S'pore Muslim leaders must tackle rise of anti-Shi'ism hate speech

Rising anti-Shi'ism in the region and the Middle East is affecting Singapore Muslims. Muslim leaders and scholars must speak out and act against such sectarianism by educating local Muslims that Shi'ism is a valid creed of Islam.

Syed Farid Alatas

For The Straits Times

The arrest in May this year of two auxiliary police officers in Singapore, for terrorism-related offences under the Internal Security Act (ISA), serves to highlight the danger of sectarianism.

One of the arrested men was reported to have held the view that the war in Syria was sectarian, being a conflict between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims. As a Sunni Muslim, his intention was to go to join the Free Syrian Army and fight against the Shi'ites in Syria.

Sunnis and Shi'tes form the two major denominations of Islam – the Sunnis make up the majority of the global Muslim population, and Shi'ites about 20 per cent. Sunnis are also the majority of Muslims in Singapore, with Shi'ites making up less than 1 per cent of the Muslim population here.

It is vital that researchers, activists and law enforcement agencies understand the connection between anti-Shi'ite hate speech and terrorism. While it is true that there is also anti-Sunni hate speech among Shi'ites, there are no known cases of Shi'ites from Singapore or the region taking up arms against Sunnis.

While not all hate speech is uttered by individuals who wish for physical violence to be perpetrated on the objects of their hate speech, we must ask ourselves if anti-Shi'ite hate speech may be one among many factors that encourage would-be terrorists to join the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or other groups in Iraq and Syria to fight against Shi'ites.

If this is possible, it means that our society has to take a very active role in minimising anti-Shi'ite hate speech not only for the sake of national security, but also to protect the dignity of Singaporean Shi'ites.

SINGAPORE IMPORTS ANTI-SHI'ITE SENTIMENTS

Traditionally, the Sunni majority of the Malay world of South-east Asia was not anti-Shi'ite.

In Singapore, for example, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) was established with the cooperation of Sunnis and Shi'ites. As was pointed out by Imam Habib Hassan Al-Attas, head of the Ba'alawi Mosque, the legal adviser during the formation of Muis in 1970 was the prominent lawyer, Mr Mohamed Javad Namazie, a Singaporean of Persian origin and a Shi'ite.

Many other prominent Singaporean Shi'ite personalities have contributed much to the overall development of the Singapore Muslim community. This includes the Jumabhoy family, whose contributions to commerce and industry in Singapore are well known. The official position of Muis, the Muslim religious authority, is that Shi'ites are a part of the Muslim community. Muis recognises Shi'ism as a creed and jurisprudential school of thought within Islam.

Today, however, Singapore is certainly not free from hate speech directed against Shi'ites that is becoming more prevalent around the world. Hate speech refers to speech that attacks an individual or group on the basis of their racial, ethnic, religious or gender identity. Such speech may take the form of writings, gestures and conduct that incite prejudice or violence against the members of a particular group.

Anti-Shi'ite hate speech can be readily found on social media. A public Facebook group, Melayu Singapura Tolak Syiah (Singapore Malays Reject Shi'ism), with 1,814 members, often demonises Shi'ites.

Comments on YouTube and other social media refer to Shi'ites as deviant (sesat), apostates (murtad) from Islam, and even mock them as monkeys, and satanic.

Offline, Singaporeans are also exposed to publications, many from Malaysia, that present distorted images of Shi'ism and contribute to antagonistic views towards Shi'ism. Shi'ism is referred to as a cursed religion that is infiltrating Islam in Singapore and needs to be stopped.

The hatred that we see here is not too different from the sentiments expressed by Abu Musab Zarqawi (1966-2006), the Jordanian-born founder of al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (later known as Al-Qaeda In Iraq, or AQI). In a 2004 letter to Osama bin Laden, Zarqawi refers to Shi'ites as "the insurmountable obstacle, the lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion, the spying enemy, and the penetrating venom". He describes Shi'ism as a "sect of treachery and betrayal throughout history and throughout the ages".

UNTRUTHS ABOUT SHI'ISM

Such hate speech is supported by assertions about Shi'ism that are simply untruths. For example, Shi'ites are said to have their own Quran. This continues to be repeated by anti-Shi'ite propagandists despite the fact that evidence of the existence of a Shi'ite Quran has never been produced.

It is also said that Shi'ism is a religion created by a Yemeni Jew more than 1,400 years ago in Arabia in order to split the early Muslim community. This is an assertion that was never taken seriously by any major Sunni Muslim scholar.

The influence of trends in Malaysia and Indonesia cannot be understated. Malaysian Shi'ites have been facing persecution for several years. Hostile views about Shi'ism are often presented during Friday sermons and in the state-controlled print media. In Indonesia, Shi'ites have been victims of hate crimes and have suffered loss of life and property.

While it is true that there are legitimate doctrinal differences between Sunni and Shi'ite Islam that can be discussed in an open and scholarly manner, the anti-Shi'ite literature originating from Malaysia and elsewhere generally presents a distortion or caricature of Shi'ism and attacks that caricature.

This is typical of the substandard scholarship that has an impact on Muslim learning in Singapore.

Sunni Muslim scholars in Singapore are remarkably silent on these distortions and hardly any attempts have been made by them to correct the false image of their co-religionists.

COMMUNITY HERE MUST ACT AGAINST ANTI-SHI'ISM

More, therefore, needs to be done on the part of Muis as well as other individuals and groups concerned with the growing sectarianism among Singapore Muslims. The fact that one Singaporean Muslim had been detained for having plans to fight against Shi'ites in Syria suggests the possibility of the radicalisation of Muslims along anti-Shi'ite sectarian lines.

The problem of sectarianism in the Singapore Muslim community, therefore, needs to be taken more seriously.

Several measures need to be taken by the Muslim community.

What is required is a long-term campaign of education to create more understanding about Shi'ism among the Sunni majority. This would include organising intra-Muslim dialogues that bring Sunnis and Shi'ites together and allow them to discuss theological and other religious issues that, if submerged or misunderstood, serve to divide them.

It is also very important that Sunnis in Singapore are taught that to be anti-Shi'ite is not part of Sunni tradition. In fact, the virulent anti-Shi'ite views that are trafficked in nowadays are generally found to have their origins in certain extremist Salafist groups. Salafis are Muslims who adopt a more literalist and puritanical approach towards Islam.

Both Sunnis and Shi'ites have been victims of the more extreme among the Salafis, that is, the Salafi-jihadi groups in ISIS in Iraq and Syria, where barbaric acts of violence were also perpetrated against Christians and other religious minorities.

Sunni scholars and activists in Singapore ought to play a prominent role in speaking out against sectarianism. This needs to go beyond making general statements now and then about the necessity for Muslim unity. They should directly address the demonisation of and hate speech against Shi'ism.

The content of sermons in Friday prayer, religious lectures (ceramah), and both formal and informal religious education, should all reflect an intra-Muslim spirit of awareness and understanding.

We know today that sectarianism is one of the drivers of terrorism as well as other forms of extremism to be found in the global Muslim community. We also know that Muslims have been recruited by ISIS to fight infidels and deviant Muslims, including Shi'ites.

Our religious authorities, scholars and activists must take a bolder stance and deal seriously with the problem of sectarianism among Singapore Muslims.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• The writer is professor of sociology at the National University of Singapore. He can be reached at alatas@nus.edu.sg