

THE ROLES OF RELIGIOUS REHABILITATION GROUP (RRG) IN SINGAPORE

by

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Introduction

Our world today is very complex. The impact of globalization has affected and moulded much of our lifestyle. Technological advances have elevated Man's progress to a height unseen and unheard of in Man's evolution history. These technological advances have connected us, far and wide; making us aware and informed of all that's happening in our world today. Through the internet, for example, Aristotle's writings could be read and studied, at a click of a mouse. Volumes and volumes of the Quranic *tafsir* (commentaries) written for centuries by a great many scholars from within the Muslim world could be downloaded in a matter of seconds, from the comfort of one's desk¹.

In Singapore itself, these technological advances have affected us greatly. The latest introduction of "Generation MIO" – a digital gateway that integrates mobile, fixed line and broadband services, to satisfy all our communications and entertainment needs – shows our suaveness and interdependency to technology. Globalization too have made durians available, to be eaten deliciously at almost anytime of the year in our city state, although rarely do we see durian trees here.

Yet, we too are in an age where transboundary changes in our lifestyle have caused the Arctic Haze, "the phenomena of a visible reddish-brown haze in the atmosphere at high latitudes in the Arctic due to air pollution"². The HIV-

¹ see <www.altafsir.com>

² see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arctic_Haze>

AIDS epidemic has shattered almost all records by infecting an estimated 38.6 million people worldwide in 2005³.

On Sept-11, our complex world awakens to a new lethal and dangerous quagmire of “religiously motivated terrorism”. Almost 3000 people were killed by terrorists who believed that their merciless acts will guarantee them seats in Paradise. These selfish belief caused thousands of wives and children to become widows and orphans in a single day. These acts of mass murder through suicide acts are fuelled through years of radicalization with an ideology that prostrates to hate and exclusivism. What we should highlight here is that those terrorist acts that had happened in September 11, and consequent events in Bali, Madrid, Indonesia and others, happened greatly due to the continuous radicalization of their minds, thoughts and hearts through the use of a misconstrued “cut and paste” ideology.

RELIGIOUSLY MOTIVATED TERRORISTS

Sadly, the beautiful message of all religions in their continuous long history until today, have been tarnished by radicalism, extremism and terrorists. In our contemporary time, many examples have surfaced to show the ugliness and viciousness of these religiously motivated terrorists. The Army of God, an extreme and violent Christian group, declares themselves as “a real Army, and God is the General and Commander-in-Chief”⁴. The Kahane Chai or Kach group, a Jewish nationalist extremist group, preaches the motto of “terror against terror” to restore the Biblical land of Israel⁵.

The famous Aum Shinrikyo religious cult, with its message of enlightenment taken from Buddhist scriptures, released sarin gas in a co-ordinated attack on five trains in the Tokyo subway system, killing 12 commuters, seriously harming 54 and affecting 980 more in 1995⁶. The controversial figure

³ see UN-AIDS 2006 Report on Global Aids Epidemic at <http://data.unaids.org/pub/GlobalReport/2006/2006_GR_CH02_en.pdf>

⁴ see <www.tkb.org/Group.jsp?groupID=28>

⁵ see <www.tkb.org/Group.jsp?groupID=61>

⁶ see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aum_Shinrikyo>

and perceived “martyrdom” of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale during Operation Bluestar in the Golden Temple, later led to the murder of India’s Prime Minister Indira Gandhi done by two of her Sikh bodyguards⁷.

These gruesome pictures of religiously motivated terrorists must never shroud our reflections of religion. All religious beliefs aim to embody its adherents with good and positive values of life. Religion brings about purpose in one’s life. Religious beliefs shape its adherents with beautiful values and characteristics. Religion envelopes its adherents with proactive and positive attributes to make them good citizens of the world. Thus extremism and radicalism is not due to religion per se, but more to its misunderstood beliefs adhered to, by corrupted minds for their own vicious personal goals and ambitions.

THE RELIGIOUS REHABILITATION GROUP (RRG)

The Muslim community in Singapore was disturbedly shocked by the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) episode. The arrests in December 2001 and September 2002, and subsequent profiling of their planned attacks on specific targets in Singapore drew great attention among the minority Muslim community here. Gladly, the positive, well-thought actions of the government in handling this crisis have opened the doors for the Muslim community to counter Jemaah Islamiyah’s (JI) existence in Singapore.

Ustaz Haji Ali Haji Mohamed, a Council Member of MUIS (the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore) and Chairman of Khadijah Mosque, and Ustaz Hj Md Hasbi Hassan, the President of PERGAS (the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association) were approached by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) to assess the JI detainees, in the middle of 2002. From the MHA’s initial findings, the MHA have found that the JI’s terrorist plans were the results of their misconstrued religious ideology. After several interviews with the detainees, both *Ustazs* concluded that the JI had misunderstood different Islamic

⁷ see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jarnail_Singh_Bhindranwale

concepts to suit their own political end of establishing a utopian Islamic Caliphate.

Due to their findings, they volunteered themselves to form the Religious Rehabilitation Group or in short the RRG, primarily with the objective of counseling the JI detainees and showering them with rightful, mainstream understanding of these concepts. Ustaz Haji Ali mentioned that “we do it for the harmony and peace of the nation”, while Ustaz Haji Md Hasbi had said “we do this on a purely voluntary basis, as service to our community”.⁸

Both Ustaz Haji Ali and Ustaz Haji Md Hasbi perform the duty as the Core Personnel of RRG who are directly involved in facilitating the Religious Rehabilitation Program. They also hold the responsibility of nominating the members of the RRG.

With great earnestness and sincere will, they garner support from the *asatizah* community (the religious teachers community) in Singapore, to come together in their fight against such misconstrued ideology. Having receive positive feedbacks and participation from the *asatizah* community, they form the Resource Group of the RRG which provide expert resource on issues relating to ideology and correct understanding of Islam. The Resource Group are made up of Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji Mohamed, a *Mufassir* (one who has translated the whole of the Holy Quran) into Malay, the late Ustaz Syed Ahmad Semait, a learned scholar, writer and translator of many classical Islamic texts into Malay, who has just passed away in 2006. Ustaz Mohammad Hj Rais, the President of the Singapore’s Syariah Court Singapore, Ustaz Ahmad Haris Suhaimi, a young scholar who has a Masters Degree in Islamic studies from Egypt, and Ustaz Mohd Hannan Hassan, the head of the Religious Education Department in MUIS.

The RRG Secretariat was then formed. Primarily, the Secretariat handles administrative affairs, co-ordination of counseling schedules, collation of

⁸ see Zakir Hussain, “Men on a Mission: Battling JI beliefs, Spreading truth,” *Straits Times*, 25 November 2005.

counselors' reports, and assist RRG members in research. The Secretariat, comprising of 5 members, are made up of Ustaz Mohamed Hj Ali, Ustaz Md Feisal Md Hassan, Ms Zubaidah Zailabdin, Mr Abdul Karim Senin, and Mr Salim Mohd Nasir. The RRG Secretariat then embarked on a research for the production of a Religious Rehabilitation Manual in May 2003. Findings from the numerous investigations by MHA and also the interviews conducted by Ustaz Haji Ali and Ustaz Hj Md Hasbi were gathered as resources. It also helped that an ex-JI detainee offered his insights for the manual. The Resource Panel of the RRG also met several times to discuss on the contents and after its third Draft, the Religious Rehabilitation Manual named: "*Islam Agama Salam & Damai: Langkah Hayati Erti Jihad Sebenar*" (Islam Religion of Peace: Ways Towards Understanding The Real Meaning of Jihad) was officially launched by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs, Mr Wong Kan Seng in Dec 2003.

In early January 2004, the RRG took another step forward by forming the Religious Rehabilitation Counselors (RRC). The RRC were formed to assist the RRG in performing religious counseling to the detained JI members. They were approached by both Core Personnel in volunteering their services to the Rehabilitation Programme in their personal capacity, not representing any mosques, associations or organizations. There are currently, twenty one RRC Members comprising of sixteen *Ustaz* (or Male Religious Teacher) and five *Ustazah* (Female Religious Teacher). They are a mixture of the old and young. There are those who graduated from local *madrasahs* and have vast experience in teaching Islam to the Muslim masses in Singapore, while there are those who have graduated from renowned Islamic universities such as Al-Azhar University, Islamic University of Madinah, and International Islamic University in Malaysia.

This mixture is unique and helps RRG in developing a resourceful approach in counseling the JI members and detainees. The counselors are credible in their own right. All RRC members are volunteers, thus they are also free to join or leave the group on their own free will. They are the late Ustaz Abu Bakar Hashim, Ustaz Mohamed Hj Ali, Ustaz Mohd Ibrahim s/o Mohd Kassim,

Ustaz Abdul Rahman Mohamed, Ustaz Hassan Mustakim, Ustaz Yusoff Hj Ali, Ustaz Saripi Rawi, Ustaz Mohd Ghouse Khan Surattee, Ustaz Mohd Khair Rahmat, Ustaz Mohd Feisal Mohd Hassan, Ustaz Mohd Suhaimi Mohd Fauzi and Ustaz Md Yusri Yubhi. In early 2005, a few more *Asatizah* (religious teachers) were approached to expand the current pool of counselors as the programme reaches out to the families of the JI. They include Ustaz Abdul Manaf Rahmat, Ustaz Mohd Murat Md Aris, Ustazah Badriyah Syed Ali Alsagoff, Ustazah Faridah Paiman, Ustazah Hamidah Rahmat, Ustazah Kalthom Muhammad Isa and Ustazah Siti Rahmah Abdul Hamid. Last year, Ustaz TM Fouzy, Ustaz Abdul Jalil Razak and Ustaz Md Saiful Alam Shah joined the fray.

The RRG had pursued continuous efforts to furnish their counselors with the necessary skills and knowledge to perform effective counseling. With the continuous support of the government and the MHA, the RRG have had multiple briefings and training sessions held by MHA psychologists. For effective use of our manual, the RRG have provided guided training in the use of the manual. Recently most of the counselors have graduated from a 7 month Diploma program in Counseling Psychology. Other than briefings, regular dialogues, talks and discussions, the RRG have had 2 retreat sessions where the RRG members discussed and shared experiences and knowledge on the JI and rehabilitation issues.

Equipped with learnt Islamic knowledge, training in counseling techniques, and proper usage of the manual, the counselors have volunteered and conducted until today, more than 500 counseling sessions. Since May 2005, around 50 family counseling sessions to the wives of the detained JI members have been conducted by our *Ustazahs* (female religious teachers).

In October 2005, RRG's effort was made public by Deputy Prime Minister and Home Affairs Minister, Mr Wong Kan Seng. DPM Wong mentioned:

"The government cannot deal with the terrorist ideology by changing the minds of the detainees who have been poisoned.

This has to be done by the religious teachers and scholars themselves. That's why the religious rehabilitation group has played a very important role in helping the government provide rehabilitation to the detainees. And this should be the case because they are the experts.”⁹

Since 2005, RRG has embarked on public education through public forums and presentations to diverse groups of Singaporean, Muslims and non-Muslims. Most significant was the road show on Jihad which attracted thousands in stadiums and mosques in various corners of Singapore. The RRG believe that the vicious ideology of JI have smeared the peaceful message of Islam. Islam's tarnished image need to be cleansed. Most importantly, Islam's message of harmony and peaceful co-existence among multi religious and multi ethnic communities must be upheld and represented. The RRG took upon their selves to become ambassadors to this peaceful message of Islam.

JEMAAH ISLAMIYAH'S IDEOLOGY OF HATE AND TERROR

“The biggest danger of the JI is their ideology, their misinterpretation of Islam and the Quran.” (Ustaz Haji Ali Haji Mohamed)¹⁰

From the RRG's counseling findings, it was found that the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) believe in a twisted form of Islamic concepts which form their ideology of hate and terror. They believe that it becomes compulsory for them to establish the Islamic Caliphate which is a utopian state, where they perceive justice and peace will flourish. Their ability to pick and choose certain pristine Islamic concepts as tools used for their corrupted political goals signifies the crookedness of their intention. Uniquely, they interpret these concepts without proper methodological

⁹ “Religious Rehabilitation Group plays key role in educating JI detainees,” Channel NewsAsia, 17 October 2005. See also Zakir Hussain, “30 Muslim leaders helping JI detainees, families,” *Straits Times*, 18 October 2005.

¹⁰ See Zakir Hussain, “Men on a Mission: Battling JI beliefs, Spreading truth,” *Straits Times*, 25 November 2005.

formulation and arrogantly believe their interpretation and understanding of these concepts are real and succinct. Concepts such as *al-wala wal bara'* became loyalty to all that follow their ways and hatred to all that opposes them. *Jihad* became exclusively War. Through their *bai'ah* (pledge of allegiance), they held that their Amir (leader) have their absolute trust. They consent to *istimata* (seeking death through suicide) to achieve their goals while believing that the virgins in heaven will await their martyrs. This simplistic, literal, non intellectual interpretation extinguishes centuries of mainstream Islamic intellectual tradition and history, and burns scholarly works of a great number of mainstream Islamic scholars.

Interestingly, the RRG found that while they were inflamed with these twisted concepts, most JI members have very little Islamic education. Most were found to be in pursuit of religious knowledge when they join the JI. Lacking in religious education, they were easily influenced with the teachings of the JI, espoused by charismatic leaders. They were thus made confused with other Islamic concepts; for example on the promises of eternal lives or *akhirah*; using violent means to restore the *Khilafah Islamiah* (Islamic Caliphate); that Military/Armed *Jihad* is compulsory for Muslims as Islamic Law is not being carried out; the coming of Islam is to execute all non-Muslims and therefore it is permissible to kill all Non-Muslims.

In the JI classes held in private homes of JI members, the plight of Muslims in Palestine, Chechnya and others was continuously emphasized and deliberated. This was solely aimed to incite their members towards adopting their perverse ideology of hate to the *kafirun* (non-believers). Finally, another feature of their lessons is the combination and intermingling of religious subjects with military ones.

In reaching out to them to correct their misconstrued ideology, the JI members in detention (DO) or under restriction order (RO) could be categorized into two groups. The first category are those who make up the hardcore, still

believing that they are right, and never are wrong. The second category are those who have shown remorse for their act and repented.

In dealing with both groups, each counselor has to go through four different phases of rehabilitation. Firstly, each counselor needs to extricate their negative imbibed ideology and understanding of their twisted Islamic concepts. Then, the counselor with his Islamic knowledge and rightful understanding of Islam, and with the help of the RRG's Manual, tries to negate these misunderstood ideologies. Thirdly, each of these misguided ideological concepts is then replaced with rightful, positive understanding of the concepts. Finally, the counselor teaches the detainees the rightful understanding of Islamic knowledge. In doing this, the counselor aims to counsel the detainees' minds and thoughts.

RRG'S COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Other than performing counseling, the RRG feels that the concerns of the masses need to be addressed too. This is necessary so as:

- to impart continuous correct understanding of Islam;
- to minimize sympathizers of the JI confused worldview;
- to inculcate understanding and appreciation of living as a minority community in Singapore, and also in a multi racial/religious environment;

RRG also hopes that its cause would continuously receive greater support especially from the Muslim masses. The RRG also feels necessary to engage, to portray the real image and message of Islam, to non Muslims. A lot of media reports have shaded Islam in many different fashions. The Jemaah Islamiyah is a fringe group which does not represent the mainstream majority moderate Muslims in Singapore. The Muslim majority among the scholars, leaders, associations, religious teachers and the masses are striving hard to emphasize the peaceful message of Islam and the tolerant and harmonious nature of Muslims in Singapore. Singaporean Muslims respect and love the racial and religious harmony that we have shared with the diverse ethnic groups and religions in

Singapore. Thus the RRG strongly believes that efforts need to be directed towards showing non Muslims that as Islam is a peaceful religion, Muslims are also good citizens, and they too love their nation.

Since early 2005, the RRG have made around 30 appearances in the forms of presentations, lectures and forums to the masses from all walks of life.

RRG and social workers from MHA and Muslim self help organizations have joined hand in hand and have been actively involved in providing services within their own specific specializations. As an example, once released, the JI detainees are assisted to recover back their jobs or are assisted in finding new jobs. During their detention, social workers help in terms of providing psychological, social and financial assistance for their families.

This collaboration that RRG is partaking today is in their involvement in the Inter Agency Aftercare Services Group. This group is a communal effort aims towards providing families of the JI detainees with assistance in their daily affairs. With the spirit of *'gotong royong'* (spirit of helping one another), Taman Bacaan, Mendaki, AMP, and the former Chairman of En-Naeem Mosque have come forward to help ease and cause as little disturbance as possible to the JI family's daily routine or life, so that they do not feel marginalize. Most importantly in this communal effort, the community with a feeling of sincerity and compassion helps provide the necessary assistance needed by the family.

RADICALIZATION OF YOUTH

“As long as Al Qaeda and its associated groups can appeal to Muslims worldwide to share its ideals, aims and objectives, Al Qaeda support and operational cells will regenerate and multiply. As long as the Islamist ideology is intact, for every Al Qaeda member captured or killed, Al Qaeda will recruit another two...As long as a radical Islamic milieu persists, Al Qaeda and its

associated groups will be able to replenish their human losses and equipment wastage.” (Rohan Gunaratna)¹¹

RRG believes that our youth, Muslims and non Muslims alike, are an important asset to be reached out to and nurtured with rightful values and supplemented with protective buoys against the wave of radicalization. While the war against terror escalates over national and international boundaries, the RRG sees the urgent need to curtail the spread of radicalization.

RRG takes it as a responsibility to inform and lead the future generation of Muslims or the youth to embrace the rightful understanding of Islam. If we are not careful in addressing the rightful understanding of Islam to the youth of today, what will the picture be, of our future generation and our world, if they adopt a violent and radical attitude of religion?

The radicals misuse of the internet to spread their distorted understanding of Islamic concepts such as Jihad need great urgency on the part of mainstream Muslim governments, institutions and scholars to obliterate and counter effectively. Abu Mohamed al-Maqdisi, the spiritual mentor of Abu Musab Zarqawi, al-Qaeda’s deceased head in Jordan and Iraq, had a great many following among netters. His wayward treatise on the *“Clear Nature on the Infidel Nature of the Saudi State”* had been downloaded 47,123 times since its publication in 2000¹².

Our youths need to be exposed both on the literal and contextual understanding of major Islamic concepts. Alongside this exposure, they need to be presented with real understanding of our present day upheavals. The relevant Muslim authorities need to continuously rally the teachings of Islamic knowledge alongside present day applications. What we urgently need is in depth practical application of the universal message of Islam which will assist our youths to

¹¹ Rohan Gunaratna, “Al Qaeda Al Sulbah – A Global insurgency in the early 21st century,” in Albrecht Schnabel and Rohan Gunaratna, eds., *Understanding and Managing Insurgent Movements*, Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2006, p. 412.

¹² Mafoot Simon, “The Shadow of Terrorism: Spreading Jihad Online,” *Straits Times*, 12 December 2006.

embrace the beauty of Islam in this globalize era. These practical applications could be filled with the richness of the Islamic civilization, and the excellence of the Islamic masters of past years and centuries. Islam is never short of excellent individuals who excel both in their worldly and otherworldly pursuits. A point that should not be missed is that the Islamic civilization has produced great number of pioneers, sages, entrepreneurs, scientists, scholars, writers, architects, *Imams*, poets, warriors, chefs, doctors and thinkers. In every continent that the scent of Islam was felt, it has been able to give birth to excellent individuals who not only enrich Islamic tradition but also enriches the progress of mankind and humanity.

The universal message of moderation (*wasatiyyah*), justice (*'adalah*), and peace (*salam*) must be continuously advocated to our youth. Religious scholars and teachers must continue venturing into our rich intellectual tradition to formulate maxims and systems that cultivate peaceful co-existence among mankind. *Quranic* injunctions such as “*to you your religion, to me mine*”¹³ must be fully appreciated. The great impact and challenges of globalization must be met with continuous promotion and practical application of beautiful moral values furnished in the richness of the *Muhammadan* exemplary and beautiful character¹⁴, which need to be adorned on our future generations to come.

CONCLUSION

RRG believes that rehabilitation is a long term effort and a continuous learning process due to its complex nature. Contrary to popular belief that radicals cannot be cured, the rehabilitation programme in Singapore aims to show that just as a human mind has the potential to be shaped with a particular belief system, it should also have the capacity to be rehabilitated from radical beliefs. The

¹³ Holy Quran 109: 6

¹⁴ Prophet Muhammad’s famous saying that he was sent to perfect *makarim al-akhlaq* (beautiful character) shows Islam’s great consideration for ethical and moral virtues and values. Many classical scholars have written treatises on the great importance of perfecting one’s character through great struggle to adorn one’s soul with beautiful virtues. This ethical approach towards finding real satisfaction and happiness in religious life must be highlighted and appreciated by all. It should act as a means towards eradicating extremism and radicalism.

Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) was conceived through the efforts of the Singapore government working in close cooperation with local Muslim scholars and religious teachers. This collaboration is important and need to be appreciated. Its rehabilitative efforts have begun to bear some fruits as indicated by the release of several JI detainees and those under restricted order.

The Singapore rehabilitation programme also demonstrates the crucial role of local Muslim scholars and community-based initiatives in reducing the threat of terrorism in Singapore. RRG has also counseled and looked into the welfare of the JI families and is currently embarking on educating the public about jihad and other misconceptions of Islam.

The RRG believes that Muslims should hold onto the dictum of unity in diversity in challenging radicals and terrorist ideas. We could differ in our appreciation of the beauty of Islam, but we should never differ in our stand towards radicals and radicalization.

Our youth of today holds the future in their hands. Although today we could guarantee that the terrorist ideology are being fought vigorously by our religious teachers, we should be aware that if such approaches are not encouraged and supported, we can never be assured that, in 10 years time, such approaches would be embarked by our future generation. The JI network in Singapore may have been crippled but JI will continue to present a long-term security threat to Singapore. JI's resilience can be partly contributed to its religious ideology; hence an effective counter terrorism strategy should not only disrupt the terrorists' base but also its ideology and appeal. Thus we should continuously present our youth with the beautiful message of Islam. Islam is a peaceful religion, and this fact must be shared and felt by our youths, and all of us.

Finally, from our efforts in RRG, we hope that we could contribute to the rightful understanding of Islam to our community, while at the same time help in preserving the security of our nation through this counter ideological initiative.



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