

# Identifying Key Concerns of *Jemaah Islamiyah*: The Singapore Context

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## Brief Overview of *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI) in Singapore

The Singapore JI cell started out as a religious organization in the late 1980s under the leadership of a charismatic, self-taught religious teacher by the name of Ibrahim Maidin. In 1988-1989, Ibrahim Maidin was inducted into JI by its Malaysian leader, Abu Jibril and subsequently appointed as its leader in Singapore. JI gradually evolved into a terrorist organization due to the exposure of its leaders, including Ibrahim Maidin to the *jihād* environment in Afghanistan. Upon his return, Ibrahim Maidin arranged for more members to receive training there. Aside from military training, these JI recruits were also exposed to the ideology and network of global Islamic radical groups including al-Qaeda. As a result, JI's ideology became more radical, their motivations grew stronger and their strategies became more refined. These relationships were further sealed with a *fatwa* issued by al-Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden in 1998, which urged Muslims to unite and fight against their Western enemies.

To facilitate its recruitment drive, JI sought to propagate its ideology through religious classes conducted in its members' home. In fact, 12 out of 13 JI members detained in the first wave of arrests were recruited via these classes. Recommended by friends or relatives, they initially attended these classes out of a desire to deepen their knowledge of Islam. The use of religious clerics like Abu Jibril and Abu Bakar Baasyir and out-of-context quotations from the *Quran* and *Hadith* lent JI sufficient religious authority to use these classes to discuss concepts like *jihād*, Islamic state and the plight of oppressed worldwide. Potential recruits would then be selected from this pool of attendees based on their enthusiasm and suitability. These JI recruits undergo a period of indoctrination to forge unwavering commitment and loyalty to the organization. Essentially, the indoctrination process is a combination of charismatic leadership, peer group dynamics and a pervasive ideology.

Following a tip-off from a Singaporean resident shortly after the 9/11 attacks, the Singaporean authorities conducted two major arrests of JI members in Singapore. In December 2001, 13 JI members were detained, including its spiritual leader, Ibrahim Maidin. Twenty-one other members of Singapore JI were rounded up in a second wave of arrests in September 2002. On July 1 2006, the Home Affairs Ministry announced the detention of five more individuals, including Mas Selamat Kastari, the operational leader in Singapore who was arrested in Bintan three years ago. While this has crippled the JI network in Singapore, the persistence of its ideology and bases in other parts of Southeast Asia means that the threat is an enduring one.

## JI Ideology, Statements and Actions

To understand JI's ideology, a study of its founding document, the PUPJI is central. According to PUPJI, JI's main objective is to develop the resources and capabilities of its members and the organization as a whole. JI views itself as the organizing platform from which Muslims can collectively act against oppressive governments and regimes. This is because JI considers all other Muslims organizations have failed in their duty to uphold the religion and deal with these oppressive governments. They also perceive the sad state of Muslim affairs as a result of no potent central leadership in the Muslim world as enjoyed during the time of the Prophet and the rightly-guided Caliphs. This warrants the setting up of the *Daulah Islamiyah* as an ideological state based on holistic Islamic teachings.

In addition, through the *Daulah Islamiyah*, JI envisions a union between religion and state, thus enabling them to correct the perceived polarities of leading a good life and total subservience to God which they view as the hallmark of secular ideologies. Towards the establishment of this Islamic state, JI has placed 5 principles as its foundation: *iman* (belief), *hijrah* (emigration), *i'dad* (prepare to struggle in the way of God) and *jihad* (struggle in the way of Allah). To provide religious justification and legitimacy for their acts, JI prescribes to an interpretation of the concept of *al wala' wal bara'*, in which they decidedly divide the world into two groups: friends who ascribe to their world-view and enemies who are opposed to them.

Prior to their arrests, the JI members had several well-developed plans to attack US interests in Singapore. In a speech days after 9/11, President George Bush suggested that the terrorists were against the Americans because of their secular, democratic ways.<sup>1</sup> However, in a speech made by then Singapore PM, Goh Chok Tong, he said that Ibrahim Maidin confessed to a senior Singapore intelligence officer, "as long as the US was doing things against the Muslims, the JI would continue to attack the US."<sup>2</sup> In the same speech, PM Goh also mentioned that one of the detainees was a service engineer who actually liked his American friends and bosses, yet he was involved in targeting American targets.<sup>3</sup> From these statements above, we can infer that the US became a target not because of its secular, democratic ways but in fact, because of the US failure to apply the principles of democracy evenly, and usually against the Muslims, as seen in the ensuing Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

JI was also planning to target local targets for various reasons. First, to facilitate the establishment of *Daulah Islamiyah*, JI planned to attack key Singapore installations like the water pipelines at the Causeway (supplying water from Malaysia) and represent them as acts of aggression by the Malaysian government. This is to create animosity,

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<sup>1</sup> Speech by President Bush addressing a Joint Session of Congress and the American people, Washington DC, 20 September 2002 <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>

<sup>2</sup> Speech by Goh Chok Tong, "Beyond Madrid: Winning against Terrorism" Council of Foreign Relations, Washington DC, May 6 2004, [http://www.cfr.org/publication/7004/beyond\\_madrid.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/7004/beyond_madrid.html)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

distrust between a Muslim Malaysia and a Chinese Singapore, thus precipitating ethnic strife that would unite the Muslims in Singapore and Malaysia, which will facilitate the establishment of a Pan Islamic Caliphate in Southeast Asia. Second, the JI perceive Singapore as allies and supporters of regimes unfriendly to Islam, particularly the US and Israel.

### **Profile of Jemaah Islamiyah Detainees**

Additionally, a study of the list of JI detainees as published in the Singapore White Paper reveal several things.<sup>4</sup> All except one of those detained are Singaporeans who received secular education in mainstream Singapore schools (though one later received a degree in Islamic Studies in Malaysia). Twenty-one have had a stint in National Service. Their ages range between 28 and 52, while their mean age was 39. All except two were gainfully employed and owned their own homes.

The JI detainees were also found to be psychologically susceptible to indoctrination and control by the JI leaders.<sup>5</sup> In addition, 58% of them received training in the technical fields, ranging from NTCs in metal machining or maintenance and diplomas in engineering and computer information technology. Strong correlations between education and professional training in the applied sciences and technical field have been found in fundamentalists across faiths. Just as engineers read blueprints as a set of prosaic instructions and specifications, this could partially explain why these JI recruits are more receptive to literalistic interpretations of the *Quran* and *Hadith*.<sup>6</sup> A training in technical or more precise disciplines like Physics could also make them less tolerant to ambiguity, hence the appeal of JI ideology as they are formulated in clear-cut, definite terms. This search for clarity becomes more acute as a response to rapid modernization with its aftermath of alienation, dislocation and identity crisis.<sup>7</sup>

### **Key Grievances of Jemaah Islamiyah Recruits**

Based on JI's ideology, statements and member profile, we can attempt to categorize JI's grievances into three levels: structural, motivational and triggering factors. Some of these factors are more remotely connected while some are more closely or directly linked with terrorism.

#### *Structural*

Structural causes are causes which affect people's lives in ways in which they may be aware or not, at a rather abstract macro level. One of the more significant

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<sup>4</sup> The Ministry of Home Affairs, "*The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism*," The Singapore White Paper (7<sup>th</sup> January 2003): 43-50

<sup>5</sup> Ibid pg 17

<sup>6</sup> R. Scott Appleby and Martin E. Marty, *Fundamentalism*, Foreign Policy, 00157228, Jan/Feb2002, Issue 128 <http://ww1.huntingdon.edu/jlewis/Outlines/MidE/MartyFundamentalism.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Arie W. Kruglanski, *Inside the Terrorist Mind*, Paper presented to the National Academy of Science, April 29, 2002, Washington DC  
<http://www.wam.umd.edu/~hannahk/ULTIMATE%2029%20APRIL%20TALK.doc>

structural causes that may push individuals towards fringe ideology is the rapid economic progress that has been enjoyed by Singapore in the past years. Though widely believed to be a major stabilizing factor for Singapore's multiethnic society,<sup>8</sup> Singapore's emphasis on economic concerns has also been seen by some to have created a nation lacking in creativity and spirituality.<sup>9</sup> . Indeed, the JI recruits arrested by the Singapore authorities are a prototype of the successful Singaporean: educated in secular schools, hold respectable jobs and possess their own homes. Yet by placing religion as a top priority above economic values,<sup>10</sup> these JI recruits are effectively saying that their search for excellence goes beyond material concerns; it is in fact equated to a search for spiritual meaning. It is in pursuit of filling this spiritual void that the JI recruits sought to deepen their knowledge and practice of Islam.

Essentially, these recruits are part of a global phenomenon of Islamic resurgence in the world today. One of the effects of rapid modernization and urbanization is an acute sense of alienation and dislocation, provoking feelings of rootlessness and an identity crisis in many individuals. Perhaps as a response to this, more and more Muslims are also turning to their religion as an anchor to preserve their self-identities in a rapidly evolving world. This has resulted in a growth of Islamic identity or affiliation in recent decades within Muslim communities. The greater observance of Islamic practices and dress codes are particularly significant among the younger Muslims as they struggle to alleviate feelings of alienation and displacement in an era of confusing, ever-changing lifestyles.

In pursuance of their newly found zest for spiritual renewal, these JI recruits found themselves caught in a dilemma between becoming better Muslims and yet maintaining their status quo as good citizens of Singapore. This is because in increasingly open, secular Singapore, there is corresponding increase to respond and contemporarize, if necessary, aspects of Islamic practices in daily life. To assist them in managing their spiritual renewal processes in the Singapore context, these JI recruits began a search for Muslim leaders to show them the path to practicing the true Islam in today's context.

Though Singapore has a Minister looking after Muslim Affairs in the Cabinet and bodies like MUIS and Mendaki who wield considerable influence in policies pertaining to the local Muslim community, they lack credibility in the eyes of the JI recruits. This could be attributed to their strong links with the Singapore government, which they perceive as discriminatory against Singaporean Muslims in both discrete and indiscrete forms. This view has been further strengthened by what has been perceived as the Muslim leaders and organizations' failure to handle issues pertaining to Singaporean Muslims in recent years including the free education for Malays, compulsory education and the tudung issue. This view is also shared among sections of the wider Muslim community. As an example, during the compulsory education saga, some see the setting up of a separate committee by the Madrasahs (the JCM) as a vote of no-confidence to

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<sup>8</sup> Brown, Michael E. and Ganguly, Sumit. *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1997. p. 267

<sup>9</sup> Ressa, Maria A. *Seeds of Terror: An Eyewitness Account of Al-Qaeda's Newest Centre of Operations in Southeast Asia*. New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 2003 p. 149.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

MUIS. Tan Tay Keong wrote, “ *The madrasahs were not confident that MUIS would truly represent their interests to the government, or play the leadership role as they ( the madrasahs) wanted on the compulsory education issue.*”<sup>11</sup>

### *Motivational*

Motivational causes are the actual grievances that people experience at a personal level, motivating them to act. Ideologues are sometimes able to translate causes from the structural level up to the motivational level, thereby moving people to act. In the case of the JI recruits, their search for credible religious leaders that could help alleviate their dilemmas and problems ended with JI leader, Ibrahim Maidin. In Ibrahim Maidin and JI, many of these recruits saw images of the true Islam, hence ending their restless search and stresses related to always having to be critical, evaluative and rational<sup>12</sup> in responding to frequently arising issues that place them in constant dilemmas between the demands of being good Muslims and the secular demands of the state.

The role of JI’s ideology is significant in explaining how things are and persuade its members to take action. Drawing conclusions from JI’s ideology, their motivation could be classified into three main categories: religious, political and socio-economic. Of these three, religion appears to be the most influential. First, religion is the glue that binds people of differing educational and economic background together for a common cause. Second, religious text is often used to engage, educate and motivate the members to commit to the organization and the cause. Divine retribution and apostasy are used to instill fear and loyalty in the recruits while rewards of the hereafter are used to instill feelings of hope and dedication.

Several political and socio-economic motivating factors arise from the religious perspective. Politically, the establishment of the Daulah Islamiyah is seen as supportive to the its ultimate goal of having a government and system that is in harmony with the tenets of Islam, in which true justice can prevail and a conducive environment to total submission to Allah can be created. From the socio-economic point of view, though these JI recruits are educated, professionals with stable incomes, they take on the roles of being the representatives and champions of the poor and repressed Muslim brothers and sisters in the world.

### *Triggering Factors*

Ji leaders also harness the religious zeal of its recruits to foster support for real or perceived injustices and oppression of the Muslim brotherhood. These injustices and discriminations include regional conflicts faced by Muslim minorities in Southern Thailand, Mindanao in Philippines and Aceh in Indonesia. Globally, the JI recruits are exposed to the injustices incurred on the Muslim brothers and sisters across the globe:

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<sup>11</sup> Tan Tay Keong, *Social Capital and State-Civil Society Relations in Singapore*, IPS Working Paper No.9, September 2001, <http://www.ips.org.sg/pub/wp9.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> The Ministry of Home Affairs, “*The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism*,” The Singapore White Paper (7<sup>th</sup> January 2003): 43-50

Chechnya, Kashmir, Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq among others. Many Muslims view the US as a superpower and champion of democratic rights, hence enabling the US to bring about justice and peace for their conflicting Muslim brothers and sisters.

However, the US has been shown to favour policies that reflect differential treatment, often at the expense of the Muslim well-being as in the case of the Israeli-Palestine conflict. This has evoked a strong sense of anger and humiliation among Muslim communities, which increasingly see US actions as anti-Islamic. The US's increasing penchant for unilateral actions, pre-emptive strikes and the deteriorating situation in Iraq provide further impetus for their claim that the US are arrogant and their policies are merely disguises for a crusade against the Muslims. Singapore became a target because of the many foreign assets here and also due to their policies of support to the enemy regimes, mainly the US and Israel.

### **Policy Recommendations**

The Singapore authority has successfully reduced but not completely eliminated the threat of terrorism in the country. There is particularly a real and present danger of continued radicalization of Muslims, should their legitimate grievances continue to remain unaddressed. As Lee Kuan Yew has mentioned, there is very little that can be done on the social and economic front<sup>13</sup> since these JI recruits are not ignorant, destitute or disenfranchised individuals. Rather, they are acting through an ideology that stems from grievances, some of which are local. How then to best neutralize the threat?

First, the Singapore government needs to develop policies that are perceived as balanced and just by all, including the Muslims in Singapore. For example, while support for the US in its war on terror is incumbent for Singapore, it has to be calibrated and conditional on universally accepted norms and standards of human rights and procedural justice. It also has to streamline its statements and actions, based on these universal standards of human rights and justice. For instance, by choosing to remain silent on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, yet coming out strongly to condemn the terror acts conducted by terrorist groups in the US, Britain and elsewhere, the government risk being seen as practicing double standards and worst, anti-Islamic. This fair play is increasingly demanded by Muslims and non-Muslims alike as seen in a recent post-election survey where fair government policies was a top concern of Singaporeans and where the ruling party strategy of tying in votes to the estate upgrading project were viewed unfavourably by a majority of those surveyed.<sup>14</sup>

Second, the renewed vigour shown by the Muslim community in seeking to deepen their understanding of Islam and practicing it should not be interpreted or worst equated with extremism. It should in fact, be seen as an attempt to find answers in Islam

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<sup>13</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, "What went wrong?" The Far Eastern Economic Review, December 12, 2002 , <http://www.singapore-window.org/sw02/021212fe.htm>

<sup>14</sup>Gillian Koh GE 2006: The other answers to what voters care about The Straits Times , 3 June 2006 [http://www.ips.org.sg/pub/pa\\_Gillian\\_ST030606\\_GE%202006%20The%20other%20answers%20to%20what%20voters%20care%20about.pdf](http://www.ips.org.sg/pub/pa_Gillian_ST030606_GE%202006%20The%20other%20answers%20to%20what%20voters%20care%20about.pdf)

on the many challenges they face in the rapidly changing world. Similarly, their inclination to be better Muslims should not be seen as detracting themselves from being fully integrated Singaporean citizens. In the Far East Eastern Economic Review, then SM Lee Kuan Yew said, “*What I saw coming was that it would become increasingly difficult to integrate our Muslims into Singapore society. Instead of community clubs mingling with everybody else, Muslims were spending more time at the mosques for their own social activities. Even their kindergartens are in the mosques.*” In this particular speech, Mr Lee is implying the process of integration as a one-way process in which the minority group partakes of the activities of the majority, failing which these minority groups are said to have not integrated.

An alternative definition of integration is provided by Tariq Modood who defines integration as “*the processes of social interaction that are two-way, and where members of the majority community as well as the minorities are actively involved so that the later alone are not blamed for failing or not trying to integrate.*”<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Mr Tariq views multiculturalism as processes of integration which are seen as both ways and also as working differently for different groups. This is because, he argues, each group is distinctive, hence integration cannot consist of a single template.<sup>16</sup> Hence, in the context of Mr Lee’s speech above, multiculturalism as defined by Mr Tariq means that not only are the Muslims expected to participate at social activities at the community clubs, but the majority is expected to meet them halfway and accommodate the unique needs of the Muslims. Why do Muslims spend more time at the mosque? One possible answer is their need for spiritual revitalization. Having known this concern, the majority can make accommodations that can encourage these Muslims to partake of the activities in the community clubs. For example, one of the obligations of practicing Muslims is their five daily prayers. By equipping the community centres with prayer halls and toilet facilities for washing up prior to prayers, the government can address their spiritual needs and at the same time, enable them to engage in the activities and thus, mix with the other races. This is the true essence of multiculturalism which takes into account the unique needs of the minority groups in achieving the greater goal of enlarging the common spaces.

One the other hand, Muslims also need to contemporarize their understanding and practice of Islam. In this respect, creating institutions of authority and credibility for Muslims to refer to for guidance and enlightenment is paramount. This is especially critical as Muslims become better-educated, widely traveled and more exposed to the divergent views on many issues pertaining to Islam and its practical application in everyday life. Hence, the way forward is for Muslim organizations and leaders to remain open and provide platforms to engage and channel these differing opinions constructively and transforming them into useful feedbacks for decision makers. Muslim leaders should also continue to upgrade their knowledge and be equally versatile in both religious and contemporary issues in the rapidly changing world. There is also a need to see to the widening scope of knowledge for those in the technical field to encourage more independent and critical thinking skills.

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<sup>15</sup> Tariq Modood, “*Remaking Multiculturalism after 7/7*”, Open Democracy, 29 September 2005 [http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-terrorism/multiculturalism\\_2879.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-terrorism/multiculturalism_2879.jsp)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

Finally, programmes which explore and encourage efforts to diminish the sources of mistrust and misunderstanding that harm relations between the Muslims and non-Muslims must be further pursued seriously. This includes mobilizing the moderate Muslims and giving them more space to move and express themselves in our effort to empower those who advocate cooperation and non-violent solutions to conflict. The aim here is to marginalize the militants and promote efforts to isolate and reduce the influence of the extremists who advocate intolerance and violence. Mainstream Muslim scholars should intensify their efforts to engage in dialogues, not only with non-Muslims but also with the voices of dissent within Islam. For instance, the Religious Rehabilitation Group has begun to embark on public talks to educate the public. To better engage the JI sympathizers from within the Muslim community, efforts should be made to encourage dialogues, as opposed to monologues whereby the transmission of information is also one way.

## **Conclusion**

The *Jemaah Islamiyah* case in Singapore is yet another example of how religious ideologues manipulate the genuine concerns and vulnerabilities of sections of the community thus motivating them to act according to the terrorists' own political agenda. While the cooperation between the Singapore government, Muslim leaders and organizations has been unprecedented and is beginning to bear fruit, more needs to be done particularly in the areas of preventive measures, where the long term goal is to prevent the further radicalization and isolation of mainstream Singaporean Muslims.

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