Combating Intellectual Deviation: The Singapore Experience
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Abstract
Countering terrorist or extremist ideologies and narratives has taken on added importance in the counterterrorism efforts of many states in recent years. There is growing recognition that eliminating terrorists using military means may not be effective in reducing the terrorist threat. As terrorism stems from conflicted understandings of religious ideologies, counterterrorism authorities would do well to counter the ideological justifications for violent extremism. It is a task that relies extensively on the capabilities of the authority and its related agencies with the collaborative efforts of the community. Broad communication campaigns and affirmative actions undertaken by all parties involved have, firstly, created the necessary awareness and understanding of the dangers of extremist ideologies among the community, and secondly, prevented these deviant ideologies from mushrooming and resulting in disharmony or destruction to lives and properties. This paper shares the experiences of Singapore in combating intellectual deviation at the governmental and community levels. It is hoped that those who are interested or involved in developing strategies in the fight to undermine the appeal of deviationist ideologies are able to draw useful lessons from the Singaporean experience.

Introduction
In the past decade, research on counterterrorism measures, especially those that deal with Islamist extremist terrorism, has produced studies detailing the various strategies and programmes that have been implemented to mitigate terrorist violence (Bokhari & Barrett, 2008; Boucek, 2008; National Security Coordination Centre. 2005). In the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States, led by a desire to strike back and also improve homeland defences against future acts of terror, measures to counter terrorism have centred on military strikes against extremist terrorist organizations and even attempts to democratise countries that are deemed to be sympathetic to the extremist cause.

However, in recent years, terrorism experts have recognised that violent extremism cannot be countered by traditional military measures alone. To date, the effectiveness of a military approach in neutralising the threat of terrorism has been contentious. The Riyadh compound bombing in May 2003, the 7 July 2005 London bomb attacks and the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks clearly show that aggressive security measures have not only failed to abate the wave of terrorism, it does little to address the radical ideology that motivates and justifies the use of terror. While military measures help to eliminate terrorism to a certain extent, comprehensive counterterrorism strategies ‘would have to include responses at
ideological, financial, legislative, media, educational, informatics and developmental levels’ (IDSS, 2006). Thus, aggressive military measures have evolved into ‘soft’ measures which target ‘the intellectual and ideological justifications for violent extremism’ (Boucek, 2008). The impetus for these soft measures was the realisation that hard-nosed military measures to combat terrorism may exacerbate the terrorist threat if they are poorly thought out or callously applied. In fact, several countries have begun to develop practical rehabilitation or deradicalisation programmes aimed at combating intellectual deviation and countering the appeal of terrorism, changing attitudes and getting detained terrorists who have renounced their terrorist ways to reintegrate into society. Increasingly, counterterrorism experts believe that it is important to understand why a small number of their citizens see violence as the best or even the only way to express their views in order to arrest the terrorist threat. Moreover, there has been growing recognition that such programmes are essential elements of an integrated counterterrorism strategy.

In the Singapore context, the government has put in place a range of measures to combat terrorism, including a community effort by a group of local Muslim religious clerics to rehabilitate those who have been detained for participating in terrorist activities. The Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) has played an important part in counselling Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) detainees and their direct family members. Its main focus is to correct the detained JI members’ misinterpretation of religious concepts by promoting an appropriate understanding of Islam and to convince them that they are able to practise Islam meaningfully in Singapore’s social context. Although the design of this programme is quite specific to its local cultural and political setting, it would generally be acknowledged that the rehabilitation programmes in Singapore has the premise, that is, to correct the captured terrorists’ flawed understanding of Islamic concepts using dialogue and discussions to encourage them to disengage from terrorism.
The majority of previous local research that have dealt with counterterrorism have focused on various levels of responses at combating extremist ideologies - ideological, financial, legislative, media, educational, informatics and developmental. In Singapore, an ideological response to countering the extremist views of JI detainees is preferred and has been fairly successful. Since the fight against terrorism is a war of ideas and values, it is necessary to ‘isolate the terrorists, diminish the underlying conditions of violence, and employ public diplomacy to counter the propaganda of the radical extremists’ (Terrorism in Southeast Asia: The Threat and Response, p. 13). Gunaratna, R. (2007), Hassan, Muhammad H. (2006) and Hassan, Muhammad H. & Pereire, Kenneth G. (2006) examined the direct and indirect initiatives undertaken in Singapore to combat terrorism. Their studies described the formation of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) whose function was ‘to study the JI’s ideology, offer expert opinion in understanding JI[‘s] misunderstanding of Islam, produce necessary counter-ideology materials, and to conduct public education for the Muslim community about religious extremism’ (p. 4). In reviewing the ideological approach, Hassan, Muhammad H. & Pereire, Kenneth G. (2006) found that counter-ideology work has focused on attempts to engage the wider Muslim community in dialogues about radical ideologies so that they would develop a true understanding of Islamic religious precepts. They suggest that any counter-terrorism strategies cannot overlook the non-Muslim community as their anxieties, concerns and misunderstanding of Islam and Muslims in general need to be addressed (p.9).

Through the examination of the counterterrorism strategies in Singapore, this paper, therefore, attempts to describe and discuss the elements of the rehabilitation programmes and combating intellectual deviation as implemented by Singapore in countering terrorism. The study will also look at what lessons can be drawn from these counterterrorism efforts.
The Definitions of Constructs

In this paper, the construct of ideology is defined as a set of beliefs, especially the political beliefs on which people, parties or countries base their actions. In this paper, deviant ideologies would refer to the ideology by which members of terrorist organisations like Al-Qaeda and JI make sense of themselves and the world. According to Gunaratna (2005), Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) members use their version set of ideas based on the chosen religious texts and interpretations to guide their actions and justify their violent actions. They also use their ideology to distinguish between what, in their perspective, are to be considered valid and invalid ways of thinking about Islam (p.70). Likewise, Al-Qaeda’s members based their beliefs on their interpretations of the Quran and Hadith and their knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence led them to develop an extremist ideology dominated by violence (Ansary, 2008).

Rehabilitation is broadly defined as the process of helping a person to revert to his former self, independence, and quality of life. For the extremist detainees in Singapore, rehabilitation seeks to change their behaviour and address their misinterpretation of several Islamic concepts. It includes reintegrating a large number of these detainees into mainstream society, thereby restoring their personal self and independence (Terrorism in Southeast Asia: The Threat and Response, p.11).

In his book, Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements1, John Horgan offered the following operational definitions:

Radicalization: the social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or religious ideology. Radicalization may not necessarily lead to violence, but is one of the several risk factors required for this (p.152).

Violent radicalization: the social and psychological process of increased and focused radicalization through involvement with a violent non-state movement. Violent radicalization encompasses the phases of a) becoming

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1 John Horgan, Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2009) p 152-153
involved with a terrorist group and b) remaining involved and engaging in
terrorist activity; it involves a process of pre-involvement searching for the
opportunity to engage in violence and the exploration of competing
alternatives; the individual must have both the opportunity for engagement
as well as the capacity to make a decision about that engagement (p.152).

**Disengagement:** the process whereby an individual experiences a change
in a role or function that is usually associated with a reduction of violent
participation. It may not necessarily involve leaving the movement, but is
most frequently associated with significant temporary or permanent role
change. Additionally, while disengagement may stem from role change,
that role change may be influenced by psychological factors such as
dissillusionment, burnout or the failure to reach the expectations that
influenced initial involvement. This can lead to a member seeking out a
different role within the movement (p.152).

**De-radicalization:** the social and psychological process whereby an
individual’s commitment to, and involvement in, violent radicalization is
reduced to the extent that they are no longer at risk of involvement and
engagement in violent activity. De-radicalization may also refer to any
initiative that tries to achieve a reduction of risk of re-offending through
addressing the specific and relevant disengagement issues (p.153).

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**Singapore – Countering Transnational Terrorism**

Singapore’s concern for its safety and security has been well documented long before
9/11. It has its fair share of terrorist attacks and ethnic tensions in the course of its history. In
fact several of its security agencies had been developing capabilities to deal with specific
threats such as those in the chemical and biological domain. As early as 1999, the National
Security Secretariat (NSS) together with the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF) was formed
with the objectives of enhancing the coordination of Singapore’s security agencies and to
forge and strengthen inter-agency links through the strategic convergence of these
organizations and other relevant government ministries, directing efforts against the emerging
threats of non-conventional warfare and transnational terrorism.

The arrests of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) members for plotting bombings in Singapore in
2001 has increased the government’s efforts to enhance the protection of critical
infrastructure and key installations which include border checkpoints, buildings and water
installations with the sole purpose of saving lives, preserving property and avoiding potential
disruption to the economy and society. The Police and Internal Security Department (ISD)
continues to map out standard operating procedures to fine tune emergency response through
special trainings for security agencies and personnel on a regular basis. Stricter border
controls have also been put in place by the government to prevent the entry of any elements
related to transnational terrorism. Examples of such measures include the purchase of
surveillance equipment to enhance the monitoring of goods and people across Singapore’s
borders and the imposition of stricter visa requirements on foreign nationals from certain
countries (MHA, 2003, p. 21).

As a proactive measure, the Singapore Parliament has also passed legislation to
criminalize terrorist funding. This is done even though there has yet to detect any terrorist-
linked accounts in its financial system. In addition, the government has drawn up new
frameworks for managing info-communications emergencies in the face of potent new forms
of cyber terrorism as well as regulating the use of materials which could be used to make
weapons of mass destruction (MHA, 2003, p. 21).

The collaboration between countries in the region and beyond has also been stepped
up as Singapore recognizes that the war against terrorism cannot be won by the efforts of the
country alone. The collaboration includes initiatives in intelligence exchanges, capacity-
building activities and counter-terrorism operations. In formulating the national security
strategy, Singapore has also studied the counter-terrorism experiences of other countries,
taking in key perspectives and insights (National Security Coordination Centre, 2005, p. 46).

Since terrorism today transcends national borders, it is necessary for Governments to
establish strong relationships with neighbouring countries through active cooperation to fight
against the threat. Singapore, for example, has signed agreements with Malaysia, Indonesia
and other international partners to ensure maritime security for the Straits of Malacca and
Singapore.
The Inter-Ministerial Task Force on Anti-Terrorism, under the authority of the Attorney-General and the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Law, was established as a common platform for senior personnel from various ministries such as the Attorney-General’s Office, the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS), the Commercial Affairs Department of the Ministry of Home Affairs to update all the existing laws related to the issue. This is to ensure that international legal instruments can be applied to provide a legal basis for all states to take action against terrorists and their supporters comprehensively.²

A multi-agency emergency exercise called Exercise NorthStar has led to the enhancement of maritime security, immediate response and containment requirements under the auspices of the Ministry of Home Affairs and with the support of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and the media.

Overall, the approach undertaken by the Singapore government is underpinned by three pillars: Robust Laws, Effective Enforcement and Strong Community Partnership. This approach has enabled the government thus far to tackle issues both upstream and downstream.⁴

**Strengthening Social Cohesion and Religious Harmony**

The JI phenomenon in Singapore is symptomatic of the terrorist wave that is confronting the world today. JI subscribes to the same ideology as Al-Qaeda, that of waging ‘religious wars’ against the U.S. and its allies. The actions of the Singapore JI extremists have the potential to affect the Muslim community by sowing seeds of distrust and suspicion between non-Muslims and Muslims. Before the public disclosure of the existence of the JI

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² Report to the Counter-Terrorism Committee on Singapore’s Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1373 (2001)
³ Professor S Jayakumar, address at the 3rd Asia-Pacific Programme for senior National Security Officers, 13 April 2009
⁴ Ministry of Home Affairs Committee of Supply Debate 2013 – Speech by Deputy Prime Minister, Coordinating Minister for National Security and Minister for Home Affairs, Mr. Teo Chee Hean – Working Together to Keep Singapore Safe and Secure, 07 March 2013
terrorist group in Singapore, the government decided to meet Muslim community leaders to assure these leaders that all investigations and security operations were focused against a group of radicals who had turned to terrorism and were not directed against Islam or the Singapore Muslim community. The Government then put forth a White Paper with recommendations to counter the terrorist threat to the country. This sensitive act had served to neutralise the potential threat to communal relations among the various racial and religious groups in Singapore.

In *The White Paper: The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism,* officials in the Ministry of Home Affairs also proposed to strengthen social cohesion and religious harmony to counter the threat of terrorism as they recognise that counterterrorism is a national effort and not a problem confined to the Muslim community. Dr Tony Tan, then Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for Security and Defence remarked in parliament on 18 July 2005 that terrorism has nothing to do with the true faith of Islam and that Islam should be “associated with any great religious faith of the world”\(^5\). Government literature pertaining to the JI terrorist threat pointed to the importance of getting all citizens to constantly remain vigilant even though progress has been made in the fight against terrorism.

In a highly-connected world, individuals searching for spiritual answers have easy and ready access to extremist literature on the Internet. As such, these individuals can now be indoctrinated directly or indirectly through the Internet, as exemplified by an arrest of Singapore’s first DIY terrorist who was self-radicalised\(^6\) when he turned to the Internet to ‘clarify’ his religious beliefs. This case of self-radicalisation has prompted MUIS, the Islamic council of Singapore, to develop a comprehensive course in religious education and the Asatizah Recognition Scheme to validate religious teachers’ academic and teaching credentials. The terrorists’ use of social media to spread propaganda and recruit new radicals

\(^5\) Dr Tony Tan, Speech at enhancing Singapore’s National Security at Parliament, 18 July 2005
\(^6\) Ibid
has been a growing concern for Singapore. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong remarked that Singapore has a very high Internet penetration and sees the need to protect its youths from coming under the influence of radical ideology as it will prove to be a challenge to undo a person’s thinking once he is imbued with terrorist ideology. The re-arrest of a former detainee in 2012 as he was detected to have reverted in undertaking militant jihad abroad underscores the importance that the Singapore government must continue to invest efforts in combating the deviant ideology.

The Inter-Racial Confidence Circles (IRCC) were formed in 2002 after the September 11 attack in America revealed how friendships between the different races could be strained in times of crisis. Leaders from the IRCC at community levels, schools and workplaces are tasked to foster the strong multi-cultural and multi-religious ties that bind the Singapore community and nation closer together. The Community Engagement Programme (CEP) was another such initiative to provide opportunities for various racial and religious clusters to attend regular briefings and activities to foster better inter-communal relations. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) is the overall coordinating ministry for the CEP and is supported by five community clusters. A Ministerial Committee on Community Engagement (MCCE) has been formed to steer the Community Engagement Programme. Currently, government agencies, namely the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Communications and Information, the Ministry of Manpower and the People’s Association work with the MCCE to promote the CEP. Mr. Wong Kan Seng, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs remarked, “The heart of the CEP is really the many people and groups on the ground who compose it by expressing it in their own way, through their diverse activities and efforts.

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7 Ministry of Home Affairs Committee of Supply Debate 2013 – Speech by Deputy Prime Minister, Coordinating Minister for National Security and Minister for Home Affairs, Mr. Teo Chee Hean – Working Together to Keep Singapore Safe and Secure, 07 March 2013
8 Prof S Jayakumar, Speech at the National Security Seminar, 12 September 2007
Working together has always been the Singapore way. It has led us to achieve many things including a remarkable society on any account, enjoying ethnic harmony, safety and security in a troubled world. Let us work always for a Singapore United.”

One important lesson from the London bombings of 7 July 2005 was that, while there may have been a plan on what actions to take to maintain communal harmony after a terrorist incident, ground sentiments were very different. Even as political and religious leaders issue statements of unity and solidarity, hate crimes jumped by almost 600% in the weeks following the attack. The question we had to ask ourselves was - what would be our people’s response if a terrorist incident occurred in Singapore and there was destruction and loss of lives. If, as in the London incident, the perpetrators were home-grown, the strain on communal relations in our multi-racial, multi-religious society is likely to be much greater. Thus the idea of the CEP germinated into what it is today. The CEP is supported by a national defence framework – Total Defence. Total Defence, launched in 1984, is a comprehensive umbrella framework that aims to foster social cohesion and harmony to respond to all kinds of threats and challenges. Its five pillars, namely military, civil, economic, social and psychological, provide clear objectives towards protecting the Singaporean way of life. The CEP can be classified under the social and psychological pillars of Total Defence as it involves our community leaders, inter-ministry agencies and grassroot organisations to manage and minimise inter-communal tensions.

The CEP brings together people from different communities in Singapore to work with each other to develop understanding and to prevent and minimise racial and religious tensions in our society after a crisis such as a terrorist attack. It targets different groups of people like those from various grassroots or religious groups, educational institutions (schools, polytechnics, ITEs, universities), employers, unions, clan associations and the media. Through the CEP, the community will be involved in response plans that will be

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9 National Community Engagement Programme (CEP) Seminar 2008
activated when a terrorist incident occurs. These plans aim to help Singaporeans cope with negative emotions following such an incident and to stay calm and resilient. This will ensure that our society stays together, and we can return to our usual daily lives in a shorter time. As a crisis may lead to misunderstandings and tensions in our multi-ethnic, multi-religious society, the CEP attempts to keep us strong and united during and after a crisis, so we can continue to live together in harmony. Since the launch of the CEP, there have been many initiatives undertaken by various communities in areas such as developing awareness of Singapore’s diversity and the need for racial and religious harmony; building understanding and forging bonds; involvement and participation from the community and building capacity to enhance social resilience.

While the Ministry of Home Affairs is the overall coordinating agency for the Community Engagement Programme, the following five community clusters will be supported by the corresponding agencies. The clusters are religious groups, ethnic-based organisations and voluntary welfare organizations; educational Institutions; media and arts; businesses and unions; and grassroots organisations.

It is the aim of the Community Engagement Programme that the various organisations under each of these clusters will work among themselves and with those in other clusters to strengthen the networks and bonds within and between their respective communities.

**Community Engagement Programme in Schools**

Educational institutions, where young impressionable minds are easily the targets of extremist organisations, are one of the most important communities that the CEP aims to reach out too. Thus, it is not surprising that the Ministry of education (MOE) is one of the major supporting agencies in steering the CEP. The ministry recognises the CEP as a long-term effort to preserve communal harmony strengthen the understanding and ties between people of different races and religions, as well as build up society’s skills and knowledge in
coping with emergencies. Its CEP does not reinvent the wheel but to work through existing structures and programmes by grafting the CEP perspective to existing community activities (MOE, 2011). Currently the emphasis on character building and citizenship education as rolled out in the new Character and Citizenship Education (CCE), is part of MOE’s efforts to enhance the building of social resilience amongst Singaporean students.

As CCE encompasses character education, it hopes to teach students to “know others” – to be socially aware of and to interact well with others, nurture positive relationships; and in the face of any challenge, to demonstrate resilience (Heng, 2011). As for citizenship education, the MOE has outlined four long-term deliverables: firstly, the development of loyal citizens with a strong sense of belonging and identity, who are committed to the well-being, defence and security of the country; secondly, the ability to show care and concern for others and contribute to improving the lives of others; thirdly, the need to be socio-culturally sensitive and active in promoting social cohesion and harmony and finally, the students must be equipped with the ability to reflect on and respond to issues – community, national or global – in an appropriate manner.

The CCE adds another dimension to MOE’s Community Engagement programme within the educational institutions cluster. It aims to further complement other key programmes implemented throughout the years, including Civics and Moral Education (CME, 1992), National Education (NE, 1997), the Community Involvement Programme (CIP, 1997), Social and Emotional Learning competencies (SEL, 2005) among others.

At the curriculum level, the Social Studies syllabus at the secondary school level, under the sections of Conflict and Harmony in Multi-Ethnic Societies and Managing International Relations, further stresses the importance of social cohesion – its current threats

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10 All About NE, MOE, p 11, 2011
11 Opening Address by Mr. Heng Swee Keat, Minister for Education, at the 1st NIE-MOE Character and Citizenship Education Conference, 8 Nov 2011, NTU
and challenges; as well as recognise that terrorism is a growing challenge to world security, its impact and measures to mitigate transnational terrorism (Social Studies Syllabus, MOE).12

Community Policing of the Spread of Terrorist and Extremist Ideology

The formation of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) is a ground-up initiative by a group of Islamic scholars to counsel and rehabilitate JI detainees so that they can reintegration into society. Singapore adopts a holistic approach to terrorist rehabilitation13. The rehabilitation programme entails three components - psychological rehabilitation, social rehabilitation and religious rehabilitation. Those detainees placed under Detention Order (DO) and Restriction Order (RO) have to undergo this programme. Inputs from various sources like case officers, religious counsellors, prison wardens, psychologists and research analysts are gathered and the data is closely monitored and assessed by the ISD of the Ministry of Home Affairs. Upon their release, the detainees continue to be monitored to ensure that they do not engage in any radical or extremist activities. However it was also noted that attending the rehabilitation programme does not guarantee one’s release from detention. It is also acknowledged that not all detainees are successfully rehabilitated through the programme and some have even been known to reject these programmes outright. These detainees have developed a negative reaction to the rehabilitation programme and are still adamant in maintaining their extremist ideology by developing defence mechanisms or psychological strategies to protect their radical beliefs from being challenged.

In the psychological rehabilitation programme, the detainees are regularly assessed by psychologists from the ISD on their vulnerability towards terrorist influence and they will be given counselling based on these psychological needs. Undergoing the overall rehabilitation programme, the detainees experience stages of change which will lead to cognitive

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12 Social Studies Syllabus Secondary (Express/Normal (Academic) – 2192/2193, MOE
restructuring. The change is observed when they begin to reflect on their past actions and consequences against the environment they are in. The various types of counselling have an effect for them to be able to re-evaluate their radical past as they had the misguided assumption that their extremist activities are supported especially by their community. Religious counsellors and visits by family members further support them to reframe their radical ideology. The increased awareness of the dangers of radicalization assists them in their unlearning and relearning to manage their emotions and develop the capacity to objectively understand global events that are often used to influence their ideology.

As for social rehabilitation programme, the detainees and the affected families are given social support facilitate in their reintegration into society upon their release. The ISD acknowledge the importance of keeping the family unit intact as much as possible during their period of detention. Families are granted regular visits to the detention centres. A case officer from the ISD and another from the After Care Group (ACG), a voluntary group consisting members from community self-help groups and mosques will be assigned to each of the family of the detained to provide social and financial support. This programme aims to lessen the level of emotional trauma, anxiety, social and financial difficulties. Many from those detained have expressed their remorse for their actions and the trouble they have caused to family, relatives and friends. They acknowledged that they have been misguided in their search for religious guidance. The regular interaction from case officers from the ISD also provided additional platform with another form of social affiliation and support. The officers in turn conduct regular assessments, monitoring and guidance. It is through such interactions that the detainees are given opportunities to improve their academic and vocational skills.

The ACG, which was formed in 2002 comprised voluntary members from Taman Bacaan, Yayasan Mendaki, Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP), En Naeem Mosque

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14 Wong Kan Seng, Motion on the White Paper on the Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and threat of Terrorism at Parliament, 20 January 2003
and Khadijah Mosque\textsuperscript{15}. The group acted as a non-governmental organisation, initiated a joint strategy to provide immediate social and financial support ranging from supplying food supplies to providing free textbooks to school going children. The main objective of this group is to ease any burdens that may have resulted from the arrests as all those arrested are the sole breadwinners. The ACG have within them to provide social workers and counsellors to provide emotional and social support to family members of the detainees. They also provide link ups to the various agencies if members are in need of jobs to supplement the family income. The efforts of the ACG do help the families not to be outcast from the mainstream society and any resentments that may have appeared initially after the arrest are tackled appropriately. Taman Bacaan publishes books and organized conventions and seminars to reach out to the general public and youths highlighting the dangers of radicalization and terrorist activities.

The third programme is the religious rehabilitation programme conducted by voluntary religious scholars who came forward to assist the government in the ideological battle by providing expert religious counselling to the detainees and those under restriction orders.

The formation of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) was actually a catalyst when two religious scholars, Ustaz Haji Ali Haji Mohamed, a council member of the Singapore Islamic Council and Chairman of Khadijah Mosque and Ustaz Mohamed Hasbi Mohamed Hassan, the President of Islamic Scholars and Religious Association of Singapore were invited separately to interview the detained members of the JI. After several interviews both scholars came to the same conclusion that the detainees had misunderstood the true message of Islam and had developed deviant ideology to suit political agenda through violence and acts of terrorism. Both scholars agreed for the need to address this major

\textsuperscript{15} Kader, Abdul Halim, Overview on Singapore’s Aftercare Programme, International Conference on Terrorist Rehabilitation, 24-26 February 2009
concern and jointly decided to form an expert group to counter the radical ideology through counseling so that the detainees will be able to understand the correct interpretation of the Islamic faith from certified Islamic religious scholars. They came forward because of the love for the nation and to provide service to the community.\textsuperscript{16}

The RRG was officially inaugurated in April 2003 to serve as an expert resource group to assist the government and the Muslim community. It promotes an appropriate understanding of Islam that addresses the misconceptions and misinterpretations of the religion as propagated by the JI members\textsuperscript{17}. It was noted that the detainees had initially search for the true meaning of Islam from acquaintances and ended up learning in private homes from people who were not certified to teach and preach in the first place. The RRG has produced two manuals to facilitate religious counselling for the counsellors.

The positive impact of the RRG efforts was highlighted by the Deputy Prime Minister, Mr Wong Kan Seng. He mentioned that “the government cannot deal with the terrorist ideology by changing the minds of the detainees who have been poisoned. This has to be done by religious teachers and scholars themselves. That’s why the Religious Rehabilitation Group has played a very important role in helping the government provide rehabilitation to the detainees. And this should be the case because they are the experts.”\textsuperscript{18}

In the initial years, RRG risked itself as being seen as lackeys of the government but they were convinced that they were doing the right thing and necessary to arrest the spread of religious extremism on home soil.\textsuperscript{19}

The RRG actively engages the community through presentations, seminars and forums at stadiums to impart the correct teachings of the religion; to minimize sympathizers

\textsuperscript{16} Zakir Hussain, Men on a Mission: Battling JI Beliefs, Spreading Truths, The Straits Times, 25 November 2005
\textsuperscript{17} Mohamed Ali, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Jihadists and Insurgents, Terrorism in SEA: The Threat and Response, 12-13 April 2006
\textsuperscript{18} RRG’s key role in educating JI detainees, ChannelNewsAsia, 17 October 2005,
Zakir Hussain, 30 Muslim leaders helping JI detainees, families, The Straits Times, 18 October 2005
\textsuperscript{19} International Conference on Terrorist Rehabilitation and Community Resilience 2013, Keynote Address by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong
of the JI ideology and to inculcate understanding and appreciation of living in a plural society that is bound to uphold the virtues of religious and racial harmony. In its efforts to reach out to the digital natives, the RRG has its own website to engage not only the young through online discussions and information sharing but also to educate the masses on the true teachings of Islam. The online community is also being catered by the MUIS website where it has dedicated a specific portal to address issues related to radicalisation and extremism. Religious leaders and clerics have for themselves also individual blogs to engage the general public on issues related to counter ideology.

In order to successfully compete against terrorist elements, the government realises the key roles of other communities and organisations play to partner each other as important stakeholders. The government has played an integral role in information sharing with the stakeholders towards the fight against terror. The kind of community policing together with the relevant agencies that is ongoing in Singapore has a proactive orientation resulting in the various segments of the society playing positive roles. The custom-made strategies of non-governmental agencies as exemplified by the RRG and the ACG in collaboration with the Ministry of Home Affairs have impacted positively in not only rehabilitating the detainees into the mainstream society but also creating greater awareness and understanding among members of the public. In the context of current phenomenon of religiously motivated terror and extremism, the Muslim community continue to do their part to reach out and safeguard against these elements. The community as a whole also continue to foster strong social networks to establish greater synergy and understanding among members so that the threat of terror can easily be defeated by a united nation.

**Responding to Terrorism - Strategies in Singapore**

The counterterrorism strategies of Singapore employ a complex mixture of military, intelligence, financial, political, legal, and even social instruments. The rehabilitation or
deradicalisation programmes in Singapore are elements of those comprehensive counterterrorism strategies and serve to address the ideological underpinnings of jihad. Their aim is to combat not only intellectual deviation, radicalisation but also to promote rehabilitation and disengagement among the extremist detainees and those who sympathise with their cause.

First, the rehabilitation programme in Singapore utilises a more comprehensive, multi-method approach. It focuses on the need to challenge the narrative of extremism and deconstruct the ideology on which it is based. In the war of ideas against violent extremism, Singapore used a variety of tactics, including the use of media and information campaigns and the use of clerics to challenge detainees’ deviant religious beliefs. In addition, the programme has catered to the need to provide a sustainable future for those detainees who decide to reintegrate into society. Some of the measures undertaken include providing them with an education or a job, re-engaging him with his family and so providing basic support for the future and creating new goals. Helping the detainees to establish a sustainable livelihood as well as both social and financial networks are important factors in both programmes as they are seen as key factors to avoid recidivism.

The Singapore approach also includes religious counselling for the direct members of the detainees’ families. The counsellors found that these family members are often either already indoctrinated by deviant ideologies or they are sympathetic to these beliefs even though they may not have taken part in terror acts. As the programme relies on the support the family members can provide in influencing the detainee to follow the right path, the counseling sessions were extended to these immediate family members. In so doing, it is hoped that the rate of recidivism will remain low. Another major element is the kind of resource and effort used although managed differently by the inter-ministry collaboration so that an integrated approach to counter such extreme ideology is achieved.
The Singapore religious rehabilitation programme is designed and run by the RRG, a non-governmental organisation. Although it may be supported by the government, the advantage of a grounds-up approach like that of Singapore’s rehabilitation programme is that its target audience, the detainees, are more likely to trust its good intentions. Singapore’s heterogeneous state is indeed unique. Singapore is always mindful of sensitive issues related to race and religion. It was a positive step in the right direction when the two co-founders of RRG came forward to offer their expertise in areas of religious rehabilitation together with other asatizahs. The positive impact of the group was evident when the religious rehabilitation programme was initiated from members of the Malay-Muslim community, a minority community in Singapore. This move is also well received by the community as it was less likely to incur any unnecessary suspicions from the Malay-Muslim community itself. But more importantly, the RRG managed to voice out loud and show to the other racial groups in the country that the local Malay-Muslim community does not share the same mindset as those propagated by the extremists and terrorists. When the counsellors are independent respected religious scholars, they are less likely to be viewed simply as tools of the government. The crux is that as the programme develops and produces its own success stories to which the terrorist detainee can relate to, they will gain more momentum and credibility.

The use of the Internet is another tool being used by actors in the country. In Singapore, the online platform to engage with such radicals and their sympathizers are less formal in nature and is being run by both RRG, the Islamic Council (MUIS) and even private clerics by having their own blogs and postings related to issues of counter ideology through the world wide web. The presence in the web is now a necessity as the “ideological threat continues to prevail especially with the advancement of technology. The Internet has become the main medium for the spread of extremist ideas. Cyberspace is shaping up to be the new
battleground for hearts and minds. Terrorists are increasingly exploiting the Internet as a tool for mass communication and radicalization.\textsuperscript{20}

\textbf{Effectively Countering Terrorism – The Way Forward}

As described in the earlier pages, the Singaporean counterterrorism approaches indicate that an adequate response requires counterterrorism policies to interact with broader public information and communication, education and foreign policies. In fact, the government must ensure that all elements of national power – diplomatic, military, economic – are integrated and adequately coordinated. The intellectual and psychological dimensions of the threat are equally important as its physical dimension, so the military component of national power plays only a supporting role in this counterterrorism effort; the primary focus is on non-military influence. Citizen diplomacy, cultural activity, economic cooperation and development, and the application of media and academic resources are key components of our response to the threat. Furthermore, governments should cooperate, build trusted networks and engage closely with the international community to mitigate the threat from terrorism. For example, the United States-ASEAN joint declaration on counter-terrorism, among other goals, pledges to share intelligence, block terrorist funds, tighten borders, and crack down on forged travel documents.

There has been a paucity of research in the long-term impact of these rehabilitation programmes, that is, how long lasting individuals’ renunciation of terrorism may be. The rehabilitation programmes currently being tried out in Singapore have not yet proven their long-term success. As most of the programmes are still in the initial stages of implementation, it will be difficult to measure their success or effectiveness. Nevertheless, these programmes represent a creative way of countering violent extremism. Although they are probably less likely to impact on hard-core, committed terrorists significantly, they seemed more successful

\textsuperscript{20} International Conference on Terrorist Rehabilitation and Community Resilience 2013, Welcome address by Ustaz Haji Ali Haji Mohamed, Co-Chairman Religious Rehabilitation Group
among younger terrorists and those who are loosely affiliated to terrorist organisations. In many ways, this may in fact be more important in reducing the next generation of militants. If combined with other efforts to reduce sympathies for militants and jihadists, modifications of the Singaporean programmes could still prove to be useful counterterrorism strategies.

**Conclusion**

As the reality that extremist terrorism will not be eliminated any time soon sinks in and indeed, it shows no sign of abating, many states now recognise that hard security measures alone will not defeat extremism. As such, Singapore soft strategy to combat intellectual deviation in the form extremism and terrorism has generated much interest.

Given that the programmes have achieved very promising results, to the very least, the percentage of detainees who have responded positively to the rehabilitation efforts is an encouraging sign. Nations that are battling extremist terrorism will be keen to learn from them and apply what they have learnt when they set up similar rehabilitation programmes in their homeland. States who have started developing their own programmes can identify similarities and differences, and point out both what can work and what may not. Obviously, one size does not fit all, and states must comprehend that success in one setting may not necessarily be replicated elsewhere.

Singapore is not immune to challenges faced by societies around the world where stability is disrupted by social tensions. Nearer in the region, bloody clashes between Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim Rohingya people in Myanmar, and between Buddhists and Muslims in Sri Lanka. The situation Myanmar has been further exacerbated by radical groups in Indonesia and has threatened to attack the Myanmar Embassy in Indonesia. Such incidents are sobering reminders that social stability especially race and religious harmony, cannot be taken for granted. Race and religion remain sensitive in a multi-racial and religious society. With the advent of social media, it is facilitating people with common interest to come
together but it can also reinforce and entrench polarizing views with groups importing causes, attitudes and values abroad and super impose them onto the local social fabric.  

Hence the emphasis on enshrining racial harmony as one of the key values in building communal trust in Singapore. At the conference jointly organized by the Religious Rehabilitation Group and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong reiterated the importance of building trust in the efforts to fight deviation when he said, “Trust underpins the social interactions and forms the foundation for any society to co-exist especially a multi-religious, multi-racial one like Singapore. The government affirmed that trust must be continually sustained and nurtured as shown in the in the case when JI network was first uncovered in Singapore. The government sought to explain the facts of the case first to all community leaders and the public. This helped to dispel misapprehensions and fears and made sure that the communities stand with one another. The establishment of Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles and the Community Engagement Programme become the foundation pillars to build trust and resilience in Singapore should crises occur”.

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21 11th National Security Seminar (NSS) – Opening Speech by Mr. Teo Chee Hean, Deputy Prime Minister, Coordinating Minister for National Security and Minister for Home Affairs, 24 Sep 2013
22 International Conference on Terrorist Rehabilitation and Community Resilience 2013, Keynote Address by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong
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