

A Holistic Critique of Singapore's Counter-Ideological Program

By Kumar Ramakrishna

SINGAPORE FACES AN ongoing terrorist threat from the al-Qa`ida-linked Muslim militant group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). JI's original campaign aimed to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia, but it developed a more global jihadist orientation after some of its fighters participated in the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s. During that conflict, JI's fighters came into contact with militants who would later form al-Qa`ida. Senior JI leaders, especially after splitting from the old Darul Islam movement in January 1993, began to harbor larger ambitions. They sought to create a Southeast Asian caliphate through armed jihad as part of the wider al-Qa`ida vision of restoring the old global Islamic caliphate running from Morocco to Mindanao.¹

Since December 2001, the Singaporean Internal Security Department (ISD) has foiled a number of JI-linked terrorist plots targeting Singapore. The October 2002 JI terrorist attack on two popular nightspots on the Indonesian island of Bali—which killed 202 people—was not lost on Singaporean authorities and Muslim community leaders. By 2002, they had already understood the need to find ways to neutralize JI's dangerous ideology that seemed so seductive to some Muslims in Singapore and the region. The Singapore government's vigilance has resulted in a number of arrests of JI militants who are now detained in the country. This article attempts three tasks: identify the wider historical, geopolitical and socio-cultural milieu within which Singapore's Muslim community—from which the JI detainees have emerged—is embedded; analyze the origins and evolution of Singapore's counter-ideological program; and attempt to provide a holistic critique of the entire program to date.

1 *The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism* (Singapore: Ministry of Home Affairs, 2003), p. 6, henceforth to be cited as Singapore JI White Paper. Also see Andrew Hammond, "Islamic Caliphate a Dream, Not Reality, Say Experts," Reuters, December 13, 2006.

The Singapore Muslim Community in Perspective

The former British colony of Singapore is home to a population of 4.6 million people, one million of whom are expatriates. Ethnic Chinese form more than 75% of the population; ethnic Indians comprise about 8.4%; ethnic Malays, who are virtually all Muslims, comprise approximately 15%. The practical necessity from the 14th century onward of expediting commercial transactions within and beyond the bustling cosmopolitan Malay trading world helped ensure that Southeast Asian Islam developed a moderate and highly tolerant hue over the centuries.² The powerful appeal of the mystical Sufism of south Indian Muslim traders also contributed to this development. Although the waves of Islamic revivalism that swept through Southeast Asia from the 1980s onward resulted in noticeably increased religiosity among Muslims throughout the region,³ significant numbers of Singaporean Muslims, even if more religiously observant, have remained politically and socially moderate, willing to practice their faith within the multicultural, secular democratic political framework in Singapore.⁴

Despite this moderation, Singaporean Muslims have struggled with a sense of generalized angst long before the emergence of the JI threat. The basic reason is the structural tension between their Singaporean identity and their transnational linkages with the wider Malay and Islamic world.⁵ Compounding matters further is the perception that a lingering official distrust of the Muslim community explains a number of policies

2 Robert Day McAmis, *Malay Muslims: The History and Challenge of Resurgent Islam in Southeast Asia* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), pp. 41-50, 63-64.

3 Azyumardi Azra, "Bali and Southeast Asian Islam: Debunking the Myths," in Kumar Ramakrishna and See Seng Tan, *After Bali: The Threat of Terrorism in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: World Scientific/Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, 2003), pp. 40-41.

4 In Singapore, as in the rest of the Malay world in Southeast Asia, to be ethnic Malay is largely to be of the Muslim faith as well. In addition, while most ethnic Indians in Singapore are Hindus, a significant minority are Muslims. For more, see McAmis, *Malay Muslims*, p. 47.

5 Joel S. Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), p. 82.

that have appeared to discriminate against the community through the years. Contentious issues among this community include the perceived lack of representation of proportionate numbers of Muslims in sensitive appointments in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF);⁶ the decision by the government to introduce compulsory national education for all children of primary school age, thereby impacting the ability of Muslim parents to send their children to a religious school (*madrassa*);⁷ the recent ban on wearing headscarves or *tudung* by Muslim schoolgirls attending national schools;⁸ and the penchant of a number of employers to require Mandarin proficiency as a job requirement, a prerequisite many Muslims consider a form of economic discrimination.⁹ Reinforcing this latent resentment are geopolitical factors. As elsewhere in the Muslim world, Singaporean Muslims have long harbored misgivings about Israel's occupation of the Palestinian Territories and U.S. support for Israel.¹⁰ Moreover, the Bush administration's "war on terrorism" and the 2003 Iraq invasion intensified local Muslim unhappiness with U.S. foreign policy. This generated a more acute awareness on the part of the average Singaporean Muslim of a wider, transnational Islamic identity.

These factors taken together help explain why the emergence of JI at the end of 2001 was initially met with a sense of skepticism within the Muslim community. There were murmurings in some quarters of a Singapore government "conspiracy" to undermine the image of Islam in the country.¹¹ Government

6 For a good summary of this issue, see Kamal Mamat, "Beyond Tokenism, Malays, Integration and the SAF," *The Online Citizen*, November 6, 2007.

7 "Singapore's Muslim Schools Under Threat," *BBC News*, April 28, 1998.

8 "Singapore: International Religious Freedom Report 2004," U.S. State Department, September 15, 2004.

9 Personal interview, Muhammad Haniff bin Hassan, October 25, 2007. Ustaz Haniff is a trained Islamic scholar who is engaged in counter-ideological work in Singapore and is the author of *Unlicensed to Kill: Countering Imam Samudra's Justification for the Bali Bombing* (Singapore: Peace Matters, 2006). The comments made were in his personal capacity.

10 *Ibid.*

11 Personal interview, Mohamed bin Ali, October 25, 2007. Ali, a trained Islamic scholar, has been personally involved in counseling JI detainees as part of the Reli-

ministers had to meet Muslim community leaders behind closed doors to assure them that the Singapore JI “arrests were not targeted against the Singapore Muslim community or Islam.”¹² Notions of an official conspiracy were quickly dispelled, however, when two respected independent Muslim religious leaders, Ustaz Haji Ali Haji Mohamed, the chairman of the influential Khadijah Mosque, and Ustaz Haji Muhammad Hasbi Hassan, the president of Pergas,¹³ were invited by the ISD to speak to the JI detainees face-to-face in 2002. After talking to the detainees, both *asatizah* (religious teachers) came away persuaded that not only was JI a real entity and not a government invention, but they became concerned about the dangerous ideology that had been sketched out for them firsthand by the detainees themselves.¹⁴

The Singapore Counter-Ideological Program: Origins and Evolution

Ustaz Ali and Ustaz Hasbi gathered together other Muslim scholars to discuss ways to “correct” the thinking of the JI detainees through a counter-ideological approach. There was no blueprint at that point.¹⁵ By April 2003, the two *asatizah* had quietly formed the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), an unpaid, all-volunteer grouping of Islamic scholars and teachers serving in their personal capacities. RRG counselors possessed formal Islamic educational credentials from both local *madrasas* as well as respected foreign institutions such as al-Azhar University in Cairo, the Islamic University of Medina and the International Islamic

Rehabilitation Group. The comments made were in his personal capacity.

¹² Goh Chok Tong, “Beyond Madrid: Winning against Terrorism,” speech at the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations, May 6, 2004. Goh is the former prime minister of Singapore.

¹³ Pergas is the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association, which is a well-respected Muslim body.

¹⁴ Personal interview, Mohamed bin Ali, October 25, 2007. Also see Religious Rehabilitation Group, “An Understanding of Islam,” presentation at the Religious Harmony Gathering, organized by Geyland Serai Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circle (IRCC) and Masjid Khalid (Khalid Mosque), Singapore, September 17, 2006.

¹⁵ Personal interview, Mohamed bin Ali, October 25, 2007.

University in Malaysia.¹⁶ In addition, the RRG counselors, who were a mix of younger and older scholars and clerics, were put through a diploma course in counseling skills to supplement their religious knowledge.¹⁷ By January 2004, the RRG boasted 16 male and five female counselors.¹⁸ By April 2004, a full year after the formation of the RRG, and armed with a religious rehabilitation

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or “Jihad Manual” to alert each RRG counselor to JI ideological distortions, the actual counseling sessions with the JI detainees began. Typically, one RRG counselor worked with an ISD case officer and a government psychologist on a particular detainee. The RRG counselor confined himself solely to religious matters, although he was kept informed by the case officer of other issues pertaining to the detainee’s state of mind and relevant personal circumstances.¹⁹

Initially, the JI detainees viewed the RRG counselors with great suspicion. They abused the counselors, calling them *munafiq* (hypocrites) and “puppets of the government.”²⁰ Over time, the

¹⁶ Ustaz Mohamed Feisal bin Mohamed Hassan, “The Roles of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) in Singapore,” in Abdul Halim bin Kader, *Fighting Terrorism: The Singapore Perspective* (Singapore: Taman Bacaan, 2007), p. 152.

¹⁷ Personal interview, Mohamed bin Ali, October 25, 2007.

¹⁸ Hassan, “The Roles of the RRG,” in Kader, *Fighting Terrorism*, p. 152.

¹⁹ Ibid.; Personal interview, Mohamed bin Ali, October 25, 2007.

²⁰ Personal interview, Mohamed bin Ali, October 25,

RRG counselors developed a good understanding of their charges. Several detainees had been incensed by issues such as the government ban on wearing the *tudung* by Muslim schoolgirls in national schools and the compulsory national education policy.²¹ Moreover, the detainees possessed a “feeling of hatred toward America” much more than the average Singaporean Muslim, and they had been upset with the Singapore government for allying too closely with the United States.²² These issues, however, were not decisive but rather “cumulative” and “links in a chain” of factors leading to eventual radicalization.²³ What did seem common to most of them was a desire for “spiritual revival.” Not particularly well-versed in the fundamentals of Islam, the majority were seeking to atone for past sins and wished to turn over a new leaf, which led them to seek out religious teachers to guide them on the right path. This is how they came into contact with the Singapore JI leaders who “presented an extremist interpretation of Islam imbibed from Afghanistan that included a strong, anti-American, jihadist streak.”²⁴

It became clear that a number of overly literal JI ideological themes needed “extricating” and “negating” from detainee minds, as phrased by the RRG.²⁵ These were the notions that Muslims must hate and disassociate themselves from non-Muslims and Westerners; that jihad only means perpetual warfare against infidels; that the *bay`a*, or oath, to the JI leadership was inviolable; that martyrdom through suicide operations was to be sought and celestial virgins awaited them in the afterlife; and that Muslims could practice an authentic faith only within an Islamic state.²⁶

²⁰⁰⁷; Mohamed bin Ali, “Rehabilitation of Extremists: The Singapore Experience,” undated.

²¹ Personal interview, Muhammad Haniff bin Hassan, October 25, 2007; Personal interview, Mohamed bin Ali, October 25, 2007.

²² Personal interview, Mohamed bin Ali, October 25, 2007.

²³ Personal interview, Muhammad Haniff bin Hassan, October 25, 2007.

²⁴ Kumar Ramakrishna, “Jemaah Islamiah: Aims, Motivations and Possible Counter-Strategies,” Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, October 2, 2002.

²⁵ Bin Ali, “Rehabilitation of Extremists.”

²⁶ Ibid.; Hassan, “The Roles of the RRG,” in Kader, *Fighting Terrorism*, p. 154.

Between April 2004 and September 2006, the RRG conducted more than 500 counseling sessions with the JI detainees.²⁷ Although the “hard core”²⁸ detainees—such as Singapore JI spiritual leader Ibrahim Maidin and others “deeply involved in the movement for more than a decade”—apparently remain unmoved by RRG counseling efforts, other detainees evinced discernible changes in beliefs and behavior between six months to a year after the RRG sessions began.²⁹ These were typically the less committed members who had decided to take the *bay`a*, or oath of allegiance, to the JI leaders primarily to satisfy their friends’ requests. They eventually showed remorse for their involvement with JI, were “receptive” to RRG efforts to instill in them more balanced Islamic teachings and were appreciative of government efforts to rehabilitate rather than prosecute them outright. Some of these detainees were later released on restriction orders,³⁰ but were still required to attend mandatory counseling with the RRG to prevent ideological backsliding.³¹ The Singapore government made the existence of the RRG public in October 2005.³²

By 2005, RRG counselors had begun talking to the families of the detainees as well. It was understood that the spouse of a detainee was likely either radicalized due to exposure to her husband’s ideas, or confused and vulnerable to radicalization. The RRG dispatched female counselors to speak with detainee spouses who were willing to voluntarily subject themselves to counseling.³³ RRG family counseling efforts were greatly aided by the formation of the Interagency-After Care

Group (ACG), which focused “on the welfare of the families of detainees.”³⁴ The ACG gradually overcame the understandable initial suspicions of detainee spouses in practical ways; for example, they provided financial assistance, as the “detainees were all sole breadwinners and the families” needed “financial support to stay on their feet.”³⁵ The ACG helped the wives find work as “clerks, cleaners and other blue-collar jobs,” and even taught them to read “utility bills or pay property taxes.”³⁶ Importantly, the ACG ensured that the education of the detainees’ children continued uninterrupted through various means such as enrolling them in tuition programs, securing school fee waivers and providing pocket money. The RRG also expanded its efforts to mitigate religious extremism in the wider Muslim community through public talks, forums, publications and establishing a website. The RRG website serves as a useful tool for public education as it provides readers access to a wide range of publications, news articles and media interviews that focus on effective responses to extremism.³⁷ The ultimate aim of the RRG website is to help “immunize” the minds of Singaporean Muslims against JI or similarly violent radical Islamist ideologies.³⁸

A Holistic Critique

How should counter-ideological work in Singapore in general and the efforts of the RRG in particular be evaluated? Those involved with the program argue strongly that the RRG is essential. They state that there is a pressing need for an organized counter-ideological capability to attack al-Qa`ida’s dangerous ideology that seduced the JI detainees and now threatens to do the same to their families, along with the wider Singaporean Muslim community.³⁹ There is also some tentative empirical

evidence of the effectiveness of the RRG approach. Some sources indicate that in the six years since 2002, 73 individuals have been detained for terrorism-related activity.⁴⁰ As of September 2008, however, only 23 detainees remained incarcerated while 41 have been released, albeit on restriction orders.⁴¹ Other observers point to the lack of “JI activity” in Singapore since the major ISD swoops in 2001 and 2002.⁴² Terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna has declared that Singapore’s detainee rehabilitation program is “working” and that the rate of recidivism has been exceptionally low.⁴³ Nevertheless, some caution is warranted. To date, the RRG and its government partners have yet to come up with a set of objective, standardized metrics to determine with scientific rigor the extent to which an individual detainee has been genuinely rehabilitated. The process is still largely subjective, depending on a joint risk assessment by the RRG counselor, ISD case officer and the psychologist in attendance.⁴⁴

There is also the complex issue of assessing the extent to which the RRG’s counter-ideology work is effective in “immunizing” detainee families and the wider Singaporean Muslim community against the virulent ideological narratives of al-Qa`ida and JI. The government has tried to foster closer ties between Muslims and non-Muslims so as to ensure that a sufficiently robust social resilience exists to weather the fallout of an actual terrorist strike. It has done so through such instruments as the Community Engagement Program (CEP)⁴⁵ and Inter-Racial Confidence Circles and Harmony Circles in neighborhoods, the workplace and schools.⁴⁶ Despite these commendable

27 Religious Rehabilitation Group, “An Understanding of Islam.”

28 Ibid.

29 Personal interview, Mohamed bin Ali, October 25, 2007.

30 These refer to legal instruments that place restrictions on the general movements of released detainees.

31 Personal interview, Mohamed bin Ali, October 25, 2007.

32 Hassan, “The Roles of the RRG,” in Kader, *Fighting Terrorism*, p. 153.

33 Personal interview, Mohamed bin Ali, October 25, 2007; Bin Ali, “Rehabilitation of Extremists.” While detainees themselves were generally required by the authorities to submit themselves to counseling, it was not required of their spouses, although they could seek counseling if they wished.

34 Jeremy Au Yong, “The Straits Times – Care Group for Families of JI Detainees Lauded,” *Straits Times*, November 14, 2007.

35 M. Nirmala, “JI Detainees: Taking Care of Family Matters,” in Kader, *Fighting Terrorism*, pp. 161-65.

36 Ibid.

37 Hassan, “The Roles of the RRG,” in Kader, *Fighting Terrorism*, p. 156. Also see the RRG website at www.rrg.sg.

38 Personal interview, Mohamed bin Ali, October 25, 2007.

39 Ibid.

40 Naureen Chowdhury Fink and Ellie B. Hearne, “Beyond Terrorism: Deradicalization and Disengagement from Violent Extremism,” International Peace Institute, October 2008, p. 9.

41 Zakir Husain, “5 JI Terror Members Released,” *Straits Times*, September 15, 2008.

42 Personal interview, Muhammad Haniff bin Hassan, November 27, 2008.

43 Husain, “5 JI Terror Members Released.”

44 Personal interview, Muhammad Haniff bin Hassan, November 27, 2008.

45 For details on the post-terrorist incident rationale of the CEP, see www.singaporeunited.sg/cep/index.php/web/about_cep/what_is_cep.

46 Muhammad Haniff bin Hassan and Kenneth George

efforts, however, a conspiracy mindset still afflicts segments of the Muslim community in Singapore, much like in neighboring Malaysia and Indonesia.⁴⁷ Despite the genuinely innovative work of the RRG, the underlying, generalized angst of the Singaporean Muslim community—the product of both historic grievances and contemporary resentment at U.S. foreign policy and the Singapore government’s pro-U.S. stance—still remains, forming a restrictive existential envelope within which RRG counter-ideology efforts must operate. Moreover, while some local observers laud the attempts by government-linked Muslim community leaders to develop a uniquely “Singapore Muslim identity” as one possible antidote to foreign extremist ideological appeals,⁴⁸ others severely criticize the move. These critics warn that “Singapore Muslims and Islam in Singapore are inextricable from the wider Islamic world”; moreover, if Singapore’s Muslim leaders go overboard in redefining local Islam to expedite greater Muslim integration into mainstream Singapore society, “Singapore would likely isolate herself, and the flock, bewildered, might seek an overseas shepherd,” including foreign “terrorists.”⁴⁹ Dealing with the underlying generalized angst of the Singaporean Muslim community requires nothing less than generational change, and must involve attitudinal adjustments on the part of Muslims and non-Muslims alike, Singapore authorities and businesses. Furthermore, given how Singapore is thoroughly wired to the outside world through the internet, a more politically calibrated U.S. foreign policy toward the Muslim world would have to be part of the mix as well.⁵⁰

While the RRG itself is obviously quite powerless to do anything about the

Pereire, “An Ideological Response to Combating Terrorism – The Singapore Perspective,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 17:4 (2006): p. 464.

⁴⁷ Personal interview, Muhammad Haniff bin Hassan, October 25, 2007.

⁴⁸ Haniff and Pereire, “An Ideological Response,” p. 465. For details of the “10 Desired Attributes of the Singapore Muslim Community of Excellence,” see *NADI* magazine (Singapore), January 2006.

⁴⁹ Syed Alwi, “Islam in Singapore: Where To From Here?” *The Online Citizen*, May 1, 2008.

⁵⁰ Haniff and Pereire, “An Ideological Response,” pp. 469-470.

structural problem of the Singaporean Muslim community’s generalized angst, there are steps forward. Within these constraints, creative ways can be explored to further enhance its impact. One potentially important approach in this regard could be to deploy ex-JI detainees to support RRG efforts in convincing the more stubborn elements of the wider Muslim community that the JI threat is real and no government conspiracy is involved. Put bluntly, the “power to convince the public of the danger of JI ideology is greater if it comes from former JI members.” Their participation would “greatly enhance the credibility of the RRG’s substantive argument.”⁵¹ It should be noted that the Indonesian police have been making active use of captured Indonesian JI militants—such as Nasir Abbas—to undercut the network’s recruitment efforts, with some results.⁵²

In sum, until fresh and innovative tactics—such as making better use of ex-JI detainees in counter-ideological work—are countenanced, the program as a whole should best be adjudged at this juncture as a qualified success, with its full potential still to be realized.

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⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 474.

⁵² Seth Mydans, “Nasir Abbas, Terrorist Defector, Aids Indonesian Police,” *New York Times*, February 29, 2008. See also Nick O’Brien, “Interview with a Former Terrorist: Nasir Abbas’ Deradicalization Work in Indonesia,” *CTC Sentinel* 1:12 (2008).