Deradicalisation in Singapore:

Past, Present and Future

Shashi Jayakumar

Table of Contents

Introduction

According to some estimates, Singapore, a cosmopolitan city-state, has the most diverse population on earth.[1] Within its 721.5 square kilometres, the resident population (5.8 million as of March 2020) ethnically comprises individuals of Chinese (76.2%), Indian (9%) and Malay (13.4%) descent. The main religions represented are Christianity (18.8%), Buddhism/Taoism (43.2%), Islam (14%) and Hinduism (5%). Four main languages are spoken, with English the working language.[2]

The country has not seen terrorist attacks in the age of al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS). But one of Singapore's closest neighbours, Indonesia, has repeatedly been targeted by the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), al-Qaeda's principal offshoot in Southeast Asia, and other violent extremists. The most deadly incident in Indonesia was the Bali attacks of October 2002, which killed 202 individuals. Several other attacks in Indonesia through the decade were executed by the JI. Singapore itself has had close brushes with the group. The local JI cell's plans to attack Mass Rapid Transit stations, government ministries and foreign embassies were interdicted by Singapore's Internal Security Department (ISD) by the arrests of cell members in 2001 and 2002.[3]

Since 2001, 94 individuals from the Muslim population in Singapore have been found to have been radicalised or involved in terrorism-related activities at a level considered serious enough by the authorities to be placed under preventive detention, which is provided for under the Internal Security Act (ISA).[4] Many have since been released, either after the lapse of a detention order (DO) or through the issuing of a ministerial direction suspending the detention (a suspension direction, or SD). Upon their release, ex-detainees are typically for a time placed on restriction orders (RO), which restrict movements and impose other conditions, with the possibility of the individual again being detained if the conditions are not complied with or if there are signs of the individual being radicalised again.[5] Others (mainly those judged to have been less involved in serious extremist activity or to pose less of a threat to society at large) were never detained but placed directly under ROs. Of those still in detention at the time

---

1   'Global Religious Diversity', Pew Research Centre, 4 April 2014, https://www.pewforum.org/2014/04/04/global-religious-diversity/ (accessed 20 March 2020).

2   CIA World Factbook, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/401.html#SN (accessed 20 March 2020).

3   Some 31 were detained, while the remainder were released shortly afterwards on ROs.

4   The ISA provides for preventive detention without trial for a period of two years (with the detention reviewed by an advisory board appointed by Singapore's president). The detention can be renewed but is subject to safeguards. For details on the ISA, see *A Singapore Safe for All* (Singapore: Ministry of Home Affairs, 2002), pp.13–31, https://www.mha.gov.sg/docs/default-source/others/isa_booklet-english.pdf (accessed 17 March 2020).

5   A person issued with an RO must abide by several conditions and restrictions. For example, he is not permitted to change his residence or employment or to travel out of Singapore without the prior approval of the director of the ISD. The individual may have to receive further religious counselling beyond the sessions he received during detention. The individual issued with an RO also cannot make public statements, address public meetings, print, distribute or contribute to any publication, or hold office in or be a member of any organisation, association or group without the prior approval of the director.

of writing (July 2020), approximately six are individuals from the JI, while 16 are self-radicalised individuals, mostly arrested in the 2010s, without formal affiliation to any extremist group (but with many showing sympathy for or declaring allegiance to IS).[6]

6   Author's estimates based on media reporting, official releases from the Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs and from a database constructed and continually updated that captures identities of detained individuals (as well as other identifiers and variables). The database covers all individuals who (a) were detained under the ISA for extremist-related activity (as opposed to other uses of the ISA, such as for cases of espionage, which are not relevant to this paper), (b) were issued ROs under the ISA, and (c) fought overseas or joined militant organisations overseas. Where appropriate, data derived from this database has been used in the present paper in order to provide up-to-date figures.

The Jemaah Islamiyah

The JI has its roots in the Darul Islam (DI, the 'House of Islam') network, which emerged in Indonesia in the 1940s, engaging in an armed rebellion against Dutch colonial rule. Following independence from the Dutch, the focus of the DI's struggle was against the Indonesian government, which the DI saw as anti-Islamic, legitimising the need for a group that could pave the way for the implementation of Islamic law.

The JI was established in January 1993 by senior DI member Abdullah Sungkar as the result of a factional split with the main DI leadership.[7] Several DI members who chose Sungkar's side in the rift and who thence became JI members either fought or trained in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s, absorbing through these experiences the anti-West, jihadist ideology of al-Qaeda.[8] The JI developed operational links with al-Qaeda, where some JI members were effectively co-opted into al-Qaeda or were closely associated with it. JI's aspirations expanded to include Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore, with its aim being the creation of an Islamic state in the entire region, through violence if necessary.[9]

By the end of the 1990s, the JI had three 'mantiqis' (regional groups), one of which encompassed Malaysia and Singapore. The Singapore JI cell was started (and, until 1999, led) by Ibrahim Maidin, a Singapore citizen and a charismatic, self-taught religious preacher, who had briefly trained in Afghanistan and whose encounters with the mujaheddin left an indelible mark. Inducted into the JI in 1988–9, Maidin took an oath of allegiance to Indonesian cleric Abu Bakar Bashir, a longstanding associate of Sungkar from the DI era, who took over Sungkar's mantle as JI leader after the latter's death in 1999.[10] Maidin played a key role in developing the cell and recruitment, as well as arranging for other Singapore JI members to train in Afghanistan.[11]

Most of the members of the Singapore JI cell began their involvement in the 1980s, when they joined Maidin's classes to learn more about religion. The classes were at the initial stages innocuous and appeared to be for a general audience. They began with mainstream topics and eventually introduced topics that stirred emotions, particularly about the conflicts in Afghanistan and Palestine, and the plight of Muslims worldwide (in Bosnia, Mindanao and the Maluku Islands in eastern Indonesia, for instance). The religious classes served as the focus for indoctrination and also a recruitment front through which Maidin, a very persuasive presence. identified over time those suitable for induction into the JI. Those whom Maidin selected were given a

7   For the split, see Solahudin, *The Roots of Terrorism in Indonesia: From Darul Islam to Jema'ah Islamiyah*, trans. Dave McRae (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), pp.144–55.

8   'Jemaah Islamiyah in Southeast Asia: Damaged but Still Dangerous', ICG Asia Report no. 63, 26 August 2003, pp.2–10.

9   *The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism* (Singapore: Ministry of Home Affairs, 7 January 2003), pp.4–5, https://www.mha.gov.sg/docs/default-source/others/english.pdf (accessed 30 December 2019).

10 *The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism*, p.6.

11 At least 8 Singapore JI members underwent military training in Afghanistan. Some Singaporean JI members attended training sessions in Mindanao in south Philippines conducted by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). *Government Statement On the Recommendation of the Advisory Board on the Jemaah Islamiyah Case*, 30 May 2002, p.6. https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/20020530-MHA.pdf (accessed 17 February 2020).

sense of having made it to an exclusive, secret group, boosting their self-esteem. Likewise, the sense that JI members were close to Allah, with JI members promised martyrdom if they died while undertaking jihad, was another boon.[12]

From the mid-1990s, and in particular from the late 1990s (a time when a faction within the wider JI was pushing to accelerate the timeline for jihad), Singapore JI members began to plan attacks within the country, undertaking reconnaissance of several targets. The majority of these plans did not get beyond a preliminary planning stage. Before this or other plans could be further advanced, the ISD broke up the cell, arresting 36 individuals in December 2001 and August 2002. All were individuals from the Singapore Muslim community[13]. The majority were JI members, while a very small number were members of Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a Filipino militant group with close links to the JI.[14]

At the time of the arrests, Singapore did not have a strategy prepared for disengagement or deradicalisation. A programme slowly came into being to rehabilitate detained JI members. The overarching rationale and approach to detention developed to become not punishment for harbouring radical or extremist thought, but rehabilitation. While in detention, interventions take place on the individual (and to some degree on his family) that have religious, psychological and social components. The aim, where feasible, is to lay the groundwork for the successful return of the individual to society.

Rehabilitation – the Religious Rehabilitation Group[15]

The 2001–2002 period was a difficult time for the Muslim community in Singapore. Within the community, there was a sense that other Singaporeans were questioning its members' loyalties.[16] The government was concerned with ensuring that the arrests would not tear the delicate fabric of inter-ethnic harmony and that distrust and ill will between communities would not fester. A separate issue was a strain of thinking within the Malay-Muslim community in Singapore (this was perhaps not the majority view within the Muslim community

---

12 *The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism*, pp.15-16.
13 Approximately 99% of Malays in Singapore are Muslim. Given the common identification of Muslims in Singapore with the Malay community, it has sometimes been assumed in some quarters that all JI detainees were of Malay ethnicity. In fact, several in the batch of detainees in 2001 and 2002 were not Malay, at least not according to official racial classifications. The 31 detainees numbered one convert (originally Christian of Indian ethnicity), six of Indian ethnicity (born into Islam), four Boyanese, three Javanese, one Malayalee, one of Arab descent and one of Pakistani descent. For biodata, see *Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests*, pp.43–50.
14 The arrests were made possible because of a crucial tip-off by a concerned Singaporean who came forward with information about how one individual (Mohammad Aslam bin Yar Ali Khan, a Singapore JI member) had claimed to know al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden and to have fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan. *Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests*, p.26.
15 The RRG and Singapore's approach to extremist deradicalisation has been well covered in previous works. See especially Rohan Gunaratna and Mohamed Feisal Bin Mohamed Hassan, 'Terrorist Rehabilitation: The Singapore Experience', in *Terrorist Rehabilitation: A New Frontier in Counter-Terrorism*, ed. Rohan Gunaratna and Mohamed Ali (London: Imperial College Press/World Scientific, 2015), pp.41–70; Mohamed Bin Ali, 'The Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG): A Community-Government Partnership in Fighting Terrorism', in *Majulah! 50 Years of Malay/Muslim Community in Singapore*, edd. Zainul Abidin Rasheed and Norshahril Saat (London: Imperial College Press/World Scientific, 2016), pp.243–55; Kumar Ramakrishna, 'The "Three Rings" of Terrorist Rehabilitation and Counter-Ideological Work in Singapore: A Decade On', in *Prisons, Terrorism and Extremism: Critical Issues in Management, Radicalisation and Reform*, ed. A. Silke (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 197–213; Muhammad Haniff Bin Hassan and Kenneth George Pereire, 'An Ideological Response to Combating Terrorism – The Singapore Perspective', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, no. 17:4 (2006), pp.458–77; and M. H. B. Hassan, 'The roles of the religious rehabilitation group (RRG) in Singapore', in A. Halim, *Fighting Terrorism: The Singapore Perspective* (Singapore: Taman Bacaan Pemuda Pemudi Melayu Singapura, 2007), pp.149–60.
16 Interview with Haji Mohammad Musa Alami (20 January 2020). At the time of the JI arrests in 2001 and 2002, Musa Alami was Chairman of an NGO, the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP). In 2003 he was appointed President of the Council of Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, the overarching body with responsibility for the interests of the Muslim community in Singapore. Both roles meant he was deeply involved in discussions within the Malay community and with government on JI-linked issues.

but nonetheless fairly widespread) that had to do with scepticism, if not outright disbelief concerning the JI arrests. Some chose to see in the arrests a conspiracy to undermine the Muslim community in Singapore, or even a conspiracy against Islam itself.[17] There had to be several meetings behind closed doors between government officials and leaders from the Muslim community in order to explain the nature of what had taken place,[18] with over 120 Malay-Muslim organisations then coming together in October 2002 to condemn groups that used Islam to justify terrorism.[19]

What played a central part in swaying mindsets within sceptical quarters of the Muslim community was the government invitation to two respected senior Islamic scholars who led institutions within the community to interview the detainees: Ustaz Haji Ali Haji Mohamed, chairman of the Khadijah Mosque, and Ustaz Haji Muhammad Hasbi Hassan, president of the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association.[20] Initial contacts by these senior clerics with the JI detainees showed that the detainees had a deviant, in some respects archaic view of Islam and some of its key tenets (not least, jihad), as well as an overwhelmingly exclusivist outlook.[21]

The detainees were also prepared to commit violence. Consider this post-release account by one former Singapore JI detainee, part of a cell within the Singapore JI that prepared for operational missions:

> *People asked why I believed in violent action. I had strongly believed that Syariah was a law created by Allah to bring peace to this world. To uphold Syariah, we must be in power as no secular government would ever adopt it. To gain power, we must overthrow the governments in the region, including in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia … as we had no means to challenge the military might of any country, the only way was to destabilise governments through guerrilla warfare such as bombing and terror activities. I believed at that time the use of violence was justified.*[22]

The two senior clerics realised after these initial interactions that detainees had been misled on several aspects of the Islamic faith. Together with other scholars, the suggestion was pitched to the government in the first quarter of 2002 that there should be a rehabilitation programme to address the ideological misconceptions.[23]

This was the germination of what became in 2003 the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG). With Ustaz Ali and Ustaz Hasbi serving as joint leaders, religious teachers were approached to become RRG counsellors, a group of unpaid, volunteer Islamic scholars (*asatizah*),

17 Interview with Abdul Halim Kader (10 January 2020). Abdul Halim Kader was a founding member of the Inter-Agency Aftercare Group (on which, see below) and was also deeply involved in discussions on behalf of the Malay-Muslim community with the government during the JI arrests.
18 Interviews with Mohamed Ali (8 January 2020) and Musa Alami (20 January 2020). Ustaz Mohamed Ali is vice-chairman of the RRG and has been involved with the organisation since its inception.
19 *Winning Hearts and Minds, Promoting Harmony: A Decade of Providing Care and Support* (Singapore: Khadijah Mosque, 2013), p.57.
20 ibid., pp.10–11.
21 Gunaratna and Hassan, 'Terrorist Rehabilitation', pp.45–6.
22 *Winning Hearts and Minds*, p.122. A point worth noting here is that the Singapore authorities have not followed the practice, established in several other countries, of actively involving 'formers'in rehabilitation work. From time to time, individuals who have gone through the rehabilitation process have in carefully managed circumstances (press interviews in official media) given their stories, expressing regret for their thinking and action. This appears to be part of an effort to demonstrate the efficacy of the rehabilitation process rather than to signify an active involvement of formers in rehabilitation.
23 Interview with Mohamed Ali (8 January 2020). Mohamed Ali is not to be confused with his father Ustaz Haji Ali Haji Mohamed, who as chairman of Khadijah Mosque played a key role together with Ustaz Haji Muhammad Hasbi Hassan in 2002-3 in liaising with the government and in making the initial suggestion that led to the creation of the RRG.

the aim of which was to understand the detainees' mindset, counsel them and, where possible, change their mindsets with a view to making them candidates for release into society.[24]

It was clear that a systematic and comprehensive rehabilitation programme was needed. However, there was no blueprint to follow, with individuals involved in the RRG at an early stage (2002–3) remarking on the rough and ready approach.[25] This period saw an emphasis on training, preparation and the acquisition of the requisite skills to meet detainees. Several RRG counsellors undertook further education in counselling from 2003–4; some also undertook further degrees focusing on counterterrorism or counter-extremist ideology.[26]

From May to September 2003, counsellors conducted research for what would become the rehabilitation manual, which would guide them later when it came to correcting deviationist thinking in the JI mindset. The manual was *Islam Agama Salam & Damai: Langkah Hayati Erti Jihad Sebenar*, which translates as 'Islam Religion of Peace: Steps towards Understanding the Real Meaning of Jihad'. The research for the manual was based primarily on two sources: findings from initial meetings with detainees, and an analysis of a document called *Pedoman Umum Perjuangan Al-Jama'ah Al-Islamiyah* (PUPJI, the 'General Guide for the Struggle of Al-Jama'ah Al-Islamiyah'), issued by JI's Central Executive Council and recovered in the course of Indonesian counterterrorist operations in 2002. PUPJI was essentially the JI manifesto.[27] The RRG manual was launched in December 2003 with RRG counsellors beginning to use the first version in April 2004. The manual included these topics: *bai'ah* (pledge of allegiance), *Ummah* (the Islamic community), *daulah Islamiah* (the Islamic state) and other Islamic concepts manipulated by JI, including jihad.[28]

Counselling for detainees (as well as some individuals under RO) began in April 2004. This was an attempt to get to grips with and, if possible, change the negative ideology of JI members, to provide them with a better understanding of Islam and to demonstrate that fulfilled living in a multiracial, multireligious society was in fact possible.[29] Initially the RRG counsellors were viewed with great suspicion by the JI detainees, who were abusive and called them government stooges and *munafiq* (hypocrites).[30] But, with their counselling training, religious knowledge and understanding of how JI's leaders had distorted key Islamic concepts, RRG counsellors were, over time, able to engage the majority of detainees in one-to-one counselling sessions and start making headway.[31] These sessions also played a role in helping detainees overcome their feelings of betrayal by other JI members.[32]

24 It was important that counsellors could show that while they were working *with* the Ministry of Home Affairs, they were not working *for* it. Interview with Mohamed Ali (8 January 2020).
25 ibid. See also Kumar Ramakrishna, '"Counter-Ideological" Work in Singapore: A Preliminary Assessment', p.46.
26 Gunaratna and Hassan, 'Terrorist Rehabilitation', pp.46–7.
27 For an analysis of PUPJI, see Elena Pavlova, 'From Counter-Society to Counter-State: Jemaah Islamiyah According to PUPJI', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 30, (2007, issue 9), pp.777–800.
28 Mohamed bin Ali, 'Countering Violent Extremism: the Singapore experience', p.194; see also Mohamed Bin Ali, 'The Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG): A Community-Government Partnership in Fighting Terrorism', p.6 and *Winning Hearts and Minds*, p.42.
29 Gunaratna and Hassan, 'Terrorist Rehabilitation', p.49.
30 Interview with Mohamed Ali (8 January 2020).
31 Counselling of JI detainees involved only one-to-one sessions. Grouping and interaction with other detainees is not practised in Singapore's deradicalisation efforts: 'The Psychology Behind Singapore's Terrorist Rehabilitation Strategy and Best Practices in Countering Violent Extremism', Counter-Terrorism Department, Internal Security Department, in *Home Team Journal* (2018, issue 7), pp.81–6, at p.83, https://www.mha.gov.sg/docs/default-source/publications/hta-journal-hr-issue-no-7.pdf (accessed 15 February 2020).
32 Mohamed bin Ali, 'Countering Violent Extremism', p.195. It was judged important to give detainees time for self-reflection. In addition to the structured counselling sessions, the detainees were provided religious texts to correct their misconceptions about Islam. In addition to the Quran, books on *tafsir* (Quranic exegesis), *sira* (biographies of the Prophet), *hadith* (the traditions and sayings of the Prophet) and *fiqh* (jurisprudence) were given to detainees. Interview with Mohamed Ali (8 January 2020).

The RRG counsellors confirmed what Ustaz Ali and Ustaz Hasbi had sensed in early 2002: most of the JI detainees were in fact not deeply versed in the fundamentals of Islam or Islamic jurisprudence, and had a very narrow understanding of jihad.[33] Present was the idea, stemming from the influence of Maidin, of being better Muslims. What was especially striking was that while the detainees had knowledge of and relied on the Quran and the Sunna, theirs was a distinct interpretation of their faith, which did not allow acceptance of the contemporary political and social situation. Another key concept for the detainees was *al wala' wal bara* (loyalty and disavowal): the duty to befriend and care only for Muslims, and the idea that non-Muslims were to be disassociated with or fought against, with armed jihad being *fardu ain* (compulsory) or indeed inevitable for all Muslims.[34] There appears concomitantly to have been an out-group aspect to this position: anyone leaving the group was seen as an infidel; the infidel status even applied to Muslims who did not subscribe to the idea of militant jihad.

Psychology and Motivations

Soon after the first JI arrests, ISD approached psychologists in the public service to interview those detained to find out why seemingly ordinary men with no criminal past were committing violence in the name of religion.[35] The psychologists' profiling showed that many of the JI detainees, besides being intelligent, were fully aware of what they were dabbling in.[36] Psychological surveys conducted after their arrests suggested profiles of 'high compliance, low assertiveness, low in the questioning of religious values, and high levels of guilt and loneliness.' The assessment was that many of those detained were 'psychologically pre-disposed to indoctrination and control by the JI leaders and needed a sense of belonging without close attachments.'[37] The key motivating factor (which they held above all else, including material comforts) was religion, with the desire to be good Muslims, to accumulate 'points' for entry into heaven and to help the wider Ummah.[38] The ISD psychologists' sessions with detainees were separate from the counselling sessions provided by the RRG counsellors for detainees (a practice that has continued up to the present), but the effort to understand and steer mindsets was a joint one. RRG counsellors used their training and knowledge of Islamic theology to refute deviant JI teachings, while psychologists focused on the psychological and emotional aspects of detainees' journey.[39]

The psychologists identified seven positive changes that took place during the course of rehabilitation. These stages were not common to all detainees and the stages themselves could intersect and overlap depending on the individual. But still, there was enough to show the general pattern:

- Self re-evaluation – including accepting that they were wrong in what they thought and did.

---

33   Interview with Mohamed Ali (8 January 2020); see also Ramakrishna, '"Counter-Ideological" Work in Singapore', p.47.
34   Gunaratna and Hassan, 'Terrorist Rehabilitation', p.48; Mohamed bin Ali, 'Countering Violent Extremism', p.195.
35   'Undoing brainwashing of JI "holy warriors"', *The Straits Times*, 17 March 2014, https://www.asiaone.com/singapore/undoing-brainwashing-ji-holy-warriors (accessed 20 Mar 2020).
36   ibid.
37   *Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests*, p.17.
38   ibid., pp.15 & 17.
39   'Undoing brainwashing'.

- Environmental re-evaluation – when they realise they were wrong in assuming their actions were supported by the Muslim community.

- Formation of therapeutic relationships [covered in more detail below].

- Awareness of radicalisation pathway – accepting and understanding their trajectory and how they were radicalised.

- Ideological rectification – realising they had been misinterpreting key concepts in their faith.

- Cognitive restructuring – developing mental skills that help them to avoid simply accepting information that confirm their biases; managing emotion and developing objectivity [JI detainees might have legitimate grievances – psychologists work on such issues as anger management, in order to teach detainees skills to avoid falling prey to a sense of wider grievance and injustice].

- Individual commitment – committing not to reinvolve themselves in terrorist activity through making resolutions and post-release plans to show their determination.[40]

Aftercare – Social/Family Aspects

Beyond the detainee himself, important work went into the social reintegration of the affected detainee's families.[41] Key issues included the state of mind of the spouse and children of the detainee, their immediate needs and their own role in the rehabilitation process. The priority was to make sure that this did not become a generational problem, that wives prevented JI teachings spreading to their children, who might become rebellious and see their father's detention through the lens of state oppression.[42] Where needed, family members (in particular, wives of JI detainees) received counselling. There were instances where the detainee had attempted to indoctrinate his wife and children with extremist thought. In some of these cases, female clerics (*ustazahs*) counselled the wife of the detainee.[43]

The efforts to ensure that wives were not radicalised and that the JI's thinking was not passed down to the children were successful not simply on account of the authorities' efforts.[44] A critical role was also played by a group known as the Inter-Agency Aftercare Group (ACG).

---

40 For a full discussion, see 'The Stages of Change in the Rehabilitation of Terrorist Operatives', Counter-Terrorism Operations Division, Internal Security Department, *Home Team Journal* (2014, issue 5), pp.53–8, https://www.mha.gov.sg/docs/default-source/publications/home-team-journal-issue-5.pdf?sfvrsn=71e6a6e1_0 (accessed 15 February 2020). Some of the information above has been obtained through remarks made by a knowledgeable source at an event held under the Chatham House Rule.

41 Mohamed bin Ali, 'Countering Violent Extremism', p.198.

42 'They help in husband's rehab', *The Straits Times*, 26 November 2005.

43 Rohan Gunaratna, 'The Battlefield of the Mind: Rehabilitating Muslim Terrorists', *UNISCI Discussion Paper* (21), October 2009, https://www.ucm.es/data/cont/media/www/pag-72507/UNISCI%20DP%2021%20-%20ROHAN.pdf. See also Mohamed bin Ali, 'Striking the Roots of Radicalism, Reclaiming Islam's Intellectual Heritage', in *Countering Radicalism: The Next Generation and Challenges Ahead*, ed. Abdul Halim bin Kader (Singapore: Taman Bacaan, 2009), pp. 107–12.

44 None of the children of JI detainees have been radicalised bar one exception: Masyhadi Mas Selamat (aged 25 at the time of his detention in November 2013), the son of JI member Mas Selamat Kastari. Masyhadi's radicalisation took place in JI religious schools in Indonesia, which he attended from the age of 13: 'Son of Mas Selamat placed on 2-year-detention order under the ISA', *The Straits Times*, 9 January 2014, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/son-of-mas-selamat-placed-on-2-year-detention-order-under-the-isa (accessed 16 March 2020). For Mas Selamat, see *Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests*, p.10. While on the run, Mas Selamat hatched a plot to crash an aeroplane into Singapore's Changi Airport. Apprehended by Indonesian authorities in 2003, he was deported to Singapore and detained under the ISA, but escaped from detention in 2008. He was subsequently recaptured in Malaysia and returned to Singapore where he remains under detention with his son. 'Singapore's most wanted militant arrested in Malaysia', *Reuters*, 8 May 2009, https://www.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-39487020090508 (accessed 17 March 2020).

The ACG was born out of the recognition by prominent institutions and individuals within the Malay-Muslim community that interventions were also needed to ensure that families affected by detentions remain on an even keel. In January 2002, leaders from five key institutions within the community – Tamaan Bacaan, En Naeem Mosque, Khadijah Mosque, Mendaki (the main Malay self-help organisation) and the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) – came together for discussion and formed a coordination group to look at the issue of the detainees, their families and their needs. This later evolved into the ACG.[45]

The group first had to explain to the Malay-Muslim community why their intervention was needed, as there were suggestions from certain quarters of the community that the well-being of detainees' families and issues of reintegration following the release of the detainee should best be handled by the government. The leaders of the ACG explained that it was the Muslim community, which had organisations with vast experience in dealing with other social problems in the community, that should take ownership of the issue.[46] Although the authorities supported the work of the ACG and was briefed by the Muslim organisations involved about their plans, the ACG, like the RRG, did not take government funds: it was important to be able to make this clear to the community (as well as detainees' families). This was persuasive and convinced many doubters within the community.[47]

ACG work was initially exhausting and demoralising, as some families did not initially trust the intentions of the ACG.[48] Counsellors persevered and drew on the range of other work they had done, including experience with dysfunctional families and drug addiction.[49] Mendaki, Tamaan Bacaan and the AMP had counsellors and social workers on their staff, as well as pre-existing links to the Family Service Centres that were at the heart of social service delivery in Singapore. These links helped the ACG navigate financial support schemes and direct families to them in turn.[50] An important aspect of the work was the effort to ensure that the education of the detainees' children continued uninterrupted. The ACG assisted with this through accessing various help schemes such as enrolment in tuition programmes, securing school fee waivers and providing pocket money.[51]

Where necessary, the ACG helped the wives (and some detainees post-release) find work, communicating with partner employers who understood the specific issues involved and who were willing to accept job placements.[52] But in some cases involving wives what mattered was simply assisting in the process of finding the fortitude to be the head of the household. This was not always a simple matter, as the majority of spouses of detainees had never worked or run a household on their own.[53] One or two wives experienced nervous breakdowns. Over time, however, most of the wives built up a strong sense of self-confidence and began to discover aptitudes and resilience they

45   Interview with Abdul Halim Kader (10 January 2020); see also Zakir Hussain and Abdul Halim bin Kader, edd. *Inter-Agency Aftercare Group: Fostering Social Reintegration and Building Community Resilience* (Singapore: Tamaan Bacaan, 2015), p.6.
46   Interview with Abdul Halim Kader (10 January 2020).
47   ibid.
48   'Taking Care of Family Matters', *The Straits Times*, 18 December 2004.
49   *Inter-Agency Aftercare Group*, p.79.
50   ibid., p.15; interview with Abdul Halim Kader (10 January 2020).
51   Case workers also acted on occasion as mentors and role models for detainees' children, who lacked a father figure: *Inter-Agency Aftercare Group*, p.15.
52   ibid., p.6.
53   ibid., p.41.

did not know they had.[54] All this also had an effect on the detainee during the course of family visits: he witnessed how his family was being cared for by the state, his erstwhile enemy. This had an effect on the thinking of some detainees, playing a part in their own mental journeys during the course of reflection and rehabilitation.[55]

It is a sign of the ACG's long term success that, by April 2015, its caseload consisted of just three cases, all of which required little intervention, with the families in question having built up resilience after several years.[56]

Measuring "Success"

For many detainees the rehabilitation effort, in terms of shifting mindsets and allowing the individual to come to the realisation that his beliefs were erroneous, takes effect between six months to a year.[57] The average time from detention to release for JI detainees is 4.04 years.[58] This figure should *not* be taken as giving any sort of indication to the overall timeline of individual radicalisation/deradicalisation, as the individuals in question have in many cases widely varying trajectories when it comes to involvement in radical networks and thought. Some harboured extreme views or had undergone a process of indoctrination for several years prior to detention, while others' radicalisation occurred over a much shorter period of time.

A rigorous post-release programme of monitoring and supervision exists in tandem with the ACG's work. A case officer is assigned to the ex-detainee to ensure the RO and the attached conditions are complied with. The office also ensures follow through with rehabilitative aspects (ex-detainees continue to attend religious counselling and weekly religious classes, which help them clarify any remaining religious doubts). The case officer also assists the detainee in getting employment and receives updates from employers about the ex-detainee's progress.[59] This continuing post-release programme of supervision, combined with the ACG's work, goes some way towards explaining why no JI member released from detention is known to have been subject to recidivism (whether that is trying to join a radical group again or engaging in extremist activity). This is a considerable achievement, especially if one looks at the overall numbers: after the 2001–2002 detentions, JI arrests carried on in Singapore – as they did in Malaysia and Indonesia – over the following years, with approximately 61 Singaporean JI or JI-linked individuals detained between 2001 and 2010, and a further six never detained but placed on ROs.

The genuine and therapeutic rapport (as opposed to a punitive regime in detention) that has been achieved in the rehabilitation setting also bears mentioning. One ex-detainee, interviewed by the media, observed, 'what kept me going was the constant support I received – from the doctors and psychologists and members of the

---

54 ibid., pp.86 & 95.
55 Interview with Mohamed Ali (8 January 2020).
56 *Inter-Agency Aftercare Group*, p.73.
57 Interview with Mohamed Ali (8 January 2020).
58 These are my estimates, calculated, where data is available, from the point of detention to the lapse or suspension of the DO.
59 Internal Security Department (Counter-Terrorism Department), 'The Psychology Behind Singapore's Terrorist Rehabilitation Strategy and Best Practices in Countering Violent Extremism', *Home Team Journal* (2018, issue 7), pp.81–6, at p.84, https://www.mha.gov.sg/docs/default-source/publications/hta-journal-hr-issue-no-7.pdf (accessed 15 February 2020).

community who volunteered their time to counsel me. Everyone had words of advice and comforted me. My case officer played a very vital role … The people I once deemed kafir (infidels) and enemies of Islam were the source of my strength. The one who opened my eyes to true Islam was a non-Muslim.'[60]

Another ex-detainee interviewed by the press in 2007 after his release related experiences that can be taken to be representative of several others. The individual, who had received combat training with the MILF in the Philippines, stated that he regarded detention as a lesson (feeling a strong sense of regret at being involved with and misled by JI leaders) and a punishment for participation in terrorism.

- During detention, the interviewee was treated well and given counselling. It was easy to connect with the counsellors – religious teachers – as the interviewee could converse in Arabic, having studied in the Middle East.

- His family and wife (who were ignorant with regards to his involvement in the JI) were supportive during his time in detention. This was an important motivator, as was the fact that friends called on him after his release and encouraged him to move on.

- The interviewee felt that he was fortunate to be detained as it prevented him from falling further into terrorism and committing further acts of violence. He felt it was important to study religion, but particularly to do so from accredited sources. The JI indoctrinates its followers to embrace violence but Islam forbids killing. Revenge and bombings are against the teachings of Islam. The wrongful actions of the few – JI members – had cast Muslims in general in a negative light.[61]

And then there were – and still are – a small number of the 'hardcore' who have refused to engage with programmes in detention and still hold fast to their ideals and belief system despite sustained efforts by the RRG.[62] Government officials in general have not addressed these cases specifically and there is little recent information concerning them. But given the rationale behind the ISA, to rehabilitate radicalised individuals in preventative detention until they are no longer considered a threat to society, it can be assumed that such individuals will continued to be detained for the foreseeable future.[63]

---

60 *Winning Hearts and Minds*, p.124.
61 'Pengongsian pengalaman hitam bekas anggota JI S'pura' ('Former JI member shares dark Episode'), *Berita Harian*, 6 October 2007, and 'Saya Kesal, Saya Minta Maaf Terlibat Dalam JI', *Berita Harian* 6 October 2007. I am grateful to Muhammed Faizal for assistance with translation from the Malay language (for translation, see also 'I was a Former JI Detainee', in Abdul Halim bin Kader, ed., *Countering Radicalism* (Singapore: Taman Bacaan Pemuda Pemudi Melayu Singapore, 2009), pp.142–5.
62 It is noteworthy that when the first group of JI detainees were interviewed by the independent advisory board assessing their cases, some expressed remorse to varying degrees, but several continued to emphasise the need for jihad, saying that injury to Singaporeans, even Muslims, was regrettable but unavoidable, and part of the jihad against the United States: *Government Statement on the Recommendation of the Advisory Board on the Jemaah Islamiyah Case*, 30 May 2002, p.6, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/20020530-MHA.pdf (accessed 17 February 2020).
63 The individuals in question are: Ibrahim Maidin, Mas Selamat (who took over from Maidin as Singapore JI leader in 1999), Mas Selamat's son Masyhadi Mas Selamat, Mohd Aslam bin Yar Ali Khan, Alahuddeen bin Abdullah (a Singaporean member of the MILF), and Husaini bin Ismail (my analysis is based on publicly reported information concerning detentions and releases of radicalised individuals).

New Faces of the Threat

As noted above, following the 2001–2002 arrests of JI members in Singapore there were further JI arrests during the decade and JI cells in neighbouring Indonesia and Malaysia were also interdicted at this time. Of the 22 individuals currently in detention, six are JI members and 16 are self-radicalised individuals; the latter form a category that was absent from Singapore before 2007.[64]

A major departure in the pattern of arrests, which with hindsight could be seen as something of a harbinger, was the arrest and detention in 2007 of Abdul Basheer Abdul Kader, Singapore's first self-radicalised individual. Basheer graduated from the prestigious National University of Singapore in 2003 and joined a law firm. He left after a brief time, apparently telling friends that the pursuit of wealth 'distracted people from being close to God'. Basheer began to want to be a better practising Muslim and also began to dress in an outwardly more religious way.[65] After a period of having his views shaped by radical websites, Basheer left for the Middle East in 2006 in order to learn Arabic, which would ease his communication with others intent on armed jihad. After being further radicalised online, he attempted to head to Pakistan, where he planned to train for jihad and then proceed to Afghanistan and join the Taliban.[66]

Individuals like Basheer were striking cases: committed and radicalised, as many JI detainees were, but without the group grievances of the JI and willing to perform jihad and to seek out like-minded people. This proved to be the key trend in the following years, with an increase in cases as the crisis in Syria developed from 2011 onwards, and especially after the rise of IS and the declaration of its caliphate in 2014. Sixteen individuals were detained under the ISA between 2007 and 2014; five were self-radicalised, with the remaining 11 linked to JI. But in the period 2015–20, a further 21 self-radicalised individuals were detained, almost all sympathetic to IS, with some having planned to join the group in Syria.[67]

Foment in the Middle East, particularly the Egyptian revolution in 2011 and the events in Tahrir Square, together with the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in the same year, seems to have left an imprint on some impressionable individuals, giving them the notion that they had

---

64   Of the total number of individuals currently issued with ISA orders (49), 21 are issued with orders of detention, 28 with ROs for terrorism-related conduct: https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/number-radicalised-individuals-isa-orders-highest-7-years (updated with my own calculations). It should be noted that foreign nationals radicalised in Singapore, once detected by the authorities, are typically deported from Singapore and not put through RRG counselling. These are mainly foreign construction workers (with a group from Bangladesh detained in 2015 and 2016 – the majority were deported, although some were jailed on terrorism-financing charges) and Indonesian foreign domestic workers. See Nazneen Mohsina and Amit Ranjan, 'The Radicalisation of Bangladeshi Migrant Workers in Singapore', *ISAS Insights*, 22 August 19, https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/the-radicalisation-of-bangladeshi-migrant-workers-in-singapore/, and 'Three radicalised Indonesian maids detained under Internal Security Act', *The Straits Times*, 23 September 2019.

65   Kumar Ramakrishna, 'The Case of DIY Abdul Basheer: The Blind Path to Radicalisation', in Abdul Halim bin Kader, ed., *Countering Radicalism* (Singapore: Taman Bacaan Pemuda Pemudi Melayu Singapore, 2009), pp.126–30, at pp.128–9.

66   There were also to be further arrests of self-radicalised individuals in 2007: two men, in their mid-twenties, who were partly radicalised online who intended to perform jihad overseas. 'Self-radicalised Singaporeans who were previously detained', *The Straits Times*, 29 May 2015; Mohamed bin Ali, 'The Enduring Threat of Self-Radicalisation, in Abdul Halim bin Kader, ed., *Countering Radicalism* (Singapore: Taman Bacaan Pemuda Pemudi Melayu Singapore, 2009), pp.137–41, at p.138.

67   https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/press-release/news/singapore-terrorism-threat-assessment-report-2019 (number of detainees updated with my calculations).

to go to the Middle East. Even before the emergence of IS, authorities and religious counsellors began to see individuals who were to some degree radicalised and interested in taking part in some capacity in the Syrian conflict. To some of these individuals, there was the sense that Syria was the 'real battlefield' and that participating in the Syrian conflict was a 'legitimate' jihad, with one motivating idea being that Shiites (as represented by the Alawite ruling class, which included President Bashar al-Assad) were killing Sunnis.[68]

A small number of Singaporeans, likely less than ten, are thought to have travelled to the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq to join IS. The most well-known is Megat Shahdan Abdul Samad, also known as Abu Uqayl, who featured in IS propaganda videos in 2017 urging fighters either to join the East Asian fighters or to come to the Middle East to undertake jihad.[69]

New types of individuals in Singapore are coming under the thrall of IS, with women beginning to feature in the ranks of the radicalised. In 2017, a 22-year-old infant-care assistant, Syaikhah Izzah Zahrah al-Ansari, became the first woman detained in Singapore for her radicalism. Izzah had been actively posting and sharing pro-IS material online since 2014. Izzah had planned to make the trip with her young child to join IS. She had been looking for an IS supporter to marry and settle down with in Syria, believing that she would reap 'heavenly rewards' if her husband died fighting. She also believed her status as a 'martyr's widow' would then help her marry another IS fighter easily.[70] She was released, with some restrictions, in 2019, after having shown progress in her rehabilitation.[71]

Surveying what is known of the individuals detained in the period from 2014, the year IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the establishment of IS' caliphate, one receives the impression of young, impressionable individuals, influenced by IS propaganda online, especially material that suggested that it was the religious duty of Muslims in Southeast Asia to make the hijrah to join the caliphate.[72] Responding to IS' call and making the journey to Syria represented an opportunity to fulfil religious obligations, be a good Muslim and belong to an in-group.[73]

For those who could not join IS, there appears in at least some cases to have been an available, simple plan B: to heed the IS call (made by, among others, then-IS spokesman Abu Mohammed al-Adnani)

---

68 Interview with Mohamed Ali (8 January 2020).
69 'Singaporean ISIS fighter shown executing man in video', *The Straits Times*, 31 December 2017, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singaporean-isis-fighter-shown-executing-man-in-video (accessed 2 March 2020). Besides Shahdan, a very small number of Singaporeans are known to have travelled to join IS, either singly, or with their families. The majority of these individuals, including Shahdan, are thought to have died in Syria or Iraq. For these cases, see 'ISIS bride and a fighter from Singapore said to have died in Syria', *The Straits Times*, 4 August 2019, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/isis-bride-and-a-fighter-from-spore-said-to-have-died-in-syria (accessed 2 March 2020); and 'No Signs Singaporeans in Syria Plan to Return: MHA', *The Straits Times*, 21 February 2019, https://www.straitstimes.com/world/no-sign-sporeans-in-syria-plan-to-return-mha (accessed 2 March 2020).
70 *Detention of a Radicalised Singaporean under the Internal Security Act*, Ministry of Home Affairs, 12 June 2017, https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/press-release/news/detention-of-a-radicalised-singaporean-under-the-internal-security-act (accessed 25 February 2020).
71 'First woman detained for radicalism in Singapore released with restrictions', *ChannelNewsAsia*, 15 June 2019, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/first-woman-detained-radicalism-singapore-released-restrictions-11659682 (accessed 25 February 2020).
72 Navhat Nuraniyah, *How ISIS Charmed the New Generation of Indonesian Militants*, Middle East Institute, 9 January 2015, https://www.mei.edu/publications/how-isis-charmed-new-generation-indonesian-militants (accessed 25 February 2020). Most of the videos in question, including the seminal 'Join the Ranks', are no longer available online.
73 Bridget Robert, 'At-Risk and Radicalised Singaporean Youths: Themes Observed and Considerations for a Youth-Centric Rehabilitation Framework', in *Learning from Violent Extremist Attacks: Behavioural Sciences Insights for Practitioners and Policymakers*, edd. Majeed Khader, Loo Seng Neo, Jethro Tan, Damien D. Cheong, and Jeffery Chin (Singapore: World Scientific, 2019), pp.249–50. The concept of hijrah was present in the JI's ideology, but did not feature as prominently: interview with Mohamed Ali (8 January 2020).

to carry out lone-wolf attacks using whatever tools were available.[74] A case in point was post-secondary student M. Arifil Azim Putra Norja'i, detained in 2015 aged 19. The first IS-radicalised individual in Singapore to have planned violent attacks in Singapore, Arifil's plan, if unable to travel to join IS, was to attack key facilities and assassinate government leaders or to carry out attacks in public places with weapons (including knives).[75]

Mirroring trends seen elsewhere, high levels of social media use (an avenue for exposure to IS propaganda and finding like-minded individuals online) has played a major role in the radicalisation of the majority of Singapore's self-radicalised cases. Those radicalised by IS, allure is expressed in slick, well-produced imagery and videos, are markedly different from the earlier Singapore JI members, whose indoctrination and radicalisation took place for the most part well before the advent of social media, with the internet itself appearing to have played little or no part in their radicalisation.[76]

Notwithstanding the dominant, social media aspect to the radicalisation of self-radicalised individuals in Singapore, there are common, conceptual strands linking the Singapore JI individuals with the self-radicalised individuals who came later. At a general level, one such link, as the ISD has observed, is 'misinterpretation and misuse of religious concepts to justify acts of violence and to influence people to support the terrorist's cause.'[77] One youth from the self-radicalised group, whose thinking appears to be by no means unique within that group, distinguished between believers and non-believers, who would end up in hell. He felt it best not to associate with non-believers as he believed that this was a sin.[78] Some self-radicalised individuals believed that Muslims living in the West or secular states were not true Muslims and did not practice Islam in the 'true' way.

A second aspect has to do with underlying motivations and means. Violence is framed as necessary to achieve the overarching goal – the establishment of a utopian Islamic state, the ideal form of government.[79] Some self-radicalised individuals also felt that Islam was under attack by secular governments or else felt empathy for or an emotional reaction to Muslims perceived to be suffering elsewhere. This empathy and desire to help others also served as a call to action.[80]

What has been presented above shows that motivations for self-radicalised individuals are in several cases not considerably different from what JI members felt. But there are important differences between the two groups. While the search for spiritual meaning and the desire to learn more about Islam can be relevant

---

74   Yara Bayoumy, 'Isis urges more attacks on Western "disbelievers"', *The Independent*, 22 September 14, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-urges-more-attacks-on-western-disbelievers-9749512.html (accessed 27 February 2020).

75   '2 Singaporean youths radicalised by ISIS arrested, one of them detained for planning terror attacks', *The Straits Times*, 27 May 2015, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/2-singaporean-youths-radicalised-by-isis-arrested-one-of-them-detained-for-planning-terror (accessed 27 February 2020).

76   Even before the rise of IS, Singaporeans had been radicalised through online teachings and sermons of charismatic individuals, in particular Anwar al-Awlaki. See Kumar Ramakrishna, 'Self Radicalisation and the Awlaki Connection', *RSIS Commentary CO10075*, 6 July 2010, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/cens/1365-self-radicalisation-and-the-aw/#.XmhSChMzbOR (accessed 7 March 2020). Awlaki's appeal endured beyond his death in 2011 for the Singapore self-radicalised (as it did for so many elsewhere seeking religious instruction) and into the IS era. Of the total number of Singapore self-radicalised, Awlaki's thought and teachings played a role in the radicalisation of nine of them, by my calculations.

77   'The Psychology Behind Singapore's Terrorist Rehabilitation Strategy', p.82.

78   Bridget Robert, 'At-Risk and Radicalised', p.247.

79   ibid., p.246.

80   ibid., pp.244 & 249. Robert's work is likely for the foreseeable future to remain most thorough study of the mindsets of self-radicalised individuals in Singapore.

for JI members, for self-radicalised individuals the search for an ideal world and an ideal self-image are central issues. One RRG counsellor observed, 'A combination of blind fervour and shallow understanding of Islam among the youths is a lethal combination that can be exploited by extremists.'[81]

Another knowledgeable individual, Bridget Robert from Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs, has observed that youth radicalisation in Singapore is 'idiosyncratic' and that there is a complex interplay of factors, which may differ from individual to individual. The cases, she observes, can be very different:

- One youth believed that violence was legitimate and necessary to fulfil God's obligation for all Muslims to be united in an Islamic caliphate. Violence against Muslims and non-Muslims who did not agree was justified.

- One youth planned to engage in violence in a conflict zone after coming across content concerning Muslims' suffering in that area: not helping meant that he had failed as a Muslim. He started looking at a range of jihadi websites and came to the conclusion that he had to take up arms to alleviate the plight of Muslims.

- One youth focused on the suffering of Syrian children after viewing videos of the Syria conflict: he wanted to help these children and was prepared to use violence to do so. He was assured that he would die a martyr if he was killed in pursuit of this.[82]

Some of the issues with the Singapore self-radicalised group appear to relate to the developmental stages of the youth in question. For some, there are situational factors that might lead to vulnerability to radicalisation. These might include family conflicts, difficulties in school or other life stressors. Some youths seek meaning and certitude. Some display poor coping strategies in connection to issues with school, relationships or financial problems. Rather than seeking guidance or social support, some choose to get involved with IS. Making plans to join IS is an avoidance strategy instead of thinking and solving the problem at hand:

> *'a pattern that was found suggested the utilisation of poor coping strategies in dealing with problems. Specifically, a number of the radicalised youths tended to adopt avoidance coping strategies more often than using approach coping strategies to deal with stressful events. Two common avoidance coping strategies observed in local radicalised youths are the tendency to engage in behavioural attempts to get involved in substitute activities as a way of either creating new sources of satisfaction in their lives or as a way to distract from the stressor.'*[83]

One interesting case not linked to IS to consider in the context of avoidance strategies is that of Wang Yuandongyi, a naturalised Singapore citizen of Chinese origin. Faced with stressors that included a series of personal setbacks and failed business ventures, Wang was detained in 2015 attempting to join a Kurdish militia to fight IS after having absorbed material online about IS' atrocities against the

---

81   Mohamed Bin Ali, 'The Enduring Threat of Self-Radicalisation'.
82   Bridget Robert, 'At-Risk and Radicalised', p.245.
83   ibid., p.248.

Kurds.[84] Wang observed in a later interview, 'Since I have so many troubles in Singapore maybe if I go to Syria to do something great then what I can do here, maybe it will make my life more meaningful in a way.'[85]

The Home Affairs Ministry characterised Wang's case as 'non-ideological'. He was not given a DO but was placed under a two-year RO and given counselling to steer him away from violence. This was evidently successful, as Wang's RO was allowed to lapse in 2018.[86]

Matters are not so straightforward for some in the thrall of IS. Consider the case of one unnamed youth, whose journey to radicalisation began in 2017 at the age of 15, when he was introduced to pro-IS social media groups by a foreign contact online. He saw IS as 'a powerful group that was fighting for Islam and its use of violence against its opponents was therefore justified.' Attempts were made to steer him away from radicalisation, including through religious counselling, but he persisted in viewing pro-IS materials online and was willing to assist IS not just in its online propaganda efforts but also in other unspecified ways if called upon by IS to do so.[87] The individual was detained under the ISA in January 2020.

Radicalisation's quickening pace in Singapore in recent years points to how it is primarily driven by online exposure. This poses particular challenges. Previously, according to official data, it would take around twenty-two months for a person to become radicalised. But this has now been cut to nine months in the IS era.[88] There have been unusually frank acknowledgements from Singapore officials that self-radicalised individuals are tougher to deradicalise.[89] This is supported by the figures: of 26 self-radicalised individuals to be detained, 16 remain in detention (a 'success rate' of 38%) as compared with the success rate for the earlier generation of JI individuals,

84   On Wang, see 'From migrant to new citizen and now ISA detainee: Wang Yuandongyi's unusual journey', *TODAY*, 16 March 2016, https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/migrant-new-citizen-and-now-isa-detainee-wang-yuandongyis-unusual-journey, and Shashi Jayakumar, 'The Curious Case of Wang Yuan Dongyi', *The Straits Times*, 2 April 2016. While foreigners fighting with Kurdish militia (and in particular the Yekîneyên Parastina Gel) against IS are a known phenomenon, it is mainly individuals from the West who have done so. Wang would (in my view) been one of the first Southeast Asians to have done so if he had succeeded in joining the militia.

85   "Kenny" (based on internal evidence likely the same individual as Wang), interviewed in a short documentary. 'How 2 Singaporeans got back on the right track after "dark path" of radicalisation', *ChannelNewsAsia*, 4 August 2018, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/videos/2-singaporeans-who-got-back-on-the-right-track-after-10588866 (at 2:25–2:39; accessed 2 March 2020).

86   'From migrant to new citizen and now ISA detainee: Wang Yuandongyi's unusual journey', *TODAY*, 16 March 2016, *Detention of a Radicalised Singaporean and Lapse of Three Restriction Orders under the Internal Security Act* (Ministry of Home Affairs, 11 May 18), https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/press-release/news/detention-of-a-radicalised-singaporean-and-lapse-of-three-restriction-orders-under-the-internal-security-act (accessed 7 March 2020).

87   '17-year-old secondary school student detained under Internal Security Act for supporting ISIS', *The Straits Times*, 10 February 2020, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/17-year-old-secondary-school-student-detained-under-internal-security-act-for-supporting; 'Update on Cases Under the Internal Security Act' (Ministry of Home Affairs, 10 February 2020), https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/press-release/news/update-on-cases-under-the-internal-security-act (accessed 23 July 2020).

88   MHA Threat Assessment Report 2017, https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/press-release/news/singapore-terrorism-threat-assessment-report-2017 (accessed 22 July 2020).

89   It is worth noting at this point that of the individuals who went through the ISA's preventive detention and RRG counselling who have subsequently been released, the only two known recidivist cases were both individuals for whom online radicalisation and immersion in jihadist propaganda on the internet played a role. The two individuals were Abdul Basheer Abdul Kader, mentioned above, and Muhammad Fadil Abdul Hamid. Basheer was released from his initial detention in 2010 but was detained again in 2012 when he renewed his online enquiries into waging jihad overseas and immersed himself in radical websites once again. Fadil was initially detained from 2010 to 2012. When released on an RO, he made some progress reintegrating into society, but was drawn to radical material online again, falling in particular under the spell of Awlaki. He planned to fight alongside IS in Syria and was detained again in 2016. Basheer was released (through suspension of his DO) in February 2016 when it was assessed that he no longer posed a threat. Fadil remains in detention aft the time of writing. 'Self-radicalised Singaporeans who were previously detained', *The Straits Times*, 29 May 2015, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/self-radicalised-singaporeans-who-were-previously-detained, and *Detention and Releases under the Internal Security Act* (Ministry of Home Affairs, 29 July 2016), https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/press-release/news/detention-and-releases-under-the-internal-security-act (accessed 11 March 2020).

which is close to 90 per cent.[90] The figures by themselves should not necessarily be taken as indicative of shortcomings in the rehabilitation regime for self-radicalised individual. The discrepancy with the 90 per cent "success rate" for JI individuals may have to do more with the fact that the those involved in the rehabilitation process (RRG counsellors, psychologists, those involved in the aftercare aspects) need more time to get to grips with challenges posed by online radicalisation, and the interplay between social media, personal circumstances, and the more persuasive aspects of ISIS' call to the caliphate.[91]

It is unlikely that there will be a sea-change in Singapore's approach to rehabilitation in the near term. Certain refinements may however be in the offing. The authorities seem increasingly aware of environmental factors in the radicalisation process and the need to adopt a multi-perspective approach, one that includes family, peers and even schools. These elements should all be part of the rehabilitation process.[92] While the outlines of such an environmental approach have been present throughout the work of RRG counsellors, ISD psychologists, the ACG and concerned friends and family, there are signs that the relevant agencies in Singapore are moving towards this approach in a more structured way. Robert remarks on 'the central idea, that to understand why a young person finds resonance with radical rhetoric, it is important to situate this within the larger frame of the cognitive and psychosocial development of a young person.'[93] It is noteworthy that the individual mentioned above who was detained in 2020 at the age of 17 has been assigned a mentor. This mentor will help to motivate him to focus on his rehabilitation, studies and family, and also guide him to develop 'life skills'. Details are scant at present, but there will be interest from observers within Singapore and beyond as to whether this additional element to Singapore's rehabilitation efforts becomes the norm.[94]

---

90 'Self-radicalised people harder to rehabilitate: Shanmugam', *The Straits Times*, 14 March 2018, https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/self-radicalised-people-harder-to-rehabilitate-shanmugam (accessed 2 March 2020). (Estimates are my own, updated from official figures).
91 Interview with Mohamed Ali (8 January 2020).
92 Robert, 'At-Risk and Radicalised', p.254.
93 ibid., p.255.
94 '17-year-old secondary school student detained under Internal Security Act for supporting ISIS', *The Straits Times*, 10 February 2020, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/17-year-old-secondary-school-student-detained-under-internal-security-act-for-supporting (accessed 5 March 2020). Not all individuals who show the beginnings of self-radicalisation have been detained. Some – presumably the cases that are deemed to be manageable and pose less of a threat to society – are placed on RO. My estimate is that there are at least five such cases. See 'How 15 Singaporeans were radicalised by ISIS ideology', *The Straits Times*, 16 June 2017, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/radicalised-in-singapore (accessed 18 March 2020).

The RRG's Evolutions

The RRG had eleven members at the time of its inception in April 2003 and was by 2019, 46-members strong.[95] Since its formation, it has conducted over 1,500 counselling sessions for detainees and their families.[96] Beyond the metrics, though, the RRG has had to evolve to cope with IS narratives and more generally to deal with the issue of self-radicalisation.

A second RRG manual was launched in 2009 and a third in 2015. Issues covered now include arguments to debunk IS narratives (not least, the lure of the caliphate), how Muslims can live in a secular environment and critical thinking when evaluating sources of religious knowledge.[97] These issues – particularly concerning the erroneous nature of IS propaganda around jihad and fallacies about the necessity of hijrah – are also covered in the RRG's online publications, pamphlets and booklets.[98]

Besides its website (which was set up in 2005), the RRG also has a presence on Facebook and YouTube,[99] and it places particular emphasis now on the online arena. One RRG counsellor observed, 'young individuals radicalised by IS propaganda are not so interested in ideology. We need to equip ourselves with an understanding of their minds, and how they interact with social media.'[100] The RRG has a pipeline of younger counsellors who are tech savvy and well versed in social media and IS propaganda online. They 'understand the lingo of those who have been hooked, and how to understand the appeal of IS.'[101]

Outreach to young people, several of whom, as had been observed, have fallen under the thrall of IS, on social media is particularly important. The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) in 2017 established Asatizah Youth Network, a group of young religious scholars, specifically for this purpose. The network uses social media platforms and lively forms of outreach (such as video logs) to debunk IS ideology and, more generally, to address misconceptions that Muslims might have concerning their faith.[102]

---

95   Mohamed Feisal Mohamed Hassan, 'Roles of Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) in Singapore', in A. Halim, *Fighting Terrorism*, p.152. The RRG also includes an administrative secretariat comprising religious teachers (*azatizah*) and others from non-religious backgrounds. Mohamed bin Ali, 'Countering Violent Extremism', p.195.
96   'Muis honours exemplary members of the community at annual awards ceremony', *The Straits Times*, 6 October 2018, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/muis-honours-exemplary-members-of-the-community-at-annual-awards-ceremony (accessed 10 March 2020).
97   See 'New helpline, manual to help counter ISIS threat in Singapore', *The Straits Times*, 9 June 2015; *Winning Hearts and Minds*, p.43; Gunaratna and Hassan, 'Terrorist Rehabilitation', p.49; and Mohamed Bin Ali, 'The Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG): A Community-Government Partnership in Fighting Terrorism', p.6.
98   See, for example, *The Syrian Conflict*, published by the RRG and available at http://www.rrg.sg/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Syrian-Conflict-Pamphlet-20140702.pdf (accessed 7 March 2020).
99   https://www.rrg.sg/ and https://www.facebook.com/RRGSG/. For examples on YouTube, see 'Mitigating the Threat of Radicalism and Extremism' (mainly in Malay), 20 March 18, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oG_pLNpXmpQ (accessed 6 March 2020). Individual RRG counsellors are also taking their own steps: Muhammad Haniff Hassan, who is also an academic, has developed a blog at https://counterideology2.wordpress.com/ to refute IS propaganda and deviant interpretations of Islam.
100 Interview with Mohamed Ali (8 January 2020).
101 This information was obtained through remarks made by a knowledgeable source at an event held under the Chatham House Rule.
102 'Parliament: Network of young religious teachers to be expanded, says Yaacob Ibrahim', *The Straits Times*, 8 March 2018, https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/parliament-network-of-young-religious-teachers-to-be-expanded-yaacob-ibrahim (accesssed 6 March 2020); see also Amalina Abdul Nasir and Ahmad Helmi Bin Mohamad Hasbi. 'The Case of Imran Kassim: What Does It Tell Us?', RSIS Commentary CO20017, 24 January 2020, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/the-case-of-imran-kassim-what-does-it-tell-us/#.XmZH5RMzbOQ (accessed 20 March 2020).

Beyond the youth work, the RRG has intensified its wider outreach into the community. Initiatives include public talks and religious talks before the weekly Friday prayers and forums dealing with the dangers of radicalisation. Educational efforts also include publications and brochures that touch on deviant ideology as well as radicalisation.[103] The aim is to reach 'upstream', providing narratives that can counteract and undermine IS propaganda before it has had an impact.

There is a wider thrust as well to present the RRG and its counsellors as a credible reference point for matters of religion and to provide guidance especially when alternative, or deviant, narratives offer themselves.[104] The RRG's clerics see themselves as gatekeepers to the knowledge of Islam. When they see religious concepts misunderstood, they have to step forward, engage at an early stage and prevent the seeds of radicalisation from being sown.[105]

The impetus for this appears to stem in part from various episodes where mainstream sources of religious guidance, including Islamic preachers both offline and online, have had a hold on individuals within the Malay-Muslim community. There have been cases where local preachers have been denied registration under the scheme for accredited religious teachers known as the Asatizah Recognition Scheme (ARS) on account of their teachings promoting intolerance or potentially violence.[106] An example from slightly further afield is Radio Hang 106 FM, a radio station based in Batam in the Indonesian Riau archipelago near Singapore (besides these two countries it also has a following in Malaysia). In 2016, two Singaporeans were detained under the ISA after they were found to have been radicalised through Radio Hang's programming, which featured Islamic teachers giving Quranic interpretations deemed puritanical, if not extreme, by the Singapore authorities.[107]

There are other examples concerning preachers with a following in Southeast Asia who spread their messages online or have them disseminated online by followers. Such figures do not necessarily directly espouse violence, but promote an exclusivist, intolerant world view that, in the eyes of the Singapore authorities, is conducive to radical thought (or even leads in time to embracing IS ideology).[108] In other cases, there have been splinter sects from mainstream Islam that are deemed deviant by the religious authorities in Singapore and Malaysia.[109]

---

103 Gunaratna and Hassan, 'Terrorist Rehabilitation', p.47. The ACG has also moved (even as its core purpose remains providing practical support to families) into organising its own youth forums to increase awareness of issues pertaining to radicalisation and terrorism. Interview with Abdul Halim Kader (10 January 2020).

104 Mohamed Bin Ali, 'The Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG): A Community-Government Partnership in Fighting Terrorism' in *Majulah! 50 Years of Malay/Muslim Community in Singapore*, edd., Zainul Abideen Rasheed and Norshahril Saat (London: Imperial College Press/World Scientific, 2016), p.5; see also Mohamed Bin Ali, 'Countering ISIS Ideological Threat: Reclaim Islam's Intellectual Traditions', RSIS Commentary CO16016, 25 January 2016, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/srp/co16016-countering-isis-ideological-threat-reclaim-islams-intellectual-traditions/#.WcHOgcgjGUk (accessed 10 March 2020).

105 Information obtained through remarks made by a knowledgeable source at an event held under the Chatham House Rule.

106 'Extremist preacher barred from teaching here; his 9 books banned', *The Straits Times*, 21 June 2017, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/extremist-preacher-barred-from-teaching-here-his-9-books-banned (accessed 18 March 2020).

107 'Extremist Ideology a Staple on Batam's Radio Hang', *TODAY*, 19 August 2016, https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/radio-0 (accessed 10 March 2020).

108 See 'Two foreign preachers barred from entering S'pore to preach on religious-themed cruise', *TODAY*, 30 October 2017, https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/two-foreign-preachers-barred-entering-spore-preach-religious-themed-cruise (accessed 10 March 2020), and Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman and Aida Arosoaie, 'Exclusionary Preachers: Cause or Symptom?' *TODAY*, 2 March 2018, https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/exclusionary-preachers-cause-or-symptom (accessed 10 March 2020).

109 https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/muis-counsels-pair-accused-of-deviant-practices

The RRG Resource Centre (launched in 2014) and RRG helpline (2015) give the public access to information on radicalisation and religious matters, with the aim of lessening the likelihood that individuals might cleave to radical ideology or deviant teachings. The helpline, manned by RRG volunteer clerics, has already proved its value in cases where the RRG has been notified by concerned family members of potential radicalisation. Two of the cases involved schoolboys of secondary school age who became convinced of the need to migrate to the Caliphate. Interventions by RRG counsellors helped to steer the boys away from IS ideology. In another case, a wife observed that her husband had adopted increasingly exclusivist religious views over time. In this instance, although counsellors had no contact with the husband, the wife learned through her interactions with the RRG about how extremists promote their ideologies. Through early awareness and involvement of the RRG upstream, the issues were dealt with before the authorities had to be brought in (and before an RO or DO was needed).[110]

---

110 'Religious counsellors save two secondary schoolboys from further radicalisation', *TODAY*, 24 June 2017, https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/religious-counsellors-save-two-secondary-schoolboys-further-radicalisation (accessed 17 March 2020). These cases of voluntary reporting should be seen within the context of greater acceptance and enhanced understanding of the RRG's work, which has developed over time within the Malay-Muslim community. It should be noted, however, that these are the only known cases of voluntary reporting since 2014; in three cases where individuals have been detained, the authorities have made it known that the family or associates of the detained individual were aware of his or her views but refrained from approaching the authorities out of a misplaced desire to 'protect' the individual.

24

The Community: Cohesion, Resilience, Tolerance

Besides the threat from self-radicalised individuals, IS has itself targeted Singapore, although its plans did not come to fruition.[111] Taking into account the heightened threat picture in the Southeast Asian region, which has seen numerous attacks by individuals and cells proclaiming allegiance to or else evincing sympathy for IS, unsurprisingly Singapore government officials have for some time openly stressed that it is a matter of 'when, not if' a terrorist attack takes place in the country. Security agencies have consistently classed the threat alert in Singapore as high in recent years.[112]

Tackling terrorism through rehabilitation alone is insufficient. Recent years have seen a multifaceted approach that encompasses the whole of society, one which has at its core an emphasis on the values of tolerance and interfaith (as well as interracial) dialogue and harmony. These values are held up by government as defining, 'Singaporean' traits.[113] While perhaps not immediately recognisable to most as traditional counterterrorism or deradicalisation approaches, the efforts that fall under this approach bear mentioning as they constitute critical upstream interventions. First, such interventions might have the effect of preventing individuals from straying from these values (and conceivably into radical thought and thence violent extremism). Secondly, the interventions put in place the building blocks for society to bounce back and recover should a terrorist attack take place.

Within the Malay-Muslim community, upstream efforts have included moves to educate the community and promote within it the values of tolerance and living in a plural, multicultural society.[114] Important work is done by the RRG and its counsellors on promoting the Quranic concept of *wasatiyah* (moderation).[115] This should be seen within the larger, ongoing body of work to mould the Singapore Malay-Muslim identity into something that, as Singapore's prime minister has put it, brings the community into a closer appreciation of 'the importance of tolerance and give-and-take with other groups.'[116]

---

111 'Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2017', https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/press-release/news/singapore-terrorism-threat-assessment-report-2017.

112 For a dissection of the threats, see the threat assessment reports issued by the Home Affairs ministry in 2017 and 2019: 'Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2017', https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/press-release/news/singapore-terrorism-threat-assessment-report-2017, and 'Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2019', https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/press-release/news/singapore-terrorism-threat-assessment-report-2019. The 2017 report had characterised the threat as 'the highest in recent years.'

113 See 'Collective effort needed to safeguard racial, religious harmony in Singapore: Shanmugam', *The Straits Times*, 19 January 2016 (accessed 16 March 2020).

114 It is worth noting that some of the hardcore JI members in detention argued that rehabilitation was not relevant to them as interreligious tolerance was concocted by infidels. 'Undoing brainwashing of JI 'holy warriors'', *The Straits Times*, 17 March 2014.

115 See https://counterideology2.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/moulding-a-wasatiyyah-community-today-kamal-hassan.pdf; https://www.rrg.sg/our-message/. It might be added that the Islamic education system in Singapore has undergone a shift over time. Within the context of modern pedagogy, the Islamic authorities now want young adults actively to question, criticise and debate issues of Islamic doctrine, including problems and issues with the global *ummah*. Engagement is now favoured over the paternalistic imparting of knowledge. Interview with Musa Alami (20 January 2020).

116 https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/madrasahs-receive-more-support-teaching-secular-subjects; Eugene K. B. Tan, 'Norming "Moderation" in an "Iconic Target": Public Policy and the Regulation of Religious Anxieties in Singapore', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol.9 (2007, issue 4), pp. 443–62, at pp.452–3.

The issue, however, is one that reaches beyond the Malay-Muslim community alone. An essential component of resilience, one that the authorities have stressed in recent years, is defending the values of pluralism and tolerance within Singapore's multicultural spaces across the board. But it is the advances in building heartware (or what might be called social resilience) particularly in recent years, that bear mentioning here.

The government has a long history of paying attention to race and religious relations, partly on account of the historical memory of race riots (which also had religious overtones) in the 1960s.[117] Since then, while there have been no major incidents of violence between racial or religious groups, the government has evinced an increasingly acute recognition of the dangers of a successful terrorist attack tearing a rent in the fabric of interethnic and interreligious relations.[118]

This is not altogether improbable. Hambali, the link between the JI and al-Qaeda, had envisioned the JI mounting attacks in Malaysia and Singapore, creating a situation that could lead to the overthrow of the Malaysian government and the creation of an Islamic state there. Attacks against key installations in Singapore could be represented as acts of aggression by the Malaysian government and this could provoke distrust and disharmony between Singapore (seen as predominantly Chinese) and Malaysia (seen as predominantly Malay-Muslim). The resulting ethnic strife could turn Singapore and Malaysia into a theatre for jihad.[119] Separately, Singaporean IS fighter Megat Shahdan Abdul Samad had at one point tried to get another (presumably Muslim) individual to drive a lorry into a crowd at a festival commonly celebrated by Tamils of Hindu descent.[120]

Shahdan's failed attempt to stoke communal hatred should be considered against the larger backdrop of an elevated terror threat level nationally and regionally and the trend of rising intolerance worldwide. Major initiatives and societal mechanisms have been at work in recent years with the aim of raising awareness of the terror threat, improving resilience and preserving common multicultural spaces.[121] Inter-Racial Confidence Circles (IRCCs), first set up in 2002 following the 9/11 attacks in the United States, act as local platforms for interfaith and interethnic dialogue and interaction.[122] This is a non-securitised platform: IRCCs operate in every constituency in Singapore under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, which is the key government ministry with oversight of community relations and engagement.

Another initiative, launched in 2006, was the Community Engagement Programme (CEP), which aimed to bolster resilience and had a heavy emphasis on ground-level rather than top-down initiatives. Studying the post-event community resilience and response (in particular the 7/7 attacks in London in 2005) appears to have left an imprint

---

117 For a useful and thorough discussion of the government's approach, see Thio Li-ann, 'Irreducible Plurality, Indivisible Unity: Singapore Relational Constitutionalism and Cultivating Harmony Through Constructing a Constitutional Civil Religion', *German Law Journal* 20 (2019), pp.1007–34.

118 See, for example, 'Opening remarks by PM Lee Hsien Loong at a Dialogue with Community and Religious Leaders on 24 July 2017', https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/pm-lee-hsien-loongs-opening-remarks-dialogue-community-and-religious-leaders (accessed 8 March 2020).

119 *Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests*, p.11.

120 'ISIS bride and a fighter from Singapore said to have died in Syria', *The Straits Times*, 4 August 2019, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/isis-bride-and-a-fighter-from-spore-said-to-have-died-in-syria (accessed 18 March 2020).

121 For useful thoughts and considerations, see Kumar Ramakrishna, 'Diagnosing "extremism": the case of "Muscular" Secularism in Singapore', *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, 11:1, pp.26–47, especially at pp.38–41.

122 'Religious Groups Roped into IRCCs', *The Straits Times*, 7 September 2007.

on Singapore policymakers, as did global flashpoints (such as the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Prophet Muhammad cartoons controversy in 2005). Strong mechanisms at ground level could help to mitigate the negative repercussions within the community and could head off the possibility of distrust and kneejerk reactions.[123] The CEP was revamped and refreshed in 2016 in the form of the SGSecure movement, essentially a nationwide call to arms in the face of the terror threat, aimed at improving resilience, partly to deal with 'day after' scenarios, and to ram home the point that every Singaporean has a role to play in anti-terrorism efforts.[124]

The emphasis in all these initiatives is dialogue (particularly interethnic and interreligious dialogue) and societal cohesion in post-event scenarios. Active participation in these initiatives has been directly equated with anti-terrorism by senior government leaders.[125] Some of this – in particular fostering trust and tolerance between communities – should be considered work in progress, given that issues of concern periodically surface, with data and surveys also suggesting that more work remains to be done in this area. The findings from one major survey in 2017 showed that if a terror attack took place, Singaporeans would display stronger negative reactions if it had been carried out by a foreign extremist Muslim organisation than if Buddhists, Christians or Hindus had been behind it, and that some groups of Singaporeans were less likely to retain trust in and openness towards Muslims in such circumstances.[126]

The nation-building effort therefore needs constant tending. In recognition of this fragility, the government has regularly warned (both publicly and through closed-door dialogues with various community bodies) against intolerance and exclusivist religious thought taking root in society. But it has also not shied away from more muscular action. A tough line is taken on religious and racial hate speech both online and offline, especially when the fabric of communal relations comes into play. It is clear, for example, that external influencers supporting hate speech or the denigration of other faiths will have no place in Singapore. In one case, two well-known preachers, Ismail Menk from Zimbabwe and Haslin Baharim from Malaysia, with hard-line and divisive stances against other religions, were prevented from entering Singapore to preach.[127] This stern line has also applied to Singaporeans. Examples include the admonishing of a religious teacher from the Malay-Muslim community in early 2020, who suggested on social media that the coronavirus pandemic was God's punishment for the Chinese for their treatment of Muslims in Xinjiang (with the individual subsequently apologising following official

123   For the CEP, see Gunaratna and Hassan, 'Terrorist Rehabilitation: The Singapore Experience', pp.55-59.
124   'Singapore to step up its strategy to counter terrorism as threat of attack rises: Shanmugam', *The Straits Times*, 16 March 2016, and 'PM Lee Urges Singaporeans to Play Their Part Against Terrorism at SGSecure Launch', *Home Team News*, 26 September 2016, https://www.mha.gov.sg/hometeamnews/our-community/ViewArticle/terrorism-at-sgsecure-launch. Although SgSecure is a multi-agency effort, the lead has been taken by the Home Affairs ministry. See 'SGSecure to shift focus from raising terror awareness to preparedness', *TODAY*, 28 September 2017, https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/sgsecure-shift-focus-raising-terror-awareness-preparedness (accessed 15 March 2020).
125   'Fight terror, show tolerance: Shanmugam', *The New Paper*, 5 June 2017, https://www.tnp.sg/news/singapore/fight-terror-show-tolerance-shanmugam (accessed 17 March 2020).
126   'Most Singaporeans do not think there will be a backlash in a terror attack: IPS report', *The Straits Times*, 25 September 2018. Over a quarter of Malay respondents thought their community was viewed by other groups as being linked to terror activities. See Shashi Jayakumar and Nur Diyanah Anwar, '"Regardless of Religion": Building a Stronger Singaporean Society', *RSIS Commentary* CO18021. https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/cens/co18021-regardless-of-religion-building-a-stronger-singaporean-society/#.XnMp19MzbOQ (accessed 19 March 2020).
127   The government has been at pains to emphasise that these actions do not target any one particular faith. Menk and Baharim's barring came soon after two Christian preachers known to have made negative comments of other religions were prevented from entering Singapore to preach: '2 foreign Islamic preachers barred from entering Singapore for religious cruise', *The Straits Times*, 30 October 2017, https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/two-foreign-islamic-preachers-barred-from-entering-singapore-for-religious-cruise (accessed 10 March 2020).

opprobrium),[128] and a Christian couple charged with sedition for distributing evangelical publications that portrayed Islam negatively.[129] There are other laws on the statute books that stand as reminders that the government is prepared to use the law if suasion and civic engagement fail.[130]

The Singapore 'deradicalisation model' cannot therefore be understood simply within the context of the work done with detainees by the RRG or the ACG. What matters is the whole, which has in its upstream elements a concerted push to instil tolerance, pluralism and understanding. Without these efforts (and without the various religious and ethnic groups subscribing to them), the body politic inevitably frays. This in turn conceivably increases the caseload of those tasked with counterterrorism and rehabilitation efforts and heightens the possibility of a terror incident. Notwithstanding the strides made in building a resilient society in recent years, given Singapore's underlying faultlines it is not altogether clear how long society itself will take to recover from an attack, which, as has been made clear, may come sooner rather than later.[131]

128 'MHA, Muis investigating religious teacher's posts', *The Straits Times*, 8 February 2020, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/mha-muis-investigating-religious-teachers-posts (accessed 20 March 2020).

129 'Singapore Christian couple convicted for anti-Muslim booklets', *AFP*, 29 May 2009, https://www.asiaone. com/News/AsiaOne+News/Singapore/Story/A1Story20090529-144623.html (accessed 20 March 2020). The same Sedition Act has been used in the past against individuals who put up blog posts online inciting ill-will against other races and nationalities residing in Singapore. 'Former TRS editor Ai Takagi, who is 8 weeks pregnant, jailed 10 months for sedition', *The Straits Times*, 23 March 2016, https://www.straitstimes. com/singapore/courts-crime/former-trs-editor-ai-takagi-who-is-8-weeks-pregnant-jailed-10-months-for (accessed 10 March 2020).

130 An example is the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) promulgated in 1991. MRHA has, among its various clauses, provisions allowing the authorities to issue a restraining order against any leader, official or member of any religious group or institution who causes ill feelings between different religious groups. MRHA was updated in 2019 to keep abreast with the development of social media: 'Parliament: Changes proposed to Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act to allow swifter action, guard against foreign influence', *The Straits Times*, 2 September 2019, https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/parliament-changes-proposed-to-maintenance-of-religious-harmony-act-for-swifter-action (accessed 14 March 2020).

131 The author would like to acknowledge the contribution of Beatrice Lee to both this paper and the database underpinning its findings. Ms Lee has also contributed to the author's Insight for the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), 'Singapore's Radicalised', 9 July 2020 (https://gnet-research. org/2020/07/09/singapores-radicalised/ (accessed 23 July 2020). Where the figures for radicalised individuals differ from the Insight and the present piece, the updated figures in the present piece should be preferred. All errors and omissions are the responsibility of the author alone.