

*Review of “Countering Islamic State Ideology: Voices of Singapore Religious Scholars*

Amjad Mohamed-Saleem

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The emergence of the Islamic State (IS) happened at a time when in the wake of the Global War on Terror and the Arab Spring, young Muslims were struggling to define themselves and assess their social roles. These shifts (cultural, political, economic) have upended traditional structures of authority, relocated centres of power and allowed a flood of perspectives on how life should be lived. These shifts have unanchored lives, challenging the traditional structures and networks that guided peoples’ behaviour in society. This frantic pace has unsettled people to such an extent that they yearn for agents of constancy to provide an oasis in the shifting sands of today. This unsettling has created the need for a search for a social identity; greater accountability and the need for security. In this uncertainty the Islamic State has provided an attraction to young people in terms of shaping a narrative and creating a sense of identity. Thus one of the challenges that has occurred has been to counter the narrative and the attraction as a concept that the Islamic State holds for young isolated Muslims. It is in this spirit that a new book “Countering Islamic State Ideology: Voices of Singapore Religious Scholars” edited by Prof Rohan Gunaratna and Ustaz Mohamad Hasabi bin Hassan, President of the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (PERGAS) and published by PERGAS 2021, is a timely and much needed contribution towards challenging the IS attraction. Over the past few years, Singapore despite its push for multicultural identity and inclusion, has not been immune to young Singaporean Muslims being seduced by the radical ideologies of IS. This book is written in an attempt to have a constructive dialogue in an easy manner with Muslims (and people of other faiths) to better understand the misrepresented and distorted information to deter those who might be influenced by IS.

It cannot be underestimated how much the Islamic State works on false narrative propagation based on misinterpretation and misapplication. For those, impressionable minds already

on the margins of society, feeling excluded and insignificant, the narrative offered is alluring. Thus the careful work that has been done to not only counter but refute specific aspects of IS ideology by clerics and theologians is noteworthy and needed, especially when it comes to specific historical doctrines and misunderstandings around the Quran as chapters 17 and 19 go into detail on. Countering the narrative also starts with mapping and understanding the global nature of this opposition against IS as chapter 2 illustrates and going back to the early traditions as chapter 3 sets out to do. In this sense, chapters 7 through 14 serve to address practical notions that have been used by IS to seduce young minds, including launching the legitimacy of launching attacks during Ramadan, the distortion of the concept of migration (Hijrah) and the danger of takfir (excommunication). What I appreciate about the book as well is not to shy away from discussing some of the more difficult interpretations of the Qur'an which are often used as excuses by IS, including discussing the perception of the religious other and the verse of the Sword. The latter in particular has often made for difficult and uncomfortable discussions and I appreciate the attempt to have an honest conversation about this particular verse and to debunk misconceptions about the issue of abrogation. This issue in particular is dealt with extensively pointing out to a number of conditions to be satisfied and thereby ensuring that the Verse of the Sword cannot be read as superior or to overrule those other verses within the Qur'an that advocate for peace, patience and tolerance.

There is an infodemic of ideas and narratives that has to be challenged and in this as the editors point out there are two aspects to be wary of: those that are attracted by the IS narrative to join and commit violence and those who perceive that what IS propagates is representative of Islam. The latter category is also an equally damaging because as the editors say "IS ideological propaganda has affected them" and a wedge is driven. Thus a correction of the narrative is needed not only for those seduced by IS into joining them but by those influenced into thinking that IS represents Muslim and Islam. So this book will go a long way to correct those misperceptions all around on the relationship between Islam and violence and the relationship of Islam with other faiths.

However it is important to realise that it is not only in countering ideas that the struggle is. There has to be more done in allowing those on the periphery to be included and heard. So those reading this book should not see this merely as an inspiration of countering narratives but also as a catalyst to instigate work to put these ideas into practice. So as people in schools, private sector and public authorities read this book, it is important understand how and what should be done to turn these ideas into practice to build harmonious relations in societies. There has to be proactive efforts made on education but also ensuring there are opportunities for people from diverse communities can meet with, engage and get to know each other. The rallying call of the concluding chapter is important that faith leaders have to be part of the

mobilisation and to reach out to the community. They are vital and important partners in the fight to counter the narrative but also to engage other communities and leaders.

It is in this spirit that I view this really important publication from Singapore. Though being grounded in a Singapore context, the shelf life of this publication goes beyond Singapore to other similar contexts to inspire an alternative narrative to what the Islamic State is providing. Whilst it does miss for example the elephant in the room, which is about power structures and who supplies the guns, it does add one part to the conversation which is about ideologies. It is thus important to reflect on the international arms industry that makes the actualisation of such power possible. However in the context of ideology narrative tackling, it is important to underline the starting premise of this book that “the face of terror is not the true faith of Islam” and doesn’t represent Islam which seeks to protect humanity. This starting point is needed for the counter narrative for people to feel that they are included and they have a sense of social identity. It is this social identity that is alluded to in the foreword by Karen Armstrong in terms of the Medina phase of the history of Islam which led not only to the development of Islamic political thinking but also its engagement as a community with other faiths. It is this social identity that the Islamic State falsely tries to portray to attract people but as Armstrong reminds us from her example of the treaty of Hudaibiyah, the social identity, spirit and ethos, of mercy and tranquillity is what we need to recapture and show how in the contexts we all live in, we can contribute to. The final sermon of the Prophet (Peace be Upon Him) alludes to this spirit and gives us the responsibility to respect the differences of others, to learn from each other, to accept each other and live with each other.