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Defusing the 'human bomb' ; Not easy to reform fanatics, but 40 out of 60 detainees have been released

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FOILING a terrorist's plot or capturing him isn't the end of the threat. The challenge remains, in Mr K Shanmugam's words, to defuse this "human bomb".

Reforming a deeply-indoctrinated fanatic is "not easy" but statistically speaking, Singapore has had positive success: To date, 40 of the 60 detainees arrested under the Internal Security Act (ISA) since 2001 have been released after rehabilitation, revealed the Law Minister.

"If you have a human bomb, the only way you can defuse that is to first remove them from harm's way ... internalise that the path they are on is wrong and change," said Mr Shanmugam, who is also the Second Minister for Home Affairs. "You hope that with the right tools, psychological approach and religious approach, you achieve that".

Mr Shanmugam was speaking at the inaugural International Conference on Terrorist Rehabilitation yesterday. Over: 200 experts from 20 countries will learn about Singapore's rehabilitation efforts and share their experiences during the three-day conference.

Mr Shanmugam pointed out that the ISA detainees had to "undergo a holistic programme that incorporate psychological, social and religious aspects".

The released detainees have re-integrated well back into society and none of them have strayed back into terrorism. Still, they will continue to undergo rehabilitation to "ensure that they remain inoculated against radical ideas."

While rehabilitation programmes for detained terrorists appear to be successful, one social psychologist feels that the methods now in use lack systematic evaluation.

"We need to look at individuals who are not exposed to the programmes because sometimes, change can occur for reasons that have nothing to do with the programme," said Professor Arie Kruglanski from the United State's Maryland University.

“We should look at factors that promote or block attitude change (because) it’s going to be difficult for them to renounce something that promoted their personal significance for a large part of their lives”.

Dr Omar Ashour said for such rehabilitation to work, strong community support remains vital, as those easily influenced by radicalism are usually the disenfranchised.

“(For) most of these members, if you looked at the causes of their radicalisation, part of that has to do with exclusion or lack of employment,” said the lecturer at the Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom.

“So if they were not re-integrated properly, they risk radicalisation,” he added.

How To know they’ve reformed

Mr Shanmugam acknowledged the system is not “foolproof”. He added: “Putting into practice an effective rehabilitation strategy would be extremely challenging ...

“How do you take them away from those beliefs and get them back into society; and there’s another major challenge — how do you know they’ve truly reformed?”

Still, he is heartened to learn that such methods are working for other countries.

The US, for instance, rehabilitated 26,000 Iraqi detainees by heavily engaging their families and religious scholars.

As a result, the number of former detainees who have gone back to terrorism fell from 15 to 1 per cent, Mr Shanmugam said.

US Major-General Douglas Stone, who was stationed in Iraq, said the military works with 160 religious leaders “to help detainees understand the good teachings of the Muslim faith”.

“During the time that we were there, we were able to reduce the recidivism rate significantly — often because we were able to determine who were the violent Islamist extremists, separate them, work them with the rest of the population in programmes like education”.

In Singapore, that role is fulfilled by the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), which counsels detainees and educates the community about the dangers of terrorist ideas.

Mr Shanmugam also unveiled a new portal, www.p4peace.com, to counter radical ideas and to spread peace and harmony online.

The conference is organised by the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research of the **Rajaratnam School of International Studies**, and the RRG.

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