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UPDATE: SINGAPORE'S COMMUNITY-BASED COUNTER-IDEOLOGY INITIATIVES

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Since it was first reported in January 2006, the Singapore Muslim community has expanded its range of initiatives to combat the ideology that propagates terrorism and violence. This is an update.

SINCE IT was first reported in January 2006, the Singapore Muslim community has launched several new initiatives to combat extremism and terrorism in the country. This reflects the community's unrelenting vigilance against extremism and its commitment to play its part in preserving peace and stability in Singapore.

Growing attention

Singapore's community-based initiatives against extremism have been commended by researchers, policymakers, and frontline security agencies from all over the world, and have been a source of reference for many counter-ideology programmes, with interest remaining high. In 2007 alone, representatives of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), the main body that spearheads counter-ideology work in Singapore, and its affiliates have been invited to present their work to nine conferences in the United Kingdom, Belgium, Austria, Germany, Malaysia, Egypt, Australia and the Philippines.

A key supporting plank in the community's initiative, though not much publicised, is social counselling for family members of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) detainees. Groups like the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) and the Young Muslim Women's Association (PPIS) have been at the forefront of this. They lend psychological, emotional and financial support to families of the detainees. This helps ensure that their children's education is not jeopardised, thus helping them integrate back into society.

In my book, *Unlicensed to Kill: Countering Imam Samudra's Justification for the Bali Bombing*

published in 2006, I countered the misinterpretation of jihad. The book offers a point-by-point rebuttal to Imam Samudra's book *Aku Melawan Teroris (I Fight the Terrorist)*. Imam Samudra was the head of the first Bali bombing operation. He is currently held in prison after the Indonesian court found him guilty and sentenced him to death.

Another initiative was the edited volume *Fighting Terrorism: The Singapore Perspective* by Taman Bacaan, a local Muslim organisation. The organisation also collaborated with the RRG to organise two conventions for students of government and local Islamic schools in January and July 2007.

Young Singaporean Muslims are also taking up the initiatives. Two dialogue sessions were organised by Muslim students of National Junior College in February 2007 for all junior college students and in June 2007 by Mendaki Youth respectively.

Intra-community work

To assist the public in understanding the meaning of jihad, a booklet titled *Questions and Answer on Jihad* was published in English and Malay in 2006 and in Tamil by the end of 2007. The booklet contains 22 questions and answers on jihad and terrorism.

The Islamic Religious Council (MUIS) also launched initiatives to promote moderation and combat extremism within the Muslim community in Singapore. Additionally, MUIS has periodically been issuing Friday sermons to remind Muslim congregations of the danger of extremism and highlight the deviant tendency of the extremist ideology.

The council established the Harmony Centre, in the newly built An-Nahdhah mosque on 7 October 2006. The centre aims to counter exclusivist tendencies and intolerance espoused by extremist ideology. The Harmony Centre has two broad aims. The first is to promote understanding about major religions in Singapore among Muslims so they can better relate with their fellow Singaporeans. The second is to promote better understanding about Muslims and Islam among non-Muslim Singaporeans so they will not have prejudices towards Singaporean Muslims. The Centre is designed like a mini museum for Islamic civilisation. It provides exhibits, audio-visual and artefacts divided into four sections: images of Islam, civilisational Islam, essence of Islam and Islamic lifestyle.

MUIS also seeks to lead the Singapore Muslim community beyond simply promoting moderation and tolerance, but to create a progressive and modern Muslim identity rooted to Singapore and well-integrated with fellow Singaporeans. After much consultation, MUIS has introduced for Singaporean Muslims "10 Desired Attributes" documented in a book entitled *Risalah (Document) for Building a Singapore Muslim Community of Excellence*, which was published in 2006. The 10 attributes address the basic question, "What does it mean to be a Muslim Singaporean?"

Websites

One of the critical areas for extremist propaganda is the Internet. In an effort to counter the extremist ideology on the Internet, various initiatives were taken by individuals and organisations. These initiatives include the following:

- a dedicated counter ideology blog set up in October 2006 and located at <http://counterideology.multiply.com>
- a blog with significant counter ideology content set up by a Muslim Singaporean lady at <http://2jay.wordpress.com/avata/>
- the RRG's official website; <http://www.rrg.sg>. The site has attracted international attention, with visitors from Japan, the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia to name a few.
- Three websites set up by MUIS – 1) a religious query platform located at <http://www.iask.com.sg> for Muslim youths with the objective of preventing them from seeking religious guidance from

wrong websites; 2) a sharing portal to reach out to young Muslims at <http://invoke.sg/cms/portal/Home.aspx> 3) a dedicated website to counter extremist ideology and promote moderation at http://radical.mosque.sg/cms/Radical_Ideology/index.aspx

Although MUIS is a government statutory body established by The Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA), the initiatives can be viewed as community work as they come from and are rooted in the community. Most critically, the bulk of the council's annual budget comes from the money contributed by the community, not from the government -- illustrating how integrated the council is with the community. (See <http://www.muis.gov.sg>).

Between 2004 and November 2007, the RRG had participated in various community engagement programmes. It made 33 presentations to various local grassroots organisations, 10 public forums at stadiums and mosques and three conventions for local youths, students from government schools and students from local *madrasah* (Islamic schools). During the same period, the RRG conducted 816 counselling sessions, 718 of which were for detainees and supervisees and 98 for their family members.

While the level of commitment and activity is impressive, there is one question that is often asked: what is the effectiveness of these initiatives in containing extremism, radicalism and rehabilitating the affected individuals? There are currently no direct methods to measure the effectiveness of the programmes, although there are several proxy indications that can be used to ascertain the effectiveness.

Calm despite the arrests

Despite the presence of local JI cells in Singapore and its close proximity to JI's main base in Indonesia, the security situation in Singapore remains relatively calm. Singapore has not been experiencing what countries in Europe have gone through -- such as attacks by home-grown and self-radicalised individuals.

Since late 2001 up till 1 December 2007, 19 (37%) out of 51 persons detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) for their affiliation with JI, or other armed groups, have been released, after an average of only three years of detention. This figure does not include those who were investigated and subsequently put under Restriction Orders only, without detention.

If there is anything else that can be done, it is the need to study radicalisation, including self-induced radicalisation, more thoroughly to understand its process and to identify at-risk groups. This effort at pre-emption will enhance the effectiveness of counter-ideology work, by reducing the number of potential radical recruits. The Muslim community should be lauded for its efforts and commitment to date; it is hoped that the dedication and energy will continue, even leading to innovative solutions to the critical problems facing the community, and the nation as a whole.

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