

Associate Paper

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Hizb-ut-Tahrir in Australia: Urgent Need for International Engagement and Counter-Narrative

Mirza Sadaqat Huda
FDI Associate

Key Points

- The radical Islamist organisation Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HUT) could pose a socio-cultural threat to Australia in the short term. It may instigate an increased level of small-scale sectarian violence in the medium term and may indirectly instigate terror attacks by affiliated groups or individuals and create a deeply divided community in the long term.
- Although the efforts of Australian security forces in preventing a number of terror attacks in the last decade should be recognised, vigilance is required. In addition to hard power measures and surveillance, policymakers must be sensitised to the urgent need to create a counter-narrative to the radical ideologies promoted by HUT.
- Since HUT is a transnational organisation with chapters in over 40 countries and follows an international doctrine with domestic undertones, for the proposed counter-narrative to have any impact, it must be drafted through robust international consultation with partner countries where HUT is active.
- Moderate Islam, societal and cultural values and national identity may be some of the key notions underpinning a counter-narrative.

Summary

Since its formation in East Jerusalem in 1953 by Sheikh Taqiuddin, a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood,¹ Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HUT) has opened chapters in over 40 countries worldwide. This international radical Islamist group aims to overthrow all Western and secular governments and unite Muslim-majority countries, as well as lands previously under Muslim rule, such as Spain and the Philippines, under a caliphate to be governed by Islamic law and headed by a Caliph, or religious leader.

Overtly, HUT does not support violence but advocates political, intellectual and religious methods of achieving its goal. Despite this, its virulent anti-Western rhetoric, support for terrorist attacks against Western troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and spreading of religious hatred against non-Muslims have led to bans in several countries.

In Australia, where HUT has not been proscribed, its activities include recruiting well-educated, middle-class Muslims, instigating social disharmony among Muslims and non-Muslims, exploiting international events and local issues to further its cause and undertaking a very sophisticated public communication strategy. HUT's rejection of all national values, including multiculturalism and democracy poses grave social, political and national security threats and should not be understated in light of its ambiguous, if not fictitious, denunciation of violence. Due to its international nature, Australia needs to tackle HUT as an ideological threat facing the wider Indo-Pacific region.

Analysis

In Australia, the threat posed by HUT in the short, medium and long terms should emphasise the urgent need for the creation of a counter-narrative to radical ideology, preferably through international co-operation with partner countries. This paper will highlight these threats and briefly explore the modalities of such a counter-ideology.

Threat Assessment

Short Term

HUT has the potential to pose a socio-cultural security threat by increasing the gap between the Muslim community and the wider Australian society in the short term. The majority of Muslim communities in Australia follow a moderate version of Islam and subscribe to Australian values, culture and society. The radical brand of transnational political Islam being promoted by HUT is thus at odds with the views of the majority of Australian Muslims. Despite this, young Muslims who feel disillusioned due to social, economic and other reasons are particularly vulnerable to indoctrination by HUT. For most Australian Muslims, their country's role in the "War on Terror" is a sensitive issue, particularly in regard to the presence of Australian troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. HUT has very effectively utilised the disenfranchisement felt by certain members of the Muslim community, as well as their sentiments towards Australia's participation in the global efforts against terrorism, which it

¹ Bergin, A. and Townsend, J., 'Responding to the Radical Islamist Ideology: The Case of Hizb-ut-Tahrir in Australia', *Policy Analysis*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute: Canberra, 14 March 2007.

has maligned as the “War on Islam”,² to create fault lines between Muslims and other communities. This was evident in the rally organised by HUT in 2005 in support of the men arrested in Operation *Pendennis*, when it asked Muslims not to work with ‘non-believers or authorities and not to oppress each other.’³ The promotion by HUT of religious intolerance and its active discouragement of interfaith initiatives will be matched by calls for intolerance by extreme right-wing political parties. These two extreme fringes from both communities will hamper integration and multiculturalism among the moderate majority and widen the gap between Muslims and the wider Australian society in the coming years. As young, university-educated people become exposed to HUT’s ideology, Australia must, in the coming years, perceive HUT not simply as a terrorist/extremist threat, but as a threat to socio-cultural harmony with severe repercussions for the future.

Medium Term

In the medium term, as more Muslims become indoctrinated by HUT and its ideology gains traction, the increased division between communities, as well as perceived grievances, may result in communal violence in the form of small-scale sectarian clashes. These may be instigated by local issues, but are more likely to be flared up by international events, reminiscent of the violence that was triggered by the ‘Innocence of Muslims’ video. Current trends suggest that, in the foreseeable future, there will be greater instability in the Middle East and other regions of the world, as well as a continued use of social media to incite instability. HUT may capitalise on both these trends through propaganda activities, which may result in an accentuation of the frequency and ferocity of sectarian clashes in Australia. Moderates from both the Muslim and non-Muslim communities may be forced to choose sides as the radicals seek to expand their membership by appealing to people’s basic religious and patriotic values and exploiting subsequent clashes as proof of the “us and them” notion.

Long Term

In the long term, if HUT is given free space to operate – as is the case at present – it may pose a significant national security threat to Australia. Although HUT does not promote violence, it does not reject the use of *jihad* for “justified” causes. This could be interpreted as condoning violence without taking responsibility. As HUT’s membership expands, its leadership may become more decentralised. Not all members may follow HUT’s overt doctrine of pursuing political objectives through non-violent means. Splinter groups may form that are prepared to undertake violence to pursue what they perceive to be “justified” causes. Lone wolf terror attacks by persons not directly related to HUT but who are influenced by their plethora of online and print material may also be a possibility.

One very significant organisational trait of HUT is its ability to infiltrate legitimate public organisations, including the uniformed services. Reports have pointed to such cases in

² Neighbour, S., ‘Islamists With Caliphates on their Minds, Not Bombs on their Belts’, *The Australian*, 2 July 2007.

³ O’ Brien, N., ‘Demand for Muslims to Speak Out’, *The Australian*, 30 July 2007.

Pakistan, as well as some Middle Eastern countries.⁴ In Australia, due to the practice of carrying out rigorous background checks, such threats would remain negligible. Despite this, Australian policymakers must be aware of this threat, while at the same time ensuring that non-discrimination is practised in letter and in spirit within all public and private employment practises. Increased diversification of Australian public and private services, including the intelligence agencies, can in fact be beneficial in building a united multicultural front against radical elements. Overall, although terror attacks perpetrated by HUT are unlikely even in the long run, individuals or groups associated with them can pose a threat and the Australian security forces must remain vigilant.

Urgent Need for International Engagement and Counter Narrative

The most significant threat posed by HUT is the increased isolation of young, educated Muslims who reject all forms of democratic aspirations, national or even regional identity, multiculturalism and tolerance, in favour of an ideology which is completely at odds with the moderate form of Islam practised by the majority, as well as traditional Australian values. The urgent need, therefore, is to create a counter-narrative to the radical ideology of HUT. Since HUT is an international organisation with chapters in over 40 countries and follows an international doctrine with domestic undertones, for a counter-narrative to have any impact, it must be drafted through active international consultation with partner countries.

How HUT appeals to Muslims in both developed and developing nations, in countries as diverse as Bangladesh and Australia, can be a suitable case study towards the creation of an international counter-narrative to the radical ideology of HUT, which may be adjusted to reflect national values and concerns. Internationally, the very basis of such a doctrine should be the promotion of moderate, non-political Islam. In the case of Australia, the national values of tolerance, multiculturalism, patriotism, fairness and non-discrimination must be promoted within such a narrative. For Bangladesh, where HUT follows similar objectives of recruiting young, university-educated students and professionals by exploiting local and international issues, secularism, the promotion of moderate Islam as practised by the majority and the reiteration of Bengali national identity, may form part of the narrative. For both countries, the engagement of Islamic scholars, youth and civil society would be crucial. Actionable programmes are also required, which would be reflective of domestic situations. These may include inter-faith dialogues, community engagement, improved governance and encouraging and facilitating the participation of minorities in employment and educational opportunities.

The Australian Response

In Australia, HUT appeals to disillusioned youth by appearing as a group that promotes intellectualism, idealism and comradeship,⁵ while maintaining ambiguity in its views on terrorism. This strategy has enabled HUT to maintain legitimacy under the Australian Criminal Code, while furthering its financial, recruitment and logistical activities.⁶ Australian

⁴ Kugelman, M., 'Another Threat in Pakistan, in Sheep's Clothing', *New York Times*, 3 August 2012.

⁵ Phillips, M., 'Jihadist Group a Threat to Us All', *The Australian*, 6 July 2010.

⁶ Bergin and Townsend, 2007.

policymakers have rightly refrained from proscribing HUT, as it would drive the group underground and may add to its appeal among youth. Surveillance, currently reported to be quite extensive, should be continued and intelligence sharing between partner countries, particularly those in the Indo-Pacific with HUT chapters, should be actively encouraged.

It cannot be overemphasised that any attempt to deter the activities of HUT, whether through surveillance or a counter-narrative, must not hurt the sentiments of moderate Muslims, as they are the most integral part of the counter-radicalisation process. Isolating the wider Muslim community would only serve to further HUT's objectives, as was the case with the fiasco surrounding Dr Mohammed Haneef in 2007, after unfounded allegations of aiding the terrorists responsible for the Glasgow Airport attacks were levelled against him.

Conclusion

In its publication, 'The Security Environment 2011-12 and Outlook',⁷ ASIO has identified "Terrorism" and "Communal violence and violent protest" as being among five major security concerns facing Australia. As demonstrated in the analysis above, HUT's activities, directly or indirectly, can be attributed to the instigation and exacerbation of both these threats. Despite this, the uniqueness of HUT as an organisation demands that security efforts cannot simply include surveillance and containment measures. Australian policymakers must be sensitised to the need to look beyond HUT simply as a terrorist threat. Suitable soft power techniques should be adopted to counter the social divisions being perpetrated by HUT, which has the potential to cause inter-communal violence, as well as to inspire terrorism in the medium to long terms.

Adopting a counter-narrative, in consultation with international partners, may be a viable strategy to counter the contemporary threat of transnational radicalisation facing the Indo-Pacific region. HUT has often proclaimed 'Western, secular governments' as its enemies. It is, however, moderate Muslims in Australia, who widely reject the norms of HUT while retaining their Islamic and Australian identities, who stand to become the greatest casualties in any ideological war between radical Islamic fundamentalists and extreme conservative parties. Australia has the difficult task ahead of proactively countering the spread of radicalisation and extremism, while retaining the country's intrinsic character of tolerance and democratic rights and, at the same time, reinvigorating ties with the Muslim community.

⁷ Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, 'The Security Environment 2011-12 and Outlook'. <www.asio.gov.au>

About the Author: Mirza Sadaqat Huda is a Senior Research Associate at the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute. He has a Masters in Security Studies from Macquarie University, Sydney and a Bachelor Degree from the University of Canberra. His interests include multilateral co-operation on non-traditional security issues in South and South-East Asia. Mr Huda was born in Bangladesh and calls Australia his second home, dividing his time between Sydney and Dhaka.

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80 Birdwood Parade, Dalkeith WA 6009, Australia.
Tel: +61 8 9389 9831 Fax: +61 8 9389 8803
E-mail: lluke@futuresdirections.org.au Web: www.futuresdirections.org.au