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Dealing with the long-term scourge of terrorism

BY

[EUGENE K B TAN](#)

November 16, 2015

The year 2015 may well be the *annus horribilis* for the way the scourge of terrorism has plagued the world. In its latest affront designed to shock and awe, the Islamic State, or Daesh, has claimed responsibility for last Friday's heinous attacks in Paris, which have claimed more than 120 lives, causing widespread panic and fear there and elsewhere.

With January's Charlie Hebdo shootings still fresh in French minds, how will France respond in the aftermath of the latest attacks?

The terrorists in Paris probably sought to emulate the 2004 Madrid train bombings. Soft targets, with civilians in non-military settings, are a popular option for terrorists because it instils deep panic, fear and divisions in multi-racial and multi-religious societies. The Madrid bombings resulted in Spain withdrawing its combat troops from Iraq.

The Paris attacks were designed to sow discord not just between Muslim and non-Muslim French, but between Muslims and non-Muslims elsewhere. The divisive issue of how to deal with the Syrian refugee crisis in Europe will surely be affected negatively, as could Europe's borderless Schengen arrangement.

No counter-terrorism strategy can guarantee a complete eradication of violent extremism. Any expectation of a risk-free society in the terrorism context is misplaced. Yet, it is in such trying times that pluralistic societies are put through the test of how resilient they are in coping and adapting to the changing inter-faith and security landscape.

In many parts of the world in these trying times, questions have been raised over how people of different religions and races can live together and of Islam's compatibility with the contemporary world, the loyalty and integration of Muslim communities, and the viability of multi-culturalism as an integrative mechanism and social glue.

Amid these concerns, it is imperative and important to remember that violence and militancy have nothing to do with the teachings of Islam or any other faith.

BUILDING UP SOCIAL RESILIENCE

Last November, Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen told Parliament that the Singapore Armed Forces would join 33 other nations in Operation Inherent Resolve, a multi-national coalition against Daesh. Dr Ng said Singapore had participated in previous multi-national coalition efforts against religious extremists who pose a terrorist threat to Singapore, such as against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, and that the latest deployment continues such efforts.

Supportive rather than combative, Singapore's contribution includes liaison and planning officers to the United States Central Command and the Combined Joint Task Force HQ, a KC-135R tanker aircraft for air-to-air refuelling and an imagery analysis team.

Singapore has been regularly cited as a terrorist target since the 9/11 attacks in the US. This threat is real as Daesh now has a Malay archipelago unit, Katibah Nusantara, for Southeast Asian fighters. Since January 2002, more than 60 persons have been arrested and detained under the Internal Security Act for alleged terrorist-related activities, including at least nine Singaporeans who had plans to join or further the cause of Daesh.

Terrorism per se, however, is not an existential threat to Singapore. Instead, a greater threat lies in whether a terrorist attack here will lead to mindless knee-jerk reactions and a tear in Singapore's social fabric.

Singapore needs to continually build up social resilience to withstand such threats. This requires a whole-of-society approach where civil society plays an active role to maintain and enhance religious harmony and avoid the incivility spiral in which distrust, fear and suspicion catalyse the breakdown and unravelling of the social fabric in the face of a terrorist attack.

Any counter-terrorism policy will work only if Singaporeans — regardless of race or religion — work as one. The terrorism threat requires not just a security response but also a holistic one — one that seeks to align the hearts and minds of the various faith and non-faith communities to the societal objective of harmony and peace.

We have a collective responsibility to invest and be engaged in enhancing trust, confidence and social cohesion among those living here. Recognising and

understanding the values and teachings of the various faiths, especially Islam, is an important first step.

Tolerance, forbearance and co-existence are useful attributes but they must be way stations to true harmony built on mutual understanding, respect and appreciation for the differences among Singaporeans. Laws alone cannot develop norms of trust, respect, confidence and stability in a multi-religious society like ours. Hence, the Community Engagement Programme, the Declaration on Religious Harmony, the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles and the Inter-Religious Organisation all have a critical role to play in developing bonds among Singaporeans.

That there has been no successful terrorist attack in Singapore can give rise to a false sense of security and complacency.

Yet, the terrorism threat will persist for the foreseeable future with no clear resolution in sight. Rather than seeing it as a problem, we should regard it as an opportunity to further develop genuine understanding, recognition and protection of our inherent diversity. The relative religious freedom we have and the inter-faith harmony and ties have to be jealously guarded.

After all, governments and civil society alone cannot defeat terrorism. A multi-stakeholder approach that drives the effort for an effective and sustainable bulwark against violent radicalism and the forces that seek to divide and destroy our humanity is needed. There is no alternative.

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