

# STRATEGIC COUNTERTERRORISM, TERRORIST REHABILITATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: THE SINGAPORE EXPERIENCE

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## I. BACKGROUND

Following the terrorist attacks in the United States (US) on 11 September 2001, the Internal Security Department (ISD) in Singapore uncovered a local cell of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a group that aimed to establish a Daulah Islamiyah (Islamic State) in Southeast Asia through violent means.<sup>1</sup>

The ISD through intelligence sharing and quick response, crippled and foiled at least six different plans to attack foreign and local assets on Singapore soil. Unfortunately, JI was successful elsewhere in the region. Some examples include the bombings of churches in Indonesian cities on Christmas Eve in 2000, the October Bali Bombings of 2002 and the Metro Manila bombings on Rizal Day in the Philippines.

After detaining more than 20 JI members between 2001 and 2002, the Singapore government was confronted with a unique situation. Initial findings led to insights into government consciousness that psychologists alone may not be sufficient to understand the phenomena of violent extremism. Outcomes from the sessions and meetings with the detainees, the counsellors observed that all detainees had distorted ideologies on Islam which encouraged simplistic thinking, fueled them towards anger and hatred, and promoted the use of violence to achieve their aims. Their exclusivist paradigm contributed to their radicalization.

## II. MODES OF REHABILITATION

From the chart below, there are 7 modes of terrorist rehabilitation that are currently being employed by governments around the world. Empirical evidence has shown that some countries are developing different facets of terrorist rehabilitation programmes, focusing on ideological, religious, educational, vocational, social, creative arts therapy, sports and recreation and psychological issues that cause violent extremism. The varied rehabilitation modes are employed by governments and agencies around the world, depending on the recommendations, availability of resources and acceptance by the implementing bodies.

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<sup>1</sup> HistorySG, "Operations against Jemaah Islamiyah Begins", 8 Dec 2001, assessed on 10 August 2017, <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/90267935-71ef-4829-8faf-f6039a086cda>



The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), for example, has a comprehensive rehabilitation approach consisting of religious, psychological, social, vocational, creative art therapy, as well as ‘Online Engagement’ as part of their rehabilitation initiatives. In the area of religious rehabilitation, the Ulama’ (religious scholars) perform group counselling and discuss the legitimacy of the king as the ruler of Saudi Arabia. They conduct comprehensive discussions on the position of a fatwa (Islamic rulings and guidance) vis-à-vis their leaders. The KSA’s psychological component employs psychologists to engage detainees and to further examine the rationale behind these detainees’ decisions to use extremism. In their social rehabilitation programme, family members are engaged in incentives like supporting the detainee’s marriage, education, or financial assistance. The KSA’s vocational rehabilitation gives the detainees opportunities to learn carpentry, clay shaping, pottery and the like. In addition, they make use of art through drawings, guided by professional art therapists in their art rehabilitation. A distinct feature of the rehabilitation of KSA is their ‘Online Engagement’. The Sakinah campaign, run under the auspices of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, is a government agency and independent programme where qualified scholars are hired to enter online chat rooms to hold discussions with users on Islam, wherein, for example, they discuss the dangers of the *takfiri* (apostasy) ideas.

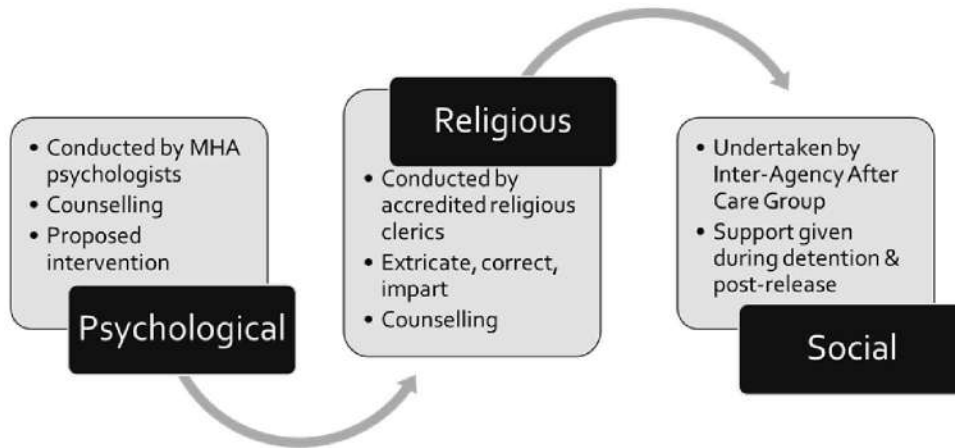
Evidently from our experience, religious intervention is a pivotal component that must be a part of terrorist rehabilitation programmes. In Singapore, Religious rehabilitation had played a key role in educating detainees, as mentioned by our Deputy Prime Minister in 2005. The government had sought expertise from religious experts as they believed that these initiatives should be carried out by subject matter experts.

Different states have different concerns and considerations, which thus decide which mode suits their detainees best. In my view, the modes of rehabilitation can be divided into two prongs. The core rehabilitation approach must include psychological, religious and social approaches. For the other, states may decide to provide an enhanced rehabilitation programme that includes other skills where suitable.

Another country worth mentioning is Sri Lanka. They had worked closely with the private sector as an enabler to terrorist rehabilitation in South Asia. Sri Lanka is in a unique position to be able to work closely with the private sector. It is a multi-faceted programme. They have rehabilitated and reintegrated 12,000 fighters. These detainees studied and transformed into productive citizens. You know it is a success when the rehabilitation produced men and women with a fresh outlook.

### III. THE SINGAPORE EXPERIENCE

The Singapore rehabilitation programme consists of three components: psychological rehabilitation, social rehabilitation and religious rehabilitation. Throughout their detention, detainees are visited regularly by psychologists, who provide psychological counselling and assess their ability to cope with the mental stress of detention as well as their psychological reasoning to establish their propensity for hatred and violence, and vulnerability to radical influence. The psychologists also assess behavioural and cognitive aspects of the detainees’ progress in rehabilitation.



### A. Psychological Rehabilitation<sup>2</sup>

Studies (e.g. Prochaska, Velicer, DiClemente & Fava, 1988; Prochaska, DiClemente & Norcross, 1992) have found commonalities in the manner people modify their behaviour. They showed that it was necessary to assess the client's level of readiness for change and to customise interventions accordingly. Thus, through interviews with detainees and RO supervisees, ISD psychologists have identified seven positive changes in assessing detainees' level of readiness for change<sup>3</sup> that take place in the course of rehabilitation.

The stages are illustrated with reference from anecdotal evidence derived from former detainees and RO supervisees who have been through the ISD rehabilitation programme.

#### 1. Self-Re-Evaluation

Self-re-evaluation is the cognitive and affective process of re-appraisal of one's self and his behaviour (Prochaska et al., 1988). During the initial period of detention, detainees begin to reflect on their past actions and their consequences. According to M, an ex-member of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) who had received military training in Afghanistan, "When the detention order was served to me, I accepted the danger that I had posed to national security" (Hussain, 2012). This detainee felt guilty and remorseful for all that he had done and felt that the move by the JI members to create chaos in Singapore had tarnished the good name of the Muslim community here. "We had not been fair. Because of the actions of a minority, the majority Muslim community had to bear the brunt. I am guilt-ridden," he said (Ibrahim, 2007).

By not being defensive about their past actions, detainees are able to appreciate the process of self-re-evaluation in their reflections.

#### 2. Environmental Re-Evaluation

A re-evaluation of their environment occurs when radicalised individuals re-assess the impact that his radical beliefs and actions have on the social environment (Day, Bryan, Davey & Casey, 2006). When in detention, they realize the consequences of the impact of detention on their families. They also gain insight into the consequences of their action on the wider Singapore society. In addition, being detained means that these radicalised individuals are removed from the online or offline radical community, which provides the space needed for them to reflect and re-evaluate their previous radical beliefs.

Religious counsellors also help the detainees to realise that the radical ideology propagated by radical preachers has deliberately ignored the importance of 'context'. They learn that contextualisation has to be applied in the interpretation of Quranic verses. Through these religious counselling sessions, detainees eventually realise that radical Islamic scholars, who supported armed jihad, misinterpreted Islamic religious texts and their ideas promoting hate and violence are in fact in contradiction with the religion.

<sup>2</sup> Hu Weiyong, "The Process of Change in the Rehabilitation of Violent Extremist- The Singapore Experience" paper resides with ICPVTR, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Home Team Journal, Ministry of Home Affairs Singapore Studies (E.g. Prochaska, Velicer, DiClemente & Fava, 1988; Prochaska, DiClemente & Norcross, 1992)

### 3. Formation of Therapeutic Relationships

Through their care and concern for the detainees and their families, the case officers and counsellors develop a close rapport and therapeutic relationship with the detainees. This helps detainees to develop confidence that the help and advice rendered are well-intentioned and will benefit them and their families. The therapeutic relationship aids detainees to be more receptive to the alternative ideas presented to them. It also provides a safe environment for them to share openly and encourages them to change. Former JI member M said: "Throughout (my) detention, I was treated well, and given encouragement and guidance when required. This on its own was an encouraging factor" (Hussain, 2012). As time passes, a trusting relationship is developed between the detainee and his case officers. This leads to the detainee becoming more cooperative with investigations and rehabilitation efforts.

### 4. Awareness of Radicalisation Pathway

Upon reflection and self-re-evaluation, detainees learn to be more cognizant of their radicalization pathway. Moreover, through interactions with case officers, psychologists and religious counsellors, they become aware of the factors and processes leading to their radicalisation.

Former JI member recollected that he was impressed by the religious knowledge and apparent piety from the white robe of their leader. He recounted the seemingly innocuous beginnings where the leader suggested that he attend a class conducted by another preacher. He shared that he did not question the JI spiritual leader because of his trust in his friend. Ex-JI member M added that soon, he and several others went for an intensive course, which stressed the need to start a struggle to establish an Islamic state. He explained: "The preachers told us that the establishment of an Islamic state must be pursued by waging jihad. According to the JI's terminology, this meant the use of armed force to take over control of the state... I accepted their explanations because they were charismatic and very convincing. The way they presented themselves gave the impression that they were sincere and wanted only the best for Islam" (Hussain, 2012). Recognising their path of radicalisation helps detainees to understand their actions and to avoid making the same mistakes in future.

### 5. Ideological Rectification

Upon reflection and engagements with the case officers and counsellors, detainees recognize that the ideas they have been exposed to and subsequently imbibed through books, the Internet, and from terrorist personalities, are not mainstream. They have been led to believe that hate and violence were what Islam required of its adherents. Through counselling by religious counsellors and reading mainstream literature promoting peace and non-violence, detainees undergo the processes of change that help keep them inoculated against terrorist ideas. The RRG counsellors helped the detainees see that the ideologies presented actually cause harm to the society, and it is a challenge to develop oneself and one's society.

The detainees start to realise that terrorists have been misinterpreting Islam and that hate and violence is not propagated by the religion. They also learn to identify inconsistencies between these values and how they behaved in the past (Robinson & Porporino, 2001). The work of the RRG counsellors is crucial in helping detainees achieve this change. Many detainees continue to see their religious counsellors after release and are also encouraged to seek guidance from their local mosques.

### 6. Cognitive Restructuring

Radicalised individuals have a distorted sense of reality and a tendency to focus solely on information which confirms their biases while disregarding alternative views. Through counselling, these cognitive distortions are restructured and detainees start to develop the cognitive tools that help prevent themselves from falling prey to aberrant influences again (Robinson & Porporino, 2001).

An example of cognitive restructuring can be seen when the detainees gradually learn from the psychologists how to manage emotion and develop the capacity to objectively frame global events. Detainees also learn personal problem-solving skills, to evaluate ideas critically and to be more open-minded.

Through counselling, detainees learn: (i) that their actions carry consequences for others, (ii) how to evaluate ideas objectively and consider a variety of sources of information in the process of decision-making, and (iii) to become less rigid and narrow in their thinking and less prone to externalise blame.

### 7. Individual Commitment

Towards the end of the change process, detainees are led to the stage where they make a choice about their future path (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982). When the detainees' beliefs have been restructured, they are guided to commit themselves not to be re-involved in terrorist activity. They make resolutions, testimonies, and post-release plans to show their determination to fulfil what they have committed themselves to. Before a detainee is released, they are encouraged to share their reflections of their detention, including their regrets, and resolutions and plans for the future.

With their commitment not to be re-involved in terrorist activities, detainees are more likely to focus on constructive activities to rebuild their lives and reintegrate into the community. Nonetheless, as with all terrorist rehabilitation programmes, the notion of relapse is a possibility. This underscores the criticality of a rigorous post-release programme to ensure that detainees do not re-engage in terrorist activity after their release.



The distinct feature observed thus far is that people modify their behaviour. It is then necessary to assess the level of each detainees' readiness for change and to customise interventions accordingly. These were seen in individuals detained by ISD for involvement with groups — disengage from radical ideologies — renouncing the use of violence. The above has no fixed pattern. Each could develop in different directions for different individuals. In some cases, the stages feed off one another in a mutually reinforcing way. In other words, they strengthen one another as they interact.

### **B. Religious Rehabilitation**



The Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) is a group of volunteers mainly from the Asatizah (religious clerics) fraternity and teachers in Singapore. Members of RRG contribute their services based on their personal capacity and their areas of expertise.

Detainees were exposed to verses and most of the time, part of the verse and not the entirety of the holy Quran. There are two components for Muslims to be aware of in order to practice Islam fully. One is to be able to read the holy book and secondly to understand the Islamic sciences (*asbab ul nuzul* (reason of revelation), *Nashikh Wal Mansukh* (the abrogation)) and related issues. Having this knowledge would then give the Muslim a complete understanding of the verses in applying them to the daily life.

The approach that the RRG counsellors have been undertaken through the detainees' thoughts with the following objectives:

- 1) To extricate their negatively imbibed ideology
- 2) To replace the negative ideology with the correct ideology
- 3) To imbue in them the rightful understanding of Islamic knowledge and finally
- 4) To exemplify the fulfilling ways of living in a multi-racial, multi-religious society as shown by our beloved Prophet Muhammad saw.

In order to ensure consistent messaging given by the counsellors to the detainees, RRG had produced three manuals to date. The manual serves as an important tool and guide for our religious counsellors to conduct structured counselling sessions. The manual is divided into three themes – Understanding Realities, Purely Concepts and Exploring Behaviors.

All the *Asatizah* involved in counselling the detainees are certified and have been endorsed by the Islamic Religious Council under the *Asatizah* recognition Scheme in Singapore. The scheme, which endorses qualified religious teachers in Singapore, was made compulsory this year in a move to ensure the community knows whom to turn to for credible religious advice. A register of these teachers is available at [www.ars.sg](http://www.ars.sg)

### **C. Social Rehabilitation**

Social rehabilitation in the form of social support is also given to enable the detainees to reintegrate smoothly into society upon release. The family also plays a significant role in this regard. Detainees are granted family visits to preserve the family unit as much as possible. An aftercare officer is assigned to each detainee's family to provide social and financial support for the detainees. The support provided by the ACG ensures that the family remains functional. Detainees can then focus on cooperating with the investigation and rehabilitation. Regular interactions with ISD case officers also provide the detainees with another source of social affiliation and support. Regular assessment, monitoring and guidance by the case officers are also conducted. Efforts are also undertaken to help detainees improve their academic and other vocational skills. This is to help the detainees find employment upon release.

To facilitate the reintegration process of the detainees released under restriction orders (RO) through career preparation and job matching exercise. This is where the detainee will be matched with relevant jobs according to their skills. The employers are fully aware of the situation of the candidate. Here we see a tripartite partnership undertaken by MHA, MOM and MOE.

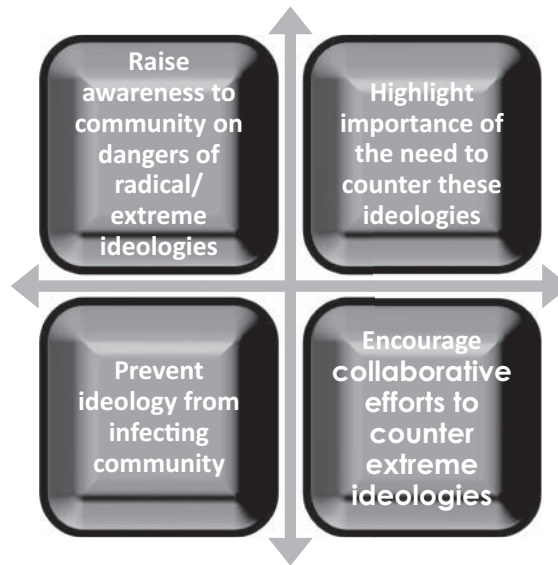
In implementing terrorist rehabilitation, we have identified challenges. For example, some governments may not be willing to invest in a soft approach and may prefer the kinetic approach as religion is seen as a private affair.

In some countries, the involvement in religion should remain in the private sphere. It's a fallacy to look at the programme as one that strictly focuses on religion. While counsellors do teach about Islam, the programme is really about de-radicalization, and you cannot pull someone away from extremism unless you touch on all the reasons that have driven a person to engage in violence.

There is no way we can guarantee that rehabilitation is a full proof process. But to measure, for instance we could look into recidivism in Singapore. Since 2002, of 83 people detained under ISA for terrorism related activities, 62 were then released. To date there have been reported only two cases of recidivism and this is a very low figure.

## IV. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES

### A. Objectives



While there have been many initiatives, designed and implemented in Singapore for corrective purposes, since 2002, Singapore has been active in getting the participation of the public to build community resilience. As a society, Singapore has always emphasised the need to build trust between communities and decades of work have gone into developing such relations. The Inter-Racial Confidence Circles (IRCCs), set up in 2002, helped entrench these efforts, as did the Community Engagement Programme, launched in 2006, with the latter now receiving an important refresh through the SGSecure movement.

SGSecure is our community's response to the terror threat. It is a national movement to sensitise, train and mobilise the community to play a part to prevent and deal with a terrorist attack. It is a call to action for everyone to unite and safeguard our way of life. The intent of terrorists is to inject fear and weaken the psychological resilience and social fabric of our society. This is why the cornerstone of our counter-terrorism strategy must be the strengthening of community vigilance, cohesion and resilience. We can all do our part to keep Singapore safe and secure.

The message that Islam is a peaceful religion needs to be amplified. The table below shows the messages that RRG, ICPVTR and other bodies are communicating with the members of the public.

Islam prohibits extremism and promotes moderation	Muslims must avoid extremist narratives	Counter-ideology is an integral part of counter-terrorism efforts
Terrorists do not represent any religion	Upholding values of peace, acceptance and respect	Promote harmonious living in multi-racial & multi-religious Singapore

### B. In Community Engagement

RRG has made several efforts through establishing an Intellectual Partnership with Academicians, Institutions (RSIS) building Social Networking with Government Agencies, NGOs, and Multi Religious Organizations & Grassroots, thus promoting Community-based Learning by having Dialogue Sessions or Closed-Door Discussions, Forums and talks.



The RRG helpline was launched in June 2015. This is a toll-free helpline as part of RRG effort to provide outreach services to the community at large. The public can use the helpline to clarify religious concepts or seek help if they are unsure or wanting to help someone they know who might need help. The RRG App launched in June 2016, allows members of the public to chat with counsellors on issues related to ideologies or terrorism-related matters. This App allows booking of the RRG resource and counselling centre for visits.



Besides the helpline and Apps, we produced publications. This is intended to provide the public with information to clarify doubts on terrorism-related events or issues currently in public debate.

The Islamic Religious Council (MUIS) of Singapore’s efforts to counter extremism and exclusivism include: 1) Pre-sermon on Fridays before the mandatory Friday prayers for men 2) certification programmes for graduates returning from Islamic Institutions abroad and 3) Mandatory Asatizah Recognition Scheme (ARS).

Topics covered in the Friday pre-sermons, range from the fallacy of ISIS’ so-called Islamic caliphate, to the need to avoid literal interpretation of religious texts — an approach that is prevalent among extremists — and the concept of moderation in Islam. MUIS has also worked with the RRG on themes such as the



importance of staying vigilant, and building resilience against extremist and exclusivist ideologies.

Certification programmes for graduates returning from overseas Islamic institutions feature automatic enrolment into the programme, which aims to familiarise them with how Islam should be practiced in Singapore's context. A 10-day pilot was run last year, and a second run is due in 2017. It is being adapted into a certification course, which has been made a compulsory requirement in the Asatizah Recognition Scheme. This was launched in early 2017. The scheme, which endorses qualified religious teachers in Singapore, move to ensure the community knows whom to turn to for credible religious advice.

In conclusion, the soft approach in countering terrorism must be positioned strategically. Governments must introduce both preventive and corrective measures in addressing violent extremism. The challenge today is to ensure terrorists are rehabilitated in the best possible way. This is imperative because if not rehabilitated, these terrorists when released will pose security threats, become terrorist iconography and influence the rest of their family members or the larger community.