subcontinent. This joint training would not only help to improve basic skills and allow access to more sophisticated equipment—both of which are severely lacking among many police officials in South Asia—but it could also allow for greater cooperation to take root and build the confidence that is necessary to strengthen regional and bilateral cooperation on intelligence sharing that helps monitor and stifle terrorist activity.

The challenges of forging counterterrorism cooperation in South Asia are formidable, as is evident from the limited results during the last 20 years of efforts mounted within SAARC. Funding and support for a regional law enforcement cooperation center on the subcontinent will have to be bolstered by much needed police reform efforts within individual countries in the region where corruption and lack of capacity remain major concerns. Although there is no guarantee that a willingness to cooperate among law enforcement officials in the region will take root as quickly as it has in other parts of the world, the urgent need for greater cooperation against terrorism demands bold action.

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# Singapore's Approach to Counterterrorism

By Gavin Chua Hearn Yuit

SINGAPORE REPRESENTS A BASTION of general stability amid low intensity conflicts in Southeast Asia. It has not suffered a terrorist attack on its soil in almost two decades. Nevertheless, Singapore's counterterrorism community believes that the country could face a terrorist attack at any moment in the future, and by facing this reality it constantly attempts to respond to rapidly emerging terrorism trends.[1]

In the last year, for example, Asia has experienced two major terrorist attacks targeting hotels in Mumbai and Jakarta, both signifying an upward trend in sophistication and scale of terrorist operations. To adequately respond to these threats, Singapore has adopted social resilience as a key counterterrorism strategy.[2] Singapore's government considers race and religion the country's "most visceral and dangerous fault line."[3] It believes that reducing racial and religion tension[4] in this multi-ethnic and multi-religious country is critical in preventing future acts of terrorist violence in Singapore.[5]

This article will first provide background on the history of terrorism in Singapore, including how the country has foiled a number of recent plots. It will then identify the Singapore government's various programs to establish social resiliency and reduce jihadist radicalization within its society. Finally, the article will show the steps Singapore has taken most recently to stir the public's imagination to the threat of terrorism to maintain public vigilance.

## Singapore's Experience with Terrorism

The last bombings to strike Singapore occurred in November-December 1987, targeting the American International Assurance building and Shell Tower. Before 1987, Singapore faced a number of other small-scale bombings, some involving Palestinian terrorists.[6] Then, in 1991, Singapore's counterterrorism apparatus received international attention when it successfully stormed a hijacked airliner and killed four terrorists claiming to be members of the Pakistan Peoples' Party.[7] Terrorist violence in Singapore faded out thereafter.

In the months after the 9/11 attacks, however, the threat of terrorism returned. Singapore's Internal Security Department (ISD) prevented Singapore's JI branch from launching a series of bomb attacks targeting foreign embassies and U.S. interests in the country in December 2001. The ISD detained a total of 13 JI members, including their spiritual

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1 "The Fight Against Terror," National Security Coordination Centre (NSCC), Singapore, 2004.

2 Through the government's community engagement programs and other initiatives to build social resilience, civilian communities are expected to develop capacities to "detect and prevent disruptions to a nation's security, and where necessary, to absorb shocks and bounce back into a functioning condition after a crisis as quickly as possible." Definition provided by the Centre of Excellence for National Security's Social Resilience program.

3 Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, National Day Rally Speech, August 16, 2009.

4 In the 1950s and 1960s, Singapore experienced race riots. One of the most prominent incidents was the "Prophet Muhammad Birthday Riots" between Malays and Chinese, which occurred on July 21, 1964. A Malay procession following the Prophet Muhammad's birthday celebrations attacked ethnic Chinese spectators. The country's race and religion fault line was also fueled by the crackdown on Singapore's Jemaah Islamiya branch in December 2001, when the possibility of a Singaporean terrorism threat became a reality. See "Appeal for Calm," *Straits Times*, July 22, 1964; Norman Vasu, "(En)countering Terrorism: Multiculturalism and Singapore," *Asian Ethnicity* 9:1 (2008).

5 Of Singapore's 4.9 million residents, 74% are Chinese, 13% Malay, 9% Indian, and 3% other ethnicities. The

traditional Chinese religions, Buddhism and Taoism, account for 51% of the resident population. The proportion of Muslims and Hindus have remained relatively unchanged since 1990 at 15% and 4% respectively. Among the Chinese, there were more significant shifts in religious affiliation, with Buddhism and Christianity surpassing Taoism as the main religions from 1990 to 2000. In comparison, almost all Malays were Muslim without significant changes during the last 20 years. Among the Indians, Hinduism had the largest following (55%) and Islam accounted for slightly more than a quarter of Indians. The "Others" category refers to smaller ethnic minority groups, such as the Eurasians. See "Monthly Digest of Statistics Singapore," Singapore Department of Statistics, November 2009; "Singapore Census of Population, 2000," Singapore Department of Statistics, May 2001.

6 "Faber House Explosion," *Straits Times*, March 18, 1985.

7 "1991 – SQ 117 Rescue," MINDEF History, Government of Singapore, 2006.

leader, Ibrahim Maidin. Maidin trained in Afghanistan in 1993, and wrote several letters to Taliban leader Mullah Omar and al-Qa`ida leader Usama bin Ladin.[8] Upon his return to Singapore, Maidin arranged for JI members to receive training in Afghanistan.[9] Subsequent arrests ensued in September 2004 and July 2006, crippling JI's network in Singapore.

Singapore has also faced a threat from homegrown radicalization. This was most vividly seen through the case of Abdul Basheer Kader, a 28-year-old Singaporean lecturer with a background in law.[10] Abdul Basheer was about to make contact with Lashkar-i-Tayyiba in Pakistan to train for "militant jihad" at the time of his arrest in Singapore in February 2007.[11] According to Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs, Abdul Basheer was affected by radical jihadist discourse read on the internet.[12]

In January 2008, Singapore authorities arrested three young men under the Internal Security Act for involvement in activities that posed a potential terrorist threat, including attempts to make improvised explosive devices and to join foreign "mujahidin networks" to wage armed jihad in Afghanistan, Palestine and Chechnya.[13]

Luckily, however, vigilance by Singapore's authorities managed to prevent these plots from actualization.

In February 2008, however, Singapore faced a major security breach when JI operative Mas Selamat Kastari escaped from a jail in the country. Kastari remained on the loose for more than a year until he was recaptured in Malaysia in May 2009 with the help of Singapore's intelligence services.

Nevertheless, the escape dealt a major blow to Singapore's counterterrorism reputation.

Kastari's escape raised the possibility of fissures developing within racial and religious harmony in Singapore. After his escape, Singaporean authorities considered the possible scenario of Kastari being harbored by jihadist sympathizers in the country, which would heighten sensitivities between Muslim and non-Muslim communities.[14] Minister Lim Swee Say described the

> **"The RRG's objective is to counsel detained JI members and to counter their ideological beliefs. Since 2003, the RRG has performed more than 800 counseling sessions, and has progressively released some of the detainees on restriction orders."**

Kastari escape as a "test in inter-racial cohesion" as certain communities might "take a position based on their racial or religious groups and draw the line."[15] Fortunately, Singaporeans passed the test without creating any racial or religious tension.

The Kastari incident also presented a useful test for social resilience in Singapore. There was a period of public outrage and confusion about the escape directed at the government and expressed on various online blogs and forums,[16] but there were also concerted efforts made by various communities to "[put] up posters, [share] information on possible sightings and even offering rewards from their own pockets."[17]

**Building Social Resilience to Terrorism**
As a result of Singapore's multi-ethnic and multi-religious population, its leaders consistently stress the importance of social harmony. Inherent in speeches is the concern that a "single flashpoint" such as a terrorist attack could destroy decades of harmony building efforts.[18] Singapore Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew presented the public audience with a wildcard scenario:

> If a Malay-Muslim Jemaah Islamiya member blew up a bomb in a Mass Rapid Transit station and the blast killed more Chinese and Indians than Malays, it would lead to non-Muslims distancing themselves from Muslims out of fear [such as in the aftermath of the London 7/7 bomb attacks in 2005].[19]

Singapore made early investments in building social resilience, an effort that would yield high dividends in the long run. One month after the Singapore JI network was exposed in December 2001, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong proposed the concept of "Inter-Racial Confidence Circles" (IRCC) for each of the country's 84 constituencies,[20] and "Harmony Circles" for schools, work places and other local organizations.[21] A National Steering Committee was also established to provide broad guidance for IRCCs to deepen inter-racial and inter-religious rapport within communities.

The total IRCC membership reached 1,021 by June 2006, of which Chinese, Malays, Indians and other ethnicities constituted 58%, 21%, 20% and 1% respectively.[22] The IRCC was renamed "Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles" in September 2007, to reflect

8 "Intelligence from Afghanistan Breaks Singapore Plot," CNN, January 11, 2002.

9 "The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism: White Paper," Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs, 2003.

10 "ISD Detains Self-Radicalised Singaporean," Channel News Asia, June 8, 2007.

11 Ibid.

12 Kumar Ramakrishna, "Self-Radicalisation: The Case of Abdul Basheer Abdul Kader," S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, June 11, 2007.

13 "Further Releases, Issuance of Restriction Orders & Detentions Under The Internal Security Act," Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs, January 24, 2008.

14 "More Likely Fugitive has Fled," Straits Times, January 16, 2009. Also see "Capture of Mas Selamat: Lesson for All in Weeding Out Terrorism," Straits Times Forum, May 12, 2009.

15 "S'poreans Get A+ for Response on Mas Selamat's Escape: Swee Say," Straits Times, March 12, 2008.

16 See, for example, "90 days Since Escape...No More Information?" Online Citizen, May 26, 2008.

17 Speech by Professor S. Jayakumar at the Opening Cer-

emony for the Second Asia-Pacific Programme for Senior National Security Officers (APPSNO), April 14, 2008.

18 "Racial Harmony is Not a Given: MM, PM," Straits Times, July 19, 2009.

19 Ibid.

20 Singapore is divided into 84 constituencies that serve as electoral divisions and where community outreach activities are concentrated.

21 "Community Development: Promote Racial Harmony & Community Bonding," Government of Singapore's eCitizen portal, February 28, 2007.

22 "Challenges for IRCCs," Straits Times, January 14, 2007.

the new role of IRCCs in bridging different religious groups at the local level. In April 2008, the minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports, Vivian Balakrishnan, announced a six-fold increase in IRCC membership from 2006, with 84% of all religious organizations joining as members.[23] The key value of the IRCC network, according to Minister Balakrishnan, is "to make sure that in times of peace, we build relationships, trust and confidence. This will create a safety net for Singapore. If ever anything unfortunate were to happen, at that point in time, this safety net would be tested."[24]

After the London 7/7 bomb attacks in 2005, the government launched the Community Engagement Program (CEP) in February 2006 to provide more integrated and comprehensive efforts in preparing the populace to be psychologically and socially resilient to terrorism. Example initiatives over the past few years include introducing Safety and Security Watch Groups at industrial and commercial premises; outreach to foreign worker populations through the foreign worker dormitories; and expanding the scope of Emergency Preparedness Exercises to cover the readiness to detect and prevent the fallout from potential communal tensions in a crisis.

Aside from the IRCC and CEP, the government also formed (formally in October 2005) the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), which is an unpaid, all-volunteer grouping of Islamic scholars and teachers who possess formal Islamic educational credentials from both local *madrasas* and foreign universities.[25] The RRG's objective is to counsel detained JI members and to counter their ideological beliefs. Since 2003, the RRG has performed more than 800 counseling sessions, and has progressively released some of the detainees on restriction orders.[26]

The RRG has received attention from U.S. policymakers. In September 2005, terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman testified before the U.S. Congress on the usefulness of Singapore's RRG program to "actively [enlist] moderate clerics as a way to get insight and then to use the information from…those clerics, to construct very effective information and psychological operations."[27] In 2007, the U.S. military adopted parts of the RRG program model in Iraq, to offer an alternative to indefinite detention without trial. Marine Major-General Douglas M. Stone, a proponent of detention reform, who oversaw U.S. detention facilities in Iraq at the time, noted the progressiveness of the RRG with its very low recidivist rate, "making the Singapore model the most successful."[28]

Even with the IRCC, CEP and RRG programs in place, clear signs remain to be seen that members of the public feel like equal stakeholders when it comes to countering terrorism and its threats to social resilience. The terrorist threat is not directly palpable to the public, in part an outcome of the "silent sentinel" effect of security and intelligence agencies operating behind the scenes effectively. A possible reason is the lack of terrorist attacks in Singapore. Yet, the recent Kastari escape has now sensitized the public to deal more directly with the effects of terrorism. New opportunities have arisen for closer public engagement toward building resilience to counter terrorism.

**Keeping the Public Aware of the Threat**
In 2009, there were three notable events and initiatives spearheaded by the government to engage the public about the dangers of terrorism. The first was Exercise Northstar VII, one of the most complex military exercises conducted in Singapore, involving more than 2,000 people from 15 agencies.[29] The exercise brought to the public

imagination a simulated Mumbai terrorist attack scenario, focusing on "soft targets" such as hotels, food and beverage outlets, and transportation networks. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong commented that in Mumbai, Indian civilians must have seen the terrorists moving through the streets carrying their equipment immediately before the attack. He wanted to make sure that civilians would immediately notify authorities if such an event were to occur in Singapore. "You must carry on living life as normal," said Lee, "but at the same time always keep an eye open and be slightly suspicious and vigilant."[30]

Second, the Singapore government introduced a series of measures to harden "soft targets" in the public sphere. A new Singapore Standard for Hotel Security was launched to enhance the conduct of systematic and regular reviews of emergency operating procedures, security plans and equipment.[31] The Police Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) Unit was enlarged to form the Public Transport Security Command, where 400 policemen will patrol the bus interchanges and MRT stations.[32] Finally, the Singapore Infocomm Technology Security Authority was established to protect critical IT infrastructure against increasing global trends of cyber-espionage and cyber-terrorism.[33]

The third and final event was the Total Defense Display and "pledge moment" at the National Day Rally in August 2009. The purpose of the Total Defense Display was to showcase Singapore's defense capability through an integrated demonstration of the country's military, civil and social defense. The rally organizers sprung a surprise on the public audience with a simulated event of a bomb discovery at the rally venue, prompting momentary confusion and subsequently general

23  Speech by minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports, Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan, at the National Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circle Workshop, April 5, 2008.

24  "Religious Groups Roped into IRCCs," *Straits Times*, September 7, 2007.

25  For an in-depth analysis of the RRG, see Kumar Ramakrishna, "A Holistic Critique of Singapore's Counter-Ideological Program," *CTC Sentinel* 2:1 (2009).

26  For more information, see the website of the Religious

Rehabilitation Group, located at www.rrg.sg.

27  Bruce Hoffman, "Evolving Counterterrorism Strategy," statement to the House Committee on International Relations, September 29, 2005.

28  "Singapore Scheme Helps De-Radicalise Detainees in Iraq," *Malaysian Insider*, April 20, 2009.

29  Background on the exercises can be located in the Singapore Ministry of Defense's *Cyberpioneer* magazine, available at www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/publications/cyberpioneer/index.html.

30  "Exercise Northstar Tests Singapore's Response to Terrorist Attack," Channel News Asia, July 15, 2009.

31  "Launch of SS 545 Singapore Standard for Hotel Security," SPRING Singapore, August 27, 2009.

32  "Public Transport Security Command to Enhance Train, Bus Safety," Channel News Asia, August 4, 2009.

33  "Singapore Infocomm Technology Security Authority Set Up to Safeguard Singapore against IT Security Threats," Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs, October 1, 2009.

awe at the Total Defense Display where the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and the Home Team (Ministry of Home Affairs and affiliate agencies) were able to showcase their capabilities and instill public confidence in Singapore's vigilance toward external threats.[34]

Furthermore, the rally also introduced for the first time a "pledge moment" where at exactly 8:22 PM Singaporeans were invited to spend 30 seconds reciting the country's pledge to foster national unity. Participants also included 700 establishments and overseas Singaporeans residing in different time zones.

**Conclusion**
All of these efforts show that the Singapore government is continuing forward with proactive measures to cope with emerging terrorist threats, and to foster national unity in the face of jihadist attempts to create divisions. Although the government hopes to avoid a terrorist attack in the future, it is cognizant of the various terrorist cells operating in the region that have killed scores of civilians in attacks on hotels and other civilian venues. Moreover, militants associated with JI continue to target Singapore, and the only reason the country has not become a victim is due to its success in foiling these plots thus far.

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34 "Multi-Sensory NDP Defence Display Set to Thrill Audiences," *Cyberpioneer*, June 29, 2009.

# Recent Highlights in Terrorist Activity

November 1, 2009 (GLOBAL): The leader of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula called on militants to bomb airports and trains in Western countries, explaining that explosives can easily be acquired from household materials. Nasir al-Wahayshi, the leader of the group, wrote in the jihadist magazine *Sada al-Malahim* that "you do not need to exert great effort or spend a lot of money to make 10 grams of explosives, more or less. Do not spend a long time searching for materials as they already exist in your mother's kitchen. Make them [explosives] in the shape of a bomb you hurl, or detonate through a timer or a remote detonator or a martyrdom-seeker belt or any electrical appliance." Al-Wahayshi also wrote that "it is a duty that a Muslim mujahid be busy planning to reap the heads of infidels." – *Reuters, November 2*

November 1, 2009 (IRAQ): Two suicide bombers—one in an explosives-laden vehicle and the other on foot wearing a suicide belt—killed two people just outside the city of Ramadi, Anbar Province. Iraqi authorities believe the bombers were targeting a passing police patrol. – *Reuters, November 1*

November 1, 2009 (IRAQ): A bomb on a bus near a police checkpoint in Karbala killed at least three people, including a policeman. – *Reuters, November 1*

November 1, 2009 (IRAQ): Explosives attached to a bicycle ripped through a popular market in Mussayab, a predominately Shi`a town that is 40 miles south of Baghdad. The explosion killed at least five people. – *Reuters, November 1*

November 1, 2009 (SOMALIA): A remotely-detonated bomb killed five senior military officers in northern Somalia's Sool region. – *Shabelle Media Network, November 1; UPI, November 1*

November 2, 2009 (UNITED STATES): Ahmad Wais Afzali, a New York City imam charged with four counts of making false statements to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, pleaded not guilty. Afzali is accused of alerting suspected terrorist Najibullah Zazi that he was

under surveillance. Before his arrest, Afzali had been used as an informant by the New York police. Prosecutors allege that Zazi admitted to taking explosives courses at an al-Qa`ida training camp in Afghanistan, and that he was planning to detonate bombs in the United States. – *Reuters, November 2*

November 2, 2009 (PAKISTAN): Pakistan's government announced $5 million in monetary rewards for information leading to the capture of top Pakistani Taliban commanders. The three most wanted commanders include Hakimullah Mehsud, Waliur Rahman and Qari Hussain, who each carry a $600,000 reward for their capture, dead or alive. – *BBC, November 2*

November 2, 2009 (PAKISTAN): Pakistani troops gained control of Kaniguram, an important stronghold of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in South Waziristan Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. On October 17, the Pakistan Army deployed at least 30,000 ground troops in a major offensive against TTP militants in South Waziristan. – *BBC, November 4*

November 2, 2009 (PAKISTAN): A suicide bomber on a motorbike detonated his explosives next to workers waiting for their salaries outside a bank near the four-star Shalimar Hotel in Rawalpindi. The blast killed at least 30 people. The attack occurred not far from the Pakistan Army headquarters. – *AFP, November 1; Guardian, November 2*

November 3, 2009 (AFGHANISTAN): Five British soldiers were shot to death by an Afghan policeman they were training in Helmand Province. The assailant managed to flee the scene. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack, although it was not immediately clear whether they were involved. – *AP, November 4*

November 3, 2009 (PAKISTAN): Pakistani troops marched into Srarogha, an important stronghold of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Srarogha, located in South Waziristan Agency in Pakistan's tribal areas, is where former TTP leader Baitullah Mehsud signed his first peace accord with the government in February 2005. On October 17, the Pakistan Army deployed