

## **Former diplomat warns Muslim millennials not to rely on online channels in search for identity**

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SINGAPORE — In a post-9/11 world, young Muslims across the globe are questioning what it means to be Muslim, and more often than not, they are turning to the Internet to seek answers to questions their elders used to give them.

The trouble with this is that it puts them in danger of being radicalised, former American diplomat Farah Pandith said at a conference titled Forum on Religion, Extremism and Identity Politics on Wednesday (July 24).

In her speech at the forum, which was jointly organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and the Ministry of Home Affairs, Ms Pandith highlighted that there are 1.6 billion Muslims in the world, with a billion of them under the age of 30.

Given the huge number of young Muslims, it is important to take this into consideration when shaping the conversation that society conducts in the battle against extremism.

Ms Pandith, who was the first-ever special representative to Muslim communities during United States president Barack Obama's administration, said that ever since the Sept 11 attack in 2001, intense media coverage on Islam and Muslims have "radically changed the feeling of what it means to be Muslim".

"If you are growing up post-9/11 and you are a Muslim millennial, or a Generation Z, that question of identity is so 'front and centre' for you.

"You are asking questions that your parents and your grandparents didn't ask. You're asking questions like, 'What does it mean to be modern and Muslim? What's the difference between culture and religion?'"

While she noted that it is normal for adolescents in any society to question who they are as they grow up, "fierce attention" from others does not help.

For Muslim millennials, it is an emotional thing first before it becomes a cerebral or political conversation, Ms Pandith said to the 200 academics, civil servants and religious representatives present at the conference held at Orchard Hotel.

### **FINDING A CONNECTION**

In their search for identity, technology has allowed young Muslims to "get answers to questions their elders used to give them", Ms Pandith added.

These messages often force the young to adopt a lifestyle that runs contrary to their culture and traditions.

"With a swish of a finger, they are seeing what it means to be Muslim on their screen," she said, even if their grandparents are saying "that is not the way we live... not our culture or our history".

And when the youth start looking for answers of what it means to be Muslim, it is those with the “loudest voices” and emotional appeal that get to them.

“The people (who) have... the answers to those young people are not normal people like you and me. They are the extremists.”

Ms Pandith added that extremist groups are able to “curate answers very specifically” for young minds to persuade them into believing that the only way to be a Muslim is to join them.

“They will tell you what to eat, what to wear, how to pray. They’ll tell you who you can talk to, who your friends are, what stations you can listen to on the radio, if anything, and where you need to go online.”

Consequently, she said, it is important to understand “identity and this idea of a monolithic (ideology)”, because these are part of the system that is underlying extremism globally.

## **ALTERNATIVES NEEDED**

While “hard power solutions” are still needed to combat extremist groups, Ms Pandith said that a “soft power” approach can prevent young people from being misguided.

Alternative narratives to what extremists are putting out is critical, and these need to be presented in a way that makes sense.

Using well-known fashion labels H&M and Zara as examples, she noted that they design their communication strategy in a “very curated way” because they understand how to persuade people.

“We have not deployed the same kind of sophistication in cultural listening and behavioural science that will help us deploy the countermeasures that are needed,” she said.

Similarly, she believes that governments around the world and society at large need to craft solutions that are “extremely curated” for different groups of Muslim youth because “not everyone is the same”.

## **WHAT TECH COMPANIES CAN DO**

Ms Pandith added that tech companies have a duty to prevent “bad actors” from using their platforms to influence others by “making changes in how their algorithms work”.

By doing so, she said it will be less likely for people to come across hate messages online.

However, fellow speaker Professor Mark Juergensmeyer said that these messages can still appear on the dark web.

The distinguished professor of sociology and global studies at the University of California, who is an expert on religious violence and conflict resolution, added that even public media has its own kind of “siloes of information”.

Using online streaming platform YouTube as an example, he said that users get to choose what kind of information they consume online and they get “rewarded” with more of such similar material due to algorithms.

“The forms of media (which an individual consumes) in the contemporary world informs people about who they are.”

Prof Juergensmeyer acknowledged that Ms Pandith’s suggestions were “excellent on a human level”, but he believed that it is ultimately a regulatory problem.

## **ACCOMMODATING FUNDAMENTALISTS**

In the same session, Professor Jonathan Fox suggested that religious fundamentalists should be allowed to defend their ideas in a free marketplace of ideas.

The Yehuda Avner professor of religion and politics at Bar-Illan University in Israel, who specialises in the influence of religion on politics, said: “Fundamentalists tend to thrive better when they can depict themselves as being challenged.”

When they are not oppressed, a lot of their arguments tend to fall apart and become less popular, he added.

Prof Fox said that a large number of fundamentalists do not desire violence, but there is a sufficient number of them who do, which is “more than enough”.

“So a free religious marketplace might be a more effective way to manage them, and control the level of potential violence.”

He acknowledged that it may seem simple in theory, but it will be difficult to practise.

In theory, he said that governments need to promote religious freedom for fundamentalists. In return, fundamentalists will guarantee they will not infringe on the religious freedoms of non-fundamentalists.

“We're essentially allowing them their modes of behaviour (and) dress institutions without government interference. (There will be no) control of the education over (the fundamentalists') children, (and) a promise (that) the secular agendas will not infringe upon their lifestyle.”

Prof Fox said this means that the government will essentially have to grant them a form of limited cultural autonomy.

This is a very serious concession by the government, and it needs to be seen by fundamentalists as having a clear and consistent policy of accommodating them — within certain limits.

“It's important because there will be instances where the government cannot accommodate the fundamentalists, but the government has to be seen as generally accommodating. And those non-accommodations are an exception,” he said.