

## Indonesia tries rehabilitation to wipe out extremism

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Indonesia launched a de-radicalisation programme after the Bali bombings in 2002, above, which killed 202 people, most of whom were tourists. AP Photo

JAKARTA // Imagine, for a moment, a possible headline in the future: "Osama bin Laden denounces terrorism and renounces jihad."

What are the odds? Is it even possible to wean an extremist like bin Laden off his violent ideology? The likelihood is hard to envisage.

But the Obama administration is keen to attempt something very close to that. This week, it agreed to give US\$11 million (Dh40m) to Yemen to build a militant rehabilitation centre in the Arab state within the next three months for released Guantanamo Bay detainees.

The centre would treat terrorists in much the same way as drug addicts: seeing Islamic radicalism as an anomalous behavioural pattern and treating it with a mix of psychotherapy, counselling and religious re-education, coupled with economic incentives to slowly steer them back into society.

This move, analysts say, underscores the realisation that punitive detention or torture in a dank prison does not necessarily reform extremists. Some militants continue to espouse a virulent hatred for the West even after serving time in prison. Killing them can be counterproductive - many of them seek martyrdom.

The future of fighting extremism around the world may lie in terrorism rehabilitation.

"At best, the use of force only temporarily cripples the terrorists' capabilities," said Rohan Gunaratna, a professor of security studies at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. "With the ideology intact, capabilities will be replenished and dangerously reinvented. Hence, the only way to stem the current global wave of terrorism is to effectively dismantle the terrorists' ideological beliefs."

About 100,000 suspected Islamic terrorists are currently in custody around the world, in large parts in the Middle East, and Central and South East Asia. In recent years, many countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq, Algeria, Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia have launched their own de-radicalisation programmes.

But to what degree is this soft approach of mollycoddling militants successful?

In Indonesia, for example, the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, and known for its more moderate brand of Islam, a South East Asian militant network called Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), believed to be an offshoot of al Qa'eda, has been responsible for string of bombings since 2002, most recently in July.

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Farihin Ibnu Ahmad went through extremist rehabilitation in prison, but maintains a Bali nightclub bombing was justified. Anuj Chopra for The National

In the past seven years, Indonesia has captured or killed around 300 suspected members of JI, which grew out of religious schools in Java in the 1990s.

The archipelago's national police launched a de-radicalisation programme after its first bout of international terrorism - the Bali bombings in 2002

which claimed 202 lives.

The programme primarily uses former militants, not clerics, to quell jihadi rage. The inmates are treated with kindness instead of brutality. For some, conjugal visits in prison are permitted.

Upon release, they receive economic assistance for their needs such as starting a new business or paying for their children's education.

As a measure of success, at least two dozen former members of JI have agreed to co-operate with the government.

But despite this, rehabilitation counsellors say it is almost impossible to alter the mindset and entirely expunge the spirit of jihad.

"Bombing Bali was the right thing to do," said Farihin Ibnu Ahmad, hunching over a bowl of chips in a restaurant in downtown Jakarta. "It was necessary to cleanse the place of immoral, lewd foreigners bringing their sins to our country. They spread Aids in our country. Our jihad was against them, the infidels."

Mr Ahmad, 43, a former member of JI, uttered these words with numb insouciance. He received weapons training in Pakistan and Afghanistan and spent a year in prison for leading a raid on a Christian village in central Sulawesi in 2000. But for a man who underwent rehabilitation in prison, he shows little remorse for his crime.

Although he insisted that he no longer condones violence against civilians, he admitted that several former JI members, including himself, are eager to go to Afghanistan to fight US forces alongside his "Muslim brothers".

And while he was thankful for the government's financial support to help him start a plastic recycling business after prison, he had only derision for some counsellors in the rehabilitation process who tried to make inmates feel "they are right and we are wrong".

"The inmates don't think they are radical," said Sarlito Wirawan Sarwono, a professor of psychology from the University of Persada Indonesia, who began working as a counsellor with the de-radicalisation programme in 2005. "It is difficult to change their minds."

At the heart of the tension is the thought that all violence is linked to Islam.

Through his counselling sessions, group discussions and one-on-one interactions, Prof Sarwono attacks the attitudes of inmates toward numerous Islamic notions, including jihad (struggle), takfir (blasphemy) and shahada (martyrdom), encouraging them to embrace a different, non-violent meaning.

But many of those in the programme are resistant to change and increasingly testy.

In group interactions, Prof Sarwono said the top leaders dominate the debate, justifying violence for jihad, while the junior members nod along, choosing to remain silent out of both reverence and fear.

"They won't budge an inch," he said, "but when you approach them individually, one-on-one, face-to-face, they are much softer."

Prof Sarwono cited the example of Abu Dujana, 42, the military leader of JI from 2005 until June 2007, who played key roles in several terrorist bombings in South East Asia. In the group, he was staunchly in favour of jihad, but privately, expressed self doubt over notions of violence.

"Why are we trying to fight the West? It's not like the Americans are invading Java," Prof Sarwono recalled Abu Dujana saying to him.

Even if such rehabilitation programmes succeed, there is the worry of recidivism. The most striking example is Said Ali al Shihri, who after spending six years at Guantanamo Bay and passing through a Saudi rehabilitation programme for religious extremists, emerged as the deputy leader of al Qa'eda's Yemeni branch. He claims to have masterminded the failed plot to blow up a Northwest Airlines flight to Detroit on Christmas Day.

In Indonesia, too, there have been cases of "reformed" militants who are recruited back into the folds of JI. Some while undergoing rehabilitation

have even indoctrinated prison guards, recruited from inside prison and directed extremist rhetoric through internet chat rooms accessed on smuggled laptops.

It takes just a handful of recidivists to wipe out any gains made in the rehabilitation programme, said Noor Huda Ismail, the executive director of Indonesia's Institute for International Peace Building.

Last year, as many of JI's leaders were jailed, and with no attacks for four years, it was widely believed the group had lost its edge. But then Mr Ismail started hearing uncomfortable whispers in internet chat rooms.

Just days later, on July 17, Jakarta's JW Marriot and Ritz-Carlton were hit by two separate bombs, both five minutes apart, killing seven people. The bombing had all the hallmarks of a JI-style attack.

Mr Ismail, as a teenager, went to the same school as some of Indonesia's most high-profile terrorists - the Al Mukmin Islamic boarding school in Central Java - described by some analysts as a "militant Ivy League" - and was roommates with Fadlullah Hassan, one of the Bali bombers convicted in the first terrorist attack in 2002.

Surprised to find his friend as a terrorist, Mr Ismail became interested in meeting with militants and trying to understand what led them towards violence.

"I tell them, 'I am not trying to discourage you from doing jihad,'" he said. "But I try and alter the way they interpret jihad."

He also regularly counsels militants in prison. He shows them a photograph on his BlackBerry of a veiled Muslim woman and her baby. The woman's husband was killed in the 2002 Bali bombings.

"'See, you are killing Muslims too,' I show them the picture and tell them, 'Of what use is such a jihad? Islam is not so myopic.'"

Not all JI prisoners - whom he prefers to call high-risk prisoners instead of terrorists - are responsive. "Some view me as a tentacle of the West," he said. "But they understand that I won't harm them.

"We are racing against time," he said. "We must engage in active reconciliation and rehabilitation to end terrorism."

Ken Ward, an analyst who has closely monitored terrorist networks in South East Asia, said rehabilitation would not work until schools that preach violent jihad were shut down or their teachings curtailed.

"It's almost as though the Indonesians are willing to allow people to acquire radical Islamic beliefs and then later try to de-radicalise them, rather than try to de-radicalise the education system."

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