



The Singapore Model: A New Deradicalisation Approach for the UK?

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The UK is currently going through a process of re-evaluating and rethinking some of its key approaches to managing terrorism offenders. Looking at Singapore's model would be a good start for policymakers.

Recent terrorist [attacks](#) in the UK have highlighted key problems in the country's counterterrorism systems and policies. Chief among them is the need to manage terrorism offenders for substantial periods of time, and what programmes need to be in place to ensure that society is protected. As the UK considers refreshing its strategy, some lessons from the Singaporean experience might be helpful. The contexts are different, but the long-term engagement model employed by Singapore might offer useful lessons for the UK.

One key piece of legislation is Singapore's [Internal Security Act](#) (ISA) which facilitates detention orders. The ISA is in fact, with several modifications, a remnant of British colonialism, which was drawn up as part of emergency regulations when Singapore and Malaya were embroiled in a communist [insurgency](#) during the 1950s and 1960s. Despite periodic [criticism](#) by human rights organisations that the ISA is simply detention without trial, there are numerous safeguards – for example, a detention order must be reviewed by an independent ISA advisory board headed by a [Supreme Court](#) judge – and independent checks and routes of appeal that exist to protect its abuse by the government.

The first use of the ISA in the post-9/11 era in Singapore took place when a cell of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), Al-Qa'ida's chief affiliate in Southeast Asia, who were responsible for the 2002 Bali bombings, was [discovered](#) in Singapore in December 2001. All

members of the cell came from the Singaporean Muslim community. One of the plots they had under development was the bombing of diplomatic missions in Singapore including the UK High Commission.

The government calculated that putting these individuals on trial would have been detrimental for ethnic relations in Singapore. Consequently, they instead chose to use the ISA to manage the offenders. The use of the ISA within this context is seen by detractors as punitive, but from the authorities' point of view it is an effective way of managing rehabilitation in a controlled environment. As Singapore's Home Affairs minister K Shanmugam has [observed](#), 'we have a clear process, detention, rehabilitate and release. You detain them and you don't do anything else with them and you put them away, then their lives are not going to get better. And you're not doing anything to deal with the situation really'.

The point is not to lock the door on people and throw the key away. Detainees are engaged and counselled one-on-one by Ustadz (Islamic scholars) in an intensive manner. In separate sessions, psychologists from the Home Affairs ministry regularly engage these individuals, with their assessments, as well as those by the Ustadz, forming a key part of the decision to eventually release detainees.

This programme, called the [Religious Rehabilitation Group](#) (RRG), was developed and staffed by concerned and well-respected Ustadz in concert with the authorities. These religious leaders had realised after their initial

interactions with the detainees that the vast majority had completely mistaken understandings of key concepts like 'jihad', 'al-wala al-bara' (loyalty and disavowal), 'hijrah' (migration), and living in 'dar ul-kufr' (non-Muslim land). Many, misled by the charismatic leaders of their cell, had come to believe that it was proscribed by Islamic law to live in a Westernised society like Singapore.

Throughout this process a path to release is open – should detainees show that they have been responsive to counselling, demonstrate genuine contrition and evince a change of perspective. Assessments of effectiveness are undertaken through repeated and continual engagement.

Social support is a critical element of the overall approach. Vocational training or job placements are given to detainees to facilitate social reintegration. In addition, during detention, families of offenders are given help as often the sole breadwinner is incarcerated. This aspect should not be underestimated as it plays a part in ensuring that the family is not radicalised; it may also alter the mindset of the detainee, seeing that their 'enemy' is offering support and help to their family, including, for example, school bursaries for children. A number of assistance schemes for the individual and family continue well after release. This 'aftercare' aspect, handled by the Inter-Agency Aftercare Group, which works closely with the RRG and the authorities, plays a role in keeping the recidivism rate low. Only two out of approximately 100



Masjid Sultan or Sultan Mosque in Singapore. Islamic scholars, or Ustadz as they are sometimes known in Singapore, play a key role in the city-state's deradicalisation programme. Courtesy of Terence Ong/Wikimedia Commons.

individuals who have been through the ISA's preventive detention and RRG counselling have had to be detained again.

The RRG has gained acceptance from the Malay-Muslim community over time. This is partly to do with the fact that a large part of RRG efforts are organic and stand on their own, without funding from the state. The family and community support structures which have developed over time to deal with other social problems within the Malay-Muslim community, such as drugs, have been adapted to aid families affected by radicalisation.

Upon release, many individuals are, depending on the assessment of the authorities, kept on a Restriction Order (RO) for some time afterwards. This places restrictions on the movements of the individual. Other conditions of the RO might include needing approval prior to joining any organisation, or mandatory further religious counselling. Those who demonstrate further progress eventually (typically after a few years) have their RO lapse.

This approach delivered some success with the first wave of jihadists

that Singapore faced post-9/11. For around 90% of the JI cases this meant eventual release. The remaining 10% (fewer than 10 individuals) were key influencers, or hardened radicals whose ideas are unlikely to change. They remain incarcerated. Engagement with them continues.

Things have changed since 2013 with the start of the war in Syria and the growth of the Islamic State. Rather than networked individuals, the threat picture has been made up of isolated individuals, often young 'meaning seekers' or those seeking diversion from their own personal problems, radicalised through online connections and in some cases seeking and succeeding to travel to Syria and Iraq.

The radicalisation process has also been compressed considerably. Whereas with the first cohort the time taken from initial contact with ideas to action was years, with the new cohort it is closer to nine months. The RRG's success rate amongst this new cohort is nearer to 25 per cent at the moment.

The exact reasons for this are unclear. One possible explanation might be the changing salience of religious

ideology. The Islamic State's emphasis on online radicalisation creates a very different social environment around the individual where religion plays a changed role. Another crucial difference is that the Islamic State actually had a territorial 'caliphate' it controlled meaning the idea of hijrah was more important than in the previous phase of Singaporean extremists as they had a place to migrate to.

This new generation of Islamic State recruits seem to have a less thorough grounding in the core tenets of Islam than their JI predecessors. They learn about Islam from online sources – 'Sheikh Google' as it is known – and are partial to more radical preachers like Anwar Al-Awlaki or Abdullah el Faisal than classical preachers. Given this, RRG religious advisers may have less influence over the detainees.

The 'Singapore model' has concomitantly had to evolve. There are younger, more tech-savvy counsellors who are familiar with online vocabularies, and who can attempt to engage with younger individuals who self-educate online, but actually may know a lot less about their religion than

the first batch of JI detainees. It appears Singaporean authorities are starting to refine their programme. A 17-year old boy was recently [detained](#) and assigned a mentor. This mentor will help him to focus on his rehabilitation, studies and family, and also guide him to develop 'life skills'.

The pool of radicalised individuals has become more diverse. Aside from Islamic State recruits, several Singaporean citizens have travelled to Yemen to fight against the Houthi. Women have [travelled](#) to Syria from Singapore and married Islamic State fighters. In response, the RRG now has female counsellors to advise female detainees.

The key principle of the programme remains that no individual is released until the state has confidence they will not re-offend. This does not guarantee success, and as has been highlighted, there have been some cases of recidivism, but it does provide a measure of protection.

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Looking at this experience from a UK perspective, there are some immediate similarities. First, offenders are more likely to be radicalised online. There is also a growing volume of individuals with mental health issues or autism spectrum disorders who are becoming embroiled in terrorist networks. This presents a very complicated problem to manage, both in terms of the direct threat and subsequent rehabilitation.

The UK has developed a number of programmes focused on trying to rehabilitate offenders. The Desistance and Disengagement Programme, seeks to engage with individuals using a range of psychological, theological and social supports to provide them with a new path. Similarly, programmes have been developed which seek to engage with offenders on an individual level to understand their specific path to radicalisation. One such programme,

Operation Constrain, met considerable pushback when it emerged in the [press](#). The UK also has an overworked probation service whose responsibility it is to engage with offenders when they are released and ensure that they do not slip back into their old ways.

But there are also significant differences from the Singaporean context. Much of the UK's programming in this space was developed or co-opted by the government. While elements of the UK's Muslim community engage with specific programmes to help with delivery – for example, counter-extremism programmes like Building a Stronger Britain Together – many organisations have become dependent on government support to survive. In fact, it is often contact with the government that creates problems for effective programmes as the link undermines the perceived independence of the programme. It is crucial to find ways of encouraging community leadership and be seen to maintain independence.

The UK also does not have indeterminate sentencing for terrorist offenders. However, in the past the UK had a system of imprisonment for public protection (IPP). In these cases, an individual served a specific sentence and then following that appeared regularly before a parole board who determined their suitability for release. The IPP system was first introduced in 2005 and then abolished in 2012. The key failing of the system was that there were not adequate rehabilitative programmes in place to help offenders make the appropriate behavioural changes needed for the parole board to permit their release.

Finally, a crucial distinction to draw between the two contexts is one of volume. While Singapore detained approximately 70 individuals from the JI and close to 30 self-radicalised individuals since 2001, with several dozen individuals judged to pose less of a threat if placed directly on RO, the UK has hundreds of cases. This places a much greater burden on the resources required for the intensive engagement that this rehabilitation method requires.

However, it must be remembered that only a small [fraction](#) of individuals convicted of terrorist offences go back

to commit further terrorist offences. This highlights a key strength of the Singaporean model – long-term engagement with extremists. This may mean that with particularly hard cases long detention periods, with all the adequate judicial protections around it, are necessary. Given that UK courts are unlikely to permit the introduction of the detention orders permissible under Singapore's ISA (and the even less likely situation that the government would be able to retroactively impose this on individuals currently in jail where most of the problem currently lies), what instead needs to be created is a more intensive probation system around certain offenders which focuses on continually trying to push them in the right direction while ensuring they do not revert to violence.

None of this will necessarily create a completely foolproof system. And it is one that will require constant adapting and updating. The problem of radicalisation does not have any easy or simple solutions. Numerous other countries have tried approaches which have shown some levels of success – [Denmark](#) for example, which uses a very different approach to Singapore. Taking inspiration from other countries might provide the UK with a more effective model to deal with radicalised individuals. But whatever the case, a key lesson is that in order to effectively manage the problem, a substantial long-term investment will be required.

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