

**Reaching  
the Youth:  
Countering  
the Terrorist  
Narrative**

THOMAS KORUTH SAMUEL



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**Reaching the Youth : Countering the Terrorist Narrative/**

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**SEARCCT** is dedicated to advocating the understanding of issues pertaining to terrorism and contributing ideas for counter-terrorism policy. The Centre accomplishes this mainly by organising capacity building courses, research, publications and public awareness programmes.

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*Said the boy, 'He learned how soft water, by  
attrition over the years will grind strong rocks away.  
In other words, hardness must lose the day.'*

**Bertolt Brecht**



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## FOREWORD

It is becoming clear that terrorist organisations today are recruiting and influencing young people to carry out acts of violence in the name of God and various other ideologies. Sadly many youths, irrespective of race, religion, education background or economic status have fallen prey to the violent rhetoric propagated by these groups.

The growing presence of young suicide bombers influenced by the leaders of mushrooming extremist groups is a serious indicator of a growing gap between youths and the awareness of the need for non-violence in achieving their objectives. The bombings in Bombay in 2008 and the establishment of the *Jemaah Islamiyah* and the *Abu Sayaff Group* are but a few cases that indicate this growing trend.

However, efforts in countering terrorism in both this region and beyond have focused mainly on the tactical and operational aspect of counter terrorism that emphasises the use of force. Unfortunately, an in-depth examination of the factors that push and pull youths into terrorism and strategies to counter the 'attractiveness' of the terrorist groups is lacking.

Realising this, the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT) in collaboration with the Japan – ASEAN Integration Fund (JAIF) and facilitated by the ASEAN Secretariat, initiated a project comprising both research and seminar components that was designed to study the issue of youths getting involved in terrorism.

This monograph, written by Thomas Koruth Samuel, studies the issue of the dynamics of youth and terrorism, paying close attention to the methods used by terrorists to entice the youth, the message or the narrative of the terrorists and the possible counter-narrative that could be subsequently developed.

*'While nothing is easier than to denounce the evildoer, nothing is more difficult than to understand him.'*

These words by the Russian novelist Dostoevsky in the 19<sup>th</sup> century continue to haunt us to this very day. It is hoped that this study will be a spark that will help shed light, making the subject matter a little less ambiguous.

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I would also like to thank Associate Professor Dr. Susan Philip, who had the unenviable task of editing my draft.

There have been numerous lecturers, policy makers, activists and academicians who have contributed their valuable time and effort to guide me in better understanding the dynamics of youth and terrorism. They have come in all sorts of shapes and sizes and I am truly grateful and thankful for their efforts.

I would like to thank my family. My mum and dad, who nurtured and made me who I am, my sweet wife, who provides me inspiration and love and my daughter who gives me so much joy.

Lastly, I would also like to acknowledge the young people; they never cease to amaze me with their potential, humble me with their ideas and give me hope through their actions.

**January 2012**

# INTRODUCTION

Youths are full of potential and will determine the future.

Extremists, terrorists<sup>1</sup> and all who prey upon the youth have always understood this well.

However, while there are numerous debates, conferences and concept papers among the authorities, academic circles, civil society and people in general on the meaning, parameters and extent of this premise, I would argue that terrorists and extremists are far ahead in realising this truth, developing methods and techniques to capitalise on this potential, and they will without doubt ride the 'coat tails' of these youth in shaping the future according to their vision.

Where does that leave us?

This study hopes to look into the dynamics between the youth and the terrorist, the push and pull factors and the subsequent consequences, the narrative of the terrorists that make such a relationship possible and the possible counter-narrative.

It must be clearly stated at the onset however, that this study is very much a work in progress. There still remains a great need to do further quantitative and qualitative work in this particular area, a more in-depth study at the ground level and a more extensive survey of the literature currently available.

In short, this study is just the beginning.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term extremists and terrorist interchangeably through the whole course of this study for while there might be difference between them, the approach, motives and strategy of these two groups with regards to the youth remain similar.



# YOUTH AND TERRORISM

*The deepest definition of youth is life as yet untouched by tragedy.*

*Alfred North Whitehead*

## Defining Youth

The definition of who can be counted as a youth varies among countries. The United Nations, for statistical purposes, defines 'youth' as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years,<sup>2</sup> while the Commonwealth's definition of a youth is 15 to 29 years old. Malaysia is in the midst of changing the definition of youth, to include only those persons between the ages of 18 and 25 years.<sup>3</sup> Using these definitions, the term 'youth' would not only encompass young people in schools, but also undergraduates in universities.

The pertinent question that we need to ask ourselves is if there is indeed a link between youth and terrorism?

In 1951, noted author Eric Hoffer published *The True Believer*, which was based upon his own observations of the rise of fascism, Nazism and communism as reactions to the Great Depression. He postulated that for the 'true believer' (someone so committed to a cause that he or she is willing to unthinkingly die for it) it was the frustrations of life which led them to join a cause that gave meaning to their own existences. Understandably, the more frustrated they felt, the more attracted and susceptible they were to extreme revolutionary solutions to their problems.<sup>4</sup> The author would argue that Hoffer's observation, made more than half a century ago, sadly but accurately describes the dynamics and relations between youth and terrorism today.

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<sup>2</sup> *Youth and the United Nations*, <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/qanda.htm>

<sup>3</sup> 'Only Those Aged 18 to 25 Defined as Youth', *The Star*, 17 November 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Tim Madigan, *The True Believer Revisited*, <http://bartoncii.xanga.com/581648156/more-on-eric-hoffer-the-true-believer-revisited/>, 4 April 2007..

## Defining Terrorism

Often times, when delivering lectures on terrorism, the author is not able to proceed beyond the 10-minute barrier as the class transforms into a 'raging inferno' when deliberating the definition of terrorism. This, the author is relieved to find, does not only apply to him as Alex P. Schmidt in 1984 concluded that 'academic researchers from many fields, have spilled almost as much ink as the actors of terrorism have spilled blood and yet have reached no consensus on what terrorism is.'<sup>5</sup>

For the subject of this study, the author would like to take Professor Kumar Ramakrishna's approach in his book 'Radical Pathways: Understanding Muslim Radicalisation in Indonesia'<sup>6</sup> of not 'splitting hairs' on the definitions but rather looking at the motivating factors and radicalising pathways that terrorists use to radicalise and recruit young people.

## Counter-Terrorism and the Youth

Currently, efforts in countering terrorism focus extensively on hard power and kinetic force, taking little consideration of the youth aspect.

Governments have developed extensive and sophisticated counter-terrorism measures at operational, tactical and strategic levels. Efforts to detect, deny, deter, disrupt and destroy terrorist activities have been designed and deployed by various agencies at different levels. In fact, the expertise, financial resources and technology that have been poured into fighting extremism today are unparalleled when compared to any other time in our history.

Against this backdrop, one would assume that it is just a matter of time before the war against terrorism reaches a successful conclusion. Unfortunately, the situation on the ground presents a very different picture. Scores of young people, regardless of ethnicity, religion or nationality, seem to be drawn into

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<sup>5</sup> *Defining Terrorism, Transnational Terrorism, Security and the Rule of Law*, Sixth Framework Commission, European Commission, 1 October 2008, <http://www.transnationalterrorism.eu/tekst/publications/WP3%20Del%204.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Kumar Ramakrishna, *Radical Pathways: Understanding Muslim Radicalization in Indonesia*, Praeger Security International, 2009.



the web of extremism and subsequent violence, ironically at a time when spending and resources on countering terrorism are at their peak.

Terrorists, with all their intrinsic and extrinsic limitations, have proven to be very successful in identifying, radicalising and recruiting individuals to a cause that is not only morally questionable but tactically challenging. While various restrictions have been placed upon them, extremists have nevertheless been able to win sympathy, support and admiration.

Why is this the case?

Biology shows us that when an individual is deprived of one sense, the other senses compensate so as to allow a semblance of a normal life. Deprived of technology, resources and technical expertise, terrorists have been highly adept at leveling the playing field by reaching out and appealing directly to the spiritual, intellectual and emotional spheres of the people. They have been able to develop a narrative that is both engaging and inspiring, allowing them access to the hearts and minds of the people in a way that authorities struggle to emulate.

What is our response?

To develop smarter missiles, better soldiers and improved airport scanners?

I would like to propose instead the need to develop a counter-narrative that engages the dogma of the extremists, counters their violent propaganda and subsequently proposes a better alternative.

## **The Danger Signs**

Statistically, the numbers are of great concern. In Peter Singer's book, 'Children at War', 300,000 boys and girls under the age of 18 are combatants fighting in almost 75% of the world's conflicts. It is disheartening to note that 80% of these conflicts where children are present include fighters under the age of 15 and approximately 40% of the armed organisations in the world (157 of 366) use child soldiers.<sup>7</sup> Professor Joseph Liow has said that militants often target

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<sup>7</sup> Peter W. Singer, *Children At War*, New York: Pantheon, 2005.

youth, ranging in age from early teens to young adults<sup>8</sup> while Professor Kumar Ramakrishna postulated that youths, particularly males between the ages of 18 and 35, have always been the focus of terrorist organisations, citing the Japanese Red Army and the Red Brigade based in Italy as examples<sup>9</sup> Noor Huda Ismail, a counter-terrorism expert based in Indonesia,<sup>10</sup> highlighted that since the *Darul Islam* (DI) era in Indonesia, terrorist organisations have targeted people as young as 16 to 17 years old.

With little skill beyond those of a combatant, hardly any integration with mainstream society, a tumultuous past and with a myriad of psychological and emotional issues, it is worrisome to note that should these children live to reach their youth, there is serious doubt as to what their future would be.

Current case studies on terrorism and extremism among young people point to a similar situation. For example, the Mumbai attacks in November 2008 that left 165 civilians and security personnel dead was a series of ten coordinated attacks orchestrated by ten individuals. What was chilling was the common thread that bound them together - they were all young. Besides the eldest terrorist, Nazir/Abu Umer who was 28 years old, the average age of the other nine terrorists was only 23 years. The leader, Ismail Khan was just 25 years old.

In the Philippines, the involvement of youth in terrorism was clearly seen in the case of the *Abu Sayyaf Group* (ASG). The ASG, listed by the United States as a foreign terrorist organisation,<sup>11</sup> seeks a separate Islamic state for the country's Muslim minority.<sup>12</sup> Abdurajak Janjalani, the founder of the ASG, was only in his 20's when he was influenced to join extremist activities and only 26 when he formed the ASG. When he died in a police encounter in 1998, his younger brother, Khadaffy Janjalani, who was only 22 at the time, took over as

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph Liow (Professor), Interview by Author, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 10 March 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Kumar Ramakrishna (Professor), Interview by Author, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, 9 March 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Noor Huda Ismail, Interview by Author, Semarang, Indonesia, 5 April 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Rommel C. Banlaoi, *Essays on the Abu Sayyaf Group*, Philippine Institute for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (PIPVTR), 2008, [http://pipvtr.com/pipvtr/files/Book\\_AHAI\\_Essays\\_on\\_ASG\\_Book\\_Banlaoi\\_2008.pdf](http://pipvtr.com/pipvtr/files/Book_AHAI_Essays_on_ASG_Book_Banlaoi_2008.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> *Abu Sayyaf Group*, Council on Foreign Relations, 29 May 2009, [http://www.cfr.org/publication/9235/abu\\_sayyaf\\_group\\_philippines\\_islamist\\_separatists.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/9235/abu_sayyaf_group_philippines_islamist_separatists.html)

the new *emir* or leader of the ASG. In 2009, the ASG was led by Yasser Iqan who was only 21 years old when he joined the movement.<sup>13</sup> Another group in the Philippines, the *Rajah Solaiman Movement* (RSM), originated from a cell of militant students and teachers at a religious school in Luzon.<sup>14</sup> It was founded by Ahmad Santos who was radicalised when he was only 21 years old. The RSM is alleged to have conducted the Superferry 14 bombing on 27 February 2004, the worst maritime terrorist attack to-date. It is significant to note that the alleged perpetrator of the act was Redento Cain Delloso, who was only in his mid-20's during the incident.<sup>15</sup>

In Iraq, insurgent groups have been accused of paying between USD 50 to USD 100 to teenagers to plant Improvised Explosive Devices (IED), shoot a mortar or fire a machine gun at coalition troops.<sup>16</sup> Though young, these teenagers have proved not only to be a dangerous threat but a security dilemma to the coalition forces.

The extent of the involvement of youth in terrorists activities was further highlighted by the UK's MI5 Chief, Mr. Jonathan Evans, when he stated that 'extremists were methodically and intentionally targeting young people and children in the UK,' and that groups like Al-Qaeda were recruiting children as young as 15 to wage 'a deliberate campaign of terror' in Britain. In his first speech since taking over MI5, Mr. Evans warned that extremists were 'radicalising, indoctrinating and grooming young, vulnerable people to carry out acts of terrorism' and that urgent action was required on the part of the UK Government 'to protect its children from exploitation by violent extremists.'<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Rommel C. Banlaoi, *Youth as Victims and Perpetrators of Terrorism: The Philippine Case*, paper delivered at the International Conference on Youth and Terrorism organised by the Ministry of Information in collaboration with the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on Feb 26, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> *Rajah Solaiman Movement (RSM) (Philippines)*, Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism, 8 July 2010, <http://www.janes.com/articles/Janes-World-Insurgency-and-Terrorism/Rajah-Solaiman-Movement-RSM-Philippines.html>

<sup>15</sup> Rommel C. Banlaoi, *Youth as Victims and Perpetrators of Terrorism : The Philippine Case*.

<sup>16</sup> Edward O' Connell and Cheryl Benard, *The Myth of Martyrdom: Young People and the Insurgency in Iraq in A Future for the Young: Options for Helping Middle Eastern Youth Escape the Trap of Radicalization*, edited by Cheryl Benard, RAND National Security Research Division, September 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Philip Johnston, *MI5: Al-Qaeda Recruiting U.K. Children for Terror*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1568363/MI5-Al-Qaeda-recruiting-UK-children-for-terror.html>, 7 November 2007.

Youth involvement in the current conflict is also sadly seen in their presence as detainees in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Camp Iguana is a detention facility dedicated to juvenile detainees aged between 13 and 15 years<sup>18</sup> while those between the ages of 16 and 18 are held at the adult facility, Camp X-Ray.<sup>19</sup>

How have we reached this juncture?

The reality is that while terrorist groups have extensive hard power (i.e. the ability to use force to pursue an agenda), they also have considerable soft power, which they have proved to be very adept at using. In turbulent times, these extremist groups attract youths by exploiting their vulnerabilities and providing them with a sense of identity, belonging and cohesiveness. Over a period of time, in a troubled environment, these youth begins to define their identity with that of the group and its struggle.

### **The Susceptibility of the Youth**

The environment has also played a conducive role in triggering favourable responses from young people towards terrorism and extremism. When there are few opportunities to break out of the cycle of poverty, perceived or real injustice and despair, there is a greater tolerance for violence. Professor Rommel Banlaoi,<sup>20</sup> in his study on young ASG members, revealed that many 'unschooled, illiterate, poor and unemployed' young Muslims in Mindanao were recruited by the ASG and lured with 'easy cash and weapons'. He further added that it was indeed telling that when three (3) members of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) were kidnapped in the Philippines in January 2009, the ASG abductors did not demand ransom payments for the release of their victims but instead asked for 'free education and development projects for impoverished Muslim communities.' In the case of Noor Umug,<sup>21</sup> a former terrorist with the Abu Sayaf Group in the Philippines, one of the factors that led him into violent action was the lack of social mobility in his

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<sup>18</sup> *Guantanamo Bay – Camp Delta*, GlobalSecurity.org , [http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/guantanamo-bay\\_delta.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/guantanamo-bay_delta.htm)

<sup>19</sup> P.W. Singer, *Too Young to Kill, Human Rights*, (Newshouse News Service, Brookings Institution, 9 January 2005, [http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2005/0109humanrights\\_singer.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2005/0109humanrights_singer.aspx)

<sup>20</sup> Rommel Banlaoi (Professor), Interview by Author, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 23 February 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Noor Umug, Interview by Author, Manila, The Philippines, 30 March 2011.

environment which produced a sense of despair. Reiterating this finding, in a study of approximately 600 young Guantanamo Bay detainees<sup>22</sup> (young being defined as those between the ages of 18 and 25), unemployment motivated a number of Gulf State detainees, particularly skilled and semi-skilled labourers, and terrorism was seen as a viable 'alternative employment.'

However, the roles that education, employment and social mobility play in the making of a terrorist are still a matter of debate. While in certain places, it might still be an issue, this trend is by no means uniform. In Indonesia for example, Sydney Jones from the International Crisis Group was of the opinion that poverty was not a factor in the making of a terrorist as seen by the large numbers of middle-class militants.<sup>23</sup> Professor Azyumardi Azra shared that thought when he postulated that it was the 'ideology of hatred' and not poverty that was the driving force for youths joining terrorist activities in Indonesia.<sup>24</sup> It is also significant to note that poverty and despair are not the only factors that draw youths into extremist groups. Membership in such groups also provides youth with a sense of identity, prestige or pride, acceptance, responsibility, outlets for frustration and excitement which appeal to all youths, regardless of economic or social status.<sup>25</sup>

On the whole, however, socio-economic factors (in some cases), coupled with youths being 'young, idealistic,'<sup>26</sup> 'emotionally vulnerable and gullible'<sup>27</sup> and at their 'physical peak'<sup>28</sup> make them prime choices for terrorist recruitment. Indeed, terrorist groups have used these circumstances to their advantage by identifying and offering youths what they are lacking or by even offering them a 'way out' of their situation through martyrdom.<sup>29</sup> This has led to numerous

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<sup>22</sup> Sharon Curcio, *The Dark Side of Jihad: How Young Men Detained At Guantanamo Assess Their Experience in A Future for the Young: Options for Helping Middle Eastern Youth Escape the Trap of Radicalization*, edited by Cheryl Benard, RAND National Security Research Division, September 2005.

<sup>23</sup> Sydney Jones, Interview by Author, Jakarta, Indonesia, 6 April 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Azyumardi Azra (Professor), Interview by Author, Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, Jakarta, Indonesia, 4 April 2011.

<sup>25</sup> *Recruitment and Radicalisation of School-Aged Youth by International Terrorist Groups*, Homeland Security Institute, 23 April 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Liow (Professor), Interview by Author.

<sup>27</sup> Rommel Banlaoi (Professor), Interview by Author.

<sup>28</sup> Kumar Ramakrishna, (Professor), Interview by Author.

<sup>29</sup> *Recruitment and Radicalisation of School-Aged Youth by International Terrorist Groups*, Homeland Security Institute, 23 April 2009.

youths dedicating their lives to violence. This sad development has been highlighted by Professor Joseph Liow, who is of the opinion that in the case of Thailand, many of the youths in the southern provinces could be considered a 'lost generation' due to their involvement in violence.<sup>30</sup> This has been reiterated by Professor Kumar Ramakrishna, when he says that unemployment and a depressed economy can lead young people to join street gangs, a life of crime and even at times, terrorism.<sup>31</sup>

It is clear that the opportunistic strategy of the terrorists of preying on vulnerable and susceptible youths has borne tremendous fruit in communities where there is a real or perceived injustice. Hence, it is important for us to understand, that in the minds of the young people in environments such as this, these groups are not looked on as perpetrators of violence but rather as fighters struggling against a tyrannical enemy. Against this backdrop of hopelessness and lack of mobility, it is perhaps understandable why youths that do join such groups are perceived to be heroic and courageous – a narrative that is actively constructed, encouraged, propagated and disseminated by terrorist groups.

### **The Terrorist and the Youth**

The relationship between the terrorist and the youth is a dynamic one. Professor Kumar Ramakrishna,<sup>32</sup> quoting Lewis Richardson,<sup>33</sup> highlights the three main factors that govern this relationship.

Firstly, the terrorists want dissatisfied youth. They need young people who are angry and frustrated with both the system and the authority in place and therefore want to change the status quo. Secondly, terrorism provides the legitimising ideology that sets the parameters, provides the structure, diagnoses the problem and even proposes the solution, thus giving disaffected youths a focus. Thirdly, the terrorist organisation is the 'enabling group' that provides the environment to nurture, facilitate<sup>34</sup> and equip its members to carry out its

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<sup>30</sup> Joseph Liow (Professor), Interview by Author.

<sup>31</sup> Kumar Ramakrishna, (Professor), Interview by Author.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat*, Random House, 2006, p. 40.

<sup>34</sup> Roy Anthony Rodgers, Interview by Author, University Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 26 January 2010.

agenda. Professor Yusuf Morales from the Philippines<sup>35</sup> sums up the reasons why youths join extremist activities, identifying three (3) primary factors which include the search for identity precipitated by an identity crisis, the desire to change the status-quo and the quest for a deeper meaning in life.

Added to the susceptibility of the youth, is the charismatic nature of many of the leaders of the terrorist organisations. These leaders possess magnetic personalities and are extremely skilled in functioning as role models and father figures for these young people; their influence could act as potential 'trigger factors' for the involvement of youth in extremism and violence.<sup>36</sup> A classic example of this, according to Professor Kumar Ramakrishna, was the case of Hambali looking for a father figure and finding it in the person of Abdullah Sungkar.<sup>37</sup>

The cult-like characteristics that are commonly found in terrorist organisations also play a vital role in ensuring that the youths who join find it difficult to leave. The charismatic leader,<sup>38</sup> the emphasis on loyalty, the clearly disseminated ideology, the suppression of dissent, the emphasis on blindly following the leader, the habit of binary thinking (the 'us versus them' mentality) are all important safeguards that ensure that youths do not leave or at least find it extremely hard to do so, should they feel at any point that they want to part from the group.<sup>39</sup> This characteristic was reiterated by Nasir Abas, a former terrorist now based in Indonesia, when he spoke on how his first teachers in the religious schools routinely condemned any form of Islamic teaching that did not agree with their strict interpretation of the religion.<sup>40</sup>

It is also interesting to note that the Asian culture which tends to emphasise collective thinking as opposed to individualistic thinking (generally associated with the West), could also mean that a charismatic leader like Abu Bakar Bashir would be able to exercise a greater degree of control over his followers.<sup>41</sup> The

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<sup>35</sup> Yusuf Morales (Professor), Interview by Author, Manila, The Philippines, 29 March 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Anas Zubedy, Interview by Author, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 14 January 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Kumar Ramakrishna, (Professor), Interview by Author.

<sup>38</sup> Jajat Burhanudin (Dr.) Interview by Author, Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, Jakarta, Indonesia, 4 April 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Kumar Ramakrishna (Professor), Interview by Author.

<sup>40</sup> Nasir Abas, Interview by Author, Jakarta, Indonesia, 7 April 2011.

<sup>41</sup> Kumar Ramakrishna (Professor), Interview by Author.

terrorist leader through his organisation also acts as an 'enabler' who provides the vehicle for the youth to be radicalised and subsequently to express their frustration at and aggression towards the suggested target.<sup>42</sup>

## **Youths : The Obvious Choice?**

For the young, hot blooded male, terrorism provides excitement<sup>43</sup> and adventure.<sup>44</sup> The simple 'thrill of assembling weapons'<sup>45</sup> is deemed to be 'cool'<sup>46</sup> and can be a potent drawing force that is very skillfully exploited by the terrorist.

At the operational level, youths with no prior police records (or 'clean skins' as the *Real Irish Republican Army* called them)<sup>47</sup> allow the terrorist group more operational freedom as the involvement of these youths (as opposed to direct involvement of senior members) would reduce the likelihood of arrest of the more senior terrorist leaders. Such youths also have the added advantage of allaying suspicion on the part of the security and enforcement authorities. This could perhaps explain Al-Qaeda's interest in Western youths. Former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director Michael Hayden observed that Al-Qaeda was actively seeking recruits among Western youth for possible operations against Western targets. Because of their familiarity with language and culture, as well as their appearance<sup>48</sup> they would 'not elicit any notice whatsoever from you if they were standing next to you in the airport line.'<sup>49</sup> Al-Qaeda, who

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42 Rommel Banlaoi (Professor), Interview by Author, Manila, The Philippines, 28 March 2011.

43 Sydney Jones, Interview by Author.

44 Jamhari Makruf (Professor), Interview by Author, Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, Jakarta, Indonesia, 4 April 2011.

45 Rodolfo B. Mendoza (Retired General), Interview by Author, Manila, The Philippines, 31 March 2011.

46 Noor Umug, Interview by Author.

47 Michael Evans and David Sharrock, *Renegade IRA Groups Coordinated Northern Ireland Attacks*, The Times, March 11, 2009, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article5884412.ece>

48 *Recruitment and Radicalisation of School-Aged Youth by International Terrorist Groups*, Homeland Security Institute, 23 April 2009.

49 Michael Hayden, Director Central Intelligence Agency, 'Transcript of Remarks,' (Presented at the Atlantic Council, New York City, 13 November 2008), available from: [www.cia.gov/news-information/speechestestimony/directors-remarks-at-the-atlantic-council.html](http://www.cia.gov/news-information/speechestestimony/directors-remarks-at-the-atlantic-council.html)



in the past have referred to children as the 'new generation of *Mujahidin*,'<sup>50</sup> have aggressively used this tactic when conducting suicide attacks in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan as young people are not immediately suspected of being suicide bombers.<sup>51</sup> This has increased the lethality of violence as young suicide bombers have been successful in circumventing security measures.<sup>52</sup> It is estimated that youths between 15 to 18 years old make up about 20% of all suicide bombers.<sup>53</sup>

Terrorist groups who have suffered losses in terms of their members are also often forced to recruit youths as much of the adult population is simply too weary for conflict and reluctant to continue the struggle. The Al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb has countered the trend of diminishing adult recruits within the North African region by actively seeking out the next generation.<sup>54</sup>

Youths are also at times given more dangerous tasks on the assumption that if they are caught they will receive lighter sentences due to their age. There is also the possibility that youths and young adults are targeted because of the skills that they might possess, as in the case of the *Jemaah Islamiyah* focusing on the recruitment of university students to ensure a cadre of educated and technically capable leaders for terrorist attacks.<sup>55</sup> General Rudolfo B. Mendoza (retired) from the Philippines asserted that the ASG had trained approximately 40 youths on using explosive devices.<sup>56</sup>

Youths are also important in ensuring continuity - *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA), the Basque separatist movement, which in the past was very selective in its recruitment, has been very active in seeking out new members from

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<sup>50</sup> Rear Adm. Gregory Smith and Major General Mohammed al-Askari, Press Conference, (5 February 2008) quoted in *Recruitment and Radicalization of School-Aged Children by International Terrorist Groups*, Homeland Security Initiative, 23 April 2009, <http://www.cleanitproject.eu/thirdpartydocs/2009%20recruitment%20and%20radicalization.pdf>

<sup>51</sup> *Recruitment and Radicalisation of School-Aged Youth by International Terrorist Groups*, Homeland Security Institute, 23 April 2009.

<sup>52</sup> Merle Kellerhals, *Using Children as Suicide Attackers Increases Sense of Barbarity*, America.gov (23 October 2007).

<sup>53</sup> Merle Kellerhals, *Suicide Terrorism on the Rise Worldwide*, America.gov (19 October 2007).

<sup>54</sup> *Recruitment and Radicalisation of School-Aged Youth by International Terrorist Groups*, Homeland Security Institute, 23 April 2009.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Rodolfo B. Mendoza (Retired General), Interview by Author.

a younger demographic.<sup>57</sup> Its ability to regenerate itself over time has been largely credited to its very own youth organisation, *Jarrai-Haika-Segi*.<sup>58</sup>

## Finding the Youth

Prisons, ironically provide a conducive environment for terrorist recruitment. They are said to be breeding grounds for radicalisation and are 'places of vulnerability' which, due to the environment, produce 'identity seekers', 'protection seekers' and 'rebels' in greater numbers than any other environment.<sup>59</sup> The American criminologist Harvey Kushner argued that Western prisons were one of the main recruitment grounds for Al-Qaeda,<sup>60</sup> while some have suggested that the 'relatively lax practices' in Western prisons have been well exploited by Al-Qaeda.<sup>61</sup> Matters are made worse in prisons when terrorists are not separated from the juvenile population. In the case of Pakistan, 92,000 prisoners share 41,000 prison places with little or no distinction being made between juvenile and adult offenders or minor offenders, hardened criminals and politically motivated militants.<sup>62</sup> The extent of the problem in prisons was graphically illustrated by the Commander of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, when he pointed out, that there were 'more insurgents per square foot in corrections facilities than anywhere else in Afghanistan'.<sup>63</sup> In this region, Professor Yusuf Morales commented on how religious sessions in prisons in the Philippines were used to recruit potential terrorists.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> *Recruitment and Radicalisation of School-Aged Youth by International Terrorist Groups*, Homeland Security Institute, 23 April 2009.

<sup>58</sup> Yonah Alexander, Michael Swetnam, Herbert Levine, *ETA: Profile of a Terrorist Group* (Ardsey, NY: Transnational Publishers Inc, 2001), p. 22.

<sup>59</sup> Peter R. Neumann, *Prison and Terrorism – Radicalization and De-radicalisation in 15 Countries*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence, <http://www.icsr.info/publications/papers/1277699166PrisonsandTerrorismRadicalisationandDeradicalisationin15Countries.pdf>

<sup>60</sup> Harvey Kushner (with Bart Davis), *Holy War on the Home Front* (New York: Sentinel, 2004).

<sup>61</sup> Ian M. Cuthbertson, *Prisons and the Education of Terrorists*, *World Policy Journal*, 22 September 2004, p. 16.

<sup>62</sup> Peter R. Neumann, *Prison and Terrorism – Radicalization and De-radicalisation in 15 Countries*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence, <http://www.icsr.info/publications/papers/1277699166PrisonsandTerrorismRadicalisationandDeradicalisationin15Countries.pdf>

<sup>63</sup> McChrystal (General), cited in Melisa Porges' case study report on Afghanistan, cited in Peter R. Neumann, *Prison and Terrorism – Radicalization and De-radicalisation in 15 Countries*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence, <http://www.icsr.info/publications/papers/1277699166PrisonsandTerrorismRadicalisationandDeradicalisationin15Countries.pdf>

<sup>64</sup> Yusuf Morales (Professor), Interview by Author.

Hence, terror detainees who are not physically separated from other criminals and in particular the younger offenders have used the time and both physical and ideological space given, to recruit and indoctrinate youths into their groups. The youths in these circumstances are vulnerable and isolated, and the support structure of family and friends is often supplanted by these groups. It is precisely because of this that some countries, like Malaysia, go to great lengths to separate detained terrorists from other criminals or younger offenders, with the hope that this physical separation will eliminate the possibility of prisons being used as the 'embryonic stage' for the identification, recruitment, indoctrination and training of potential terrorists. This step, however, will inevitably incur costs which authorities might not want to bear.

Religious institutions preaching skewed and misconstrued interpretations of any religion have the potential to capture the hearts, minds and imaginations of young people seeking focus and identity. In most cases, recruiters identify and target the more promising youth and pull them into a smaller setting where a more comprehensive indoctrination programme is then undertaken, without arousing the suspicions of the moderate members of the congregation.<sup>65</sup> Focusing strongly on the actual injustices happening all around the world, these 'men of God' clinically exploit the youths into thinking that the only alternative left is violence. Told repeatedly that they have 'god' on their side, these youths are manipulated into believing that they are actually struggling for a noble and worthy cause, with the definite assurance of victory.

Universities and institutions of higher learning are also being turned into recruiting pools for terrorists. Professor Bilveer Singh from RSIS, Singapore,<sup>66</sup> is of the opinion that there is a growing trend of undergraduates being radicalised by terrorist organisations, particularly in Indonesia. According to Professor Yusuf Morales,<sup>67</sup> in the Philippines this phenomenon has been occurring since the 1980's. This was further reiterated by Dr. Jajat Burhanudin who highlighted that terrorists have in the past assigned their members to join

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<sup>65</sup> *Recruitment and Radicalisation of School-Aged Youth by International Terrorist Groups*, Homeland Security Institute, 23 April 2009.

<sup>66</sup> Professor Bilveer Singh, Interview by Author, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 10 March 2011.

<sup>67</sup> Yusuf Morales (Professor), Interview by Author.

student or youth organisations and subsequently act as mentors to youths and undergraduates with the purpose of recruiting them in the future.<sup>68</sup>

Noor Umug, a former terrorist in the Philippines, highlights that terrorist organisations in the Philippines radicalised youth (17 to 18 years) through education, citing the use of student and undergraduate associations in schools and universities by Communist based terrorists groups to recruit potential terrorists. According to him, Muslim-based radical groups establish religious schools and then provide scholarships to attract young people to study in these institutions. He gives the example of how Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, the brother-in-law of Osama bin Laden established a school in Southern Philippines with the overt purpose of recruiting youths into terrorism. It is also significant to note that in most cases, youths began studying in these institutions with purely benign motivations, such as wanting to become religious leaders; unfortunately according to Noor Umug, many of them were deceived and subsequently radicalised. This process which takes around one to two years often even includes military training as part of the curriculum.<sup>69</sup>

Another significant development is when foreign students and lecturers from countries that are in conflict zones utilise lecture sessions to vividly describe the atrocities and injustices occurring in their respective countries; over a period of time they mould their students into thinking that the 'propaganda of the deed' is the only recourse left against these atrocities and the regimes that perpetrate them. This problem is further compounded by local students going abroad to study but instead being indoctrinated and radicalised. Not only are they 'infected' with radical ideas but they 'import' these ideas to their local setting when they return home.

Even schools have not been spared, according to Professor Joseph Liow,<sup>70</sup> with teachers often propagating extremist thinking and ideology. In the case of Indonesia, Sydney Jones,<sup>71</sup> cited an example of six students (aged 17 to 21) arrested in Jawa, who were radicalised through religious sessions in schools. In her opinion, high schools were deliberately being targeted by terrorist

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<sup>68</sup> Jajat Burhanudin (Dr.) Interview by Author.

<sup>69</sup> Noor Umug, Interview by Author.

<sup>70</sup> Joseph Liow (Professor), Interview by Author.

<sup>71</sup> Sydney Jones, Interview by Author.

organisations for recruiting purposes. This was further reiterated by Professor Azyumardi Azra when he spoke on terrorists recruiting high school students in Indonesia.<sup>72</sup> It is also significant to note that according to Sydney Jones, 23% of the entire population of Indonesia are in high school,<sup>73</sup> giving the terrorist a wide pool of potential recruits. Noor Umug from the Philippines highlights the ASG's policy of selecting the brightest and toughest students who were willing to fight for their religious cause. These young recruits, according to him were initially given simple tasks such as surveillance; if they proved adept, they would graduate to higher challenges such as partaking in operations and even carrying out executions.<sup>74</sup>

### **The Terrorist, the Internet and the Youth**

The internet has been a particular useful tool in reaching out, particularly to the young, and has been a boon for terrorists, allowing them to disseminate propaganda and attract new young recruits who, due to their age, are very much 'internet savvy'.<sup>75</sup> According to Bruce Hoffman, 'virtually every terrorist group in the world today has its own Internet website and, in many instances, multiple sites in different languages with different messages tailored to specific audiences.'<sup>76</sup> While in the past, terrorist indoctrination, recruitment and training relied heavily on physical meetings between recruits and recruiters (which required time, coordination and travel), the internet has overcome this problem by providing connections quickly, easily, remotely and anonymously.<sup>77</sup>

The role of the internet as a 'radicalisation accelerant'<sup>78</sup> and as a 'venue for radicalisation'<sup>79</sup> has significantly changed the way terrorists operate for it

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<sup>72</sup> Azyumardi Azra (Professor), Interview by Author.

<sup>73</sup> Sydney Jones, Interview by Author.

<sup>74</sup> Noor Umug, Interview by Author.

<sup>75</sup> Rommel Banlaoi (Professor), Interview by Author.

<sup>76</sup> Zanini and Edwards, *The Networking of Terror in the Information Age*, p.43 in Bruce Hoffman's testimony on *The Use of the Internet by Islamic Extremists* before the Permanent Select Committee in Intelligence, United States House of Representatives, 4 May 2006.

<sup>77</sup> *The Internet as a Terrorist Tool for Recruitment & Radicalization of Youth*, White Paper prepared for the US Department of homeland Security, Science and Technology Directorate, 24 April 2009, [http://www.homelandsecurity.org/hsireports/Internet\\_Radicalization.pdf](http://www.homelandsecurity.org/hsireports/Internet_Radicalization.pdf)

<sup>78</sup> United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Violent Islamist Extremism, The Internet, and the Home Grown Terrorist Threat* Majority & Minority Staff Report, 8 May 2008, p.11.

<sup>79</sup> Rommel Banlaoi (Professor), Interview by Author.

has allowed them unprecedented scope and opportunity in developing and strengthening their *modus operandi*. Nur Azlin Mohamed Yasin,<sup>80</sup> indicated that there was a significant increase in extremist websites between 2007 and 2011, which in her opinion was a 'worrying trend.' She went on to question if this on-line trend was a possible indicator of what was happening off-line. This was emphasised by an officer from the Internal Security Department (ISD) Singapore, (who spoke on the conditions of anonymity), about extremists targeting youth through the internet.<sup>81</sup>

This trend has been made possible due to the simple fact that youths and the internet in this day and age are so closely intertwined. Statistically, internet usage among the young has risen dramatically and the usage has evolved from a passive, individually-directed, information-seeking process (termed as Web 1.0) to an active, socially-connected, user-involved environment where youth interact, discuss, create, collaborate and pass on content (termed as Web 2.0).<sup>82</sup> Hence, with Web 2.0, there is no need for an individual to feel like a 'lone wolf' any longer<sup>83</sup> as it allows individuals who otherwise would have little chance of meeting together to now connect with one another.<sup>84</sup>

Besides the websites, other facilities on the net, ranging from e-mail, chat rooms, e-groups, forums, virtual message boards, are all facilities frequently visited and used by youths. These technological platforms have been increasingly used by terrorists as virtual training camps, providing an online forum for indoctrination and the distribution of terrorist manuals, instructions and data.<sup>85</sup> In this region, the leader of the *Tandzim al-Qaeda* cell was purported to have six blogs, 37 articles and 35 audio mp3's to spread their ideology through cyberspace.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Nur Azlin Mohamed Yasin, Discussion with Author, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 10 March 2011.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with an Internal Security Department Officer (Singapore) on 11 March 2011.

<sup>82</sup> *The Internet as a Terrorist Tool For Recruitment & Radicalization of Youth*, White Paper prepared for the US Department of Homeland Security, Science and Technology Directorate, 24 April 2009, [http://www.homelandsecurity.org/hsireports/Internet\\_Radicalization.pdf](http://www.homelandsecurity.org/hsireports/Internet_Radicalization.pdf)

<sup>83</sup> Ng Sue Chia, Interview with Author, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 9 March 2011.

<sup>84</sup> Kumar Ramakrishna (Professor), Interview by Author.

<sup>85</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Terrorist Dot Com: Using the Internet for Terrorist Recruitment and Mobilization*, in *The Making of a Terrorist, Vol. 1: Recruitment*, edited by James J.F. Forest (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2005).

<sup>86</sup> *Grad Used Net to Recruit Militant Members*, The Star, 2 August 2011.

What is also disturbing is that the natural inclination of the current generation of young people to gravitate towards the internet has been well anticipated and exploited by terrorist groups. How else can we explain the fact that the Taliban, who in the past punished people who owned television sets, are now actively updating their websites numerous times a day? This dramatic change stems from the fact that they have realised the power and potential of the internet. The prominence that terrorists give to the internet was vividly seen when Abu Yahya al-Libi, a key leader of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, praised the '*mujahideen* on the information frontline' – the site designers, bloggers, video editors and others who support the vast online presence of al-Qaeda, saying, 'May Allah bless you lions of the front, for by Allah, the fruits of your combined efforts – sound, video and text – are more severe for the infidels and their lackeys than the falling of rockets and missiles on their heads.'

The terrorists' skilful ability to creatively utilise the internet has enabled them to exponentially increase their potential reach; because of this, we see a transition by the terrorist, from the realm of physical space to cyberspace.<sup>87</sup> In December 2007, the *As-Sahab*, Al-Qaeda's multimedia arm,<sup>88</sup> announced that Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al-Qaeda's number-two, would entertain questions from the general public posted on selected militant websites. His offer elicited more than 900 entries and in April 2008, Zawahiri responded to these queries in an audio statement accompanied with English and Arabic transcripts.

The late leader of the Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu-Musab al-Zarqawi's strategy of videotaping the carnage in Iraq and then disseminating it as broadly as possible was greatly enhanced with the advent of YouTube and blogs. The utilisation of the video camera as a 'weapon of war' in graphically documenting the struggle accompanied by the extensive use of this social networking site to publicise the conflict, have led some to refer to the conflict in Iraq as the first 'YouTube War'.<sup>89</sup> The internet has also showed great potential in becoming the focal

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<sup>87</sup> Steve Coll and Susan B. Glasser, *e-Qaeda from Afghanistan to the Internet: Terrorists Turn to the Web as Base of Operations*, Washington Post, August 7, 2005.

<sup>88</sup> Audio Message from Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri issued by *as-Sahab* and addressed to Muslims: 'Set Out and Support Your Brothers in Somalia' – January 2007, SITE Institute, <http://counterterrorismblog.org/site-resources/images/SITE%20Institute%20-%201-4-07%20-%20Zawahiri%20Audio%20Support%20Somali%20Brothers.pdf>

<sup>89</sup> Ana Marie Cox, *The YouTube War*, Time (magazine), July 19, 2006, <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1216501,00.html>

meeting point for terrorists all across the globe and has even been dubbed 'the next Afghanistan'<sup>90</sup> with social networking sites replacing the battlefield as the venue to link up and to fight for a common cause.

The Malaysian newspaper *The Star* in a report dated 2 August 2011 mentioned how a local public university graduate was detained in 2010 for using the internet to spread extremist teachings and recruit new militant members.<sup>91</sup>

Given this development, we can understand how young people have been radicalised through the internet without even having to physically meet other fellow terrorists. In Singapore, a 20-year-old national serviceman, Muhammad Fadil Abdul Hamid, was arrested under the Singaporean Internal Security Act (ISA) for having contacted Anwar al-Awlaki, the radical United States-born preacher, and expressing interest in joining a militant movement operating in the Palestine territories, Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>92</sup> Awlaki, known as the 'Bin Laden of the Internet',<sup>93</sup> has been said to have made contact with numerous groups and individuals in the region and is also said to have inspired US Army Major Nidal Hasan, who killed 13 at Fort Hood in Texas in 2009. He was also reportedly in touch with two of the 9/11 hijackers and has been linked with Nigerian Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who attempted the Christmas Day bombings in 2009.<sup>94</sup> It is pertinent to note that Awlaki's global reach, as seen in the cases above, has been solely due to the internet.

While in the past terrorists have used the internet as a means to disseminate their rhetoric of hate, we now see that the internet has extended its potential

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<sup>90</sup> Aidan Kirby Winn and Vera L. Zakem, *Jihad.com 2.0: The New Social Media and the Changing Dynamics of Persuasion in Influence Warfare: How terrorists and Governments Fight to Shape Perceptions in a War of Ideas*, Edited by James J.F. Forest, Praeger Security International, 2009.

<sup>91</sup> *Grad Used Net to Recruit Militant Members*, *The Star*, 2 August 2011.

<sup>92</sup> Mustafa Shafawi & Imelda Saad, *Self-Radicalised 20-year old NSman Detained Under ISA*, [channelnewsasia.com](http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1067829/1.html), 6 July 2010, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1067829/1.html>

<sup>93</sup> Aamer Madhani, *Cleric al-Awlaki dubbed bin Laden of the Internet*, *USA Today*, 25 August 2010, [http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2010-08-25-1A\\_Awlaki25\\_CV\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2010-08-25-1A_Awlaki25_CV_N.htm)

<sup>94</sup> Kumar Ramakrishna, *Self-Radicalisation And The Awlaki Connection*, *Eurasia Review – News and Analysis*, 13 July 2010, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/201007134929/self-radicalisation-and-the-awlaki-connection.html>



to include the actual identifying, nurturing and developing of raw recruits into fully-fledged terrorists. Internet radicalisation has, then, been utilised as a means of self-radicalisation. This 'computer screen to battlefield process' poses a grave threat and requires a paradigm shift in our efforts to counter terrorism.



## UNDERSTANDING THE ENVIRONMENT

*The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.*

*Edmund Burke*

### **The Central Tenet of Violence and the Making of a Terrorist**

Realising that the conventional approach of winning the support of the people through elections and persuasion is likely to be difficult or time consuming, terrorists rely heavily on the use of violence to achieve their objectives.<sup>95</sup> However, in order to influence recruits, particularly the young, to cultivate a habit of and to participate in violence, there is a need to develop a paradigm shift that makes participating in violence seem like a possible and morally acceptable form of response. This however has its own sets of problems as the concept of violence is at most times unpalatable to most people. It is in this context, therefore, that the terrorists have proven to be tremendously creative and deceptive.

### **The Staircase to Terrorism**

The pre-requisite in making violence the optimal response for the terrorist group is to turn something that is seen as reprehensible into something that is accepted and justified. Fathali Moghaddam in his seminal paper 'The Staircase to Terrorism'<sup>96</sup> uses the metaphor of a narrowing staircase leading to the terrorist act at the top of the building. While the metaphor is for terrorism in general, it does have particular resonance for youth. Moghaddam posits that the staircase to terrorism has a ground floor and five higher floors, with specific sets of behavioural patterns categorising each level. The ground floor is marked by perceptions of unfairness and feelings of relative deprivation. Some individuals among this group will climb to the first floor to search for solutions. Should they be unable to find these solutions or improve themselves, there is a higher chance that they will then proceed to the second floor.

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<sup>95</sup> Thomas Koruth Samuel, *Understanding the Narrative of the Terrorist from the Perspective of the Youth in SEARCCT's Selection on Youth and Terrorism*, 2011.

<sup>96</sup> Fathali M. Moghaddam, *The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration*, *American Psychologist*, Vol. 60. No. 2, p. 161-169, February – March 2005.

In an interview, Omer Ali Saifudeen, of the Home Team Academy, Singapore, postulates that when youths do not see results, there is a higher tendency for them to see violence as a possible option.<sup>97</sup> Professor Joseph Liow also reiterates this point, citing the case of some countries in the region where the youths felt that the authorities were unjust and no action was taken to address their grievances, giving rise to the notion that violence was the only way to resolve the conflict.<sup>98</sup>

Individuals who reach the second floor are influenced by their leaders to project their frustrations onto the enemy. Should they continue their ascent, they reach the third floor which is characterised by an attitude that now sees violent action against the perceived enemy as justified. Recruitment into terrorist organisations takes place on the fourth floor, where the potential recruit is taught to see the world from a binary worldview i.e. to develop an 'us-versus-them' mentality. This point has been reiterated by Professor Yusuf Morales who notes that certain youths in the Philippines look at the world in general and the Philippines in particular in a very narrow way or in terms of binary opposites.<sup>99</sup>

At the last level i.e. the fifth floor, individuals are taught to sidestep inhibitory mechanisms that could prevent them from taking the lives of others and themselves and are subsequently sent out to carry out terrorist attacks.<sup>100</sup>

## **The Ground Floor**

The ground floor, in this analogy, is marked by perceptions of fairness and just treatment. In this regard, poverty and the lack of education might not necessarily lead to acts of terrorism. What is instead significant is the sense of perceived deprivation or in this context relative deprivation. This concept, according to Moghaddam, is best illustrated through a study conducted by Stouffer<sup>101</sup> in which members of the Air Corps during World War II expressed less satisfaction with military life than did members of some other units despite

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<sup>97</sup> Omer Ali Saifudeen, Interview by Author, Home Team Academy, Singapore, 8 March 2011.

<sup>98</sup> Joseph Liow (Professor), Interview by Author.

<sup>99</sup> Yusuf Morales (Professor), Interview by Author.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid

<sup>101</sup> Stouffer, S. A., Suchman, E. A., De Vinney, L. C., Star, S. A., & Williams, R. M. (1949). *The American Soldier: Adjustment During Army Life* (Vol. 1). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

the higher rate of promotions in the Air Corps. This was explained through the concept of relative deprivation in which the higher rate of promotions in the Air Corps raised expectations and thus created more dissatisfaction for those who were not promoted. General Benjamin Delfino highlighted this point when he spoke about unfair land distribution in the Southern Philippines, which gave rise to dissatisfaction among the Moro people. The issue was not so much the quantum of land that was given to them but rather the perceived unfair distribution when compared to the Christians.<sup>102</sup> Hence, it is not necessarily the poorest or the least educated youth that might be susceptible to carrying out violence expressed through terrorism, rather, it is the youth who perceives that he or she deserves 'more' but has instead been given 'less' who would be the prime candidate. This idea is significant, as it moves away from the idea of measuring tangible indicators among youth such as education and poverty as the prime motivators for joining terrorism. Instead, it focuses on the perception of youth in contrast to their environment. This point has also been made by General Mendoza, who stated that it was not religion but rather anger that was the primary motivating factor that led youths to join terrorist groups in the Southern Philippines.<sup>103</sup>

This sense of deprivation is made worse when there is the added perception that other groups are better off and that efforts to better oneself are being blocked by others.<sup>104</sup> This then explains, the terrorist group's preoccupation with putting the blame for every problem, rightly or otherwise, on the shoulders of the perceived enemy. Nasir Abas, spoke on how terrorists in this part of the region often indoctrinate the young recruits into believing that the 'Jews and the Westerners' were the enemy.<sup>105</sup> The extremist groups then repeatedly highlight the idea that not only are the present problems caused by the enemy, but that they are taking active steps to ensure that this condition is actively perpetuated. This leaves the youth little option but to rise, rebel and defy the oppressor. Hence, it is probable that perceived injustice and relative deprivation rather than absolute deprivation are the catalysts for collective action.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Benjamin Delfino (Retired General), Manila, The Philippines, 28 March 2011.

<sup>103</sup> Rodolfo B. Mendoza (Retired General), Interview by Author.

<sup>104</sup> Gurr, T. R. (1970). *Why Men Rebel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

<sup>105</sup> Nasir Abas, Interview by Author.

<sup>106</sup> Miller, D. L. (2000). *Introduction to Collective Behavior and Collective Action* (2nd ed.). Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland.

## The First Floor

Individuals who climb to the first floor do so for personal mobility and to improve their situation. It is also significant to note that when paths to individual mobility are perceived to be open, there is far less tendency to attempt non-normative actions.<sup>107</sup> Another important factor to ensure that young people are not drawn into violent behaviour, is to actively encourage them to participate in the decision making processes.<sup>108</sup> For young people, getting their voice heard and participating in the process is of great importance. The author recollects a youth conference on terrorism that was held in Kuala Lumpur in February 2009, in which the author was part of a team that prepared the final Chairman's text without taking into account the full participation of the youths in the writing process. The result was catastrophic and the author learned an important lesson; ignore the young people at your own peril!

Given the need of the youth to be heard, consulted and factored into the decision-making process, the authorities can dramatically undercut the power and the influence of the terrorists by ensuring that the young people in their respective countries have ample opportunities to channel their creativity, energy and ideas in formulating thoughts on issues that concern them, as well as ensuring their participation in resolving issues that particularly involve them. The author's experience indicates that the authorities rarely involve youth in decision making processes for it can be a cumbersome and tedious job. Youthful idealism and government bureaucracy do not always go hand in hand. Hence, the reluctance of the authorities to involve young people in matters of state. However, the problems that arise from ignoring this dynamic group are far greater than the challenges posed when dealing with them. Furthermore, not involving youth, not only ensures that the country will not be able to benefit from their talents but more significantly, heightens the potential for young people to be drawn to violence as the last resort by which they can obtain their objectives. Basically, if we do not get the young people, the terrorists will.

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<sup>107</sup> Tyler, T. R. (1990). *Why People Obey the Law*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

<sup>108</sup> Tyler, T. R., & Huo, Y. J. (2002). *Trust in the Law*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

## The Second Floor

Terrorism has been said to be the weapon of the weak against a superior enemy. At times, it is also used to target innocent victims as a result of the perpetrators' inability to hit out at the actual 'enemy.' 'Displaced aggression' is defined as 'instances in which individuals aggress against persons other than their frustrators.'<sup>109</sup> This occurs when you cannot aggress the person who made you frustrated because that person may have more power than you. Therefore, you displace your aggression toward an innocent third party who is probably less powerful than you.<sup>110</sup> This has been said to be one of the possible reasons for terrorism.<sup>111</sup> Hence, young people who might not have the opportunity to travel to the West and take out their anger against the Western governments whom they see as the enemy, seek out local targets that most closely resemble their perceived enemy. So while taking out the Pentagon in Washington D.C. might prove to be quite difficult, targeting the McDonalds in the neighbourhood is far more feasible. Many of these terrorist organisations are adept at raising international issues as a catalyst for local action. Of course, the logic of bombing a local bar to influence American policy on Israel is, sadly, rarely considered. In this context, individuals who expound the concept of the 'propaganda of the deed' and are willing to exercise violence to achieve their objectives, eventually leave the second floor for a higher level that allows them to now become deeply engaged in justifying terrorism.<sup>112</sup>

## The Third Floor

At this level, recruits are persuaded to become committed to the morality of the terrorist organisation through the following means: isolation, affiliation, secrecy and fear. At this level, the terrorist organisation functions firstly as the only viable option to bring about change, and secondly as a 'home' for disaffected individuals.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Barron, Robert A; Richardson, Deborah R. (1994), *Human Aggression. Perspectives in Social Psychology*. 2nd edition.

<sup>110</sup> PSY307 – Displaced Aggression, Psychewiki.com, [http://www.psychwiki.com/wiki/PSY307-Displaced\\_Aggression](http://www.psychwiki.com/wiki/PSY307-Displaced_Aggression), retrieved on 5 September 2011.

<sup>111</sup> Miller, N., Pederson, W. C., Earlywine, M., & Pollock, V. E. (2003). *A Theoretical Model of Triggered Displaced Aggression*, *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 7, 75–97.

<sup>112</sup> Fathali M. Moghaddam, p. 161-169.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

## The Fourth Floor

At this level, recruits will be fully immersed in the ideology and activities of the group. Emphasis will be on indoctrinating the recruits on the legitimacy of the terrorist organisation and its goals, a belief that the ends justify the means, and a strengthening of a categorical us-versus-them mentality.<sup>114</sup> At this stage, conformity and obedience will be heavily emphasised, the leader comes to represent a strong authority figure and nonconformity, disobedience and disloyalty are immediately dealt with.<sup>115</sup> The punishments range in severity. Professor Jamhari Makruf highlighted how youths in Indonesia are threatened or branded as infidels if they want to leave their group.<sup>116</sup> In the case of the ASG in the Philippines, Noor Umug relates that should the followers begin to doubt the principles and tenets of the group, they are immediately branded as traitors and in some cases even killed.<sup>117</sup>

There is thus at this stage the compulsion to remain in the group even if there is a desire to leave it.<sup>118</sup>

## The Fifth Floor

At this level, the youths who are involved with the terrorist group have reached a stage where violence is an accepted norm in achieving the set objectives. However, there is still a need to overcome naturally placed inhibitions that balk at the prospect of taking a life. Terrorist organisations overcome this hurdle by adopting two psychological processes that are central to intergroup dynamics.<sup>119</sup> The first psychological process that is indoctrinated in the youth involves social categorisation, whereby recruits in terrorist organisations are trained to treat everyone outside their group, including civilians, as the enemy.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Jamhari Makruf (Professor), Interview by Author.

<sup>117</sup> Noor Umug, Interview by Author.

<sup>118</sup> Jamhari Makruf (Professor), Interview by Author.

<sup>119</sup> Brown, R., & Gaertner, S. L. (Eds.). (2001). *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Intergroup Processes*. Oxford, England: Blackwell.

<sup>120</sup> Sageman, M. (2004). *Understanding Terror Networks*, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.



This binary world view that is based on the premise of 'us' and 'them' thereby legitimises civilians as potential targets. The second psychological process involves psychological distance created by exaggerating the differences between members of the group and the 'others'.

The Staircase to Terrorism analogy is important in that it shows that it is the conditions on the ground that lead to terrorism and removing one set of individuals, in this case young recruits, will only make room for another set to step forward and climb to the top. What is important therefore is to reform conditions on the ground floor so as to ensure that there is little need to climb to another level.



## CHALLENGING THE NARRATIVE

*First they came for the communists,  
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist.*

*Then they came for the trade unionists,  
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews,  
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a Jew.*

*Then they came for me,  
and there was no one left to speak out for me.*

*Martin Niemöller*

*You can cage the singer, but not the song.*

*Harry Belafonte*

### **The need**

The ability of the terrorists to manipulate facts and distort truth has been tremendously useful in influencing, indoctrinating and radicalising the youth. In this regard, it is sad to note that an effective challenge to the premises and assumptions of the terrorists with the intention to provide a counter-narrative for young people has not been designed, developed and disseminated.

Professor Bilveer<sup>121</sup> is of the opinion that if an effective counter-narrative programme is not in place, there will be problems at a later stage. In this regard, Ken Konboy is also of the opinion that there is an urgent need to pay close attention, particularly to the younger generation.<sup>122</sup> This point was further reiterated by Noor Huda Ismail based on his experience in running various innovative counter-radicalisation programmes in Indonesia.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Bilveer Singh (Professor), Interview by Author.

<sup>122</sup> Ken Konboy, Interview by Author, Jakarta, Indonesia, 4 April 2011.

<sup>123</sup> Noor Huda Ismail, Interview by Author, Jakarta, Indonesia, 5 April 2011..

In many cases, authorities have assumed – wrongly, in the opinion of the author – that in the case of terrorism, there is simply little need to debate, convince and persuade the audience on the transgressions of the terrorists and the legitimacy of their actions. Indeed, often times, the authorities in question think it incredible that terrorists deserve any reaction besides that of loathing and repugnance. However, as Amina Rasul from the Philippines points out, if we do not engage with the youth, we run the risk of driving them into violent action. Hence, the need, according to her, of getting the youths to be stakeholders in the progress of the nation.<sup>124</sup> Recounting from his personal experience, Noor Umug speaks about the alienation of the youths being a major factor for them joining militant movements in the Southern Philippines.<sup>125</sup>

The approach of the authorities and the lack of an ‘alternative discourse’<sup>126</sup> when dealing with counter-terrorism vis-à-vis the youth is both detrimental and counter-productive. The current generation of young people, who grow up questioning all assumptions and all levels of authorities, will not believe that terrorism and by extension violence are bad simply because they have been told so. On the contrary, the very act of instructing and expecting them to obey unquestioningly, can actually be a catalyst for their interest in the ‘other side.’

Given this situation, Professor Dr. Azyumardi Azra notes the importance of targeting youths in an effort to counter the radicalisation process of the terrorists.<sup>127</sup> Singapore, realising this need, has developed various counter-measures, often initiated by the authorities but driven by various segments of the community such as schools, community organisations and religious institutions, to present the state’s views on extremism, terrorism and violence with the hope of countering the narrative of the terrorists.<sup>128</sup> Malaysia, in initiatives led by the Royal Malaysian Police (RMP), has also played an extensive and pivotal role in engaging with detained terrorists with the hope of not only rehabilitating them but also returning them back to society.

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<sup>124</sup> Amina Rasul, Interview by Author, The Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy, Manila, Philippines, 29 March 2011.

<sup>125</sup> Noor Umug, Interview by Author.

<sup>126</sup> Omer Ali Saifudeen, Interview by Author.

<sup>127</sup> Azyumardi Azra (Professor), Interview by Author.

<sup>128</sup> Interview with an Internal Security Department Officer (Singapore) on 11 March 2011.

It is also interesting to note that most of the experts interviewed were of the opinion that giving the youths space was no longer a luxury but instead was a necessity.<sup>129</sup> Professor Kumar Ramakrishna talks about the concept of the 'marketplace of ideas'<sup>130</sup> whereby the youth in question not only hears the theory and rhetoric of the terrorists but also has the chance to hear the counter-narrative. The onus is then on the side of the authorities to present its case on why violent extremism is not the way to advance one's agenda. Premesh Chandran, the Group Chief Executive of Malaysiakini<sup>131</sup> notes the futility in this day and age of curtailing people's ability to express their views, or restricting the flow of information available to them. Marina Mahathir<sup>132</sup> further warns that cracking down on freedom and curtailing space for personal expression will only serve to drive such people 'underground.'

Nevertheless, there is a need for caution. Opening up space indiscriminately could lead to a cascade of ideas that has the potential to lead to further polarisation. Should the youth be only exposed to radicalised teachings and come from an environment where only such thought prevails, there is a possibility that his or her initial ideas of extremism will only be further reinforced.<sup>133</sup> Given this possibility, Professor Bilveer Singh suggests that while the opening up of space is important, the pace for such a process has to be carefully thought out and planned.<sup>134</sup>

## **The Root of the Problem**

When we see the tragedy of terrorism, be it in a suicide bomber detonating himself in a place of worship or a car bomb exploding in a night spot, it is important to realise that what we see is the culmination of the work of the terrorist. The incident is actually the final result of a process that took both time and effort to develop.

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<sup>129</sup> Bilveer Singh (Professor), Interview by Author.

<sup>130</sup> Kumar Ramakrishna, (Professor), Interview by Author.

<sup>131</sup> Premesh Chandran, Interview by Author, Group Chief Executive of MalaysiaKini, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 19 January 2010.

<sup>132</sup> Marina Mahathir (Datin Paduka), Interview by Author, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 1 March 2010.

<sup>133</sup> Kumar Ramakrishna, (Professor), Interview by Author.

<sup>134</sup> Bilveer Singh (Professor), Interview by Author.

If this act of violence is the result of a process, how and why did this process begin and are our efforts to counter this process actually working?

Most studies indicate that violent action is a possible consequence of radical thought. At this juncture, it is pertinent to note that the author does not suggest that all radical thoughts leads to violent action but rather that most violent action has its beginnings in radical thought.

That being the case, it is pertinent for us to ask if we can actually counter radical thought through the use of hard power?

Or to phrase it in another way, can ideology be defeated solely through kinetic force?

This is a significant question, for the reality on the ground is that the majority of counter-terrorist efforts at the strategic, tactical and operational level depend a great deal on the use of force. While it is possible to understand the role of force when actively countering violent action, it is not logical to assume that kinetic force will have the same level of success when dealing with something as abstract as an idea or thought.

So where does that leave us?

While a great deal of thinking and resources have rightfully gone into developing an effective counter-terrorism strategy against the terrorist use of force, virtually none has gone into developing parallel strategies in countering the idea or narrative of the terrorist.

Simply put, we have allowed radical ideas to develop into violent action, before doing something about it. This 'intervention-at-a-later stage' strategy has allowed the terrorists a distinct advantage in capturing the 'hearts and minds' of young people.

This has to change.

## Terrorists and Counter-Terrorists - The Difference of Focus

In terrorism and counter-terrorism, the strategy that is used is heavily dependent on who the audience is. Conversely, a possible way of identifying who the audience is by looking at the strategies being employed. Hence, in the case of counter-terrorists, it makes sense that strategies such as detecting, denying, deterring, disrupting and destroying are employed, as their main focus is the terrorist. Interestingly, this is not the case for the terrorists for whom, the author would argue, the main audience is both the authorities i.e. the counter-terrorists *and* the people. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in cases where secondary trauma is engineered and facilitated by the terrorist.

### Secondary Trauma

The phenomenon of 'secondary trauma' is defined as a set of symptoms that parallel those of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)<sup>135</sup> which include hyperarousal symptoms such as feeling tense and/or having angry outbursts.<sup>136</sup> These sets of emotions could happen when an individual associates himself with victims of violence, through direct or indirect means, and as a result, over a period of time, identifies and feels the suffering and pain of the victim as his own. The Fort Hood incident, in which a US Army psychiatrist Major Nidal Malik Hasan killed 12 people, was said to have possibly been caused by secondary trauma.<sup>137</sup> What is of significance is the manner in which secondary trauma has been the cause of violent conduct. No longer does an individual have to be in direct contact or close association with a victim before he or she feels their pain. With this approach, youths who are otherwise in stable and peaceful environments might nevertheless be severely affected through these 'ideological inducements'.<sup>138</sup> Marhmudi Hariano alias Yusuf, a former terrorist now based in Semarang, relates how he was introduced to videos and reading materials about the suffering of Muslims at the age of 17 by his teachers.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Ted Bober and Cheryl Regehr, *Strategies for Reducing Secondary or Vicarious Trauma: Do They Work?* Brief Treatment and Crisis Intervention Advance Access originally published online on December 30, 2005, Oxford University Press.

<sup>136</sup> *What are the Symptoms of PTSD?*, National Institute of Mental Health, <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/what-are-the-symptoms-of-ptsd.shtml>

<sup>137</sup> Tim McGirk, *Hasan's Therapy : Could 'Secondary Trauma' Have Driven Him To Shooting*, [www.time.com](http://www.time.com), 7 November 2009.

<sup>138</sup> Rommel Banlaoi (Professor), Interview by Author, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 23 February 2010.

<sup>139</sup> Marhmudi Hariano alias Yusuf, Interview by Author, Semarang, Indonesia, 5 April 2011.

It is in this regard that we see how the terrorist has focused and has been able to connect the individual to the perceived injustice of the aggrieved party. By cleverly manipulating the Information Communication Technology (ICT) revolution, in tandem with the globalisation phenomenon, terrorists have been very successful in ensuring that pain, anguish and misery happening in distant lands and even in different times, have been brought into the lives of the people, vividly and graphically, by the media in general and the Internet in particular. Through blogs, chat rooms and the YouTube, perceived or real injustices happening all around the world have been condensed, edited, packaged and delivered to arouse a variety of feelings and emotions with the express purpose of eliciting sympathy, 'igniting the flame'<sup>140</sup> or even encouraging active participation in violent action. This was seen in the case of a 22-year old British undergraduate who was shown videos of Muslims allegedly 'suffering because of the West' which led her to be radicalised, wanting to be the first female British suicide bomber in order to make 'the Western world listen'.<sup>141</sup> In a study of young Guantanamo Bay detainees,<sup>142</sup> many indicated the extensive use by their recruiters of visual displays and films of suffering women and children in refugee camps in Chechnya, Palestine and Afghanistan. Nasir Abas notes how his teachers used to distribute reading materials and also show videos of Muslims suffering in Afghanistan and Palestine.<sup>143</sup> Harry Setyo, a former Indonesian terrorist, recounted from his experience how instructors used videos, reading material and lectures on issues in Palestine and Ambon to indoctrinate young recruits.<sup>144</sup> Noor Umug from the Philippines highlights how teachers in certain religious schools in the Southern Philippines actively include reading materials and videos of suffering Muslims in Palestine, Afghanistan and other Middle Eastern countries. These visual stimuli were used by terrorists to generate anger as the seed for future violent conduct.

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<sup>140</sup> Rommel Banlaoi (Professor), Interview by Author.

<sup>141</sup> Divya Talwar, *Muslim Women Targeted by Extremists' at UK universities*, BBC Asian Network, 5 August 2010 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-10855565>

<sup>142</sup> Sharon Curcio, *The Dark Side of Jihad : How Young Men Detained At Guantanamo Assess Their Experience in A Future for the Young : Options for Helping Middle Eastern Youth Escape the Trap of Radicalization*, edited by Cheryl Benard, RAND National Security Research Division, September 2005.

<sup>143</sup> Nasir Abas, Interview by Author.

<sup>144</sup> Harry Setyo R., Interview by Author, Semarang, Indonesia, 5 April 2011.



Secondary Trauma and the subsequent resources and expertise deployed by the terrorist in this particular area show us the emphasis that terrorists put on identifying and targeting the audience.

At this juncture, the author needs to clarify that he is not speaking of videos and materials depicting people suffering that are used to create sympathy, educate and enhance awareness but rather that which are used to nurture anger and hatred leading to acts of violence.

### **Understanding the Construct of the Terrorist Narrative**

It is pertinent to note that terrorist rhetoric finds tremendous traction with young people. In this regard, the author would argue that authorities, in their counter-terrorism strategies, have not paid sufficient attention to debunking and developing a narrative to counter that of the terrorists. As mentioned earlier, while great attention is paid to countering the terrorists mainly via hard power and kinetic force, scant attention is given to the fact that much ground has been lost, particularly in tackling the youth at the mental, emotional and intellectual planes.

In this regard, hard and searching questions need to be asked:

- When a youth is confronted with the terrorists' rhetoric and propaganda, does he or she possess the ability to critically analyse the assumptions and presuppositions of the terrorists and is he or she equipped to offer a counter to the narrative of violence subscribed to by the terrorists?;
- Should not the authorities have a more active role in challenging the myths of the terrorists?; and
- Do the current counter-terrorism efforts take into account the need for developing a narrative counter to that of the terrorists?

## The Premise of the Terrorist

The author would like to postulate that the main rhetoric of the terrorist comprises a simple three-step progression, which is as follows:

- I. There are injustices occurring in many parts of the world;
- II. There is a need to act; and
- III. Violence is the only possible response.

These straightforward assumptions appeal to idealistic and simplistic youths and have the added advantage of being partially true. Firstly, it is reiterated and reinforced that there are tremendous acts of injustice, cruelty and discrimination, causing incredible misery, suffering and anguish to numerous innocent people all around the world. According to Roy Anthony Rodgers from University Malaya,<sup>145</sup> terrorists are very adept at exploiting and manipulating such grievances, legitimate or otherwise. Reports, images and life-witness accounts are all skillfully deployed to bear witness to this worldwide suffering, and it is subsequently conveyed by the terrorists to any interested individual through any available means.

Secondly, the gauntlet is thrown in the form of a question:

- What are you going to do about this?
- What is your response to this tragedy?

Harry Setyo R.,<sup>146</sup> a former terrorist in Indonesia, relates from his own experience how the terrorist recruiters would draw the youths' attention to the plight of suffering Muslims, and subsequently question them on their response to such tragedies. Marhmudi Hariano alias Yusuf highlights how as a young man he felt compelled to defend his fellow Muslims, whom he perceived as suffering, wherever they were, after being exposed to the rhetoric of the terrorists.<sup>147</sup> Sydney Jones reiterates that in the Indonesian case, the premise that 'this is the way that you can actively help your fellow Muslims', functions as a strong and effective recruiting strategy for the terrorists.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Roy Anthony Rodgers, Interview by Author, University Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 26 January 2010.

<sup>146</sup> Harry Setyo R., Interview by Author.

<sup>147</sup> Marhmudi Hariano alias Yusuf, Interview by Author.

<sup>148</sup> Sydney Jones, Interview by Author.

Given the volatility, the need for action and the high sense of idealism among young people, the felt need to act upon these perceived injustices will naturally be very great. Indeed, young people often wonder how it is possible for such terrible injustices to have continued all this while without anyone taking action to counter them. Then, regardless of what has happened in the past, the youth is motivated to act and correct this terrible injustice.

It is significant to note that the terrorist has not strayed far from the truth with regard to the first premise; there are numerous cases of wrongdoing happening all around the world causing great pain and misery to the innocent. Also, acting to right these flagrant abuses is not only morally correct, it is also the right thing to do.

Young people not only are able to both identify with and comprehend these two premises but they are also drawn by idealism and altruism to wholeheartedly support these ideas.

It is however here that the terrorists slip in the third premise, innocuously, as the most natural progression from the initial two premises: violence is the only possible response. In an interview, Roy Anthony Rodgers<sup>149</sup> highlights that the assumption that there was 'no other way' and that extreme action was the 'only recourse left', was a very important triggering factor for youths to embrace violence.

Therefore, the young people are shown graphic evidence of the first premise – that injustice is thriving and causing tremendous misery. Once their conscience is seared and their idealism evoked, they are confronted with the second premise – that they now have to act. In this excited state, where emotions are stirred and passions are running high, the third premise, that violence is the sole alternative, is offered; often, it is blindly accepted, with little critical evaluation or thinking on the part of the young person.

Thus, it is significant to note that in the hands of the terrorists, the youth do not just arrive at the conclusion that violence is a possible alternative; rather, they are carefully, methodically and systematically led through various stages involving their mental and emotional faculties, passing from intellectual analysis

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<sup>149</sup> Roy Anthony Rodgers, Interview by Author.

to a stirred conscience and finally to a perceived undeniable conclusion that violence is the sole alternative.

### **The Narrative of the Terrorist**

We have looked at the method the terrorists use to reach out to the young, but what is the message that they wish to convey?

Or in other words, what is the narrative of the terrorist?

The author would argue, that like all good lies, the story the terrorists put forward contains many elements of the truth, making it more credible and believable.

### **The First Myth: 'Violence is the Only Way'**

It is important to note that the violence of the terrorists that the author speaks of here does not refer to the act of self-defence but rather to indiscriminate and deliberate attacks on civilians and properties with the express purpose to hurt, kill and destroy.

The first myth that is propagated by the terrorist is that violence is the only way. The audience, particularly the youth, is made to believe that the world that they dream of can only be shaped through violence. Violence is seen as a cleansing force to rid the world of the evil that thrives on inequality, injustice and discrimination. In this light, violence is seen as both permissible and justifiable.

Also, the use of force is touted as an operational and strategic option that will propel the terrorists group towards success and the accomplishing of their objectives and goals. Violence, then, is branded both as the morally justifiable and tactically superior option that will in due time ensure complete victory.

It is significant to note that youths who are well-known for rebelling against all forms of authority and questioning all assumptions, are surprisingly meek and often seem to tamely accept the premises of the terrorists with shocking ease. This lack of critical thinking on the part of the youths, according to Roy Anthony Rodgers,<sup>150</sup> is the result of a deficient education system which makes youths susceptible to radical teachings.

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<sup>150</sup> Roy Anthony Rodgers, Interview by Author.

At this particular juncture, the authorities could emulate the terrorists, who have been very successful in getting the youths to question authority. Perhaps, the time has come to give the terrorists a dose of their own medicine. While the questioning and potentially rebellious nature of the youth is probably what led them to get involved with terrorism, there is also considerable potential to use those very same traits to get them to question and possibly rebel against their own terrorist groups. This possibility of disengagement, according to Professor Kumar, often comes when young people gradually mature and develop the ability to critically think about and evaluate the situation.<sup>151</sup>

When dealing with young people who often 'reprimand' the author for his ignorance and proceed to inform him that the terrorists are using violence because that is the only alternative, the author then challenges them to examine the rhetoric used by the terrorists. The author commends the young people for critically analysing the assumptions and premises of the authorities, but questions why they practice double standards by accepting as 'gospel truth' the rhetoric used by the terrorists.

The author then proceeds to ask these young people to list for him groups that have used violence and, through violence, successfully achieved their objectives. Usually, what follows is dead silence. Saying this, the author does have to caution that there are some instances where there is empirical evidence of groups that have utilised violence and achieved some short-term goals. This being said, groups that have had considerable long-term success as a result of their use of violence are relatively few.

The idea is to challenge the young people to do three things:

- Firstly, for them to show the objectives of these terrorists groups (which in most cases focus on the liberation of a certain people-group from foreign invaders, the end of discrimination, the need for justice and equality etc);
- Secondly, to compare these objectives with the actions that have been taken by the terrorists (indiscriminate bombings, beheadings of prisoners, killing of civilians through suicide attacks); and
- Thirdly, to analyse if any of their actions have helped them achieve their objectives.

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<sup>151</sup> Kumar Ramakrishna (Professor), Interview by Author.

The purpose of this exercise is to show the young people that strategically speaking, the tactic of terrorism via violence is an inferior one. This is important, because thus far, most counter-narratives (if any) against the terrorists focus on the moral argument that violence is both illegal and immoral. While this is true, the argument loses its potency when it is shown that the enemies of the terrorists are themselves at times extremely violent, evil people and therefore the presumption is that violence against such an enemy is permissible as it is simply an act of self-defence against the more malevolent authorities.

Therefore, at present, most of our arguments that emphasise the immorality of violence fall on the deaf ears of a generation who are very well aware of the injustices and cruelty perpetrated by 'legitimate' authorities and states and who therefore consider it hypocritical that these actors be spared from the violence that they themselves seem so freely to dispense. Therefore, a counter-narrative that focuses on the immorality of the violence perpetrated by the 'perceived aggressors' gains very little traction in the hearts and minds of the young.

However, should we be able to challenge the effectiveness of the strategy that is being employed by the terrorists, we need not waste time defending the 'wickedness of the regime in power', but can focus instead on how, tactically, the terrorists are using a strategy that statistically and historically speaking has very little chance of success.

Hence, the author's question to the young people is, 'why would you suggest a strategy that has so little chance of success to a group that you actually support and sympathise with?'

The author tries to show the young people that, by first looking at what the terrorists proclaim to do through their manifestos, and then considering their actions and analysing their subsequent impact, two main conclusions can be derived;

- At best, violence is a tactically inferior strategy; and
- At worst, terrorists are aware of this but have their own vested interests which have very little to do with their stated objectives of helping the people.

Besides showcasing the tactical inferiority of violence, there is also the need to document the inherent weaknesses and dangers that come from using the strategy of violence.

Firstly, there is the ironic possibility of the victim becoming the aggressor when violence is used. By definition, the term victim suggests an individual or group that is marginalised physically, mentally or even emotionally. When such victims resort to acts of violence such as indiscriminate bombing to deliberately hurt and kill civilians or to destroy property, the line that they are victims no longer seems tenable and instead they now take on the mantle of the aggressors. This does little to further the cause of the victims.

Secondly, when violence is used, we are, figuratively speaking, on a very slippery slope. Violence signifies the end of any effort to reconcile differences through other means such as negotiations or through compromise. It means that there is no longer room for discourse or discussion to solve a problem or a disagreement. Should this be the perception, then we must not be surprised when violence is therefore seen as the only way to deal with a dispute or a disagreement. Indeed, history has shown us that leaders who achieve power through violence, are just as often overthrown through violence. As remarked by a very perceptive man, 'All who draw the sword, will die by the sword.'

Also, this could explain why terrorist groups often break into splinter groups, each preferring to go their own way or at times even training their guns on each other, when a disagreement arises. This is simply because violence is seen as the only option to solve a problem. Hence, terrorist groups who engage in violence lay the seed for the younger generation, particularly for those born and raised in conflict situations, to see things solely through the lenses of force and aggression. Simply put, the language of violence will be the only language spoken.

Is that the legacy that we are willing to let the terrorist leave behind for a community that we sympathise with?

## **The Second Myth: 'We are doing it for the People'**

Most, if not all terrorist groups proclaim that all their actions, particularly the ones that raise concerns in terms of morality and legitimacy, are done 'for the people.' Hence, following their line of argument, violence is but a natural response on behalf of a marginalised group of people against an unjust authority. The late leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Vellupillai Prabhakaran echoed this thought when he said, 'It is the plight of the Tamil people that compelled me to take up arms. I felt outrage at the inhuman atrocities perpetrated against an innocent people. The ruthless manner, in which our people were murdered, massacred, maimed....'<sup>152</sup> Hence, terrorists have been able to shift attention from their insidious use of violence by characterising it as the justifiable need for self-defence on behalf of a suffering and victimised people-group.

In the author's engagement with the students, he mentions how the late Osama bin Laden often reiterated his passion for defending the rights of the oppressed people. The author then asks the students how the late Osama came into the position of representing the people he claimed to be fighting for.

Who elected Osama to take this role?

Did he get a mandate from the people that he claimed to be fighting for?

Why could he not go through more conventional means, such as trying to get elected as the leader of the people he claimed to be fighting for?

At the very least, did the majority of the people-group that he purportedly represented join his organisation?

To bring this argument to the level of the young people, there is a need to question them on whether they would allow themselves to be ruled and spoken for by a group or an individual whom they did not choose?

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<sup>152</sup> *Tamil National Leader Hon. V. Pirapaharan's Interview*, The Week (India) March 23, 1986 as quoted by Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Terrorist Threat*, John Murray Publishers, 2006.



There is a need to ask the young people to consider if there are any differences between a terrorist organisations which claims to speak and act on behalf of a people-group and a malevolent dictator who decides, unilaterally and with impunity, what is good for the people he forcibly rules.

The question must be asked why people are aghast when authorities come to power through force, yet treat as legitimate the actions of terrorist groups which have not even been legally chosen to represent the people they claim to be fighting for?

Is it justifiable for a terrorist group to claim that they are representatives of a suffering group of people simply because they are fighting for them? If that is the case, hypothetically, can a Malaysian who is angry with what is going on in Palestine and intends to fight for the rights of the Palestinian people, immediately assume the role of the representative of the Palestinians, simply because he has decided to fight for them?

Is this method acceptable?

Ironically, this is what is claimed by the terrorist. The premise of the terrorist in this situation is very simple;

- We claim that you are marginalised.
- Because of that, we will fight for you.
- This very act of fighting on your behalf is sufficient to give us the right to represent you and your interest.

The author challenges the young people to consider the logic of the terrorist, which implies that a people-group that is suffering from some form of oppression by an unjust authority no longer has the right to choose who should represent them and by default has no choice but to accept these terrorists as their representatives.

During the author's sessions with the young people, he often puts up a slideshow of pictures featuring the two planes crashing into the World Trade Centre Towers on 11 September 2001. He then asks the students to ponder the statement of the terrorist perpetrators that this was purportedly done for the people, and after that, to consider these two questions:

Firstly, who are the people that this was done for?

The people in Afghanistan?

The people in Palestine?

The marginalised Muslims in different parts of the world?

Secondly, what good has it done them or any other group of people?

In fact, what do we actually see happening?

Afghanistan suffered tremendously after the 11 September bombings in the United States.

The plight of the Palestinians has altered little since the New York World Trade Centre bombings.

Muslims in many parts of the world have suffered both directly and indirectly after the attacks in the United States.

So who has benefitted from all this?

Certainly not the people that these terrorist groups claim to be fighting for.

Often, in our engagements with young people, when these questions are asked, there is no clear consensus as to who 'benefited' from the 9/11 atrocities. This is quite astounding, for Al-Qaeda has categorically stated, over and over again, that it is fighting for the people. We are, however, still unclear on who they are fighting for, and how this action has brought any benefit to these people.

While the author is very well aware that injustice and discrimination by authorities often cause great suffering and pain to innocent people, he is also wary of any individual or organisation that takes it upon themselves to represent the victimised group without going through any due process, particularly when the manner in which they hope to achieve their objectives involves indiscriminate and arbitrary violence.

Often when the author points these ideas out to the young people, he finds a few angry ones, launching into a tirade on how the terrorists are up against an evil enemy that has shown little mercy and has cruelly wronged many. It is at these moments that the author relates to them the story of the famous Kurdish General Saladin. Legend has it that his soldiers brought to him prisoners of war during the crusades and were waiting to torture them. What instead transpired was that General Saladin instructed that they be treated with the greatest care and respect. His astonished and angry soldiers then recounted what the enemy had done to their captured comrades and how this was the opportune time for them to get their revenge. General Saladin's response to the outbursts that came from his soldiers is worth remembering;

'Since when did your enemies become your teachers?'

While we acknowledge that numerous authorities and people in power have made cruel and evil decisions that have caused great pain and misery to many, this by no means makes terrorism or the act of killing, hurting, and destroying innocent civilians and their properties justifiable.

Two wrongs will never make a right.

### **The Third Myth: 'We have No Choice'**

Terrorists, when confronted about their use of violence against the innocent, often claim that they had very little choice in the matter. They feel as if their hands were forced and that they had no alternative but violence. The late LTTE leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran stated, 'The Tamil people have been expressing their grievances in parliament for more than three decades. Their voices went unheard like cries in the wilderness. In Sri Lanka there is no parliamentary democracy where our people could effectively represent their aspirations. What passes as parliament in Sri Lanka is an authoritarian rule founded on the tyranny of the majority.'<sup>153</sup> Hence, following this logic, the choice of violence was not taken by them but was rather forced upon them through the various actions of the authorities.

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<sup>153</sup> *Tamil National Leader Hon. V. Pirapaharan's Interview*, The Week (India) March 23, 1986.

The question that the author poses to the youths are, 'what is the justification for killing the innocent?'

Have they exhausted all other means before they have come to the conclusion that they have no choice but to turn to violence, or is violence seen as the less difficult path to take in wanting to achieve their objectives?

There is a need to question young people whether the terrorists have exhausted all other means before resorting to these acts of violence.

Does it make sense in rational, moral or religious terms to take the life of another due to the pain and misery brought about by a third party, solely on the basis that the aggressor and the victim of terrorism had some things in common, such as their nationality, race or religion?

As mentioned earlier, does that not make the victim the new aggressor?

Is it not logical to conclude that using violence against a stronger opponent would in most cases further enrage the aggressor, causing greater violence to be unleashed on the victims?

Will the act of terrorism not alienate the victims from the mainstream and will they not now lose support when they engage in acts of violence?

Should violence be used, will it not mean that the victim has to give up the moral high ground which is often the only advantage he or she possesses?

Given the doubtful effectiveness of the tactic of violence, is that trade-off a wise one?

Will it not ensure that the possibility of compromise is no longer tenable and further justify the authorities in question to continue their unjust ways?

Given all these questions, the premise of the terrorist that they have no choice, is simply a luxury that they can ill afford.

## **The Fourth Myth: 'We are Representing the Oppressed'**

Almost all terrorist groups claim to be fighting for the oppressed and marginalised of society.

It is pertinent for us to ask whether they are the best candidates to take up that job and what qualities and attributes they have that allow them the right to do so.

It is pertinent that we ponder whether terrorists have a vested interest in ensuring that the conflict continues, irrespective of whether it is detrimental to the people they claim to represent. In many cases, where conflicts are passed from one generation to another, terrorism is seen as an industry that provides a vocation, security and status. In such a situation, should peace occur, what would happen to terrorist group members, who owe their power, position and strength to the conflict?

In such situations, would it be likely that terrorists would give up their position of power and strength, and instead take the course that, while being detrimental to their position, would bring about greater benefit to the people they claim to be fighting for?

Should they not wish to do so, what then can the people do?

And as mentioned earlier, what good have they brought the oppressed people that they claim to be fighting for?

What are the tangible and concrete benefits that have brought to the already suffering masses?

In economic, social, health, culture and welfare terms, how have the oppressed people benefited from the actions of the terrorists?

Indeed, have the oppressed not in fact suffered more due to the actions taken by the terrorists?

This being the case, it is possible that the actions of the terrorists (which in most cases further deprive and marginalise the community), ironically ensure

that the community in question never reaches a stage where it is educationally and economically able to challenge the power of the malevolent authority.

It is also pertinent to note that these same questions can be legitimately asked about any party that aims to rule a people-group or a nation-state. The only difference with a terrorist group is that with conventional elected authority, there is the possibility of voting them out of power should the electorate decide to do so. The author often asks the young people that he engages with on whether they think it is possible for people to do the same to a terrorist group. Simply put, you can, in most cases, throw out the ruling power, should you wish and that is accepted as a God-given right.

Would the people of Afghanistan be able to do the same with the Taliban?

### **The Fifth Myth: Our Recruits are Committed to the Cause and Victory Will be Ours**

Terrorists are also adept at giving the impression that it is simply a matter of time before they attain success as a result of their struggles. While the reality on the ground may be far different, the terrorists successfully convince the potential youth recruits that it is just a matter of time before they are victorious. They do so for two distinct purposes. Firstly, to showcase and exaggerate the strength and advantages they have over the enemy, be it in terms of the dedication and skill of their recruits, their brilliant and courageous leaders, divine assistance, or the sheer potency of their tactical, operational and strategic plans. They seek to convince the young people that though they may appear to be the weaker party, they are in actual fact going to emerge triumphant.

Hence, terrorists place great emphasis upon the dissemination of rhetoric on the quality of their recruits. They thus seek to balance the equation when dealing with a numerically superior adversary by inspiring more potential recruits to join them. God, as the force behind the terrorist organisation, is also prominently highlighted. The assurance of divine intervention not only gives credence and legitimacy to their struggle, but also provides reassurance to the youth and instills perseverance when things are not going well for the terrorist organisation. Terrorists are also very well aware that including the divine equation not only increases hope in young people but ensures their loyalty, as the young individual is no longer fighting for just a group, but for

a group that is perceived to be carrying out the will of God. The leaders of terrorist groups are also often highlighted as beacons of hope and inspiration. Terrorist organisations constantly work on the image of such leaders, making them appear like heroic and courageous legendary figures, so as to inspire awe and devotion on the part of the followers, sympathy on the part of the population and even fear on the part of the enemy. Stories are circulated about the brilliance of the leadership in inflicting crushing defeats on the enemy and the absolute fear on the part of the adversary when dealing with these leaders. All these efforts are carefully designed to give the impression that despite what is being said by the media or regardless of the situation on the ground, the terrorist organisation is on the path to victory.

Terrorists also often seek to discredit the authorities by painting them as being incompetent, corrupt and lacking the mandate and goodwill of the population. Hence, while possibly acknowledging the superiority of the enemy in terms of strength of numbers and military might, terrorist organisations constantly portray the enemy as being on the brink of collapse due to the intrinsic and extrinsic problems that it faces as a result of its own corruption or illegitimacy. Any positive development on the part of the adversary is simply seen as mere propaganda to shore up support for a dying regime and any setback on the part of the terrorist group is seen as a small, temporary setback that will have little effect on the final outcome of the conflict. This unrealistic assessment of the proceedings of war is often uncritically accepted by the young people, who have been indoctrinated to accept the rhetoric of their leaders.

### **The Sixth Myth: Our Enemy Knows Only the Language of Violence**

With this premise, the terrorists seek to depict the enemy (most often the ruling authority) as a party that acts and reacts only through the lens of violence. Hence, compromise, negotiations and discussions with such an enemy will simply be pointless, not because these strategies have not been attempted, or because of a lack of effort by the 'victims', but rather because of the inherent nature of the 'enemy' that refuses to use or recognise any form of interaction but violence.

Given this scenario, the option of violence is therefore forced upon the 'victims' as, they are told, no other forms of interaction with the authorities will be successful. By using this line of thought, the terrorists again try to show that the option of violence has been forced upon them.

In the author's engagements with undergraduates, this is often the refrain that he hears. 'How else can one deal with an enemy that only knows the language of violence?'

This premise has some underlying assumptions that need to be examined closely. Firstly, there is the assumption that the enemy is homogeneous and that violence is accepted by all on the other side. This is seldom the case. Even when the Nazi atrocities were at their height, there were numerous Germans who refused to 'simply follow orders' and courageously chose to take a different path. If this is the case, is it then justifiable to label everyone on the other side as the enemy and even worse, to target and terrorise them?

Secondly, assuming that the authorities are indeed unjust and violent, there is the assumption that there is nothing that can be done through non-violent ways to change their ways and mindset. This assumption runs contrary to what we see in reality, when we consider statesmen such as Nelson Mandela who was labeled a terrorist in South Africa, but later went to become the President of the rainbow nation and a force for unification, earning the respect and admiration of many who, prior to that, condoned and practiced the apartheid system of governance.

Thirdly, does reacting to violence by resorting to violence actually make things better? Is there any empirical and historical evidence to suggest that in the majority of cases, regimes that use indiscriminate force, actually mend their ways and change their system of governance when confronted with violence?

Very rarely is it seen that lasting peace which is acceptable to both sides can be achieved when aggression and violence are used to resolve the conflict. While it is probable that short-term peace might be possible, it is at times simply the lull before the storm. Hence, one might be able to win the war through use of force, but unless one wins the peace, it is simply a matter of placing one's self between the end of World War One and the beginning of World War Two.

Mahatma Gandhi, who in his lifetime confronted hatred, prejudice and suffering without resorting to violence, once remarked, 'an eye for an eye, and in the end, the world will grow blind.'



## Challenging the Myths?

It is pertinent to note that the terrorist rhetoric mentioned earlier, particularly their justification for the use of violence, finds tremendous traction with young people. In this regard, the author would argue that authorities, in their counter-terrorism strategies, have not paid sufficient attention to debunking and developing an 'alternative'<sup>154</sup> or counter-narrative to that of the terrorists. While great attention is paid to countering the terrorists mainly via hard power and kinetic force, scant attention is given to the fact that much ground has been lost, particularly in tackling the youth at the mental, emotional and intellectual planes. In this regard, hard and searching questions need to be asked, among them being:

- When a youth is confronted with the terrorists' rhetoric and propaganda, does he possess the ability to critically analyse the assumptions and presuppositions of the terrorists and is he equipped to counter the narrative of violence subscribed to by the terrorists?;
- Should not the authorities have a more active role in challenging the myths of the terrorists?; and
- Do the current counter-terrorism efforts take into account the need for developing a counter-narrative to the terrorists' own narrative?

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<sup>154</sup> Omer Ali Saifudeen, Interview by Author.



# THE ALTERNATIVE TO VIOLENCE

*General, your tank is a powerful vehicle. It smashes down forests and crushes a hundred men. But it has one defect: It needs a driver.*

*Bertolt Brecht*

*An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.*

*Mahatma Gandhi*

## **If not violence, then what?**

Often after presenting the view on the tactical inferiority of violence in achieving one's objectives, the author is then confronted with the legitimate query on what then should be done in the face of injustice, discrimination and pain inflicted by a stronger party against a weaker one. What non-violent options are there to address legitimate grievances of a people-group that is marginalised and deprived of justice?

At this juncture, the author must stress that at no point does he condone the cruelty and injustice that has been inflicted on certain people-groups, whether in the past or in the present. He is also of the opinion that not doing anything in such a situation due to the complexities involved is not an option and that neutrality, or not wanting to take sides when the weak are being oppressed, is both cowardly and dishonorable, as neutrality does little for the oppressed victims. As has been said, 'neutrality always sides the aggressor and never the victim'.

The author mentions these caveats simply because in his engagement with the youths, there is a tendency for some of his listeners to believe that since he disagrees with indiscriminate violence carried out in the form of terrorism, he is not sympathetic towards the plight of the weak who are supposedly 'forced' to use the strategy of terrorism. The author empathises with the plight of the suffering, whether in Chechnya or Palestine, or anywhere else and strongly sees the need to address their legitimate grievances. He merely disagrees with the use of indiscriminate violence against the innocent.

So coming back to the original question, what then can we do to address the plight of those suffering under the yoke of political oppression and bondage?

The author hopes to address this legitimate query at three levels;

- Firstly, to propose a strategy of non-violence;
- Secondly, to flesh out the characteristics of non-violence, looking at relevant case studies of situations where non-violence was used as a strategy; and
- Thirdly, to construct a concrete and tangible methodology of non-violence.

## **The Characteristics of Non-Violence**

### **Non-Violence: A Realist Approach and Not a Theoretical Construct**

When talking about non-violence, it is easy to get the impression of a misty-eyed hippy in a trance, singing about 'making love and not war.' Or perhaps, the idealistic youth emotionally advocating that 'we give a peace a chance.' Or even the vocal Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) demonstrating against war and violence.

Against this backdrop, it is easily assumed that the non-violent approach is an abstract, theoretical construct that will not find traction in the 'real' world, where genocide, ethnic cleansing and two major world wars are some of the significant hallmarks of the 20th and 21st centuries.

However, if a realist approach is taken to mean an approach that must be applicable and doable in actual situations, then the author would like to argue that non-violence has been just that in the past and has the potential to continue to be so now.

So what then is non-violence?

Bob Irwin and Gordon Faison in their article 'Why Nonviolence? Introduction to Nonviolence Theory and Strategy'<sup>155</sup> define the concept as 'taking action

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<sup>155</sup> Bob Irwin and Gordon Faison, *Why Nonviolence? Introduction to Nonviolence Theory and Strategy*, New Societies Publishers, 1984.

that goes beyond normal institutionalised political methods (voting, lobbying, letter writing, verbal expression) without injuring opponents.’ They categorise non-violent action into three (3) main forms:

1. Protest and persuasion;
2. Non-cooperation; and
3. Intervention.

The first category, protest and persuasion, includes activities such as speechmaking, picketing, petitions, vigils, street theater, marches, rallies, and teach-ins. The second category involves active non-cooperation, whereby, when facing perceived injustice, people may refuse to act in ways which are considered to uphold the status-quo, for example, to work, buy, or obey. Activities in this category may include refusal to pay taxes, withholding rent or utility payments, civil disobedience, draft resistance, fasting, and more than fifty different kinds of boycotts and strikes. The third category, intervention, can be defined as the active insertion and disruptive presence of people into the usual processes of social institutions. Examples of such activities include sit-ins, occupations, obstructions of ‘business as usual’ in offices, the streets, or elsewhere.

In the light of all these possible options, the assertion that the strategy of non-violence is a passive reaction that can offer little in terms of substantive action, really cannot hold water. The strategies and activities mentioned earlier are not only comprehensive but have also been tested and proven on numerous occasions.

The campaign against the slave trade by William Wilberforce, the movement for female suffrage by Susan B. Anthony, Carrie Chapman Catt and numerous others, the Gandhian philosophy of ‘*satyagraha*’ (devotion to truth), Nelson Mandela’s struggle to overcome apartheid in South Africa, Martin Luther King Jr.’s part in the American Civil Rights movement and Aung San Suu Kyi’s continued efforts in Myanmar<sup>156</sup> are excellent case studies of non-violent strategies that have been carried out and have achieved considerable success despite tremendous opposition.

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<sup>156</sup> Anne Williams and Vivian Head, *Freedom Fighters*, Futura Publications, 2007.

Marina Mahathir,<sup>157</sup> an active blogger and newspaper columnist in Malaysia, spoke on the need to allow youths legal and beneficial ways to express their anger and frustration. At the national level, she spoke of the 'Malaysian convoy to Palestine' and the 'Malaysian Children's Letter Writing Initiative to Children in Palestine' as examples of non-violent ways to express one's support for victims of unjust developments in the world. These constructive channels could be utilised to redirect possible anger and frustration.<sup>158</sup>

The key to unlocking the potential of strategies of non-violence to achieve some form of success lies in understanding the concept of 'power.' The conventional view of power is that it is something that a select few have and that the majority of others do not. Hence power, it is assumed, lies in the hands of the soldiers, authorities, the rich, and institutional bodies. However, the grasp of the principle of power in the strategy of non-violence is fundamentally different. Rather than seeing power as something possessed by one party, to the detriment of another, it argues that power is instead a dynamic social relation. Power depends on the assumptions of *continued obedience*. However, when people refuse to obey the authorities or those that are in power, their grasp on power begins to crumble. This basic truth is in essence obvious but it took the dramatic historical episodes of Gandhi's civil disobedience campaigns to begin to establish a new model of power.

Hence, the author would like to argue that non-violence, far from being a passive and abstract idea, is instead a practical and feasible strategy that has been practiced in different parts of the world and has brought about concrete and tangible results. However, non-violence is far from easy, and because of this, has been seldom used. The sacrifices and the time involved in getting results are both great and long and many are not prepared to pay the price and perhaps this could explain why the strategy has not gained general acceptance. Simply put, we lack the courage, internal fortitude and perseverance to utilise this strategy and since pondering one's own personal weaknesses is never palatable, it is much better to instead claim that the strategy has little chance to find success in the 'real' world.

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<sup>157</sup> Marina Mahathir (Datin Paduka), Interview by Author.

<sup>158</sup> Denison Jayasooria (Dr.), Interview by Author, Institute of Ethnic Studies, *University Kebangsaan Malaysia* (UKM), Bangi, Malaysia, 26 January 2010.

It is also significant to note that in the author's engagements with young people, when he shares with them the stories of the many heroic people mentioned earlier, who used the strategy of non-violence, they are often amazed on two counts. Firstly, that there is a plethora of activities, efforts and actions that can be carried out under this particular strategy, and secondly, that the strategy of non-violence has actually worked!

While there is a need to caution the young people that these efforts came at great cost, personal sacrifice and often took long periods of time, with victory often seeming far from certain; highlighting these efforts nevertheless allows the young people to see that there are viable options besides violence that deserve their consideration. As Theodore Roszak observed, 'People try non-violence for a week, and when it 'doesn't work' they go back to violence, which hasn't worked for centuries.'<sup>159</sup>

### **Non-Violence: Active Engagement and Not Passive Watching**

Often, there is also the impression that non-violence is basically non-action. Hence, the strategy of non-violence is perceived as letting the enemy dictate the agenda and the subsequent outcome of the struggle, while the adherents of non-violence just passively watch the aggression and injustice go by, leaving the victims to suffer and allowing the aggressors to go unpunished and at times even be rewarded for their misconduct.

This understanding of non-violence is unfortunately predicated on the false assumption that the sole relevant action when faced with aggression is counter-aggression; since non-violence is contrary to counter-aggression, it is perceived as 'doing nothing.' This point is constantly put across by young people when questioning why the author advocates 'doing nothing' when it is suggested to them that non-violence is a possible strategy in countering injustice. The simple understanding is that non-violence equals non-action.

Why is this so?

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<sup>159</sup> Quoted by Eric Stoner, *Is There No Other Way In Libya?* 25 March 2011, <http://wagingnonviolence.org/2011/03/is-there-no-other-way-in-libya/>

Unfortunately, the strategy of non-violence has a problem in nomenclature. The name itself is based on the antithesis of something i.e. violence. Hence, non-violence is always seen in the context of 'violence' and since the fundamental assumption is that violence is deemed as the sole possible action when countering injustice and tyranny, by default non-violence therefore means non-action.

There is, therefore, a need to dispel the myth that non-violence is non-action, by making the effort to show that there is a whole gamut of operational, tactical and strategic initiatives that can be carried out under the ambit of non-violence.

The exemplary leader of non-violence, Mohandas K. Gandhi, regarded himself as a soldier, albeit a soldier of peace; this 'naming' of himself as a soldier helped create the impression of a disciplined, strategically cohesive movement that systematically and comprehensively sought to achieve its objectives through concrete, tangible and winnable strategies.

### **The Methodology of Non-Violence:**

What, then, are these winnable strategies, and how can they be put into practice? The author would like to advocate five steps which could bring about results, particularly in bringing about positive change. These steps include:

- 1) Meeting the immediate needs of the people
- 2) Creating awareness of their plight
- 3) Seeking support and solidarity from those watching
- 4) Utilising the tool of shame
- 5) Building soldiers of peace

#### **1) Meeting the Immediate Needs of the People**

In discussions with young people, the author is often told, very passionately and comprehensively, about the sufferings of various people-groups at the hands of evil individuals and regimes and he is also frequently reminded by the young people that his words of non-violence in the face of such injustice, are tantamount to joining the enemy in destroying the innocent victims.



In such situations, the author asks the following questions:

- In conditions where such great evil is present and tremendous suffering is evident, besides expressing your anger and indignation, what have you done to help the victims?
- In such a situation, can the suffering people count on you for anything beyond your words of condemnation and anger against their enemy?
- While venting your frustrations and anger at the evil enemy and feeling the pain of the victims is the initial step towards correcting injustice, when do you plan to bring about concrete and tangible change for the suffering people?
- Besides talking, what else will you do?

The author understands the feelings of anger and disappointment expressed by the audience when talking about the aggressors and the victims of aggression. However, he is also of the view that solely expressing and venting one's emotions on the issue and stopping there, is simply insufficient.

Therefore, while sympathising with the 'suffering people' about the injustice that is inflicted on them, it is also incumbent upon us to assist them at practical levels. Meeting the needs of such people-groups via medical, financial and educational means has the potential to relieve the suffering of the people while restoring their pride and dignity. Numerous NGO's and International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGO's) are in these conflict areas providing and assisting at all levels in various forms.

Getting youths involved in these activities will allow them a constructive channel to express their feelings and emotions while assisting the afflicted people in a concrete manner.

## **2) Creating Awareness of the Plight**

When confronted with unprovoked aggression and tyranny, there is a need to publicise the injustice and pain that is suffered. There is a need to objectively document the misery that has been brought about by evil men who have wrought pain and suffering upon the innocent. Haing S. Ngor, the noted survivor of the Cambodian 'killing fields', did just that through his writings and his subsequent portrayal of a journalist's assistant in the Oscar-winning movie

*The Killing Fields*. While the movie did little to end the violence in Cambodia, it certainly brought the world's attention to the plight of the Cambodian people. Also, it was a grim reminder to future generations of what evil men are capable of doing.

There are some who may believe that such means of creating awareness lack the ability to change the mindset of the perpetrators and the aggressors. Let us be clear, the audience for this strategy is not the aggressor but the general audience who are spectators to the injustice. The purpose of this strategic action is to invoke the sympathy, empathy, support, indignation and even anger of the audience at the fact that such injustices are allowed to continue, and consequently to bring about action, perhaps initiated by members of the audience, both at the civil and governmental level, that could alter the situations and circumstances of the victims.

The author is reminded of the heroic efforts of Timor Leste's President Ramos Horta, who tirelessly worked during the occupation of his country to remind the world of what was taking place in his country. His efforts, often seen as futile, were eventually instrumental in bringing the world's attention to the plight of his people.

History reminds us that when these strategies are carried out, results can be so painfully slow in appearing that the efforts often appear futile. History also shows us that they can and have succeeded.

### **3) Seeking Support and Solidarity From Those Watching**

Creating awareness of the plight is also an essential prerequisite for getting support and solidarity from those watching. The possibility of obtaining assistance, be it moral, financial or international support, is a possibility that has yet to be fully explored. East Timor's liberation, South Africa's independence and Aung San Suu Kyi's ongoing struggle for freedom would not have been possible without the assistance and support of outsiders. More tools need to be conceptualised, developed and deployed to identify and actively seek out those that could potentially be of assistance when dealing with injustice.

Is this idea merely a theoretical construct or can it be actually be applied on the ground?

Is it possible to get state actors who have little national interest in a conflict elsewhere to get involved?

The 'Responsibility to Protect' initiative, a timely intervention pioneered by Canada, looks to the international community to actively get involved 'where a population is suffering serious harm, as a result of internal war, insurgency, repression or state failure, and the state in question is unwilling or unable to halt or avert it'<sup>160</sup> While there remains much to be worked out at the technical level, the initiative does indicate that there is a level of consensus that the international community does not have the 'option of doing nothing' in the face of people suffering injustice. There is, then, the possibility of a viable methodology being put in place; what remains is a catalyst which will spur these international actors to act. The author argues that highlighting the atrocities being committed and shaming those who choose to take a neutral stand in the face of such injustice is not only possible but plausible.

#### **4) Utilising the Tool of Shame**

The option of shaming a specific audience is a powerful tool in the arsenal of a non-violent warrior. In this course of action, we highlight the unprovoked oppression, discrimination and injustice perpetrated by the violent side against the victims. The purpose of utilising this tool is to cause righteous indignation and a sense of anger amongst those who are neutral in the conflict and a sense of shame and embarrassment among the supporters, sympathisers and allies of the aggressor.

There are those that are of the opinion that shame is an emotion that can only be felt if one has an active conscience and that in many cases certain 'aggressors' have gone far beyond that. Being a student of international relations and having seen man's enormous potential for evil, the author is inclined to think likewise. That is why shame should not be directed merely at the enemy but also their allies, supporters, and sympathisers. More importantly, those adopting a neutral stance should also be targeted by this strategy of 'shaming' on the basis that there is a moral and legal obligation to get involved, and neutrality should not be an option. The message must

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<sup>160</sup> *The Responsibility to Protect*, Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, December 2001, <http://responsibilitytoprotect.org/ICISS%20Report.pdf>

be conveyed to this audience that standing on the sidelines in the face of unprovoked violence against a people-group is simply repugnant.

## **5) Building Soldiers of Peace – Youth Advocacy for Peace**

There is an urgent need to train and nurture a cadre of young people that not only espouses peaceful ideals but more importantly are well trained and equipped to be active advocates of peace. According to the United Network of Young Peacebuilders, ‘advocacy is the act of pleading or arguing in favour of something, such as a cause, idea, or policy. It is an ongoing dynamic process, which seeks a progressive change in actions.’ The various forms of advocacy would include lobbying (local policy makers, governments, foreign governments, regional and international institutions) networking (talking and making connection with others and joining committees, groups or conferences), mass participation (protest with media coverage, boycott, training, petitioning) and using the media to raise public awareness (broadcasting one’s cause on radio, television stations and the internet, distributing information packages to government officials and media, writing press releases and conducting media interviews).<sup>161</sup> Looking at the various options listed above, it is well possible that we have been a little rash in coming to the conclusion that there are few tools available when it comes to non-violent efforts in countering extremism and terrorism.

There are some who might raise the question on whether youths are suitable for this role and the possibility of them making a positive impact.

This is a fair question and needs to be addressed. Firstly, it is important to note that youths make up nearly 1.8 billion people or approximately 25% of the world’s population.<sup>162</sup> Youths are also severely affected by violence caused by extremism and terrorism, unfortunately, both as victims and perpetrators. *The United Nations Study on Violence against Children* indicated that ‘violence against children exacts extraordinary costs to society, and is linked

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<sup>161</sup> *Youth Advocacy for a Culture of Peace - A Reflective Guide for Action in Europe*, United Network of Young Peacebuilders, [http://www.unoy.org/downloads/2008\\_YACoP.pdf](http://www.unoy.org/downloads/2008_YACoP.pdf)

<sup>162</sup> Fatimah Zwanikken, *Youth as Agents of Change*, The OPEC Fund for international Development (OFID) Quarterly, October 2011.

to lifelong social and health problems.<sup>163</sup> Youths also have the potential to be agents of social change. History has shown us that many movements that brought about positive and significant change were led by youths. The social movements of the 1960's such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Anti-War Movement had their roots in college campuses. Even today, we see live global concerts campaigning for the eradication of poverty and raising public awareness of climate change. Most of the target audience for such campaigns are the youth, in the realisation of their potential to address issues that are important to their futures.<sup>164</sup>

Hence, given that youths make up a sizable number of the population and are both directly and indirectly affected by violence, ignoring their role in addressing issues of violence, extremism and terrorism would be detrimental.

The option of non-violence has often times been seen to be a feeble attempt to counter injustice, depravity and misery initiated and carried out by people with evil intent. Besides, it being an option that requires immense courage, wisdom and sacrifice (qualities that are often times rare to find), another reason for its lack of use could be due to the lack of knowledge on its various facets and tremendous potential. A counter narrative that: (1) examines the theoretical construct of the strategy of non-violence; (2) analyses the case studies that history provides; and (3) both crafts and develops a non-violent strategy that is tailored to meet the challenges of a particular conflict could appeal to the young and challenge the terrorists' notion that 'violence is the only way.'

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<sup>163</sup> *Youth Advocacy for a Culture of Peace - A Reflective Guide for Action in Europe*, United Network of Young Peacebuilders, [http://www.unoy.org/downloads/2008\\_YACoP.pdf](http://www.unoy.org/downloads/2008_YACoP.pdf)

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.



## CONCLUSION

There is a growing trend of youths getting involved in extremism and terrorism. This dynamic is governed by three push and pull factors, namely the environment, the makeup of the youth and the makeup of the terrorist organisation. In this regard, the terrorist has proven to be highly creative and adaptive in manipulating the environment, exploiting the youth and adapting its organisation to suit the needs and desires of the youth.

This process has been carried out by the terrorist through the construct of a narrative that appeals to the 'hearts and minds' of the youth. The counter narrative to that of the terrorists is still very much in its infancy and has yet to fully realise its potential. In this regard, it must be stressed that the inertia in developing and disseminating a sophisticated counter-narrative could be detrimental in winning the struggle against terrorism with regard to the youth.

Against this backdrop, there is a need to develop a counter narrative that not only seeks to debunk the rhetoric and propaganda of the terrorists but also seeks to provide a substantive, creative and feasible concept that could be used by the youths when confronted with the realities of injustice, discrimination and suffering. In this regard, it is suggested that the concept of non-violence be explored and developed so as to provide an alternate strategy to violent thought and action





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