

Blunting the knife-edge of ISIS terrorism

Graham Ong-Webb

For The Straits Times

The recent unveiling of major upgrade plans to Singapore's counter-terrorism efforts by the Ministry of Home Affairs has provided much substance for Singaporeans to think about, as societies around the world gear themselves up to manage the terror threat the best way they can.

As Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam's speech at the Home Team Leaders' Forum last month reminded Singaporeans, the threat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militant group is indeed monstrous and "qualitatively different" from that posed by groups such as Al-Qaeda.

Unlike for the Al-Qaeda terrorist, the lowest-common-denominator weapon for the ISIS perpetrator, when stripped of other means, is actually a knife. As Mr Shanmugam said: "(Terrorists) have begun to use knives, machetes - items that are easily accessible to people."

Indeed, one of the two self-radicalised Singaporean youths inspired by ISIS propaganda and arrested under the Internal Security Act for terrorism-related activities last May planned to carry out

attacks in public places with knives. Knives have become emblematic of ISIS fighters. They were sanctioned by the group as a weapon of choice when the shocking video of American journalist James Foley being beheaded with a 15cm-long knife was uploaded to the Internet in August 2014.

The image of the knife-wielding lone wolf was etched into the global mind during an attack at a London railway station last December that saw a number of people wounded. The incident raised fears that Britain could face more of such "low-grade attacks" by lone actors.

Closer to home, Malaysia in January saw its first ISIS-related "lone cub" attack when a 16-year-old schoolboy held a sales assistant at knifepoint in a shopping complex before he was apprehended by the police.

The precedent for a group-level incident was set by the terrorist attack in the Chinese city of Kunming in March 2014. A group of eight individuals, suspected to be Xinjiang militants, rushed into a railway station and started slashing and stabbing people indiscriminately with knives and cleavers. The attackers killed 29 people and injured 143 others.

In Taiwan last week, the decapitation of a four-year-old girl

- nicknamed Little Light Bulb - by a deranged individual with a cleaver also sent a psychological shock wave around the world, although the incident was not related to terrorism.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SINGAPORE Singapore's extremely stringent border policing and control measures significantly mitigate the risk of contraband explosives and firearms entering the country that can be used in an ISIS attack similar to those that happened in Paris and Brussels recently.

However, beefed-up security patrols and the deployment of more closed-circuit television cameras across the island cannot be expected to future-proof Singapore from knife-wielding terrorists, even though they help improve monitoring and response. There are simply too many people to track.

When push comes to shove in the face of terrorism, it will be members of society who must serve as first responders by backing one another.

This is a mindset that has been firmly established in most citizens in Israel, a country besieged by waves of terrorism since its national independence in 1948. Israel has been dealing with a spate of attacks since last year which

observers have described as the "knife intifada".

It has led the country's domestic security agency to conclude that these types of terrorist attacks cannot be detected ahead of time. Citizens must therefore be the first line of defence. Indeed, on top of recognising civilian contributions to opposing attacks, Israelis share tips in open forums on how to blunt a knife charge by improvising with surrounding objects. Discussions are tempered by a sense of prudence and responsibility. The Israeli authorities provide self-defence principles to the public and tips on exercising good judgment.

Here, the story of Little Light Bulb is also instructive. Although she was killed, her mother fought off her daughter's attacker as best as she could. While it was a mother's natural response to protect her child, this act of bravery must resonate at the societal level with all peoples.

This is why upcoming national programmes such as SG Secure, designed to organise, train and empower people to stand firm and put down a terror attack when needed, are necessary.

But such programmes are complete only if they are extended to provide basic self-defence training to able-bodied citizens. All physically able national

servicemen already receive such training. There is no good reason all Singaporeans cannot receive such instruction as well.

To be sure, the best response for all civilians in the face of an attack is to help one another get away from harm. Yet, there are tactical situations where the social responsibility to disrupt an attack is required. In strategic terms, it telegraphs the message to groups such as ISIS that humanity will not be daunted.

At the end of the day, such training programmes must continue to complement long-existing initiatives to bolster social harmony. Should a member of society still be attacked, it will be a moment for other individuals not just to respond but also to draw upon the national wellspring of cohesion - built through prior efforts at community-building - to heal and prevail.

Again, we can learn from the mother of Little Light Bulb in her resilient belief that society is fundamentally good and that we must not lose trust in one another.

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Will Britain choose irrelevance?

Dambisa Moyo

When voters in Britain go to the polls on June 23 to decide whether their country should leave the European Union, the issues they will have to reckon with will include the impact of their decision on unemployment, trade flows and the stability of financial markets. But there are other less quantifiable considerations that must also be weighed in the balance.

The economic arguments against a British exit from the EU - or Brexit - have been well rehearsed. Many have suggested that if Britain were to leave, manufacturers would secure continued access to the European market by fleeing across the English Channel, costing the country millions of jobs.

Similarly, withdrawal from the EU risks undermining London's position as a global financial centre, which depends on the city's integration into European markets. Trade agreements, too, would have to be renegotiated in the wake of a Brexit.

Another area of concern for many voters is in regards to Britain's sovereignty - the idea that independent countries should have ultimate decision-making authority over what happens within their borders. Membership in the EU sometimes requires ceding control to a complex web of often-inefficient Brussels-based supranational institutions.

I hold a doctorate in economics and work with businesses whose employees and operations benefit from Britain's membership in the

EU. I also have a pronounced disdain for red tape and inefficiency. And yet, I do not believe that economic considerations or concerns about sovereignty offer compelling arguments for Brexit.

Much more important is the potential impact of such a decision on Britain's global standing.

Membership in a European community of 500 million people provides Britain with considerable influence over geopolitics and the global economy. As the world becomes ever more daunting and complex, maintaining that influence is clearly in the country's interest.

The referendum campaign is playing out against a global economic and political backdrop that is nothing if not foreboding. The International Monetary Fund has warned that global growth is unlikely to return to the levels that it attained before the 2008 financial crisis.

Indeed, global consulting firm McKinsey predicts that global growth rates during the next 50 years will be half of what they were over the previous five decades.

Meanwhile, Mr Martin Dempsey, retired army general and former chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said that the world has entered the most dangerous period he has ever witnessed.

Developing countries are home to roughly 90 per cent of the world's population and some two-thirds of their residents are younger than 25. Stagnant growth, or shrinking output, in many emerging economies has serious consequences. Britain's Overseas



Development Institute predicts that by 2025, roughly 80 per cent of the world's population will live in fragile states.

Job-eroding technological advances, worsening income inequality, demographic shifts, dwindling natural resources and environmental depletion are adding even more straws to the camel's back.

The world is already undergoing the worst refugee crisis since the end of World War II, with some 60 million people having been driven from their homes. The mounting instability will only exacerbate the problem.

Leaving the EU will not shield Britain from the vagaries of the

global economy. It will only deprive the country of a leading voice in shaping the response to new and existing challenges. Britain is far better placed to influence the global policy agenda from inside the EU than from outside it.

To be sure, leaving the EU would not strip Britain of its historical prominence in international organisations - most notably, its permanent membership of the United Nations' Security Council. But a non-European Britain would be less likely to secure the same standing and influence in whatever institutions emerge in the years ahead.

Within the EU, Britain is a critical part of an influential economic and

political bloc with undeniable heft. Amplified by the EU, its voice can influence world events, providing the country with what the British like to describe as an ability to punch above its weight.

Should Britain leave, however, its influence would be limited to its true size on the global stage: a relatively small country with limited economic and political power. As British voters prepare to cast their ballots, they should weigh carefully the consequences of international irrelevance.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

Dambisa Moyo, economist and author, sits on the boards of several global corporations.

Membership in the EU would provide Britain with considerable influence over geopolitics and the global economy. But leaving it could result in consequences of international irrelevance.

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