

Extremism not tied to any one faith, says Shanmugam

Every religion will have some who will abuse or misuse it: Minister

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It is a mistake to tie extremism to any one faith as every religion has believers who will misuse or abuse it for their own reasons, said Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam.

Calling for a departure from this way of thinking, the minister yesterday highlighted how there have been cases in the region where extremists come from a variety of religions, including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam.

Mr Shanmugam was replying to

a query on Singapore's response to extremism during a question-and-answer segment that took place before a virtual lecture organised by the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore.

"We need to recognise that in every religion, there are people who will misuse it, abuse it and use it to attack people of other faiths – sometimes for political reasons, sometimes for other reasons. But it has usually got a nexus which has got very little to do with faith and religion," he said.

Noting that Singapore had its first case of far-right extremism recently, Mr Shanmugam said the authorities here took an approach based on their experiences with Islamic extremism by involving local clerics in the case, as they have more credibility with believers.

Before the lecture yesterday, which was given by the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) Assistant Minister for Cultural Affairs, Mr Omar Saif Ghobash, and held over videoconferencing platform Zoom, Mr Shanmugam also made opening remarks in which he touched on the subject of extremism.

Local extremists in South-east Asia have been inspired by conflicts in the Middle East and have travelled to join extremist groups there, where they receive training and are further radicalised.

When they return, they pose a threat to South-east Asia, said Mr Shanmugam, who made the point to highlight how close the two regions are and how powerful an effect any kind of event in the Middle East can have here.

South-east Asia and the Middle

East also have deep economic ties. The minister said that for Singapore, bilateral trade with countries in the Middle East was worth nearly \$60 billion in 2019. The value of this trade has been growing at a compound annual rate of 4.2 per cent over the last five years.

The two regions are linked by common religious identities as well, with South-east Asia being home to nearly 300 million practising Muslims, said Mr Shanmugam.

Islam is the dominant faith in the Middle East.

"Many Muslims across the world see the Middle East as the seat of Islam and a point of reference on religious matters. The cultural and religious interactions between the Middle East and South-east Asia are extensive and go back centuries," said Mr Shanmugam.

Mr Ghobash, who is also the well-known author of the book *Letters To A Young Muslim*, published in 2017, said Singapore has always been a model for the UAE.

"We've learnt, and we've studied and we've visited a lot of times, and have tried to emulate Singapore in many ways, so thank you, Singapore," he said.

Mr Ghobash also addressed questions from the more than 150 people tuning in to the lecture, including one on how the UAE plans to project and build on its soft power.

He said soft power is not something that can be controlled or directed, but rather is something that is a function of how a country operates.

He brought up UAE's Emirates airline, and how its development from having just one plane to being a big operation that connects hundreds of cities to Dubai has given rise to some soft power.

"I don't think anybody thought that was going to happen in the first place, but in promoting Dubai as a place to kind of transit through or come and visit, the airline has been a massive source of soft power," Mr Ghobash said.

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