

An Ideological Response to Combating Terrorism – The Singapore Perspective

MUHAMMAD HANIFF BIN HASSAN* & KENNETH
GEORGE PEREIRE*

*Research Analyst, International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore

ABSTRACT The article examines alternative strategies to combating the scourge of terrorism beyond military approaches. There is now more realization, especially after the difficulties experienced in Iraq today, that an innovative multi-pronged mix of methods is needed to combat international terrorism. The paper looks at an ideological response towards combating terrorism by looking at the Singapore experience. The Singapore government recognizes the importance of an ideological response as an integral part of counterterrorism measures. Terrorism occurs when opportunity, motivation and capability meet. The prevention of terrorism requires the elimination of at least one of these three factors- motivation- often driven by ideology. The paper will look at direct and indirect initiatives undertaken in Singapore to combat terrorism and will also look at the Muslim community in Singapore's response to the threat to Singapore society. Lastly, the article will examine some lessons learnt from the Singapore experience in applying an ideological approach in combating terrorism as well as some recommendations of what more can be done to move forward.

Introduction

In a CIMIC Group North Seminar on Civil–Military Cooperation and Counterterrorism held in the Netherlands from 15–16 November 2005, keen interest was expressed by participants and guest speakers alike on understanding some of the strategies Southeast Asia was employing to combat the terrorist threat. Of particular interest was the concept of an ideological approach towards fighting terrorism. There is now greater consensus that the fight against the terrorist scourge cannot and must not

Correspondence Address: Muhammad Haniff Bin Hassan, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University, block S4, level B4, Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798. E-mail: ISMHaniff@ntu.edu.sg; Kenneth George Pereire, E-mail: ISKGPereire@ntu.edu.sg

be fought by military means alone. This will merely fuel resentment and hatred and serve to escalate the threat globally. Instead, an innovative multi-pronged mix of methods must be applied to address the problem of terrorism. This could even mean countries in the West being receptive towards learning alternative strategies and approaches to fighting terrorism, including drawing lessons from the experiences and approaches of combating terrorism by countries in the East for example. Likewise, countries in the East can learn from the Western experience.

It is in light of this that this chapter on the ideological approach to combating terrorism using the Singapore approach has been conceived. A caveat to note at the outset is that the chapter is in no way prescriptive. It merely serves to provide information and guidance. Neither does the chapter argue that the ideological approach project in Singapore is a perfect or ideal 'one size fits all' model. Counterterrorism and counter-ideology work needs to take into consideration different cultural and contextual realities. The project is also at a relatively early phase and there is still much fine-tuning and tweaking that needs to be done to ensure its relevancy and continued operability. As such, a more judicious approach that involves a willingness to learn from one's own mistakes in counterterrorism is the order of the day and this chapter will go one step further and even highlight some of the challenges of the ideological response project in the Singapore experience. This will be discussed later in the chapter.

The first question that we need to ask ourselves is why adopt an ideological approach? This is essentially because terrorism occurs when opportunity, motivation and capability meet. The prevention of terrorism requires the elimination of at least one of these three factors – motivation – which is often driven by an ideology.

It is important to understand that the role of ideology is especially significant for al Qaeda and its South-East Asia associate, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). It plays an important role in the public interface between the group and its target audience. Using propaganda, al Qaeda and JI can successfully indoctrinate the public into terrorist sympathisers, mobilise terrorist supporters and recruit terrorist members.¹

A recent example of this that is still fresh in our memory is the four youths who set off the bombs in London on 7 July 2005. In brief, they actually had little knowledge of Islam and were nursing a deep sense of alienation from society. They had a desire, however, to find out more about their religion and the opportunity to use them as pawns was sensed and seized by terrorist groups and this resulted in the misguided youths deciding to blow themselves up, destroying many innocent lives in the process.²

In particular, the radical worldview of al Qaeda and JI, poses a serious challenge today. The organisations' pervasiveness and their extremely

violent approach – as demonstrated by the Bali attack of 12 October 2002 and the Marriott bombing of 5 August 2003 – have catapulted JI to the status of principal security threat to the region.³

Al Qaeda in Singapore

The People

In Singapore, al Qaeda's interest was represented by elements of JI, a splinter group of the Indonesian Darul Islam movement, formed by former Darul Islam fugitives based in Malaysia. Its actual strength remained unknown, but it was estimated to have 60 to 80 members.⁴ It started when Ibrahim Maidin, was inducted into JI in 1988, and was subsequently appointed as its first leader, the *Qoid Wakalah*.⁵ Maidin led Singapore JI until 1999. He was succeeded by Mas Selamat Kastari.⁶

JI's presence in Singapore was undetected until a member of the Muslim community in Singapore tipped off the Internal Security Department (ISD), a security agency overseeing the internal security of Singapore under the Ministry of Home Affairs, about a Singapore citizen who was believed to have links with al Qaeda. The suspect was identified as Mohd Aslam bin Yar Ali Khan who had gone to Afghanistan in November 2001 at the beginning of the coalition forces' attack on the Taliban. Subsequent investigations traced Aslam's contacts and connections. Aslam was later arrested by the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan.⁷

In December 2001 and August 2002, two major operations were conducted against the JI elements in Singapore, resulting in 31 JI members being detained under the Internal Security Act. A few were later released with a Restriction Order.⁸ Seven more Singaporeans were later arrested, with only one released with a Restriction Order.⁹ The restriction order was also placed on ten other individuals who were found to be JI members.¹⁰ The much sought-after Mas Selamat Kastari, who had threatened to crash an aircraft into Singapore's Changi airport, was arrested in Riau by the Indonesian authorities.¹¹

Since the first arrest, only five JI members have been released under restriction orders. For three of them, the orders were not extended by the ISD, as they were found to have cooperated with the authority and responded positively to the rehabilitation programme prescribed for them.¹²

Singapore JI's operational capabilities had been tremendously weakened by the swift arrests of most of its leaders and key operatives. More recently, Mohammad Sharif Rahmat, a 35-year-old Singaporean, who has been a member of the JI since 1990 and trained with the JI and a militant group in Muzaffarabad, Pakistan in preparation for armed conflict, was detained under the ISA on 11 November 2005.

Nevertheless, the threat to Singapore remains. For example, although JI operations in Singapore have more or less been crippled, how sure can we be that the Malay/Muslim community in Singapore, especially the youth whom terrorists cells seem to target are safe from deviant teachings and influences?¹³ Also, the threat from foreign operatives and fugitive members still persists.

Singapore Government Response

The Singapore government recognised the importance of an ideological response as an integral part of the counterterrorism measures against the threats of al Qaeda and JI from the outset. However, the government was of the view that the primary responsibility for combating the al Qaeda and JI ideologies should fall squarely on the shoulders of the Singapore Muslim community. Leaders in the government called on the generally moderate Singapore Muslims to speak out against the false ideology of hate being disseminated by al Qaeda and JI. They also called on local Muslim scholars and leaders to come forward and ensure that others would not be influenced by such ideology. Unlike government security personnel, Muslim scholars and leaders had the capacity to reach the community through mosques and *madrassahs* and to inoculate them against perverse and dangerous religious teachings.

The Singapore government's response to al Qaeda and JI ideology can be divided into initiatives that directly counter the ideology and those that indirectly contribute to preventing its spread.

Direct Initiative

An important initiative taken by the Singapore government was the formation of a Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), which was launched on 23 April 2003.

When the Internal Security Department (ISD) realized from the first batch of detained Singapore JI members that the plots were hatched as a result of their religious ideology, two prominent local Muslim scholars were approached to assist with the ISD's assessment. One was the chairman of a local mosque, and the other was the President of the Singapore Association of Muslim Scholars and Teachers (Pergas).¹⁴ Both scholars served as a primary consultant and contact point with the ISD. This later resulted in the formation of the group.

The aims of the group were to study the JI's ideology, offer expert opinion in understanding JI misinterpretation of Islam, produce necessary counter-ideological materials and to conduct public education for the Muslim community on religious extremism.

The RRG consisted of the following:

- (1) Secretariat Group: six members who were volunteers from various Islamic bodies. Its main function was to assist in the administrative aspect of the group and in preparing counter-ideological materials for the RRG's Resource Panel.
- (2) Resource Panel: consisting of one Muslim scholar from the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, a judge from the Syariah Court of Singapore and three independent Muslim scholars. Its main function was to vet the counter-ideological materials and provide feedback and advice to the two principal consultants.
- (3) Rehabilitation Counsellors Panel: The RRG has, to-date, 20 religious counsellors who are local Muslim scholars working on a voluntary basis. Initially, the counselling programme covered JI detainees and supervisees (under restriction order). This was later extended, on a voluntary basis, to families, wives and children, as some of the wives were either members of JI or exposed to JI's ideology through their husbands. As of June 2005, 93 counselling sessions had been held for the detainees, 139 for the supervisees and 14 for family members.

To help members of the RRG perform their roles, regular briefing, training and dialogue sessions were held by the Internal Security Division. The members were briefed on developments on terrorism by lecturers and researchers from the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS). They were also given training on basic counselling techniques by professional counsellors.

Various Muslim and non-Muslim organisations were briefed on the RRG's efforts as part of the government update and assurance initiatives. Since June 2005, talks delivered by members of the RRG, as part of a public education programme to counter extremism in Islamic understanding, have been intensified. The RRG has written a manual as a guide to rehabilitation and produced presentation materials related to JI's ideology for the counsellors, with the help of materials from Pergas and the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, IDSS.

The response to the religious counselling programme varied from individual to individual. However, there have been positive signs. Three detainees were released and placed under restriction order while three others who were under the restriction order did not have their restriction extended due to their positive response to the counselling.¹⁵

Indirect Initiative

It is important to mention certain counterterrorism measures taken by the government, which were indirectly related to counter-ideological

work. As part of the soft approach, the Singapore government had been extremely concerned with the welfare of families of the JI detainees.

Most of the detainees were the sole breadwinners and their wives were homemakers. Their arrests meant that the families experienced financial difficulties. The Internal Security Department (ISD) facilitated Muslim organisations in the provision of financial assistance to the families, to ensure that the education of the children was not disrupted or their future jeopardised. The money came from various funds managed by the Muslim organisations. The immediate family members were also offered psychological and emotional support by trained counsellors who visited them regularly to assess their condition and offer assistance. They also functioned as communication channels between the families, the ISD and the detainees.¹⁶

These initiatives were significant in helping to win over the hearts and minds of the detainees and their families, and to integrate them back into society. It was particularly important to minimise the risk of the children being radicalised in future by the detention of their fathers or by economic marginalisation that might result from disruption to their education and loss of financial security.¹⁷

The government acknowledged that the Muslim community would feel uneasy with the exposure of JI, and would fear prejudice, discrimination or hate crimes. Some saw it as a conspiracy to tarnish the image of Muslims and Islam and also to further marginalise a community which was a minority in the country. Instead of supporting the government in combating extremism, the community could become sympathetic to JI's cause. Grievances could potentially radicalise elements within Muslim community who were not JI members. To avert this, the government had to reassure the community that it did not view JI's ideology as representative of true Islam and Muslims.¹⁸

To win over the hearts and minds of the community, the government had to show sensitivity and restraint when communicating the JI issue. The government ensured that Muslim community leaders were briefed on the arrests before details were disclosed to the media. Closed-door sessions were held where evidence was shown and questions answered.¹⁹ Special visits and sessions were held by the Internal Security Department (ISD) upon request.²⁰ The ISD and members of the RRG also toured various organisations to update the community on developments in their work.²¹

Realizing also that JI's ideology sought to drive a wedge between the Muslim community and the Singapore community at large, the government called on Singaporeans not to place the blame on the Muslim community or Islam. It asserted that JI was a fringe group supported by a small minority among the Muslim community. The organisations that JI members were involved in also should not be prejudiced because they

were not aware of the links or supported JI. Many of them had condemned terrorism and extremism.

The government also pointed out that it was a member of the Muslim community that had tipped off the ISD about JI, triggering the arrests. It called on all Singaporeans to stay united and maintain social harmony, an essential element for the survival of the country and all Singaporeans. The government held special briefing and dialogue sessions with non-Muslim communities to bring these points across.²² An important initiative in this respect was the formation of Inter-Racial Confidence and Harmony Circle at community levels, schools and work places to promote better inter-racial and inter-religious understanding between different communities and to provide a platform for confidence building among the different communities as a basis for developing, in time, deeper friendship and trust.²³

The underlying philosophy was: 'if Singaporeans of all races and religions build for themselves a more cohesive and tolerant society, groups such as JI would find it much harder to establish a foothold in Singapore'.²⁴

Singapore Muslim Community Response

Although the discovery of JI and the announcement of the arrests of its members came as a shock to the Muslim community in Singapore, they did not go into a long period of denial. Earlier, Muslim organisations had issued statements of condemnation against the 9/11 attacks and initiated public debates about moderate Islam. Hence, they were quick to condemn JI's plots in Singapore and expressed disapproval of its ideology and links with al Qaeda.

Condemnation and disapproval came in two waves. Initially, public statements were made by individual Muslim organisations and leaders. Realizing the importance of showing unity due to the gravity of the issue, 122 Muslim organisations representing almost all the registered Muslim civil societies came together to issue a public statement condemning terrorism, rejecting ideological extremism and reinforcing their commitment to Singapore as their country.²⁵ This was done long before the Muslims in Britain, America and Australia rallied together after the London attack.²⁶

The statement offered assurances to the government and others that the community leaders were united in the battle against extremism in their midst. It also sent strong signals to members of the Muslim community that extremism that promotes violence and causes security threats to the country would not be tolerated.

In early 2003, a book entitled *Muslim... Moderate... Singaporean* was jointly published by two Muslim bodies. The book proposed six

principles of moderation as guidelines for Singapore Muslims in making their ideological stand on various issues: upholding peaceful means, upholding the principles of democracy, upholding the principles of rule of law, being contextual in thinking and practices, respecting the opinions and rights of others and upholding Islamic teachings.²⁷

In September 2003, Pergas, the only registered association of Muslim scholars in Singapore, took personal and direct initiatives in counter-ideological efforts against al Qaeda and JI ideology by organising the Convention of *Ulama* (Muslim scholars) with the objective of rallying scholars in defining and combating extremism. Pergas presented three position papers for consultation and adoption by the 130 participants who were mainly members of Pergas,²⁸ which were subsequently published as a book entitled *Moderation in Islam in the Context of Muslim Community in Singapore*.

The book is particularly relevant in counter-ideological efforts in two respects. It highlighted the key extremist ideology and misinterpretation of Islam, and offered rebuttals using the approach adopted by al Qaeda and JI, that is, using the Quran, the *hadits* and the opinions of Muslim scholars. Secondly, it offered a Charter of Moderation for the Muslim community in Singapore, which contained 27 points as a common basis. The charter has been useful in guiding the community to practise Islam in the context of Singapore, and for religious teachers in guiding the community towards moderation.²⁹

As a follow up to the convention and to disseminate the ideas in the book, Pergas organised public talks and forums at mosques, and closed-door discussions with its members. Sessions were also held for Singaporean undergraduates studying at overseas Islamic institutions when they returned to Singapore during their term breaks. A special session was also held in Cairo for Singaporeans studying in Al-Azhar University.³⁰

Another interesting project is the Singapore Muslim Identity project, initiated after consultation within the Singapore Muslim community and which attempts to identify and crystallise what Muslims in Singapore stand for as 'Singaporean Muslims' and to forge a distinctly 'Singapore Muslim' identity without sacrificing any of the core tenets of Islam. This is important as no two Muslim communities across the world are exactly alike even though key tenets of the religion are shared by all Muslim communities. The project also attempts to prevent dangerous self-serving foreign groups from drawing a binary distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims or claiming that Muslims can only live in a Muslim-majority nation.³¹

In short, the aim was simple. Creating a strong and confident Singapore Muslim community was an important and vital part of Singapore's multi-racial, meritocratic and harmonious society. This is

because if any community felt they did not have a place in Singapore, this would completely undermine what the country stands for and they would then be prone to play into the hands of Jihadi elements.³²

Lessons Learned and Policy Recommendations

Singapore's counter-ideological efforts have been instructive in identifying the objectives of counter-ideological work, target groups, the importance of collaboration between Muslim scholars and the security agency, and the approaches and pitfalls involved. From this experience, it can be deduced that some of the important objectives of counter-ideology are to immunise Muslims in general from extremist ideology, persuade less fanatical members of terrorist groups to abandon the ideology, rehabilitate detained terrorists and to minimise the anxiety and suspicion of non-Muslims by presenting alternatives to terrorist ideology.

The primary target group of the ideological response is not the terrorists themselves, but the Muslim majority by providing them with a correct understanding of Islam so that they will not be easily influenced by the terrorists' propaganda. It could be almost impossible to persuade any hardcore members of terrorist groups to give up their ideology. However, the majority of Muslims can be convinced of the importance of rejecting such ideology and any efforts to support it. Terrorist groups can only persist through popular support.

Another important target group which is usually overlooked in counter-ideological work, is non-Muslim population. They should be provided with alternative perspectives to terrorist ideas that will hopefully reduce their anxiety, concern and misunderstanding of Islam and Muslims in general. In a multi-racial and multi-religious country, this is an important aspect of social harmony, which any counter-terrorism strategy needs to address. Often, terrorism also aims to destabilise a whole society or country.³³

As al Qaeda and JI do not believe in Western philosophy and ideals, it should be recognized that the 'conventional lens' originating from the West would not be able to prescribe the best refutation of their theological and juristic arguments. Any meaningful approach should take into account the nature of their ideas, couched in juristic and jurisprudential pronouncements. It is proposed here that counter-ideological work adopts the theological and juristic approach in the ideological war against terrorism. The use of the classical Muslim scholars' methodology of *ijtihad* or deduction from the Quran and the *hadits*, has been demonstrated in Pergas' book. Such approaches to theological and juristic interpretations of religious questions are respected by all

Muslims, as the opinions of Muslim scholars still carry more weight than that of other scholars.

To complement this approach, it is also necessary to consider 'a third way' which is neither separatist extremism, nor imposed Westernism. The aim is not to approach the counter-ideological campaign as a war to convert Muslims to 'our' [American/Western] way of life, but to prevent mainstream Muslims from being hijacked by a splinter group whose view are now rejected.

Al Qaeda is currently viewed as being far removed from mainstream Muslims. But it is now understood that there are many opportunities for 'enabling the legitimate religious yearnings of everyday Muslims to see political expression without creating a dualistic struggle with Western ideals'.³⁴ Such alternatives should be identified and promoted especially those that can change the repressive and corrupt political regimes seen by many Muslims as inconsistent with their ideals.

Both the 'theological and juristic approach' and the 'third way' can be combined in that the theological and juristic approach is used as a key mechanism in offering alternatives that the Muslim community considers neither extremism nor Westernism.

Scholars who are not trained in this field still have a role to play in counter-ideological work, but they may not have the know-how and religious legitimacy to respond to the theological and juristic arguments of the extremists.³⁵

The close collaboration between the ISD and Muslim scholars is a commendable development, and becomes more significant when viewed in the light of the relationship between Pergas and the government on various issues relating to Islam and the local Muslim community. Both parties were able to put aside previous differences to overcome a shared problem. Therefore, it is important for policymakers to incorporate Muslim scholars to succeed in winning over the terrorists' sympathisers and for the refutation to be widely accepted by the Muslim community.

It underscores the importance of Islamic educational institutions like *madrasahs* and Islamic universities, because they provide the correct foundation for students to learn mainstream Islamic traditions and theology, which are important ballasts in combating extremist ideology. A healthier relationship between the *madrasahs*, Muslim scholars and the government is crucial in the ideological struggle against extreme militancy. This is particularly significant in the context of Singapore in which none of the JI detainees were graduates from local *madrasahs*. There were also no reports of religious teachers in local *madrasahs* being involved in JI. Hence *madrasahs* should be made an important partner in this effort rather than be treated generally as a threat.

Since the main responsibility of combating extreme ideology lies with the Muslim community, it is important to ensure a good relationship

with moderate Muslim leaders. Nevertheless, policymakers must note that while the broad moderate–radical categorisation is a useful means of essentialising differing tendencies among Muslim leaders and scholars, one should be aware of the difficulty of distinguishing between ‘moderate’ and ‘radical’ because in reality such a neat dichotomy does not exist. Community and political leaders all over the world behave in ways that defy such easy categorisation. Thus, a more subtle or nuanced approach is needed, one which assesses a leader or scholar by looking at his views, opinions and works on various issues, rather than judging him on a specific issue only.

Despite the hardline positions taken by some leaders and scholars on several issues, co-opting them into counter-ideological work provides opportunities for engagement which may facilitate understanding of each other’s perspectives and also the views of moderate scholars. Tolerating differences on political issues is a primary requirement in attaining the common goal of neutralising extremist ideas, which are at the root of terrorism. This was exemplified through the collaboration of the ISD and Pergas.

One can say that by co-opting Muslim community leaders and scholars, the government not only shows its trust and confidence, but will also gain trust and confidence in return. Such a relationship will be significant in uprooting extremism from the community, and will encourage others to report potential threats to the authorities. In the long run, it will prevent future generations from falling into the same traps as the Singapore JI members.

The ISD was prudent in avoiding generalisations in making assessments and in deciding the best way to deal with each different segment. It differentiated JI members who were involved in the operational unit from those who were involved in missionary work amongst the detainees and their family members. Due to the nature of the terrorism threat after the 9/11 attacks, many policymakers and security agencies preferred to adopt a ‘better safe than sorry’ approach, which contributed to over-generalisation in assessment. Examples of generalisation are that Wahabis are extremists, Arabisation is not good, political Islamists are dangerous and that *madrasahs* are factories for terrorists.

Instead, counterterrorism and counter-ideology works need to take into consideration different cultural and contextual realities. A policy that worked for one group or one area may not be successful for other groups or areas. Even within the same group, cultural and contextual differences will need to be addressed. Political, historic and socio-economic considerations are all part of the contextual consideration in formulating policies at the national and international levels.

It is in the interests of counter-ideology to take into account the heterogeneity of Muslims and Muslim organisations around the world.

They should be considered as partners and assets, and not as a malignant community that has to be distrusted.

Jl's close relationship with a few *pesantren* and the image of Taliban being the product of *madrasahs* have raised concern about the institution being the breeding ground of radicalism and extremism among policymakers and security agencies. However the six full time *madrasahs* in Singapore provide a different picture. They accommodate about 5,000 Muslim students from Primary 1 to Pre-University 2.³⁶ They make up 5 per cent of the total number of the Muslim student population. It is important to note that none of the Jl detainees in Singapore were graduates of these *madrasahs*.

Contrary to common perceptions, *madrasahs* in Singapore do not confine themselves to religious subjects. Nor do they employ outdated modes of teaching and learning. The local *madrasahs* had been teaching subjects such as English, science and mathematics for many years before the implementation of compulsory education, which required that such secular subjects were taught in schools.³⁷ Although one cannot make claim that *madrasahs* in Singapore are totally free of *jihadist* extremism, it should be recognised that the local *madrasahs* are not a source of threat. This is also an example of the importance of understanding different contexts in counterterrorism. Even though the local *madrasahs* are given some level of autonomy, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, which oversees Islamic education in Singapore, supervises and governs these schools.³⁸ This is unlike *madrasahs* in Pakistan and some *pesantrens* in Indonesia, which operate without supervision.³⁹

While ideology plays an important role, one cannot discount the effect Muslim grievances have in radicalising Jl members in Singapore. Indeed, Jl's recruitment strategy used the plight of Muslims to attract membership. In the beginning, Jl's pioneers were sympathetic to the fate of their fellow Darul Islam fugitives who had to escape the oppression of Suharto's authoritarian regime. A few Singapore Jl members were involved in the Christmas Eve bombing operation in Riau because of the perceived injustices against Muslims in Ambon. Similar grievance also motivated their involvement in MILF.

Therefore, at a global level, counter-ideology must be supported by efforts to address the root causes of global Muslim grievances such as the inequitable foreign policies of major powers in the Middle East, especially vis-à-vis Israel and Palestine, the presence of foreign military forces in Muslim countries and the continued support for undemocratic regimes in Muslim countries.

Acts of terrorism cannot be stopped simply by defeating terrorist forces. Neither can the problem be overcome just by attacking the underlying values of the act, the obsession with revenge and its ideological motivations. The problem lies in both the misinterpretation

of the sacred text and the opportunity and context that provide for the text to be misinterpreted in that manner.

Policymakers must not only call on non-Muslim people not to discriminate against Muslims for acts that were committed by a minority among them, and emphasise that Islam is a peaceful religion, but they must also make the effort not to allow the extremist non-Muslims to dictate the agenda of Muslim and non-Muslim relations by continuously casting doubts on Islam and on Muslims in general, suggesting that Islam is inherently problematic, incompatible with democracy and modernity, or anticipating an inevitable clash between Islam and the West.

Those who view Islam as a threat have gone as far as advising major powers to give unequivocal support to regimes threatened by Islamists such as those in Algeria and Egypt. They urge that major democratic countries should not insist that those states implement political liberalisation, because this will allow the participation of Islamists. Such people view these states as a lesser evil than Islamist states. The proponents of this view even deride the notion of 'Islamic moderates', accusing those who view Islam as being capable of reforms compatible with democracy and the West of being 'apologists' or 'relativists'.

It takes two hands to clap. Thus, the war against terrorism cannot be won by countering extreme ideology in the Muslim community without countering prevailing prejudiced views among non-Muslims or Westerners that cast doubt on Muslims, antagonise them and do not promote optimism for peaceful coexistence between the West and Muslims.

Closing Remarks

Counterterrorism is no different from counter-insurgency. It is a battle against an organised group motivated by a cause or ideology seeking to achieve its political aim. It seeks to win over the support of the people, thus weakening its enemy, which will eventually enable it to launch a final blow.

In counterinsurgency, the people are 'the centre of gravity' because the government and the army need their support, while the insurgents emerge from these people. By winning over the people, the flow of recruits and support is cut off. This approach is popularly known as the 'battle for the hearts and minds'. However, this does not mean that winning the hearts and minds of the insurgents themselves is not important. Such a campaign may be launched to defeat the insurgents' 'psychic forces' or morale.

Counterterrorism measures, which involve counter-ideology, need to take into consideration different cultural and contextual realities.

A policy that worked for one group or one area may not be successful for other groups or areas. Even within the same group, cultural and contextual differences will need to be addressed. Political, historic and socio-economic considerations are all part of the contextual consideration in formulating policies at the national and international level.

The efforts made by the Singapore government and the community are not without their shortcomings, but those aspects that need to be unlearned are a discussion for another place.

Areas for Improvement

The efforts made by the Singapore government and the community in counterterrorism in Singapore have resulted in some successes, but they are not without shortcomings.

In the initial period of the RRG coming to the public through forums and talks, it was not well received by some segments of the community, especially among those elements sympathetic towards Salafis and Wahabis.⁴⁰

The initiative was perceived as an effort to promote Sufism, not only to counter the extreme ideology of JI, but also to posit an alternative to Salafis and Wahabis who are not seen as part of the Sunni Islam's four major mazhabs (schools of Islamic jurisprudence).⁴¹ This was primarily due to the fact that individuals put at the forefront of these initiatives were well-known leaders and practitioners of Sufi orders in Singapore and this inadvertently shaped the content and the ideas underlying the initiative.

This perception was aggravated when *Berita Harian*, a local newspaper, published an interview with one of the regular panelists and the main sponsor of the forum, who is a former graduate of the Islamic University of Medina. He chose the path of Sufism and is known for his strong criticism of Salafis and Wahabis, who in his view would have led him to fanaticism and away from Sunni tradition. In his view the Sunnis, as opposed to Salafis and Wahabis, understand the Quran and the *hadits* (Prophet's tradition) through the interpretation of the *ulama*. He was reported as saying that most graduates from the Middle Eastern universities were exposed to a radical worldview, thus appearing to criticise graduates from the Saudi Arabian universities and Wahabis.⁴²

The reaction could be felt in the few letters that were published by the newspaper. These letters defended Salafis and Wahabis and argued against the anti-Salafi/Wahabi bent in the RRG's forums.⁴³

This was an unfortunate development as it served to draw attention away from the good unpublicised work the RRG had done, but was also seen as a misguided strategy in counter-ideology.

It is perhaps true that the ideas of JI and al Qaeda are essentially Salafi/Wahabi. However, it is both inaccurate and imprudent to frame the counter-ideology as essentially counter-Salafi/Wahabi and to prescribe Sufism as the counter-force. It is very important in counter-ideological work to avoid generalisation, whether in the form of making assessments and analysis or drawing conclusions.

Giovanni Caracci in his article 'Cultural and Contextual Aspects of Terrorism' wrote that, in the study of terrorism 'it is easy to over-generalise and engage in reductionism'. He then quoted Walter Reich: 'Researchers should take special care to identify the individual and the groups whose behaviour they are studying and limit their explanations to those individuals and groups, define the circumstances under which those explanations are valid, and not to suggest more than they do'.⁴⁴

A study of extremist ideologies will show that they are often characterised by simplistic generalisation and reductionism such as a binary view that sees the world divided into two camps only: the 'good' versus the 'evil', or 'if you are not with us, you are against us'. Counter-ideological work should make the same mistake. To be successful, counter-ideology should be specific in its response.

The Need for Intellectual Rigour

While the mind of the general Muslim masses requires simple arguments to enable them to understand the deviant ideas underlying JI ideology, counter-ideology work should go beyond that.

For the ordinary Muslims it is sufficient to listen to religious leaders saying suicide bombing is forbidden because Islam forbids killing oneself and JI's idea of jihad is wrong because jihad, in Islam, has a meaning which is wider than waging war or armed struggle.

Counter-ideology must carry with it an intellectual rigour. Thorough study of the extremist ideas is required to make an accurate description of them. Their argument must be examined rigorously and set out together with its counter-argument, so Muslims can make an informed judgement as to why the extremist ideas are wrong, invalid or unrealistic and the counter-arguments are truly founded on the scriptures and rational, not mere allegation, dismissive argument or rhetoric.⁴⁵

Intellectual rigour in counter-ideology work is also a necessity because study on the followers and sympathisers of JI and Al Qaeda shows that a significant number of them are educated people. They are not simple-minded or ignorant folks who are oblivious to world events or their religion.⁴⁶ Looking at their ideological materials, one can see the depth of their knowledge about their ideology, religion and world events, albeit in a narrow blinkered form. JI and its ideology are not like Ayah Pin's congregation and his teachings⁴⁷ which, founded on irrational or

mystical thinking, can simply be dismissed or will go away with a simple one-page fatwa.

Secondly, a segment of Muslim society would need a more rigorous intellectual rebuttal especially, in a country like Singapore where Muslims' standard of education is high and naturally would and should not be satisfied by a simple decree. A critical understanding of JJ's deviant ideology based on sound intellectual counter-argument with some inductive approach would have greater impact for counter-ideology work because it empowers people with knowledge and provides a non-paternalistic dimension for counter-ideology work. They would not, therefore, need to be continuously given guidance to be able to recognize extremist groups that could emerge in a different form or name in the future.

The Print and Digital Media

The print and digital media, which includes the Internet, are two platforms that the RRG need to capitalise on in order to reach out to the Muslim community.

These media not only help to disseminate ideas, but more importantly, they help to preserve them for future generations. Many great Muslim scholars left behind documented works in the form of books, which members of the RRG should emulate. Terrorism today is a great threat and works to counter the ideology behind it are of great service. Such work today is greatly helped by the work of previous Muslim scholars and the future threat of terrorism might be overcome by drawing lessons from today's works if they are communicated beyond the verbal platform.

Especially important in relation to the print media is the newspaper. Its daily publication and wide distribution allows speedy and regular dissemination of ideas to the community.

So far, the RRG's appearances in local newspapers have taken the form of interviews and news coverage, which were essentially the papers' initiative. They comprise only two articles written by a member of the RRG in the *Berita Harian* and none at all in the *Straits Times*. With over 20 *asatizah* (Islamic religious teachers) as members of the RRG, perhaps more could be done in this respect. The community could be much enlightened by insights from the people who have the privilege of engaging directly with detainees.

The Role of Former Detainees

Although some of the detainees and the supervisees have been released from detention and supervisory order, to-date none has been put

forward in public to speak against JI ideology. Their role is limited to helping the RRG and the authorities behind the scenes.

Since all of them are restricted by the authorities in the making of public statements, delivering talks, sermons and lectures, it could be assumed that the key to their involvement publicly in counter-ideology work lies in the hands of the authorities. In other words, they have not been permitted such involvement yet.

A former detainee is currently working full-time in researching the JI ideology in one of the local think-tanks, but none of his work can be accessed by the public due to the restrictions imposed.

This is a major setback for counter-ideology as the power to convince the public of the danger of JI ideology is greater if it comes from former JI members. Their appearance and criticisms would greatly enhance the credibility of the RRG's substantive argument.

In summing up, the battle against terrorism will be long and drawn out and is, unfortunately, going to be with us for many years to come. As such, it is imperative to devise an appropriate mix of approaches or strategies for dealing with this problem; otherwise potential exists for the problem of terrorism in the world and in our midst to spiral out of control. The resulting outcome is one where man lives in a perpetual state of fear, panic and chaos. As a viable approach to combating terrorism, the ideological approach requires a great deal of patience and persistence as it is a complicated process of eliminating the grievances and misunderstandings that often leads people down the path of terrorism. Secondly, the ideological approach, at least from the Singapore experience is also a relatively new tactic that is still in need of constant fine-tuning and improving in order to achieve success. Nevertheless, the approach signals a step in the right direction as an appropriate or viable approach to combating terrorism and it is worth investing considerable time, energy and resources in seeing it through.

NOTES

1. Muhammad Haniff Hassan, 'Response to Jihadis' View of Jihad: A Sample Approach to Counter Ideology Work', *Combating Terrorism*, (ed.) Rohan Gunaratna, Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2005 p.85.
2. Speech by Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, Minister for the Environment and Water Resources and Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs at the People's Association Malay Coordinating Council's (MESRA) Talk 'Understanding Islam' on 25 Jan. 2006. Full text is available at < <http://www.pap.org.sg/articleview.php?id=227&mode=&cid=23> > (20 March 2006).
3. Ibid.
4. Farah Abdul Rahim, 'ISD Questioning 10-12 Others Linked to JI: Wong Kan Seng', *Channelnewsasia.com*, 24 Sept. 2002.
5. 'White Paper: The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism', Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore, 2003 p.10.
6. Ibid.

7. Walter Fernandez, 'Arrest of Singaporean in Afghanistan Forced ISD to Act: Wong Kan Seng', *Channelnewsasia.com*, 23 Jan. 2002; Ministry of Home Affairs, 'Government Responses to Media Queries on the ISA Arrest', 18 Jan. 2002.
8. Restriction orders are provided by section 10 of the Internal Security Act which allows the minister to suspend a detention order with conditions that restrict the detainee's activities and movements within and outside the country. See Ministry of Home Affairs, 'Singapore Government Press Statement on ISA Arrests', 11 Jan. 2002; Ministry of Home Affairs, 'Singapore Government Statement on Further ISA Arrests under the Internal Security Act', 16 Sept. 2002.
9. Ministry of Home Affairs, 'Singapore Government Press Statement on the Detention of two Singaporean Members of the Jemaah Islamiyah Karachi Cell', 18 Dec. 2003; 'Singapore JI Group Crushed but Regional Threat Remains – Minister', *AFP*, 26 Dec. 2003; Karl Malakunas, 'Two Young Singaporean JI Members Arrested. Local Branch Dismantled', *AFP*, 26 Dec. 2003; Ministry of Home Affairs, 'Comments by the Minister for Home Affairs on Mohd Aslam's Return', 27 Jan. 2003; Ministry of Home Affairs, 'Press Statement on the Arrest of Jemaah Islamiyah Fugitive – Arifin bin Ali @ John Wong', 10 June 2003; Ministry of Home Affairs, 'Government Press Statement – Update on Counter-Terrorism Investigation in Singapore', 14 Jan. 2004; Mark Baker, 'JI Plotting More Attacks, Manila Warns', *The Age (Australia)*, 2 July 2003; Hasnita A. Majid, 'Home Affairs Minister Confirms JI Man in Indonesia is Mas Selamat Kastari', *Channelnewsasia.com*, 7 Feb. 2003; Ministry of Home Affairs, 'Government Press Statement – Extension of 17 Detention Orders and One Restriction Orders, Release of two Detainees and Lapse of two Restriction Orders', 15 Sept. 2004.
10. Ministry of Home Affairs, 'Government Press Statement – Update on Counter-Terrorism Investigation in Singapore', 14 Jan. 2004.
11. 'Jakarta arrests 'Singapore JI head'', *CNN.com*, 4 Feb. 2003.
12. *Ibid*; Ministry of Home Affairs, 'Government Press Statement – Update on Counter-terrorism Investigation in Singapore', 14 Jan. 2004.
13. Speech by Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, Minister for the Environment and Water Resources and Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs at the People's Association Malay Coordinating Council's (MESRA) Talk 'Understanding Islam' on 25 Jan. 2006. Full text is available at < <http://www.pap.org.sg/articleview.php?id=227&mode=&cid=23> > (20 March 2006).
14. Both volunteered their services and acted in their personal capacity.
15. All information on the RRG was primarily based on interview with Mohamed bin Ali, Secretary of the RRG, on 26 Aug. 2005. See also Zakir Hussain, '30 Muslim Leaders Helping JI Detainees' Families', *Straits Times*, 18 Oct. 2005. The most recent release of a JI member was Muslim convert Andrew Gerard or Al Ridhaa Abdullah who was released on 24 Oct. 2005.
16. Interview with Mohamed bin Ali, Secretary of the RRG, 26 Aug. 2005. See also M. Nirmala, 'Taking care of family matters: Quietly and without fanfare, community groups have been providing assistance to families of Jemaah Islamiyah detainees', *Straits Times*, 18 Dec. 2004.
17. Melvin Singh, 'Back to Society', *The New Paper*, 26 Sept. 2002.
18. Speech by Mr Goh Chok Tong, the then Prime Minister of Singapore during a dialogue session with union leaders/members and employers at Nanyang Polytechnic, 14 Oct. 2001 and at the Singapore Institute of International Affairs 40th Anniversary Celebration Lunch at Hotel Fullerton, 27 Nov. 2002. Full text is available at < <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/public/index.html> > (3 Sept. 2005).
19. A closed-door session with Muslim community leaders was held at the Parliament building on 19 Sept. 2002. See Melvin Singh and Arul John, 'Not the Last Episode in the Terror Threat Drama ...', *The New Paper*, 19 Sept. 2002, pp.12–13.
20. The ISD held a visit and briefing especially for Pergas after the second major arrest on 6 Oct 2002.
21. Briefings were held at the Islamic Religious Council, Pergas on 17 July 2005, the Fellowship of Muslim Students Association on 6 Aug. 2005. The Singapore Home Affairs Minister visited and had dinner with Pergas leadership on 1 Dec. 2004 followed by a visit by newly appointed Director of the ISD on 8 Dec. 2004.

22. Noor A. Rahman, 'Kan Seng: Isu JI Adalah Isu Keselamatan Negara', *Berita Harian*, 25 Sept. 2002; S. Ramesh, 'Singaporeans Urged to Play their Part and Help Disrupt Terror Plot', *Channelnewsasia.com*, 30 Sept. 2005.
23. 'The White Paper', p.23.
24. Ibid.
25. Arlina Arshad and Laurel Teo, 'S'pore Muslims Unite to Condemn', *Streets Times*, 10 Oct. 2002; Fatonah, 'Learning to Get Along – Muslim Leaders Pledge Commitment to Enlarge Common Space in S'pore', *Streets Times*, 10 Oct. 2002; Zubaidah Nazeer, 'The Love of the Homeland is Part of the Faith', *Straits*, 10 Oct. 2002.
26. 'Joint statement', *The Muslim Council of Britain website*, 15 Jul 2005, available at http://www.mcb.org.uk/Signed_Ulama_statement.pdf (25 July 2005); 'US Muslim Religious Council Issues Fatwa Against Terrorism', 28 July 2005, available at <http://www.cair-net.org/downloads/fatwa.htm> (29 July 2005); 'Aussie Muslims Vow Anti-Terror Action', *IslamOnline*, 23 Aug. 2005, available at < <http://islamonline.net/English/News/2005-08/23/article02.shtml> > (5 Sept. 2005).
27. Muhammad Haniff Hassan, *Muslim ... Moderate ... Singaporean*, Al-Khair Mosque and Perdaus, 2003, p.6.
28. See Pergas, *Moderation in Islam in the Context of Muslim Community in Singapore*, Pergas, 2004.
29. Ibid, pp.185–324.
30. Interview with Mohd Jakfar bin Embek, Head of *Dakwah* Department, Pergas.
31. Ibid. pp.6–7.
32. Ibid. pp.7–8.
33. Muhammad Haniff Hassan, *Key Considerations in Counter-Ideological Work Against Terrorist Ideology*, M.Sc dissertation, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, 2005, pp.12–14.
34. Stephen Biddle, 'War Aims and War Termination', *Defeating Terrorism: Strategic Issue Analyses*, edited by Colonel John R. Martin, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, Jan. 2002, p.11; See also Sami G. Hajjar, 'Avoiding Holy War: Ensuring that the War on Terrorism is not Perceived as a War on Islam', *Defeating Terrorism: Strategic Issue Analyses*, pp.17–19.
35. Muhammad Haniff Hassan, *Key Considerations in Counter-Ideological Work Against Terrorist Ideology*, p.17.
36. See <http://www.madrasah.edu.sg/about.html> (1 Sept. 2005).
37. Muhammad Haniff Hassan, *Key Considerations in Counter-Ideological Work Against Terrorist Ideology*, pp.33–36.
38. Ibid; also see <http://www.madrasah.edu.sg/about.html> (1 Sept. 2005).
39. Christopher M. Blanchard, 'Islamic Religious Schools, *Madrasas*: Background', *CRS Report for Congress*, 10 Feb. 2005.
40. Salafi is wider than Wahabism. Salafi thought has existed in the Muslim community for hundreds of years and has spread worldwide. While it is true that Wahabi is Salafi, it is but one of Salafi's many orientations. Salafi and Wahabi are not two sides of the same coin. There are Salafis who are not Wahabis. There are Wahabis who are not Saudis. There are also Saudis who are neither Wahabis nor Salafis.
41. Chairul Fahmy Husaini, 'Jihad pakar bom JI terpesong' and 'Berjihadlah melalui derma, niaga dan pendidikan', *Berita Harian*, 28 Nov. 2005, p.4.
42. Chairul Fahmy Husaini, 'Awat fahaman mengganas', *Berita Harian*, 3 Dec. 2005, p.12.
43. Haji Abdul Rashid Haji Ramli, 'Forum Jihad: Usaha dipuji, tetapi isu mazhab tidak perlu dikaitkan', *Berita Harian*, 10 Dec. 2005, p.15; Mohamad Nazri Shaari, 'Tolak pendapat universiti Timur Tengah sumbang kepada fahaman ekstrem', *Berita Harian*, 28 Dec. 2005, p.9, Mohamed Farhan Mohamed Samsudin, 'Sokong usul cerdik pandai Islam tampil perjuang Al-Quran, Sunnah', *Berita Harian*, 21 Dec. 2005; Hajah Fatimah Hussein, 'Sanjung teguran demi kemuliaan Islam', *Berita Harian*, 17 Dec. 2005.
44. Giovanni Caracci, 'Cultural and Contextual Aspects of Terrorism', *Psychology of Terrorism* (ed.) Chris E. Stout, London: Praeger, Vol.3, p.60.
45. Muhammad Haniff Hassan, *Key Considerations in Counter-Ideological Work Against Terrorist Ideology*, M.Sc dissertation, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, 2005, pp.14–15.
46. 'White Paper: The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism', Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore, 2003, pp.15, 43–50.

47. Ayah Pin is a cult leader. His group is known as the Sky Kingdom. It was based in Terengganu state of Malaysia. His followers believe that Ayah Pin is a reincarnation of God. Ayah Pin disappeared before the Malaysian government could arrest him. Some his followers were arrested and the others scattered. See 'Pie in the sky', *The Edge Daily*, available at http://www.theledgedaily.com/cms/content.jsp?id=com.tms.cms.article.Article_f23d73ef-cb73-c03a-1b11b790-ac95cc79 (15 March 2006); 'Malaysia "teapot cult" attacked', BBC News, 18 July 2005, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4692039.stm> (15 March 2006); 'Malaysian sect members arrested', *BBC News*, 4 July 2005, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4648581.stm> (15 March 2006).