting peace.

The war against terrorism today is a war against a specific strain of militant Islamic terrorism that wants, in effect, a 'clash of civilisations' or, in the words of the Algerian I earlier quoted, 'a war between the camp of Islam and the camp of the Cross'.

The JI has tried to create the conditions for Christians and Muslims in South-east Asia to set against one another. In December 2000, it attacked churches in Indonesia, including one church on an Indonesian island off Singapore. It has sent its members to fight and stir up trouble in Ambon against Christians.

At the trial of those responsible for the Bali bombings of October 2002, one of the defendants, Amrozi, dubbed by the media as the 'smiling terrorist', said that he was not sorry for the Westerners killed in the Bali attacks. He said: 'How can I feel sorry? I am very happy, because they attack Muslims and are inhuman.' In fact, he wished 'there were more American casualties'. What was most chilling is that this hatred is impersonal.

One of those we detained in Singapore was a service engineer with an American company. He confessed that he actually liked his American friends and bosses. He was nevertheless involved in targeting American interests. We have a sense that he had struggled with this. He eventually decided to testify against the spiritual leader of JI, Abu Bakar Bashir, but only because he felt betrayed by Bashir's denial of the very existence of the JI organisation which Bashir headed and to whom he and other members had sworn allegiance.

The favourite tactic of terrorists of all stripes has always been to try to provoke a backlash to serve their cause. When news of the JI arrests broke, my immediate concern was to maintain social cohesion in Singapore. Singapore is a multiracial society with a 15 per cent Muslim population. They

are well integrated in our schools, housing estates and the workplace. Nevertheless, misunderstandings could easily arise. We met Muslim leaders in a number of closed-door sessions to share details of the investigations and to explain that the arrests were not targeted against the Singapore Muslim community or Islam.

I also held dialogues with several thousand grassroots leaders of all ethnic groups and religions to make clear that I viewed the Muslim community in Singapore as peace-loving and to stress that the JI arrests should not cause fault lines to develop in inter-racial and inter-religious relations. We formed inter-racial confidence circles in schools and workplaces to promote better inter-racial and inter-religious understanding between the different communities.

But on a global plane, I sense that the beginnings of a backlash may already be upon us. Antagonism against Muslims has risen in Europe and the US since 9/11. A number of senior European politicians have spoken against admitting Muslim Turkey into the European Union. The municipal government of Rotterdam wants to change the city's racial profile and an all-party report to the Dutch parliament recently concluded that 30 years of multicultural policy had failed; yet Holland is one of the most liberal and tolerant of European countries. In Britain, the chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality has dismissed multiculturalism as out of date and no longer useful.

Muslims are feeling this unease with them. Perhaps as a response, many of the younger generation of Muslims everywhere are increasingly adopting the symbols of religiosity.

My second conclusion is that it is only through absolute and unsentimental clarity about the threat we face that we can define, differentiate and therefore isolate militant Islamic terrorism from mainstream Islam. It is not sufficient to repeat, mantra-like, that the majority of Muslims are peaceful and do not believe in violence. Unfortunately, we too often sacrifice clarity to be politically correct.

Last month, the Muslim Council of Britain, a government-linked organisation, provoked a storm of protests when it asked the authorities of some 1,000 mosques to preach peaceful Islamic doctrines, be vigilant against Islamists and cooperate fully with the police. Baroness Uddin, a Labour peer of Bangladeshi origin, condemned it as 'entirely unacceptable that 1,000 mosques were written to as if they were all harbouring terrorists' and accused the council of supporting a witch hunt. But who would be better than the Muslims themselves to make the necessary distinctions? If we pretend in the name of political correctness that distinctions ought not be made, it is inevitable that all Muslims be viewed with suspicion.

This brings me to my third and perhaps most important conclusion. Just as the Cold War was an ideological as well as a geopolitical struggle, the war against terrorism must be fought with ideas as well as with armies, with religious and community leaders as well as police forces and intelligence services.

GLOBAL MENACE

THIS ideological struggle is already upon us. The terrorist threat has moved beyond any individual or group. It has become a global menace. Unless we win the battle of ideas, there will be no dearth of

willing foot soldiers ready to martyr themselves.

This ideological struggle is far more complex than the struggle against communism because it engages not just reason but religious faith. Non-Muslims have no locus standi to engage in this struggle for the soul of Islam. It is a matter for Muslims to settle among themselves.

In Singapore, one of those we arrested admitted that he and others had been programmed and manipulated to have a 'tunnel vision' of the concept of jihad. Another detainee told our security authorities that he hoped an ustaz or religious teacher could come to the detention centre to help him 'purge' his wrong ideas about Islam and teach him 'true Islam'. In other words, although he recognised that his religious teachings were wrong, he would acknowledge only a religious authority to change his ideas.

We were fortunate that in Singapore the Muslim community and Islamic leaders trusted the Government sufficiently to be willing to offer their help. They understood that unless they acted, all Muslims could have been tarred by a few. A number of Islamic religious teachers have volunteered their services to our security authorities to undertake religious counselling and rehabilitation of our JI detainees.

We welcome their help. But as a secular government, we cannot and do not tell religious teachers what they must preach. As long as they do not espouse violence, we must be prepared to risk a certain amount of criticism. Religious leaders regarded as too pro-government may not be credible to their ground. Participation in the rehabilitation of JI detainees by Islamic scholars and counsellors gave the Muslim community in Singapore a stake in combating extremist Islamic terrorism. It facilitated the evolution of self-policing by the Muslim community and helped inoculate it against radical elements.

This may seem an obvious point. A Rand report released in March categorised Muslims into fundamentalists, traditionalists, modernists and secularists. The report recommended that the West support the modernists first; support the traditionalists against the fundamentalists; confront and oppose the fundamentalists; and selectively support the secularists. Such an approach is a start. But I believe that it oversimplifies the problem by failing to recognise what all Muslims share in common. It overstates the differences within the global Muslim community.

THE UMMAH IS REAL

IT IS a fact that there is a living, vibrant Islamic ummah or global Islamic community, perhaps more so today than in any time in modern world history. The ummah is not monolithic. But the identification that all Muslims feel for events affecting other Muslims has become real and visibly stronger and more widespread since global communications have facilitated the dahwa or missionary activities of the Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia preaching and spreading Wahhabism with its oil wealth. Denying that there is such a globalised Muslim political and religious consciousness, or trying to argue that a universal ummah is a danger or somehow undesirable, only mobilises all Muslims to dig in as they feel their religion is under siege.

What we are confronted with is a dynamic spectrum and not static categories within the ummah.

When we ask why is it that moderates in such a spectrum do not raise their voices to challenge extremists, we must acknowledge that one reason is that on many issues they share much common ground even when they disagree on particulars.

Do you seek to change the world by prayer and faith? Do you work with an imperfect reality and strive towards its perfection? Do you not reject all that is not Islamic and seek to destroy it by force so as to re-establish the perfect Caliphate? These are all questions that vibrate and resonate around a single axis of faith.

We know that we should work with the moderates and isolate the extremists. But as we seek to separate the wheat from the chaff, we need to recognise that both come from the same plant. How we seek to engage and encourage the Muslim world to fight the ideological battle against the extremists must reflect this sensitivity and awareness.

This is complicated but not impossible. In Malaysia, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi fought the Islamic party, PAS, on the issue of the kind of Islamic state that Malaysia should be. He won a resounding victory in the general election. He checked PAS' advance towards an austere Muslim state with syariah laws with his vision of an Islamic state that is Islam Hadhari or 'Progressive Islam'. He has joined issue not on whether Malaysia should be an Islamic state but on the nature of such a state; and the struggle to define Malaysia's Islamic state will continue for a long time.

In Indonesia, Islamic-based parties generally did not do as well as parties that do not campaign under the banner of Islam in the recent parliamentary elections. But the Islamic parties will remain a crucial swing factor in the presidential elections later this year.

I recently travelled to Egypt, Jordan and Bahrain and also met a number of other Middle Eastern leaders in Singapore. I found them determined to fight the ideology that feeds the Islamic terrorists through educational reform and other means. They understand the problem. I am encouraged by these signs and am trying to initiate a dialogue between Asia and the Middle East to share experiences and forge understanding. India and South-east Asia together have more Muslims than in the Middle East. It is possible Asian Muslims can make a contribution to the ideological fight.

ROLE OF THE U.S.

ONLY the US has the capacity to lead the geopolitical battle against the Islamic terrorists. Iraq has become the key battleground. Before he was killed in Saudi Arabia, Yousef Al Aiyyeri, author of the Al-Qaeda blueprint for fighting in Iraq, said: 'If democracy succeeds in Iraq, that would be the death of Islam.' That is why Osama bin Laden and others have put so much effort to try and break the coalition and America's resolve to stay the course to build a modern Iraq that Muslims will be proud of. Those who do not understand this, play into their hands. The key issue is no longer weapons of mass destruction or even the role of the United Nations. The central issue is America's credibility and will to prevail. If that is destroyed, Islamic extremists everywhere will be emboldened. We will all be at greater risk.

But the US cannot lead the ideological battle. The Rand report also fails to sufficiently acknowledge the deep distrust Muslims across the spectrum feel for the West and for the US in particular. It

overstates the ability of any external force to influence one Muslim group against another. Recently, a Malaysian Muslim academic told one of my officials that while moderate Muslims did not condone what the extremists were doing, they were reluctant to speak up because they felt that this was a Western agenda and did not want to play into the hands of the US and its allies. They were distrustful that the US would manipulate Muslim voices for its own agenda.

The sources of Muslim anger and distrust of the US are complex. At one level, it is perhaps no different from the discomfort many, including US friends and allies, feel about US pre-eminent supremacy. At another level, it reflects the anguish of societies unable to cope with US-led globalisation and its occasional unilateralism. But I can think of no Muslim society anywhere in the world where the Palestinian issue does not provoke a basic, common emotional response, no matter how it may be expressed or intellectually articulated.

I am familiar with and indeed fully agree with the argument that even if the Palestinian-Israeli conflict were to be resolved, terrorism would not end. This is only logical, given the ideologically driven motivations of Islamist terrorists of the Al-Qaeda strain. But while most Muslims do not approve of suicide bombings, they all do empathise with the plight of Palestinian Muslims. They are angered and disappointed by what they perceive as America's acquiescence in Israel's disproportionate use of force against the Palestinians and, most recently, its policy of 'targeted assassinations'. They are critical of what they regard as America's double standards, citing, for example, the US determination in taking action against Iraq but not Israel for non-compliance with UN Security Council resolutions. These are views expressed consistently by leaders of Muslim nations whom I have met, including those most strongly supportive of America.

The end of the Palestinian conflict will not end terrorism. But moderating the perception that Muslims have of America's role in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict would certainly go a long way to moderating their view of the US. And this is essential if the ideological battle is to be won.

I am aware of the various measures that the US has taken to try to win the Muslim mind, such as setting up radio and television stations to broadcast alternative views of US policies to the Middle East. But the real issue is political policies, not public relations.

Like it or not, the Palestinian issue has become the lens through which Muslims around the world view the war against terror and actions against Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, among others. That is why when, for example, one of the convicted Bali bombers, Imam Samudra, justified his actions by claiming that 'the war against America and its allies is a war against evil, against tyranny and a war against terrorism and this is jihad in the path of Allah', it strikes a disconcerting resonance in the Muslim community.

And that is why when the likes of Abu Bakar Bashir claim that the CIA engineered the Bali bombings 'to discredit Islam', even rational, educated Muslims do not speak out to dismiss what they know to be preposterous.

I know that these are sensitive issues. I do not want to be misunderstood. Singapore is a friend of Israel. Israel helped Singapore build up its armed forces and to survive at a time when no other country in the world, not even the US or Britain, was confident enough in us to take the risk of doing

so. We will always be grateful. Singapore's relationship with Israel is one of the best in Asia.

But like most people in the world, we watch the escalating cycle of violence with deep anguish - 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'. We know there are no simple solutions. Still, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the cycle of violence fuel the global ideological struggle in which we are now all engaged. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict can no longer be seen only as a regional conflict or a matter of the self-defence of one country. The Palestinians know this. They know that Israel's reactions win sympathy for their cause from Muslims all around the world and help the Islamic terrorists.

We are unfortunately now in a situation where Muslim friends of the US feel uncomfortable about speaking out in America's defence and where mainstream Muslims hesitate to condemn extremists lest they be regarded as supporting the West. Beyond the Palestinian issue, I found many Middle Eastern leaders uncomfortable with the pace at which the US is urging reforms for the region. They are concerned that their interests and fears are not taken seriously enough by the US. Unless the US gains the confidence of the mainstream Muslims, they will not engage the extremists vigorously. If they do not, I fear the ideological battle will be lost.

Education and opportunities for further studies abroad, especially for Muslim women, are crucial to winning the ideological fight. This is an area in which the West can play an important role. There is nothing wrong with the right type of religious education. But if mental horizons are shaped only by a religious education of even the most mainstream type, it means a limitation of opportunities for jobs and career development. And if opportunities are limited, sooner or later any religion will turn inwards on itself. This will make it easier for deviant ideologies to take root. In Singapore, we have insisted that the madrasahs or religious schools include a secular curriculum that will enable its graduates to make a living.

Genuine post-9/11 security concerns should not lead the West to shut off or shun the Muslim world. To do so will be self-defeating. But with grants, scholarships, fellowships and investments, the West should seek to create maximum exposure, engagement and opportunities. Once Muslims have been exposed to the modern world as in Malaysia or Indonesia, and have benefited from it without compromising their faith, it will be much more difficult for the Islamic ideological strain that only harks backwards to the seventh century to take root.

I found the Middle Eastern countries I recently visited, in particular Bahrain and Jordan, eager to build modern economies. We are close to concluding a free-trade agreement with Jordan and have agreed to start negotiations on an FTA with Bahrain. We are also pursuing similar initiatives with Egypt and Qatar. Viewed in the context of the broader ideological struggle, FTAs are strategic as well as economic choices by these governments.

Other Arab countries should be encouraged to plug themselves into the 21st century economy. Education, development, opportunities for employment and career development are not only what most Muslims themselves want. They are also less sensitive areas than democracy, human rights or equality for women and can be pushed more vigorously with less prospect of resistance. Education, including education for women and better employment opportunities which bring about a higher standard of living are areas in which mainstream Muslims and the West have clear common interests. With education will come greater access to news and information and knowledge beyond their own

borders.

Social and political changes will take time but progress will be unstoppable. A gradual approach is more likely to succeed and take root than a 'big bang' strategy which could have unpredictable and unwelcome results.

If we are to win the war against terrorism, we must, as Sun Tze in The Art Of War says, understand the enemy. And we must, all of us, Muslims and non-Muslims, Americans, Europeans, Arabs and Asians, unite against it. But we must create the conditions that will make this essential unity possible.

Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong delivered this speech to the Council on Foreign Relations, Washington's premier think-tank, last night.