Self-Radicalisation: The Case of Abdul Basheer Abdul Kader

Kumar Ramakrishna[*]

11 June 2007

THE REVELATION that the Internal Security Department (ISD) has detained a well-educated Singaporean Malay/Muslim who was planning to wage jihad alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan has caused concern for two main reasons. First, unlike earlier Singaporean militants arrested in 2001 and 2002 who came under the ideological sway of the Al-Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terrorist network, it appears that 28-year old polytechnic law lecturer Abdul Basheer Abdul Kader had instead "self-radicalised". In short, he is a lone-wolf self-starter, not part of JI, who absorbed his militant jihad ideas directly from radical Islamist websites on the Internet. Such "home-grown" militants are difficult for intelligence services to pick up as they generate far smaller "signatures".

Second, Abdul Basheer does not fit the profile of someone who might be prone to religious militancy. For instance, unlike the majority of detained Singapore JI militants who come from generally blue-collar backgrounds, Abdul Basheer has a much better socioeconomic pedigree. He studied at the prestigious Raffles Institution and the National Junior College, before graduating from the National University of Singapore Law School in 2003. On top of that, Abdul Basheer actually practised with the prestigious local law firm Drew and Napier before quitting to teach law at a local polytechnic. Abdul Basheer, in short, had every opportunity to do well for himself. So what went wrong?

The Radicalising Process

Before addressing this question, we must first understand what we mean by "radicalisation". We could think of this as the psychological process by which an individual experiences a significant personality change through thoroughly internalizing a revolutionary subculture. In this process of becoming "acculturated" into the new subculture, the individual virtually sheds his old personality and learns drastically new ways of thinking, feeling and acting. A revolutionary subculture is usually anti-status quo-oriented. It includes an ideological "Story" that diagnoses the predicament affecting a group, identifies the cause of the problem, and suggests a remedial strategy of action. In Abdul Basheer's case, it is likely that he had imbibed the Global Jihad subculture of Al Qaeda and similar radical Islamist militant networks.

In other words, he is likely to have bought into the Story that the cause of the Muslim world's current problems is the loss of the old Islamic Caliphate; that the obstacle to the restoration of the Caliphate is the unholy alliance of "Zionist Israel" and the "Crusader US" and their allies; and that the strategy to set things right is all-out jihad in "hot zones" such as Afghanistan and Iraq, among others. This is why he had wanted to learn Arabic in a Middle Eastern country to communicate with the "mujahidin fighters". It is also why he sought to train with the Lashkar e-Tayyiba (LeT) terrorist network to prepare for joining the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Abdul Basheer's profile

There is much we do not know about Abdul Basheer, his family background, or of his experiences in school and at work. Nevertheless, the information that has emerged allows us to formulate some very preliminary observations. The first thing that jumps out is what has been revealed about his personality. Described as very smart, well-read, jovial and eloquent, we know that Abdul Basheer was a first rate debater in his JC days and was regarded as a competent lawyer, though he did not practise law for long. Furthermore, the "old" Abdul Basheer was apparently a party animal, who enjoyed the nightlife and working as a part-time bartender in a pub. While still in JC, he formed a rock band with himself as lead vocalist and drummer. He also apparently dressed like a "punk" who enjoyed wearing "big earrings". All this is rather telling because the old Abdul Basheer would have belonged to the minority of nominal Muslims who are practically non-observant. It would seem that before he became a religious radical, the old Abdul Basheer was a "social radical" in terms of lifestyle habits and dressing, which suggests that he was a non-comformist within the generally conservative Singaporean Malay/Muslim community. In social psychological terms, this marks him out as someone who has a strong *internal locus of control*. That is, Abdul Basheer is obviously someone who believes that he can exercise control over external events and actively shape his life, rather than passively resigning himself to outside forces such as fate and family wishes. The sad reality is that if Abdul Basheer had continued with that kind of proactive, go-getting outlook on life, he seemed destined to achieve the Singapore Dream. Instead, he opted out.

Reacting to the Status Quo

Analytically speaking, the most likely reason for this is that at some point after starting work Abdul Basheer encountered what some psychologists would term a *de-legitimating discovery*, or an incident or series of incidents that caused him to lose faith in the innate rightness of the status quo. What we know is that after graduating from NUS in 2003, he joined a prestigious law firm but left after only a year and became a law lecturer at a local polytechnic. Apparently Abdul Basheer told friends that he had left the practice of law because the pursuit of wealth "distracted people from being close to God". We could accept this at face value as the discovery that caused him to question his life priorities. We also know that by late 2004 Abdul Basheer had begun to immerse himself in radical Islamist discourse on the Internet, when he had apparently not done so before. There is no necessary logical connection between wanting to get out of the rat race to live simply before God and suddenly deciding to familiarize oneself with the hate-filled, us-versus-them Global Jihad view of the world. Something else is missing: the element of personal animus.

In the absence of more information, we can only wonder about the detailed reasons Abdul Basheer left the law firm after such a short time, and whether he considered becoming a polytechnic lecturer a severe loss of status. Given what we do know of his strongly assertive, "in-your-face" personality, we cannot rule this out. Thus one *possible* reason why Abdul Basheer became susceptible to the virulent, anti-status quo appeal of Global Jihad subculture was because he himself had experienced a profound personal de-legitimating discovery. This left him with a painful "narcissistic wound" and extremely upset with the status quo. At a deeper, subliminal level, he may have sought opportunities to *strike back*.

Personal transformation

It is at this point that Abdul Basheer could possibly have weaved his own individual "narrative" of having been "wronged" in his personal life into the wider web-based Global Jihad Story of the embattled worldwide Muslim *ummah* undergoing persecution at the hands of an US-Israeli cabal bent on destroying Islam. To Abdul Basheer, the Global Jihad worldview would have appealed to him intellectually and viscerally. It would have led him to emphasize his "authentic" Muslim identity whilst deliberately eliminating all vestiges of his "copycat" secular, Westernized, self. Furthermore,

the Global Jihadi call to militant action would have appealed strongly to Abdul Basheer's activist, let's-do-something-about-this mentality. As a result, the old *social* radical would have gradually transmogrified seamlessly into the *religious* radical. This transformation was obvious by 2005, when an old classmate from law school chanced upon a completely different Abdul Basheer in town. While he was still his counter-cultural self, there was a huge difference: where only a few years earlier he had sported punk dressing and big earrings, he now wore a beard, religious clothing and even an obvious mark on his forehead caused by intense prostration whilst praying.

Abdul Basheer represents an evolution in the radical Islamist challenge. Earlier Singapore and Malaysian JI militants, by swearing the oath or *ba'ia* to the likes of the late Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, had essentially imbided a very Indonesian Islamist agenda. This is because JI emerged from the historic Negara Islam Indonesia (NII) movement in West and Central Java, and to this day has generally retained an Indonesia-first bias. Abdul Basheer, in contrast, appears to be a genuine "de-territorialized" Global Jihadi, who sees his fight as part of a worldwide cosmic conflict between Islam and the West. In his jihad, the front is wherever Muslims are oppressed, not just Southeast Asia.

Virtual Radicals

In a way, Abdul Basheer is not really a lone wolf. He is part of the wider subculture of Global Jihad, comprising virtual communities of radicals connected to one another via the Internet. These "email jihadis" have severed all allegiances to the nations of their births. They are united instead by an emotionally powerful attachment to abstract, idealized notions of the global Islamic community or *ummah.* Conversely, they have equally abstract, deeply dehumanised notions about their enemies, and will not necessarily shy away from mass-casualty terrorist attacks on civilian populations whom they deem complicit in the "crimes" of their governments. This should be reason enough for more information-sharing on the detailed backgrounds of people like Abdul Basheer, to better help analysts develop vital early warning indicators of the potential vulnerability of individuals to self-radicalisation.

---

[*] *Associate Professor Kumar Ramakrishna is Head of the Centre of Excellence for National Security at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University. He is currently working on a study of terrorist motivations in Southeast Asia.*