

Why Muhammad Tahir Ul Qadri could be the PR champion that the community badly needs

by Sagar Sarkar



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On reading a recent news report that Muhammad Tahir Ul Qadri, a prominent Pakistani Islamic cleric, politician and scholar is introducing a 'counter terrorism' curriculum in London, I could not help but think it could not have come at a better time.

The beleaguered British Muslim community is desperately looking for a PR champion who can rise from within and create a much needed image makeover. The problem at the moment, however is that the PR machinery of the Islamic State (IS) is proving to be a highly efficient and successful marketing tool that achieves a specific and targeted spread about what it cares most – its doctrine.

It would not be out of place to compare the IS propaganda machinery today with Josef Goebbels' powerful PR efforts of the early 1930s when once again indoctrination was the key to boost following of the National Socialist German Workers' Party and build support for the Nazis. But without any real equivalent of the amplification power of social media of today, diffusion of the Nazi ideology remained somewhat contained and did not spread globally. In the high tech world of 2015, the IS enjoys a tremendous advantage in that it has cleverly used western technology and PR techniques to market its programme of indoctrination and radicalization. This is indeed an irony, since the IS tells its followers to shun all things western. At another level, the IS benefits from the core advantage of social media outreach in its cost effectiveness and powerful diffusion capabilities.

Comparison with Nazi ideology is limited largely to the use and dissemination of propaganda and the exploitation of the young. Bernard Haykel, renowned IS scholar from Princeton University has been reported as commenting that IS are not a fascist group and that unlike the Nazis, IS does not promote a cult leader or leader worship at the core of its doctrine.

In fact, I believe that is the simplicity of it all – that an idea is so much more powerful when it can reside and grow in the minds of millions and is not limited by any human incarnation or 'Führer'- like entity. The danger of the IS ideology is that anyone can be a part of it and I think that is a very clever, but nonetheless, deadly PR coup.

If there are lessons we have learnt from history, it should tell us that the IS have not yet reached the military capability of the Nazis post 1940s. Again, this is not a like-for-like comparison. Perhaps, we all rest assured in that belief that the IS can never match up to the military power of the West, and that gives us a false sense of security. But what we fail to realise is that the germ of an idea, once grown, does not need a land borne army complete with missiles and tanks. Through the system of indoctrination, the IS

are successfully managing to recruit home grown followers by winning hearts and minds. Sadly, it has been one of the most successful PR campaigns of our times. This approach is also a key element of 4th Generation and hybrid warfare, which are characterised by a blurring of lines between politics, combatants and civilians, and in which nation-states may not be necessarily confronted, but rather the society through social media and psychological warfare.

The need of the hour is to combat the well- oiled IS PR machinery and this can only be done from the inside, by opinion leaders and learned scholars from within the community. The efforts of Muhammad Tahir Ul-Qadri are perhaps a timely intervention in a much needed effort to turn around the PR game and dilute the barbarous impact of IS on the minds of young people. I fervently hope that we are able to recognise this and offer the likes of him the support required to influence hearts and minds.

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