

The Dominant Perspective on Terrorism and Its Implication for Social Cohesion: The Case of Singapore

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Abstract

This paper seeks to portray and examine the dominant understanding of terrorism as reflected in official discourse in Singapore. It also evaluates its impact on attempts aimed at combating terrorism's potent threat to social cohesion. It is maintained that pervasive influence of the culturalist approach woven into the understanding of terrorism has had the effect of thrusting into focus Islam and certain presumptions of the identity and culture of the Muslim community of Singapore. The dominance of this approach conditions and compounds the lack of a more comprehensive and objective analysis of the phenomenon informed by concepts and methodology from the social sciences. This impedes efforts at fostering social resilience and cohesion aimed at thwarting the looming threat of terrorism.

Keywords: Terrorism, Singapore, social cohesion, Muslim community, Malays, politics

Introduction

In Singapore, official discourse on the 9/11 tragedy and the 'war on terror' thrust into focus once again the problem of social cohesion (Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs 2003: 23). With its ethnically plural society comprising a Chinese majority (about 76 percent), a substantial minority of Malay/Muslims (about 15 percent) and a smaller percentage of Indians and others, social cohesion has been a major political concern since Singapore's inception in 1965. This paper seeks to examine how the problem is managed in the context of post-9/11. It contends that the understanding of terrorism reveals the persistence of the dominance of the culturalist perspective, which has the effect of focusing on Islam as the crux of the issue. This not only impedes a more comprehensive understanding of terrorism but may undermine the very efforts at fostering cohesion.

From the outset since 9/11, Singapore's political elite has publicly declared that the war on terror is not a war against Islam nor is the

Muslim community in Singapore in any way associated with the perpetrators of the tragedy who have called for a global holy war. Such declarations were important to defuse the rising contempt for Muslims by a section of non-Muslims in Singapore as the backlash of inter-communal hatred could cause serious disruption to national cohesion, as Singapore prepares to support the United States' initiatives against Iraq, Afghanistan and the Al-Qaeda terrorist network. Thus, shortly after the 9/11 attack, Goh Chok Tong, then prime minister, issued a stern warning to this effect:

We do not want Singapore to be polarized along racial and religious lines. All communities... must see the conflict for what it is – a war against a common enemy, terrorism, and not one against Islam. We must not equate Islam with the terrorist acts of Muslims who perpetrate them. We will deal seriously with anyone who tries to exploit the current situation to inflame relations between racial and religious groups.¹

Similarly, Lee Kuan Yew declared: 'It is necessary to emphasize that the war against terrorism is not a war against Islam. The majority of Muslims have nothing to do with terrorism or extremism.'²

Yet, the perception that Islam is inextricably intertwined with the problem recurred. Speeches expressed concern with what has gone wrong with Islam as political leaders delved into theological conflicts in the history of Muslim societies³ and pointed out that 'militant terrorist groups have hijacked Islam as their driving force and have given it a virulent twist' as they set out 'to impose their version of Islam.'⁴ Lee's assertion that underlying the problem of radicalism is the battle for the soul of Islam reinforced this view:

We have as neighbours over 200 million Muslims in Indonesia and some 15 million in Malaysia. At first sight, this is a struggle between extremist radicals in the Muslim world on one side and America, Israel and their western allies on the other. But look deeper and you will see that at its heart, it is a struggle about what Islam means between the extremist Muslims and the rationalist Muslims, between fundamentalist Muslims and modernist Muslims (*Straits Times* 20 February 2003: 17).

Although Lee alluded to the rise of terrorism in the context of the cold war, this angle was not consistently pursued in official discourse.

That religion is the issue is also implied in Foreign Minister George Yeo's comments:

The interaction between Islam and Christianity over the centuries has been a troubled and difficult one. Memories of the crusades still run deep. Terrorism has complicated matters further. September 11 forced religious leaders on

both sides to look hard at each other's positions wondering whether any reconciliation is possible. In Singapore, September 11 and the discovery of JI network encouraged Muslim and Christian leaders to reach out to each other (*Straits Times* 18 March 2008: 20).

Dominance of the Culturalist Approach

While at one level of the discourse, Islam is removed from the problem of terrorism, at another, it is woven into it. This inconsistency manifests the prevalent influence of the culturalist approach in analyzing issues involving Muslims in general, reinforced by 9/11. Characterized by a style of thought in which perspectives and methodology of the social sciences utilized in understanding culture and society are largely neglected, this approach is not anti-culture as such, but shores up an essentialized one. In this perspective, Islam constitutes the single major force that shapes Muslims' sentiments, attitudes, values and orientations, relationships with Muslims and non-Muslims and perceptions on a myriad of issues, as it is deemed 'a discrete entity, a coherent and closed set of beliefs, values and anthropological patterns embodied in a common society, history and territory' (Roy 2004: 9). Being an 'exploratory concept for almost everything involving Muslims', Islam is reductively ascribed as the main motive that conditions Muslims' thought and action in ways that are common and predictable. It is also the factor accorded overriding significance in explaining their problems and drawbacks (Roy 2004: 9-17).⁵

This approach is also manifested by an imagination of the *ummah* (unity of believers of the same faith) as an exclusive group, distinguished from others in terms of worldview, attitudes, beliefs, sense of values shared more in common by them than with non-Muslims and which condition judgment pertaining to matters affecting their own kind. Differences and alignment within the *ummah* are attributed to variation of theological leanings regardless of the innumerable diversity of group thought, ideological interests, traditions, politics, history and cultures of the Muslims.

A number of factors, some external to Singapore, condition its prevalence, including the use of Islam to justify terrorism, the focus on conflicts involving Muslims, the constant confusion between Islam as a religion and Muslim culture and the 'compelling need for instant analysis' by observers, politicians and the public (Roy 2004: 9-17).⁶ Equally pertinent is the inundation of publications that make Islam the issue, such as Islam and violence, Islam and terrorism, the Islamist menace as well

as apologetic denials of these.⁷ Compounding these is the ideologically motivated rhetoric Mamdani characterized as 'Culture Talk' (Mamdani 2004: 17-62). Unlike culture studied by anthropologists (face-to-face, local and intimate), this comes in ready-made geo-political packages used as the basis to explain those in favour of a peaceful, civic existence and those inclined to terror.

The geo-politics of the region are no less pertinent. Historically, Islam has been the potent force that mobilized Malay/Muslims against the governing elite in the context of colonialism necessitating colonial governments to contain its influence.⁸ Singapore's model of multiculturalism premised on race, which forms the primary means of social classification and basis of significant policies, also tends to downplay heterogeneity within ethnic groups and commonalities between them (Clammer 1998: 173).⁹ Its predominantly Chinese population in the midst of a Muslim majority region and fear of potential divided loyalty of its Malay/Muslims in the face of aggression by its neighbours may also compound the prevalence of the perspective.¹⁰ Being the only Chinese majority state with two neighbours with entrenched communal politics vis-a-vis their more economically dominant Chinese minority makes it even more vulnerable to this approach in its ideology of survival. Although the state does not adopt a communal economic policy as in Malaysia, the perspective conditions its management of ethnic relations and political representation. Furthermore, its strong alliance with the US and Israel, and being the only country in the region that supported the US invasion of Iraq, could have induced fear of vulnerability to terrorists' reprisals impacting the need to balance its foreign policy with ethnic relations management. These could have been reinforced by projections of Muslims in the region as 'potentially sympathetic' to terrorist networks (Ramakrishna 2002: 5).

The issue with the culturalist approach is not in its assumption that Muslims share concern for one another when it involves problems affecting their own kind, for such sentiments are not unique to them. Its major limitation is its presumption that this common religious bond can override other considerations and impair objectivity when it concerns matters affecting them. The approach existed long before 9/11 and the Bali bombings but is reinforced after these tragic events. For instance, it is manifested in the basis underlying Muslims' appointments to strategic positions in national security. As Lee in a dialogue with community leaders explicated,

These are realities we have to weigh when deploying anyone to a sensitive appointment in the Singapore Armed Forces. We must never put the person in a situation where he may face a conflict of loyalties. ...it is a difficult matter to put a Malay Muslim of deeply religious family background in charge of a machine gun. We should never have to ask this of anyone...in the security services, because of our context, we cannot ignore race and religion in deciding suitability.¹¹

Such a perception, which strongly implies that should Singapore be attacked by a Muslim aggressor, Malays' loyalty may not be vouched for, reveals the strong presumption of the reified *ummah*. That Muslims would presumably face a dilemma merely because the aggressor is another Muslim, irrespective of any other consideration or object of war, downplays or negates variations and conflicts in values, thought, morality or ideological interests that are generally assumed of any society.

September 11 reinforced the dominance of the culturalist approach evident in official discourse highlighting Singaporean Muslims' sentiments on the war against terror. Though acknowledging Muslims' support for the government's stand on the war, speeches reiterated the problem of the *ummah* on social cohesion and warned of its growing strength with global communications and oil wealth from Saudi Arabia.¹² Muslims are repeatedly singled out and advised not to be taken in by terrorists that portray the US as being against Islam. As Goh asserted,

We are a multi-racial, multi-religious society and Singaporeans may not all react in the same way to the same events. It is important...that we get across the message that we support the US because it is fighting terrorism. Unfortunately, innocent Afghans are caught in the cross fire, and we sympathize with them. That is why we are extending humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. We must expect Osama, the Taliban and their followers to portray the US as being against Islam and attacking a Muslim country. They have called all Muslims to start a jihad against the US. I am comforted that our Muslims understand the issues and are not confused by the call.¹³

His reference to the notion of the 'clash of civilizations', which draws its source from Huntington's thesis (1996), is yet another manifestation of the prevalent perspective. Itself a symptom of the approach, the thesis is premised on a deep binary between two camps, Muslims and the Western Other, characterized by conflicts and clashes:

Osama's tactic is to turn the US war against terrorism into a war seen by Muslims as against Muslims. If he succeeds, he would have divided the world into Islamic and non-Islamic camps, and brought about a clash of civilizations. I do not think he will succeed because the Americans have been careful not to fall into his trap. Nevertheless, Osama's message strikes a chord amongst many Muslims, even moderate ones, because of deep

seated historic reasons and the strength of Muslim brotherhood. Hence, it is understandable why Singaporean Muslims feel strong sympathy for the fate of the Afghan civilians who are at risk of a humanitarian disaster.¹⁴

It is this perspective that prompts Goh to doubt a RAND Corporation study differentiating groups of Muslims. Though he admits its usefulness as a starting point, he asserts that it overstates differences within the global Muslim community and oversimplifies the problem by failing to recognize what all Muslims share in common.¹⁵

It is the dominance of the culturalist perspective that even allows room for pontificating that Muslims may sympathize with those who support or perpetrate terrorism. That Huntington's thesis surfaced in official local discourse despite it having been vehemently criticized, highlights its prevalence in understanding Muslims. Said (2001), for instance, had noted that the thesis overlooks internal dynamics and the plurality of civilizations and misses the fact that the major contest in most modern cultures concerns the definition or interpretation of each culture. The perspective also reduces identities to isolated entities devoid of the influence of human history, which has contained not only wars and conquests but also facilitated exchange, cross-fertilization and sharing.

Fear of the 'Ummah'

The fear of Muslims' potential sympathy for terrorists who would exploit fellow Muslims using a common religion reveals the dominance of the culturalist approach. Furthermore, focusing on Muslims as potential opponents of the war implies that non-Muslims are advocates of the war effort or are at least agreeable to it. While Muslims may well feel for their fellow Muslims threatened by the perils of war, their sentiments are also shaped by a myriad of considerations and principles that are not exclusive to them as Muslims, of which the cost to innocent human lives is not the least significant. From the outset, voices of dissent have proliferated on why war is deemed not the best course for punishment in spite of 9/11; these cut across religious and ethnic lines including factions within the American public itself and the United Nations. However, the overriding significance accorded to the *umamah* clouds the possibility of conceiving that Singaporean Muslims' thinking and sentiments on this issue are not necessarily homogenous or determined by ties of common faith in isolated, static, exclusive conditions. On the contrary, like others, including Singaporeans, their sentiments may well

be shaped by interaction with ideas produced and circulating in this shrinking global world. By locating the dilemma as one confronting the Muslim community per se, the culturalist approach assumes difference based on religion, which may impair a more accurate understanding of the sentiments of Singaporeans as well as diversity within the Muslim community itself.

Muslim's Religiosity and Religious Institutions

The focus on Islam has also renewed apprehension for Muslims' religiosity and religious institutions fostering social cohesion, which had been highlighted prior to 9/11. Muslims' involvement in mosques rather than in national organizations and some of their religious practices such as dietary restrictions were issues that have raised concerns bearing on integration. After 9/11, Goh had commented that while most Muslims in Singapore are moderate, open-minded and inclusive, there are some who have become rigid in the practice of their religion, such as those who insisted on headscarves in schools for girls and who preferred to eat separately from non-Muslims. He raised concern over the possibility that the increasingly narrow and rigid interpretation of their religion would discourage critical thinking and open them to exploitation by radical clerics, which happened to many members of the JI who are believed to have been indoctrinated into believing that taking part in a jihad could alone atone for their sins.¹⁶

The apprehension is also reflected in Lee's assertion that though his original concern was over the growing separateness of the Muslim community, which tended to centre its social activities in mosques instead of in multiracial community clubs, what came as a shock was that this heightened religiosity facilitated Muslim terror groups linked to Al-Qaeda to recruit Singaporean Muslims into their network.¹⁷ He opined that the increase in religiosity worldwide has

geared up whole populations and then some of those in a high pitch are hijacked by the extremist radicals to become jihadists. Al-Qaeda and their local extremists recruit from the mosques those who look suitable for their own religious classes, where they are taught that it is the duty of all good Muslims to fight for all oppressed Muslims worldwide and, if necessary, to die for the cause, to become *syahids* (martyrs) (*Straits Times* 30 December 2002: 30).

Such apprehension may well have been conditioned by the spotlight on radical preachers such as Abu Hamza Al-Masri, of Finsbury

Park Mosque in London, and others in Pakistan and Indonesia who used mosques and religious schools to preach radical ideas and obtain recruits. They provide fodder for the image of these institutions as conveyor belts for the radicalization of young people. However, such thinking leaves many important questions unanswered. For instance, it cannot explain how demanding the right to put on the *tudung* (headscarf) and eating separately from non-Muslims translates into violence, killing and terrorism or makes one participate in atrocities that involve taking away innocent lives. Nor can it explain why fundamentalist Muslims who insist that only their interpretation on various issues is right, never turn to violence that sanctions the killing of innocent people. Furthermore, research systematically examining factors generating recruitment have also dispelled these images and cautioned against overgeneralizations. Not only are these mosques or *madrasah* found to be very few in number, their connection with violence and terrorism is tempered by a collusion of factors that has been overlooked or missed (Sageman 2004). In many instances those involved in these atrocities were neither affiliated with religious institutions nor were they religious in terms of their observance of Islam (Roy 2004: 309-10). More importantly, in most of these cases mosques were meeting places but not themselves radical in terms of the teachings and activities they propagated.

As Islam and Muslim religiosity are accorded focus conditioned by the culturalist approach, the battle, it is asserted, must be undertaken by the Muslims themselves. Thus Goh declared:

This ideological struggle is far more complex than the struggle against communism because it engages not just reason but religious faith. You and I as 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.¹⁸

In this respect, an oft-cited authority is Gunaratna who maintains that while Al-Qaeda can be tackled militarily, it is only by challenging the Islamists' misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the Koran that the international community can inflict long-term strategic damage on the group. As such, an integral part of the strategy against Al-Qaeda should include exposing its heretical nature (*Straits Times* 15 October 2002: 13).

'Moderates' and 'Extremists'

Despite its complexity and diversity, the Muslim community, by virtue of the operation of the culturalist paradigm, is divided into two overarching entities, namely, the moderates and the extremists. The term 'moderates'

is malleable and has been used with different meanings including being less religious (*Straits Times* 26 August 2002: 11). It has also been utilized to refer to those who 'believe in the modern world and are part of the IT civilization' as opposed to the extremists who by implication reject these (*Straits Times* 3 December 2004: 10). Yet, such a notion contradicts the profile of many terrorists who, like the second generation of Al Qaeda militants, have been found to have emerged disproportionately from modern, secular education and institutions of learning.¹⁹

Stemming from the culturalist approach, these two categories are pitted against one another. In particular, the 'moderates' are expected to take the lead and counter the 'extremists' who promote violence and radicalism. As Lee maintains,

Governments can beef up their intelligence services, ferret out and destroy terrorist networks ... but only the Muslims themselves, those with moderate, more modern approach to life –can fight the fundamentalists for control of the Muslim soul. Muslims must counter the terrorist ideology that is based on a perverted interpretation of Islam' (*Straits Times* 7 October 2003: 18).

The framing of the problem as a matter of religion, which places the onus on the 'moderates' to resolve, is part of a wider discourse that has been traced to Bernard Lewis who believed that there are other groups (apart from the fundamentalists) and had warned of a hard struggle between them, which the west can do little or nothing about. It must remain a bystander while Muslims fight their internal war, pitting good against bad Muslims (Mamdani 2004 : 22-23).

That the 'moderates' themselves have had the task thrust upon them of having to fight their own misguided kind or otherwise suffer the consequence of remaining silent is reflected in Goh's counsel: 'If you do not isolate these groups, you leave them alone, the fringe groups will become bolder and bolder and they become more and more radical in their views. And then the non-Muslims will come to the conclusion that Muslims are like that, when it is not true.' The Muslim community is thus urged to establish some kind of 'self policing' mechanism to identify deviant groups, 'people who might be prone to terrorism' (*Straits Times* 1 February 2002: 11).

Warnings of a backlash to the silent 'moderates' who would be victimized, not only by the radicals but hate crimes by non-Muslims, also surfaced in Lee's statements:

But the crux of the battle really, the core battle, is between moderate and extreme Muslims. At the moment, the moderate Muslims are keeping out of sight. But if Madrid, 9/11, Bali and so on keep going on and the moderates in

the Muslim world keep silent, either condone or duck the issue, then there is a danger that the West may begin to feel, that really, there are no champions to counter these terrorists. ... That would become a very dangerous problem' (*Straits Times* 27 March 2004: H 2).

The culturalist perspective again surfaces in the reasons articulated for the perceived lack of support by the 'moderates' to speak up:

When we ask why it is that moderates in such a spectrum do not raise their voices to challenge extremists, we must acknowledge that one reason is that on so many issues they share much in common even when they disagree on particulars.... We know we should work with the moderates and isolate the extremists. But as we seek to separate the wheat from the chaff, we need to recognize 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.²⁰

Such statements imply that Muslims are restrained in condemning extremism from within their own society due in part to their common faith. Yet Muslims' historical consciousness and vehemence against immorality and bankruptcy of extremism occurred very early on in history. Alatas, for instance, traced evidence of terrorism to the hideous activities of the Khawarij during the reign of the Caliph Ali in the seventh century who resorted to terror against Muslims and created extreme fear and insecurity, which the Muslims struggled against (*Utusan Melayu* 23 May 2002). The common faith did not create a sense of ambivalence towards horrendous acts of violence perpetrated by those of the same faith. In the same spirit, innumerable Muslims across the globe have utterly condemned terrorism that has resulted in the sacrifice not only of the lives of innocent non-Muslims but Muslims themselves.

Thrusting the challenge onto the Muslim community does not mean that the government is washing its hands of the problem and it has certainly not. However, it has to some extent facilitated treating the community as a kind of interest association, charged with the duty of looking after the requirements of its own defined members (Brown 1993: 26).²¹ Muslims are also urged to make the religion understood by the non-Muslim majority, which many have responded to.

Muslim Elite's Reaction

The dominance of the culturalist perspective has also impacted strategies aimed at combating terrorism. Community leaders, for instance, have galvanized measures regulating who should teach Islam and what

should be taught. Surveillance of religious teachers has been institutionalized. One measure that has received much attention in the popular media is the Asatizah Recognition Scheme established by the Muslim Religious Council (MUIS) that seeks to prevent the propagation of deviant teachings by officially recognizing a selected pool of religious teachers for that purpose (*Straits Times* 10 June 2007: 2-3). The perspective has also resulted in the battle for the correct interpretations of Islam amongst Muslims themselves. They rhetorically call for Islam to be 'put in the right perspective', 'to adjust their [the Muslims'] approach, taking into account changing environment and circumstances', 'to strive for peace not animosity with mankind', to 'focus more on substance rather than form in religious practices' (*Business Times* 3 August 2002: 1-2), 'to be moderate in outlook, conscious of the situation around them and respond accordingly' (*Straits Times* 17 December 2001), to articulate an Islam relevant for Singapore, and one that is not inconsistent with being a loyal Singapore citizen (*Berita Harian* 8 August 2002).

The focus has also enhanced the role of a group of theologians who are inevitably constrained by the language of theology in analyzing terrorism. The rise to prominence of the Religious Rehabilitation Group, or RRG, formed in 2003, illustrates this point. Self-initiated by a few members of the religious elite, the efforts of the group in counseling JI detainees have been applauded by the government that sees itself in no position to counter misguided religious ideas (*Straits Times* 18 October 2005: H3; 19 February 2006: 7; 21 August 2006: H7). Also reaching out to educate students and youths, the RRG takes the line that terrorism is caused by the erroneous interpretation of Islam. Given this presumption, the group has focused on explaining the theological meanings of *Jihad*, (struggle), *Al Wala Wal Bara* (love and hatred), *Darul Islamiyah* (Islamic state), *Baiah* (oath of loyalty) and *Istimata* (seeking death through suicide), all of which seek to establish that Islam does not contribute to violence (*Straits Times* 3 February 2007: 8-9).²²

Moderate Muslims and the Issue of Identity

A more serious repercussion is the rise of groups positioning themselves as guardians of Islam within the community. Although they speak for moderation, their views on specific issues are problematic, such as the necessity of a collective voice on matters pertaining to Islam. This view, which in effect means that only the self proclaimed guardians can speak for Islam, reflects their level of tolerance for diversity. They

have also asserted that Islam is a comprehensive religion that governs all aspects of life including law, government and politics, but the political emasculation of Muslim minorities justifies the exemption of the full implementation of Islamic systems and Islamic law (minority *fikh*). Implicit in these writings is a style of thought that is based on a binary in principles between secular and Islamic systems. In principle they uphold the Islamic law on punishment (*hudud*) as a religious obligation, without discussing in detail what it entails, while maintaining that their minority status excludes them from implementing it. Similarly while they delve into tenth-century theological discourse on the legitimacy of territory of existence and the rights and obligations of minority Muslims in this context, they acknowledge at the end of the day that it is not incompatible in Islam for Muslims to work and live in Singapore.²³ Amongst them are sympathizers of political Islam who emphasize the need to contextualize theology to suit conditions where Muslims constitute a minority (Muhammed 2005).

Although they do not promote political activism that challenges the state, their thinking can create unwarranted problems bearing on integration. When state systems and institutions are constantly perceived as distinct from Islamic ones, polarities and ambivalence can result in the minds of ordinary Muslims. Rather than facilitate integration and partake as active citizens in the development of these national institutions, the result may well create or intensify doubts and condition exclusivist orientations and marginalization. Furthermore, such rhetoric is indeed alien to Malay/Muslim religious discourse in Singapore. Its undiscerning importation brings along with it concerns that are insignificant to Singaporean Muslims and drags the community into discussing issues irrelevant to them.

Another major reaction conditioned by the culturalist perspective in the context of post 9/11 is the Singapore Muslim identity project embarked upon by the Muslim Religious Council of Singapore, which has culminated in a charter explicating the Singaporean Muslim identity.²⁴ The charter aims to promote a community of excellence and progress based on the values of Islam. Here again, Islam is the focus as religious officials galvanize support from the community for the formalization of ten attributes that the Council deems integral to Singaporean Muslim identity.²⁵ These attributes, however, are well established in the basic teachings of Islam. The main challenge that has received much less attention is how these are reflected in Singaporean Muslims' religious institutions.

Development of Research

In effect, the dominance of the culturalist approach, which makes Islam the issue, blocks systematic and intellectually informed investigations based on the contributions of social science perspectives, concepts and methodology vital for a more comprehensive understanding of terrorism, which has been eloquently pointed out by Said (1994: 341-59). The problem is also reflected in Sidel's forceful critique (2008) against intellectual productions on the 'Islamist threat' in Southeast Asia. Of pertinence is his observation of the 'excessive narrowness in sources', dearth of critical discussion and the lack of the 'realm of explanation' that are found in the all-too-ready conclusions accounting for violence in the name of Islam. Much of these, he maintained, are based on sources that identify the bad guys and provide detailed accounts of their ideological influences using theological and other languages. Sidel demonstrated how this approach conditions not only the selection of problems but their level of abstraction resulting in pertinent gaps that limit understanding of the phenomenon (Sidel 2008).

Such works are part of the alternative discourse beyond theology in explaining terrorism, generally absent in official discourse. They are grounded in an analysis of history and the politics of alignment of specific political groups amidst the reconfiguration of political and economic power across societies. Mamdani (2005), for instance, locates 'Islamic' terrorism in the context of a political encounter in the late cold war dating from the American defeat in Vietnam. He demonstrated how America's ideology during the cold war justified alliances with Islamists in the battle against Soviet power in Afghanistan, which became a global jihad, and explained how it turned against America when the terms of the pact were not fulfilled. Though this political project harnessed aspects of Muslim tradition or culture, Mamdani asserts that it is a modern political movement at the service of a modern power and not a cultural affliction. Similarly, Roy's study concluded that radicalism 'is a political decision, formulated (after the decision to use lethal action has been made) in religious terms, which could even be considered *bid'a* or innovation.... There is no systematic link between a radical political position and theological thinking' (Roy 2004: 257).

Sageman's findings (2008), based on profiling the third wave of terrorists involved in the bombings in London and Spain, further caution reliance on the culturalist perspective.²⁶ It undermines the view that the phenomenon is predominantly intertwined with Muslim religious insti-

tutions or theological interpretations of Islam. He found that many were second generation marginalized migrants from secular, middle-class households who do not adhere to austere tenets of Islam, nor are they the product of poverty, ignorance, religious brainwashing or recruits from terrorist camps. They were in fact home-grown, self-recruited, young wannabees, seeking thrills and a sense of significance and belonging in their lives and connected through the internet. Some, such as those involved in the Madrid bombings, are running one of the most successful drug networks there. Sageman cautions that the explanation for their behaviour lies not in how they think but rather in how they feel, compounded by the moral outrage over the invasion of Iraq that he sees as fanning the violent orientation among these perpetrators in cyberspace. Further support is provided by (Abou Zahab and Roy's study (2004) on Islamist networks in Pakistan and Afghanistan, which revealed that these groups had little relation to avowed religious ideology although all purportedly give priority to the *ummah* above ethnic or nationalistic identities. The authors also explained shifts in ideology within these groups, which recourse to the culturalist mode cannot explain.²⁷ Such works dispel the 'ummist' perspective that makes Islam the issue. They provide insights into the complex diversity of radical groups in terms of their ideological beliefs, orientations and mode of operation and account for factors that condition radical shifts in ideologies within them.

That Islam is the issue is also challenged by recent findings based on the largest ever survey of Muslim opinion worldwide conducted by the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies.²⁸ The survey, carried out in 40 predominantly Muslim countries involving more than 50,000 interviews, revealed that radicals – defined as those who condone extremist acts like the September 11 attacks – form just about seven percent of the Muslim respondents worldwide. The most significant finding was that none within this group gave religious justification for their beliefs. Instead, their response was that the US 'deserved' the hit for reasons that were political. The overwhelming majority condemned the attacks because innocent lives were lost and civilians killed, with some saying their religion forbade such attacks. In most Muslim-majority countries, an overwhelming number of Muslims did not support extremism while saying that religion was a very important part of their lives – 99 percent in Indonesia, 98 percent in Egypt, 98 percent in Saudi Arabia and 95 percent in Pakistan.²⁹ The survey concluded that politics, not piety is the dividing line between those who advocate violence and those who don't.

Implications for Social Cohesion

Such alternative sources and perspectives are crucial to providing a more informed understanding of the problem that cannot be overlooked in seeking remedies to eradicate the threat of terrorism and avoid potential negative backlash on social cohesion. As long as the problem of terrorism is perceived as closely rooted in theological interpretations of Islam, which the Muslim community must resolve, little can be done to bridge understanding. Furthermore, it reinforces the danger of groups with vested interests who will misuse Islam to create insecurities and friction, undermining social cohesion. This will intensify the very concern of the government encapsulated in Goh's statement:

Our greater worry is the threat to our security, and to our racial and religious harmony following the discovery of terrorist activities in our country. ... Should a terrorist threat in Singapore by some extreme group ever succeed, it would do untold harm. Not only would it cause the loss of life and property, but far worse, it would also result in profound misunderstanding and distrust between the different communities.³⁰

Muslims themselves have expressed unease over the focus on Islam and their religiosity. They maintain that it has created an unwarranted image of the community and questioned whether this was necessary when terrorist attacks involved a handful of extremists. This has necessitated Malay political leaders to urge Muslims not to jump to conclusions about the intentions of non-Muslim political leaders (*Straits Times* 10 June 2002: 6).

The government has repeatedly stressed the need for social cohesion, not merely as a counter to terrorism's backlash on the Muslims, but also to eradicate it (Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs 2003: 23). It urged the Chinese not to distrust or discriminate against the Muslims because of the acts of few extremists while Muslims are told not to harbour suspicions against non-Muslims. It has also introduced various strategies towards fostering harmony and trust including the establishment of Inter Racial Confidence Circles (IRCC) and the Code of Religious Values, which aim to widen networks and deepen linkages between ethnic groups. In addition, civic groups have called for the creation of alternative, ethnically neutral platforms to strengthen understanding and trust as a counter to existing community-based self-help groups that are believed to reinforce differences and exclusiveness.³¹

Without doubt, all these efforts are inspired by a commitment to social cohesion. However, there are already sufficient major institutions

that embody values of social justice and equality in the domains of religion, education, politics and government, law and culture, and the arts within Singaporean multiracial society conditioned by the social philosophy of elites in these domains. One cannot agree more with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who maintained that by continuing to uphold the ideals of meritocracy and equal opportunity and treatment regardless of race, language and religion, we can build confidence and trust between the different communities and that building trust takes time and requires frequent interaction between leaders and members of the public of different ethnic and religious groups (*Straits Times* 10 February 2006: H9).

This positive ideal of cohesion will, however, be marred as long as the culturalist perspective remains dominant. It hampers awareness of our common destiny and humanity. Community leaders have asserted with certainty that if a bomb went off in Singapore and if radicalized Muslim Singaporeans were found to be responsible, distrust and hate crimes between the races would result. This reveals how deeply the culturalist perspective has conditioned the understanding of terrorism as intertwined with Islam (*Straits Times* 17 December 2005: H7). Government leaders' speeches revealing that after 9/11 some non-Muslims feared entering the same lift with Muslims and that Chinese companies may refuse to employ them are further evidence of the deep distrust and insecurity harboured by some.³²

The danger of the culturalist approach is that it can be abused by those who succumb to irrationalism, prejudice, malice and hatred for the other. It may also reinforce tribalism, parochialism and bigotry, all of which are traits of negative orientations that undermine the well-being of plural societies as they thwart the need to think in terms of humanistic values and our common humanity.³³ The major challenge lies in upholding and strengthening progressive and inclusive orientations within existing institutions to defend against the threat of terrorism and safeguard social cohesion. In this struggle there is no place for the culturalist perspective.

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NOTES

- ¹ Goh, Chok Tong. Speech at the Dialogue Session with Union Leaders/Members and Employees, Singapore, 14 October 2001. Available from: <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public/> (accessed 5 May 2009).
- ² Lee, Kuan Yew. Speech at the First International Institute for Strategic Studies Asia Security Conference, Shangrila Hotel, Singapore, 31 May 2002. Available from: <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public/> (accessed 5 May 2009).
- ³ Goh, Chok Tong. Speech at the National Day Rally, Singapore, 18 August 2002. Available from: <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public/> (accessed 5 May 2009).
- ⁴ Lee, Kuan Yew. Speech at the First International Institute for Strategic Studies Asia Security Conference, op. cit.
- ⁵ Roy's discussion on defining a cultural community is relevant (Roy 1999: 56-65). See also Said's critique of according Islam overriding significance in understanding Muslims (Said 1997: xv-xlviii).
- ⁶ Roy (2004) maintains that even then, few involve Islam, even if reference is made to it in the aftermath in ideological terms.
- ⁷ See for instance, Lewis (1990). On discussions by local scholars on the issue, refer to Tan (2002) and Desker (2003).
- ⁸ For a discussion on Dutch policy on Islam, refer to Benda (1958: 9-31).
- ⁹ For a discussion on the construction of the Chinese race, refer to Clammer (1998:164-74).
- ¹⁰ Singapore's position within the region prompted the PAP to liken it to an 'independent Israel in Southeast Asia' in its rationale for merger and influenced the establishment of an alliance with the US as the strong defense partner, based on the Israeli experience (Chan 1971: 11).
- ¹¹ Lee, Kuan Yew. 'Loyalty and the SAF'. Speech at Dialogue Session with AMP and Majlis Pusat, Parliament House Auditorium, Singapore, 3 March 2001. Available from: <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public/> (accessed 5 May 2009).
- ¹² Goh, Chok Tong. 'Beyond Madrid: Winning Against Terrorism'. Speech to Council on Foreign Relations, Washington DC, 6 May 2004. Available from: <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public/> (accessed 5 May 2009).
- ¹³ Goh, Chok Tong. Speech at the Dialogue Session with Union Leaders/Members and Employees, Nanyang Polytechnic, Singapore, 14 October 2001. Available from: <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public/> (accessed 6 May 2009).
- ¹⁴ Goh, Chok Tong. 'Beyond Madrid: Winning Against Terrorism', op. cit.
- ¹⁵ Goh, Chok Tong. 'Beyond Madrid: Winning Against Terrorism', op. cit. For details on the RAND report, refer to Rabasa (2004).
- ¹⁶ Goh, Chok Tong. 'National Day Rally Address'. University Cultural Center, NUS, Singapore, 18 August 2002. Available from: <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public/> (accessed 6 May 2009).
- ¹⁷ Lee, Kuan Yew. Speech at the First International Institute for Strategic Studies Asia Security Conference, op. cit.
- ¹⁸ Goh, Chok Tong. 'Beyond Madrid: Winning Against Terrorism', op. cit.
- ¹⁹ For a brief account of the profile of these terrorists, see Roy (2004: 51-52) and Kurzman (2002: 1-2).
- ²⁰ Goh, Chok Tong. 'Beyond Madrid: Winning Against Terrorism', op. cit.
- ²¹ Brown perceives this as part of the 'corporatist' model in the management of race in Singapore's politics.
- ²² See also Muhammad Haniff Hassan and Mohamed bin Ali (2007).
- ²³ These views are contained in the work of PERGAS (2004).

- ²⁴ The *Straits Times* (7 May 2003: 12,13) provides a report of the context and rationale underlying the articulation of the Singapore Muslim Identity.
- ²⁵ The ten attributes are identified and discussed in Muslim Religious Council of Singapore (2006).
- ²⁶ For a more detailed account of the profile and group dynamics based on 400 biographies from trial records in New York in 2001, refer to Sageman (2004).
- ²⁷ For a discussion on shifts in ideological and religious alignment of Islamist groups in Pakistan and the role of ethnicity often overlooked, refer to Abou Zahab and Roy (2004).
- ²⁸ Available from: http://cmes.hmdc.harvard.edu/files/ModerateExtreme_Flyer_POLL_01.08.pdf (accessed February 2009).
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Goh, Chok Tong. 'Prime Minister's New Year Message 2002'. Available from: <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public/> (accessed 6 May 2009).
- ³¹ See Gillian Koh (2006). Refer also to the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) (2006).
- ³² Goh, Chok Tong. Opening Remarks at Dialogue with Community Leaders on Impact of Arrest of JI Operatives, Kallang Theatre, Singapore, 28 January 2002. Available from: <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public/> (accessed 6 May 2009).
- ³³ Shaharuddin's (1980) discussion on the traits of the backward mind in religious experience and its impact on the well-being of plural society is highly useful in this context. Though his insights deal with negative religious orientations, his critique may well extend to orientations that are not based on religious beliefs.

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