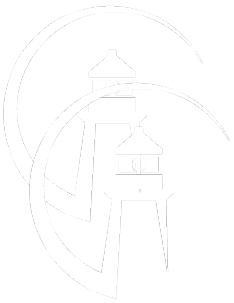
QIASS | Qatar International Academy *for* Security Studies

LEVERAGING TERRORIST DROPOUTS *TO COUNTER VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA*

BY: **SUSAN SIM**

JANUARY 2013



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TO COUNTER VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

BY:
SUSAN SIM
VISITING SCHOLAR
QATAR INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY FOR SECURITY STUDIES

JANUARY 2013
PHASE II: VOLUME II

www.qiass.org

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Introduction

> *What I explain in this book is not with the intention of dropping my friends into a mire of sorts, but has as its purpose* ***the purpose of informing and giving insight to the community****. I do not have the heart to see the Islamic community grasping at information that is sullied and malicious, let alone information that is deviated. … It is sufficient that we confront the enemies of Islam who endeavor to lead the Islamic community astray, and that we as Muslims do not depart from the Islamic community.*
>
> *My other purpose in writing this book is to mutually remind Muslims, with the hope that those friends who are involved in bombing actions away from the field of battle or who have the desire and planning for such, to desist and cease from actions, which to the best of my knowledge are actions that are encompassed within the bounds of the classification known as earthly destruction.* ***There are no physical actions I can undertake to bring about a stop to their bombing operations except by means of my tongue****, which it is hoped will be able to open the inner hearts of those Muslim friends. Remembering the statement of the Messenger of Allah who commanded his companions to assist people who behaved cruelly by means of putting a halt to their cruel acts.* (Emphases added.)
>
> Nasir Abas
> *Inside Jamaah Islamiyah: A Former Member's True Story*
> Jakarta, October 2011

With this introduction to his memoir, former Jamaah Islamiyah[1] (JI) leader Nasir Abas suggests that he is carrying out both counter-radicalization within the Islamic community at large and deradicalization of violent extremists.

The former Amir of JI's Mantiqi III, a region encompassing Borneo island, Sulawesi, and the Southern Philippines, his memoir was a best-seller in Indonesia when the original

[1] There are various spellings, the most popular of which are Jemaah Islamiyah (used in the Singapore White Paper) and Jemaah Islamiya (used by the US National Counterterrorism Center). For convenience, this paper uses Jamaah Islamiyah, as spelled by the terrorist dropouts discussed here. The group's full name, Al Jamaah Al Islamiyah, means "Islamic congregation" in Arabic.

Indonesian-language version first appeared in 2005. He was not the first JI leader to write an account of life inside what is generally considered Southeast Asia's most deadly terrorist group. But he was the first defector to publicly denounce its use of violence.

Figure 1. Covers of memoirs by Ali Imron and Nasir Abas.

Since then, Ali Imron, another Afghan mujahidin veteran, now in prison for building a bomb used in the 2002 Bali bombing, has also written a memoir denouncing the attack. Calling himself a country boy who became a militant, he minces no words about his role, calling the book *Ali Imron Sang Pengebom*, or *Ali Imron the Bomber* (Jakarta, 2007).

Nasir Abas and Ali Imron are the poster boys of the Indonesian police's terrorist disengagement program, which began with the arrest of Ali Imron in January 2003. Nasir Abas was arrested three months later.

Despite the rising recidivism rate and criticisms of the program as insufficiently rigorous, Detachment 88, the elite police counterterrorism unit, has since also convinced another ideologue, Medan-based Khairul Ghazali, to write two monographs that undercut the religious justifications used by terrorists to sanction their use of violence. Ghazali is

serving a five-year prison term for involvement in a Medan bank robbery in 2010 to finance jihadi actions. The robbers were his students.

Umar Patek, another terrorist leader convicted of involvement in the Bali bombings in 2002, shed tears as he begged a Jakarta court for forgiveness in June 2012. How did the Indonesian police convince a militant who trained and fought in Afghanistan and the southern Philippines, who escaped arrest for nine years despite a bounty of $1 million offered by the United States, to express remorse in public for the killing of innocents? The Umar Patek flip offers practitioners interesting insights into how to persuade hardcore radicals to abandon their cause.

But perhaps the more salient question for policymakers is, to what avail? What use are such books or tears in stopping terrorism?

From GWOT to CVE

In recent years, as attention has focused on understanding the processes of terrorist recruitment and radicalization, policymakers have also begun to focus on the processes of disengagement and deradicalization. What will it take to encourage extremists to walk away from their groups and give up violence as a modus operandi? The two processes are not always the same; nor does one follow the other. Where terrorists have been captured and will eventually have to be released after a period of imprisonment, more than a dozen governments have been experimenting with disengagement programs that they call terrorist deradicalization or rehabilitation. As Horgan and Altier (2012) note, they each have "their own distinctive titles, and that proved to be a clue as to their context-specific expectations for what constituted success."[2]

Some of these programs have led to wider efforts to counter ideological extremism at the community level. More than winning hearts and minds, policymakers are increasingly concerned about disrupting, or providing an alternative narrative for, those setting out on the path toward violence. Are there effective interventions that communities or governments can undertake in order to dissuade a young person from considering violence or from joining a terrorist group?

This shift in strategic analysis is reflected in the change of nomenclature. From the controversial Global War on Terror (GWOT), we now worry about Countering Violent Extremism (CVE).

CVE does not replace "catch or kill," but it calls for intervention processes that encompass the various phases of the radicalization trajectory, starting with inoculation of the target recruitment pool, rebuttal or deterrence to discourage radicals from engaging in violent action, and rehabilitation of captured violent actors.

In other words, CVE is about preventing and reversing radicalization.

A key component of CVE is identifying the types of extremist narratives that attract recruits and contribute to their radicalization. It is not always clear why an individual accepts the narratives, but terrorist recruiters like Ali Imron can articulate them in everyday terms. In the passage below on practicing jihad, Imron explains his decision to participate in the Bali bombings.

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[2] John Horgan and Mary Beth Altier, "The Future of Terrorist De-Radicalization Programs," *Conflict & Security*, Summer/Fall 2012.

From *Ali Imron Sang Pengebom*: "Why I Bombed"

The majority of people look at the bombings as acts of cruelty and brutality, barbaric, inhumane, and so on. Then why should I be one of the actors involved in such actions? Below I will put forward some of the reasons that led me to be involved with the [Bali] action. My reasons are:

1. Lack of satisfaction with the current government

The main reasons for not being satisfied with the government are:

> *a. The absence of Imamah*
>
> *Imamah is the control center of the Islamic State that govern all aspects of life related to the state of religion and the world. Because Muslims do not have Imamah, various problems will arise…*
>
> *b.The Syariat of Allah is not enforced thoroughly …*
>
> *The absence of Imamah and Sharia has become a main cause for a country not to be blessed. That makes Indonesia incapable of resolving multi-dimensional issues. One of them is the issue of security. The citizens do not feel safe anywhere in the motherland. They are not safe from crimes.*

With the bombings that we did, the hope was that there would be a big revolution in Indonesia that would send a message to build Imamah and to enforce Sharia thoroughly. At the least it would be a lesson to the government to manage this country better than before.

2. Rampant destruction

Destruction of morals, the economy, and the social and cultural fabric has affected the world, including Indonesia, where Islam is the majority religion. The destruction occurred in two ways:

> *a. Destruction of faith and thought …*
>
> *b. Destruction of morals …*
>
> *[His list includes the government wasting its mandate, the majority of the people following non-Islamic culture, promiscuity, prostitution, adultery, haram food and beverages (including illicit drugs), murders and persecution, rape, robbery and fraud, thuggery, gambling, entertainment and music, dressing in Western style).*

3. A hope of jihad fi sabilillah (in the way of Allah) being opened

Jihad is a war purely to enforce Allah's word, to diminish the polytheistic, to protect Islam and Muslims, enforce and protect the Islamic nation, widen Islamic power, protect and defend the all Muslims territories, and spread kindness and the truth.

The multidimensional crisis in Indonesia has become worse, even though Islamic organizations, religious schools, and mosques are numerous and the number of preachers

and Islamic teachers is large. All of them have the same mission and ambition, but cruelty has become rampant, and thus the morals of this country are very poor.

It seemed that there was no effective way to effect change and to stop all the destruction except to wage jihad—a war between good and evil. When there is a war between good and evil, sinners will be afraid of the swords of the mujahidin. Thus, cruelty will be demolished gradually.

My involvement with bombing has a personal purpose and hope. We bomb those whom we think of as the enemy and also in order to fulfill the obligation of jihad for Allah. Allah will show the way to open the battlefield between Muslims and Kafirs [non-believers]. On the battlefield, it will be seen who is good and who is evil. This will make it easier to demolish cruelty and other crimes. With jihad it will be easier to resolve multidimensional issues in this country.

4. To carry out the duty of jihad

Jihad fi sabilillah is a pure war which is ordered by Allah. I always pray to be given the ability and opportunities to carry out my obligation to do jihad. While waiting for these opportunities, Hambali came with the idea and program to bomb churches in 2000, while Ali Ghufron came with the idea of the Bali Bombing in 2002. In my opinion there were still doubts as to whether these acts were permissible. However at that time I agreed because I believed in those who brought the ideas. I thought those bombings were jihad planned by Jamaah through which the truth is guaranteed. By involving myself in those bombings, I was carrying out my obligation to do jihad in Allah's path.

5. To seek revenge against Kafirs

The ruthlessness of Zionist Israel towards Palestine, of the Somalia war, the Czech war, the Kashmir war, the Moro war, the Ambon [Maluku island] riots, the Poso [Central Sulawesi] riots, and other acts which are carried out by non-Muslims towards Muslims, have become the basis for our seeking revenge. The church bombing [in Bali] is revenge against Christians because of the riots in Ambon and Poso. The Bali bombing was revenge against America and its allies for attacking Muslims in Afghanistan and Somalia. We believe that America is allied to Israel to fight the Palestinians. That is why I followed when Hambali and Ali Ghufron came with ideas of bombing the churches and Bali.

Ali Imron's rationale for participating in attacks on churches and pubs in Indonesia is drawn from the Salafi Jihadi ideology that JI embraced and perpetuated: that jihad (by which adherents mean physical battle, or qital) against Islam's enemies is the most important means of establishing Islamic law and restoring Islam to its former glory, reached during the time of the Prophet's companions. Creating an Islamic state in Indonesia through the sword is but the first step toward a global caliphate.

Broken down into its key elements, Ali Imron's list hits all the buttons that we now know terrorist ideologues press, to varying degrees and in different combinations, to recruit and radicalize:

- The **political** narrative, in which the West (along with Israel and other allies) is seen as controlling the world and threatening the existence of Islam.

- The **moral** narrative that emphasizes the decay of Western societies.

- The **religious** arguments that sanction the use of violence against enemies of Islam and obliges good Muslims to wage jihad to restore the glory of Islam.

- The **social, heroic** narrative that plays on the need of disaffected individuals to make a difference by acting in solidarity with oppressed Muslims and avenging wrongs to the community.[3]

If these are the extremist messages that recruiters learn to deliver, might a former messenger be well-placed to help us craft effective counternarratives? And could he also be a credible advocate against violent extremism?

[3] See Eelco J.A.M. Kessels, Introduction to *Countering Violent Extremist Narratives* (The Hague: National Coordinator for Counterterrorism, July 2010).

Delivering Alternative Narratives

That credibility appears to be what Detachment 88 hoped to leverage when it decided to provide former terrorist leaders Nasir Abas and Ali Imron with a platform to repent for their past actions. The Indonesian police reasoned that JI members are more likely to listen to their seniors, whom they respect, than to a government they considered apostate. And Nasir Abas and Ali Imron have delivered, speaking out against the violence wrought by the Bali bombing.

The problem is that, while both former terrorists reject violence directed at civilians, they do not reject violence per se. They are candid in admitting that their regrets are for tactical errors committed by JI, not for having been members of JI. They still believe that they have a duty to kill American, Israeli, and Russian soldiers involved in fighting Muslims. The difference is that now, having learned from their mistakes, they will be better prepared and attack only from a position of strength.

In an interview with the QIASS CVE I team in August 2010, the affable Nasir Abas boasted that he "could have planned operations any time": "I had more weapons and better-trained men than [JI leader] Hambali, and I know all the routes from the Philippines to Malaysia to Indonesia."[4] He still regrets not having better prepared his JI subordinates to fight Filipino soldiers in Mindanao. Asked what his greatest regret was in a follow-up interview with the QIASS CVE II team in November 2011, he said:

> *If I had to do it again, I would make a plan, prepare Special Forces and train them in fighting against the troops. I would recruit many more people. This is my greatest regret as, at that time, I saw myself as a warrior, a Muslim warrior.*

True to his new role, Abas hastened to add: "Only after capture did I see the light. But I never used operations against civilians."[5]

The JI doctrine of *jihad qital*, or jihad as battle, is still intrinsic to the group's belief systems, but they now place constraints on, say, suicide bombing. Or, as Ali Imron says in "A Message to My Friends" at the beginning of his memoir:

> *Do not easily allow suicide and influence others to commit suicide because if the action is wrong then you will bear the sin of suicide. And don't let the young guys be influenced by others [who are] willing to commit suicide by bombing in a state of no war and in any place. Suicide bombing is [only] permissible in war and when there is no other option available.*

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[4] Interview with QIASS CVE I team, Jakarta, August 28, 2010.

[5] Interview with QIASS CVE II team, Jakarta, November 3, 2011.

One might conclude that the Indonesian police, in using Abas and Imron, is buying street cred to tell local extremists this – just not at home.

Even then, it is a message that is being drowned out by an increasingly radical fringe that is shopping not so much for fatwas as for leaders prepared to tell them the next target to bomb. In 2012 alone, there have been fourteen terrorist incidents in Indonesia, and dozens arrested. None of the incidents was on the scale of the Bali bombings, but a third of them targeted police officers. Compared to JI, these new terrorists have virtually no training; inexperienced students of former JI bomb-makers, supplemented by Internet recipes, hurriedly teach them bomb-making skills. They also do not have the respect for seniority that the hierarchically conscious JI cultivated in operatives, who had to swear oaths of allegiance to their Amir, a supreme leader with absolute authority over them. To this new breed of Indonesian terrorist, Nasir Abas and Ali Imron are "traitors," not to be heeded.[6]

Yet for remaining JI members, their defection and public denunciations of the Bali bombings are significant. One senior JI Mantiqi II member, arrested by the Malaysian Special Task Force in 2002 and detained for six years, is still stung by their betrayal. "I don't know what made him change," he says of Ali Imron. "We are good friends. What he and Nasir Abas say may be good for them. But it is definitely not good for us. It will ruin our solidarity."[7] What he means by "solidarity" is that Nasir Abas and Ali Imron are now showing JI members an alternative interpretation of jihad that does not glorify violence against civilians.

In assessing the effectiveness of former terrorists in crafting and delivering counternarratives, we have to ask if leveraging terrorist dropouts is an idea of limited use or one that has yet to be effectively utilized.

Nasir Abas and Ali Imron, with their nuanced renunciation of violence as a means of achieving socio-political goals, might be acceptable messengers in Indonesia because they were former mujahidin fighters trained in Afghanistan. Abas held a leadership position in JI while Imron was a key participant in several terrorist acts, giving them a legitimacy and capacity to influence those inside and on the periphery of the extremist movement. Paradoxically, these same qualities would be undermined if they were to completely deny *jihad fi sabillilah*. Adherents believe it to be a mortal sin to renounce this doctrine.[8]

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[6] Author interview with Noor Huda Ismail, Singapore, January 12, 2013.

[7] Author interview, Semarang, May 13, 2012. A Malaysian who frequently travels to Indonesia, he asked that his real name not be used, preferring to be known only as Pak Cik.

[8] I thank Robert McFadden, Senior Vice-President of The Soufan Group and former Special Agent in Charge of the NCIS Global Support Field Office, for this insight.

By emphasizing their jihadi credentials, Ali Imron and Nasir Abas provide an alternative reading of salafi-jihadism that threatens the JI ideology. But is it one that most societies can accept? Ali Imron, for example, in interviews with the QIASS CVE team, saw the irony of his being asked about the content of his counternarrative message.

> *I worry because my message might not be acceptable to the international community. I'll tell my friends we're establishing an Islamic state by following the way of the Prophet Mohammad and by saying Islam is a religion of peace. But once we achieve [an] Islamic state, we can do war in the name of jihad. Can my opinion be accepted internationally?*[9]

[9] Interview with the QIASS CVE II team, November 4, 2011.

Use of Terrorist Dropouts

In September 2007, the late Abu Yahya al Libi, a senior member of the al-Qaeda Sharia Committee, offered the United States a six-step plan to defeat AQ. At the top of his list of unsolicited but rather brilliant advice was to amplify the cases of "back-trackers"—ex-jihadists who had renounced armed action. Al Libi, otherwise known as AQ's Theological Enforcer (Scheuer, 2007) and High Command attack dog (Brachman, 2007), was drunk on hubris, having escaped from Bagram Prison two years earlier, when he made the video "Dots of the Letters," which contained this list:

1. Focus on amplifying cases of ex-jihadists who have renounced armed action.
2. Fabricate stories about jihadist mistakes and exaggerate mistakes when possible.
3. Prompt mainstream Muslim clerics to issue fatwas that incriminate the jihadist movement and its actions.
4. Strengthen and back Islamic movements far removed from jihad, particularly those with a democratic approach.
5. Aggressively neutralize or discredit the guiding thinkers of the jihadist movement.
6. Spin minor disagreements among leaders of jihadist organizations as being major doctrinal or methodological disputes.[10]

Ciovacco (2009) suggests that telling the stories of ex-jihadists is "one of the most powerful tools to defeat al Qaeda" because it refutes AQ's preferred message that it is winning the long war. He adds:

> *Jihadist recruitment and radicalization are analogous to wildfire in the most dry and combustible areas. When the number of recruits to jihadist groups rises, its impact is exponential on the jihadist cause. Every additional recruit serves as an ambassador for the greater movement, inspiring family members, friends, and acquaintances by both the good news in their religious solidarity and victories, but also with their bad news of injury and death. Often the latter inspires a sense of revenge with willing observers accepting the gauntlet.*
>
> *Consequently, the most influential way to counter this spread of jihadist recruitment and radicalization is to inspire change from within. Internal change is even stronger than destroying jihadist fighters because it avoids their becoming martyrs and living on in memory to fight another day. This internal change can be manifested in ex-jihadists. Ex-jihadists have abandoned the cause for many reasons. … Regardless of why ex-jihadists have defected, the critical step is the publication of*

[10] Carl J. Ciovacco, "Could Al Qaeda's Own Strategy to Defeat Itself Actually Work?," *Strategic Insights* 8, no. 3 (August 2009); citing Jarret Brachman, "Abu Yahya's Six Easy Steps for Defeating Al Qaeda," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Volume I, Issue 5 (December 2007).

> *their story. These individual stories, although anecdotal, will help to illuminate the cracks in the jihadist movement for all would-be recruits to see.*[11]

The use of the media is important because, as Abu Yahya says, the role of the media in publicizing the ideological retractions helps redirect public attention away from the role of the host government in prompting the retractions; distance increases perceptions of legitimacy.[12] The media, he suggests, can conduct interviews with reformed scholars, publish their articles, and print their books.

Abu Yahya, it would seem, was taking a page from Detachment 88's playbook. In Indonesia, journalists have been given access to cooperative terrorist leaders for jail cell interviews.[13] Convicted terrorists are encouraged to write their memoirs and ideological tracts. To facilitate the writing, they are given their own cells, portable computers, and books, and when their works are ready, senior police officers provide personal funds to publish them, usually under a minor but respectable imprint. The hand of Detachment 88 is supposed to be hidden, but someone forgot to tell Nasir Abas; in his introduction to the English edition of his memoir, he thanks Police General Bekto Suprapto for supporting its publication. (Suprapto was the Head of Detachment 88 when Nasir Abas was captured in April 2003; Abas credits Suprapto for his conversion.)

Former Detachment 88 head MG Tito Karnavian explains Indonesia's strategy of leveraging terrorist dropouts for CVE as one of "neutralizing the JI recruiters like Nasir Abas and Khairul Ghazali and neutralizing the narratives of the radical ideologues."

> *The police can't debate religion. But we know the extremists are not interested in listening to moderates. We therefore need to co-opt the radical ideologues to re-orient some or all of their concepts —for example; the concept of thagut [evil oppressors] is central to how they perceive the enemy. If Ghazali shows that the government and police are not thagut, it's a big problem for the extremist movement as it'll have to reformulate who the enemy is.*
>
> *Ali Imron is good counter-propaganda. He amplifies the wrongdoings of JI—the killing of innocents. We allow his recruits to visit him so he can tell them. He's the real deal.*[14]

JI, he notes, employs tactics based on salafi-jihadist doctrines, including violence, and the ability of spiritual leaders and operations recruiters to spread this ideology is crucial to its

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[11] Ciovacco, "Could Al Qaeda's Own Strategy to Defeat Itself Actually Work?"

[12] Brachman, "Abu Yahya's Six Easy Steps for Defeating Al Qaeda."

[13] Sadly, lax prison management also means journalists have also had no problems getting to intransigent terrorists such as the Bali bombers, who fielded numerous interviews in the months leading up to their execution in 2008. One of them, Imam Samudra, not only wrote his memoir, *Aku Melawan Teroris* (*I Am Against Terrorists*), but also used a smuggled laptop to conduct lessons in electronic hacking for his acolytes.

[14] Author interview, Jakarta, May 10, 2012.

survival. The main communication channels used by these JI recruiters are invitation-only study sessions called *taklim* (education in the sense of enlightenment) and *tarbiyya* (training and socialization of military information, strategy, rationalization of violence, and construction and glorification of jihad and jihad history).

Inspired by Sebeok's simple communication model,[15] Karnavian believes effective radicalization will only take place if all the key elements are healthy. These include: source (recruiters to formulate and encode the message), destination (recruits to decode and interpret the message), a message (ideology communicated verbally and nonverbally), a channel (face-to-face or mass communication) and a context (internal and external). Any weakness in one element can disrupt the process.

In 2012, Karnavian wrote that this approach suggests several strategies for countering the process of radicalization.

> *Focusing on the destination (potential recruits) and blocking the radical pathway to them is not the only way to disrupt the process of radicalization. Strategies and tactics could be formulated to target other parts of the communication system: the source or sender (spiritual leaders or recruiters, by co-opting or enabling), the channels (by paralyzing the enabling groups and its activities or mass communication methods employed such as internet or printed publications), the messages (countering the ideology or the teachings by a more intense spread of more moderate ideology), and the context, particularly the external context (the environment by which disaffected persons or destination or receiver share common grievances. Understanding the internal context or the individual is important for the rehabilitation of militant detainees, but may be too complicated as a counter-radicalization strategy, as the internal (or personal) context of each potential recruit varies widely.*[16]

In terms of weakening the message or ideological narrative, the goal is to make the "content and packaging of the narrative less interesting and popular" through public education involving influential *ulama* (theologians), as well as by constructing a new narrative to counter and neutralize the concepts central to the radical ideology.

> *This of course requires the involvement of well-known religious institutions as well as leaders who will be listened to by the public and whose depth of religious knowledge cannot be questioned. In addition, it is most important that the personal qualities of these ulama be exemplary so that the new narrative can be understood and accepted both by the general public as well as by the radical groups themselves. From the experience of Egypt and Indonesia itself—as shown by the case of Nasir Abas —**leading figures of the radical network itself can revise the ideological narrative to become more moderate and can have a more powerful impact on changing the thinking of members of the network than moderate ulama**.*

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[15] Thomas A Sebeok, "Communication," in Paul Cobley (ed.), Communication Theories: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies, Volume 1 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

[16] M. Tito Karnavian, "Explaining Islamist Insurgencies: The Case of Al Jamaah Al Islamiyah and the Radicalization of the Poso Conflict, 2000–2007," unpublished dissertation given to the author.

> *This effort requires state pressure on these leaders through law enforcement and intelligence initiatives so that they become cooperative.*[17] (Emphasis added.)

Karnavian's explanation for Indonesia's use of terrorist dropouts to undermine the legitimacy of the extremist narrative is persuasive, raising the question of why Malaysia uses its JI dropouts sparingly in its deradicalization efforts and Singapore not at all. Part of the answer is that whereas Malaysia and Singapore have a fairly good track record of rehabilitating captured extremists and containing the spread of extremist narratives, Indonesia's efforts have been far less successful. Leveraging terrorist dropouts for CVE is seen as a low-cost, high-profile program with less obvious outcomes.

A comparison of how these three Southeast Asian governments have handled the violent extremism exemplified by JI is instructive.

Until Singapore uncovered a local network in 2001, JI was flourishing in the radical underground, successfully sending members to Afghanistan for mujahidin training and recruiting Western-educated graduates in Malaysia, madrassah students in Indonesia, and employed Singaporean men seeking religious knowledge. JI even brought together operatives from around the region to carry out several terrorist attacks incognito and ran training camps in conflict zones in Indonesia and the southern Philippines, sometimes with the assistance of Arab fighters sent by al-Qaeda central. Until the Bali bombings of October 2002, the Indonesian government denied the existence of such a terrorist movement, playing to public opinion of a Western conspiracy to undermine Muslims.

The Bali attacks were a wake-up call that forced Jakarta to allow the Indonesian National Police to join the Singapore Internal Security Department (ISD) and the Malaysian Special Branch (later Special Task Force, Counterterrorism Operations) in hunting down and decapitating JI. As Karnavian said in an interview, "The Bali bombing was the turning point of Indonesia recognizing Jamaah Islamiyah as a terrorist group."[18]

The approaches used by the three countries differ. By October 2002, Singapore and Malaysia had already swept up most of the JI members in their countries, using preventive detention legislation bequeathed by the former British colonial government to deal with a pan-Malayan communist insurgency. Of the 60-odd JI members detained in Singapore under the Internal Security Act (ISA) since 2001, two-thirds have been released following a comprehensive rehabilitation program consisting of religious counseling by volunteer Islamic scholars, psychological counseling to cope with stress and adjusting to civilian life, and after-care support for families. Malaysia detained 100 under its ISA; almost all have been through a deradicalization program, passed a polygraph test, and have now been released.

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Author interview, Jakarta, December 13, 2010.

The availability of preventive detention legislation allowed Singapore and Malaysia to hold extremists, even those who had not participated in acts of violence, for as long as required to neutralize the threat they posed. Some were released within months. Up to twenty, including the Singapore cell leaders of JI, who refused to undergo the voluntary rehabilitation program, remain in custody.

Indonesia had few laws to deal with terrorism when the Bali bombers struck. Reeling from the public outrage, it adopted a catch or kill, prosecute and release strategy. The courts dealt with those the police could prove were involved in terrorist activity; of the 800-plus suspects prosecuted in the last 10 years, three have been executed, but most were released after short periods of imprisonment. About 80 suspects, including the self-styled leader of al-Qaeda in Indonesia, Noordin M. Top, as well as bomb-maker Azahari Husin, were killed in police raids.

The handling of former extremists is also markedly different in the three countries.

While Singapore used the intelligence it obtained from the JI detainees to write a White Paper on "The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism" (Singapore Parliament, January 7, 2003), detailing the network and its operatives, its links to al-Qaeda, and its terrorist plots, ISD did not then and still does not use the militants themselves to counter the extremist narratives, either in counseling sessions with detainees or in public counter-radicalization seminars. Those released from custody are also discouraged from giving media interviews; there have been at most three carefully screened media interviews given by former detainees on condition of anonymity.

The Malaysian STF invites former militants to speak to those under detention for terrorist activity. The few who do agree to help in the deradicalization seminars do not speak publicly about their work. However, the cloak of secrecy has more to do with the Malaysian STF's general reticence to discuss what are known locally as ISA cases; the public perceives preventive detention to be susceptible to abuse for political purposes, leading to the law's repeal last year.

In contrast, former terrorists like Nasir Abas are treated like celebrities in Indonesia, invited to paid speaking engagements, recognized by hotel staff, and treated respectfully by police officers. Abas has in fact turned himself into a mini-industry, always ready to do interviews with foreign media and offer researchers ideas for rehabilitating former extremists. His memoir was translated into English by a fan living in Australia, who "volunteered to help translate this book even though we have never met."[19] By his own

[19] Nasir Abas, Author's Introduction for English Edition, *Inside Jamaah Islamiyah: A Former Member's True Story* (Jakarta: Grafindo, 2011), 11.

account, he has trained many to be terrorists but has not been personally involved in a terrorist attack.

Along the way, Detachment 88 has also had spectacular failures in its experiment with former terrorists. At least two terrorist leaders released early because they were cooperative immediately returned to militancy. Between 2009 and 2010, former JI Mantiqi III leader Abu Tholut (Nasir Abas's predecessor) and former KOMPAK leader Abdullah Sunata set up a military training camp that brought together several extremist groups across the jihadist spectrum. Detachment 88 uncovered this camp by accident when a local resident reported the presence of outsiders in a remote area of Aceh.

Abu Tholut and Sunata fooled their police handlers by continuing to stay in telephone contact, pretending to be cooperative after their release. Failures such as these raise questions about the effectiveness of deradicalization programs and whether disengagement is ever permanent.

The Willing Dropouts

In making the case that terrorist dropouts can contribute to promoting a counternarrative, Michael Jacobson defines dropouts as those who have "voluntarily walked away from" terrorist organizations.[20] He was intrigued, while working on the 9/11 Commission, to learn that some of those selected by al-Qaeda to participate in the suicide attacks had backed out, despite pressure from al-Qaeda. The long list of defectors he compiled include former Egyptian Islamic Jihad head Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, also known as Dr. Fadly, whose work is often cited by al-Qaeda as ideological justifications for its actions; Sheikh Salman bin Fahd al-Awdah, an extremist cleric whose incarceration by the Saudis in the 1990s inspired Osama bin Laden to action; Hassan Hattab, a founder of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, now known as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb; six leaders of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group; al-Qaeda members Jamal al-Fadl, Essam al-Ridi, and L'Houssaine Kherchtou, who turned against the group and became US government witnesses in the embassy bombing trials in early 2001; and Nasir Abas.[21]

Jacobson does not include Ali Imron on his list of terrorist dropouts, perhaps because Imron is still in prison.

Indeed, Imron himself knows that his current status as a prisoner casts doubt on his sincerity. "Please support me to be free from jail," he pleads with a QIASS CVE study team at the end of an interview. "My intention is to do maximum deradicalization. Some say of me, 'He's saying what he does now because he's a prisoner.' But I will do so even when I'm free.'"

Self-serving? No doubt. But as Karnavian says, he is "the real deal." Some of Ali Imron's former students still visit him in prison. A group of ten former students reportedly asked him to teach them to make bombs. Imron told another visitor that he rejected the students' request, but it is not clear if he reported their attempt to acquire bomb-making skills to Detachment 88.[22]

The key difference between dropouts like Nasir Abas, Ali Imron, and the latest to join their ranks, Khairul Ghazali, and "failures" like Abu Tholut and Abdullah Sunata, is that Abas, Imron, and Ghazali have staked out public positions repudiating the violence perpetuated by JI. There is no walking back for them. They may still be in police custody,

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[20] Michael Jacobson, "Terrorist Drop-outs: One Way of Promoting a Counter-Narrative," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 3, no. 2 (2009).

[21] Michael Jacobson, *Terrorist Dropouts: Learning from Those Who Have Left*, Policy Focus #101 (Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2010).

[22] Confidential source, January 14, 2013.

or were in police custody when they decided to make the break, but they have now actually turned against JI in their public utterances, even if they still believe in the goal of turning Indonesia into an Islamic state.

Jacobson and other analysts who have studied terrorist dropouts note that there are many reasons why they turned against their groups, ranging from strategic and tactical disagreements to petty rivalries and personal slights that turned into festering disillusionment with their group leadership and dynamics. Specific acts of violence can also be triggers for cognitive dissonance.

The QIASS CVE team heard many of these justifications during interviews with eight former terrorists in Jakarta in August 2010 and November 2011. The former JI members who were more senior cited particularly the tensions that arose within the group when it began to shift its targeting from the near enemy to the far enemy following Osama bin Laden's 1996 fatwa and its adoption by Hambali.

HS, a former JI leader who claims to have recruited more than two hundred people for its Central Java operations, said he left the group in 1998 over *takfiri* issues.[23] He had joined JI because "as a Muslim, I want to see Indonesia under Islamic law." His role was to select recruits for training in Afghanistan in anticipation of the armed clash with the Indonesian authorities.

But he grew uncomfortable when the Afghan veterans began "telling us the real enemy is not the Indonesian government but America."

> *As leader, I could understand why America [was] the enemy because it did many bad things to Islam. But I felt ambivalence in the JI direction. There were tensions among members about the shift in focus to the US. There was even a discussion to remove Abu Bakar Ba'asyir as leader because some senior members had direct access to al-Qaeda but not Ba'asyir.*
>
> *We considered Bai'ah to be loyalty to God and Ba'asyir as leader of our group. We pledged our loyalty to Ba'asyir as leader of the group. So some felt uncomfortable because we took money from al-Qaeda. The JI doctrine is to listen and obey. If the leader says A, we say A. Moving our bai'ah from one person to another is okay if the leader does it. But Ba'asyir did not give his bai'ah to Osama bin Laden. As far as I know, only two JI members did—Hambali and Zulkarnean.*

In repeated interviews,[24] Nasir Abas and Ali Imron say that at the time of their arrest, they were already disenchanted by al-Qaeda's increased influence over the JI agenda, and that the indiscriminate killings caused by the 2002 Bali bombing were the last straw. They made deliberate decisions to cooperate with the Indonesian authorities almost

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[23] Interview with QIASS CVE I team, Jakarta, August 28, 2010.

[24] They were interviewed by the QIASS CVE team in Jakarta in 2010 and 2011.

immediately upon capture. The courtesy their police interrogators showed them made the decision easier. (Also see Annexes A and B for excerpts from their memoirs.)

One could say that they used their capture by Detachment 88 to disengage and to participate in their own rehabilitation. Nasir Abas and Ali Imron, whose brothers also became involved in JI, are among the rare few who have gone further by helping the Indonesian police persuade other JI operatives to cooperate. In fact, they are considered "key CT assets," helping to debrief prisoners as well as offering advice to Detachment 88 on undercover operations.

Similarly, Khairul Ghazali says he "changed after being remanded" and now helps the Indonesian government.

> *In fact, I write books, collaborate with the government to deradicalize, to change the wrong paradigm of Muslims and their leaders [a paradigm that views non-Muslims as the enemy], to convey the message that terrorism is un-Islamic.*[25]

Ghazali, who says Abu Bakar Ba'asyir considered him the movement's "leader of Sumatra and Aceh," has written two books at the request of Detachment 88: Robbery Is Not Fa'i, refuting the religious arguments used by extremists to justify the robbing of banks and jewelry shops as fa'i (spoils of war) to finance their jihadist operations; and They Are Not Thagut, defending the Indonesian police and government against the extremist charge that they are evil oppressors deserving of death.

In separate interviews, each of the three ideologues spontaneously declared that he had a "personal responsibility" to correct the misinterpretations of Islam held by extremists. Each said that following his arrest by the Indonesian police, he had time to reflect on the real meaning of jihad and learn that his faith did not justify the violence. Having changed his mind, he felt a need to lead others to the correct path.

As Ghazali, who considers himself a religious scholar, put it:

As such, I am responsible to guide those in the wrong, who had spread the wrong message to the community, to be led to the correct path. …The number of terrorists or those with [a] terrorist mind-set is not large and there are only a few. But these few are the ones who destroy the image of Islam…I am made the enemy by the other radicalized terrorists after I've chosen to return to the correct Islamic path. They consider me as a usurper who leaked their secrets. In actual fact, I want to return them to the correct path.

Ali Imron, who proudly noted that telling his life story to other detained terrorist suspects had helped them change their minds and agree to cooperate with the police, explained his

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[25] Interview with the QIASS CVE II team, Medan, November 5, 2011.

obligation: "We all have [the] responsibility to do deradicalization, personally or as a group, to help the police develop a program to deradicalize people."[26]

Nasir Abas went further by calling on the Indonesian government to do more to involve the community in countering extremism:

> *The [party with the] most responsibility to do deradicalization is not the government but the community. … The government makes the strategy, but each of us has a personal responsibility. No budget? We do it voluntarily. The priority must be to prevent the young from becoming radicalized and to work on the ex-combatants.*[27]

This community involvement is particularly important, Nasir Abas feels. He sees the nature of the extremist threat as shifting from violence carried out by a well-organized group like that of Noordin Top (a master planner killed by Indonesian police in 2009), to self-radicalized individuals planting bombs they learned to make from recipes found on the Internet. These individuals were getting their "ideological education from the Internet and listening to Aman Abdurrahman, who preaches that the government is the enemy and Muslims who are not with them are *takfir*." (Abdurrahman, who set up the Jamaah Tauhid Wal Jihad in Indonesia after the Iraqi terrorist group of the same name, is currently serving ten years in prison for his involvement in the Aceh training camp. He previously served four years in jail for organizing a bomb-making class. He became famous in prison for his jailhouse sermons and translations of jihadi texts from Arabic to Indonesian.)

The most effective counternarrative, the three terrorist dropouts said, were their life stories—how they became involved in terrorist activity, killed for a flawed belief system based on wrong interpretations of their faith, and now regret the deaths they caused.

Although Singapore does not use terrorist dropouts to counsel its JI detainees, one of the products of its comprehensive terrorist rehabilitation program, Faiz Abu Bakar Bafana, now helps out with the Malaysian program, lecturing at the STF's deradicalization seminars for detained JI members. Faiz, a Malaysian who was detained along with his brother, a Singapore citizen, by the ISD for four and a half years and subsequently repatriated to Malaysia, had a radicalization trajectory similar to many other JI members. In an interview with the QIASS CVE II team, he said he did not set out to join a terrorist group. He was led into JI because he took religious classes run by JI and found its interpretations of how Muslims should practice Islam according to the Prophet's way attractive. He was not well-schooled in Islamic teachings and accepted uncritically JI's use of religious verses to justify its violence, recruiting his own brother into JI, along with thirty others.

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[26] Interview, November 4, 2011.

[27] Interview, November 3, 2011.

> *I didn't really think about the laws in Islam, but the people who were attacking Muslims and so it was right to attack them. We didn't bother to check if it was allowed by Islamic law, the Sharia. It was about anger and revenge.*[28]

It was only in detention in Singapore that he began to ponder his religious beliefs. "They asked me why do all this [violence]? I said they're killing Muslims. We must retaliate. They said, You're not killing the perpetrators but people in the street. This triggered my thinking."

He began to read Islamic books and learned that jihad was permissible only under certain conditions and that it had a wider meaning. JI had selectively used religious verses to teach him that jihad was compulsory, that they were always at war (*qital*). "JI comes up with these verses and fail[s] to show us the other parts that contain injunctions."

He had hitherto never challenged the JI teachings. "They [Singaporean authorities] brought in *ustadz* (religious scholars) for me to check my beliefs. They asked me questions. Is it Islamic to put bombs in a supermarket, to kill old ladies? What if one of them is your mother? I realized that in Islam, we are not allowed to kill women and children except in war zones. We are not in a war zone. I pondered and came to the conclusion that these actions were against religion. They must stop."

For former JI Secretary General Zulkifli Marzuki, a Malaysian, the reality of life on the run sank in after he found himself in Dacca after fleeing Malaysia with Hambali when the Singapore and Malaysian crackdown on JI began in late 2001. After five years on the run, hiding out in Thailand, Cambodia, and finally Bangladesh, he began to have regrets. "I started thinking I had a good family, business. I killed people but we were not military. I had made a big mistake."[29]

Marzuki also feared that if he "surrendered to the wrong government," or if he were captured, he might end up in Guantanamo Bay. In 2005 he contacted his family to arrange his surrender to the Malaysian police. His former business partner gave him the name of a Malaysian STF officer to contact. He accepted the STF's terms of surrender, returned to Malaysia a year later, was detained several months, and went through a deradicalization seminar conducted by the STF with help from several religious clerics. He now speaks at such seminars, among a small group of carefully vetted former detainees whom the STF considers "radical but … out of the circle of militancy" and able to exert a positive influence on those still in custody.[30]

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[28] Interview with the QIASS CVE II team, Kuala Lumpur, November 2, 2011.

[29] Interview with the QIASS CVE II team, Kuala Lumpur, November 2, 2011.

[30] STF briefing for QIASS CVE II team, Kuala Lumpur, November 2, 2011.

Unlike Bafana, Marzuki did know JI was an armed group—"a mujahidin organization that had been involved in the Afghan war and was linked to other organizations in South Thailand and the Philippines"—when he decided to become a member. His former business partner was close to Hambali, whom he admired. He was thus flattered when Hambali told him that his business skills were needed to help JI set up front companies for the network. "They said that as an accountant and businessman, I have good financial ability and can help them manage JI as it grows," he recalled in an interview with the QIASS CVE II team.

Now a successful entrepreneur in Kuala Lumpur, his message for those on the verge of joining JI is to think carefully. "There are many channels to express your unhappiness to the government or the UN. You still have a chance to change the world without violence."

The specter of Gitmo looms large for JI operatives arrested overseas. Umar Patek decided to be cooperative with the Indonesian police following his arrest in Abbotabad in 2010 because he feared that they might allow Pakistan to turn him over to the United States, where he would face indefinite detention at Guantanamo Bay.[31]

All six men had different entry paths to violence. The similarities in their individual trajectories to disengagement suggests that the decision to leave the terrorist organization might be emotional, but de-radicalization is a cognitive choice (or series of choices) that a terrorist must make. He has to want to change his beliefs before he will accept that his religion does not justify resorting to terrorist violence.

[31] Author interview with MG Tito Karnavian, May 12, 2012.

The Ex-Jihadi Food Network

From left: Anchor of Neo-Democrazy program, Metro TV; Noor Huda Ismail, terrorism expert and social entrepreneur; Yusuf Adirima, former JI fighter in Mindanao and manager of Dapoer Bistik in Semarang.

TV Anchor: You are known as a writer as well as an analyst on terrorism issues. Why do you want to open a café with former convicted terrorists as your employees?

Noor Huda Ismail: Well, I do believe that no one is born a terrorist. There are processes where normal individuals become involved in terrorism, namely introduction to violence, being involved, but also leaving [disengaging from] violence. I have been using [the] food industry as a way to help former convicted terrorists to integrate into society because running a café like Dapoer Bistik, we can't choose our customers. We have to serve everyone who comes to our café regardless of their background. So in many cases, Yusuf, who used to fight against Catholic people in Mindanao in 2000, is now serving Catholic people who come to our café after their church sermon. Food becomes a medium for Yusuf and his perceived enemy to constantly interact in a normal setting. The fear of this initiative is the possibility of Yusuf going back to violence again after he gets enough money from working in the café.

TV Anchor: Is that true, Pak Yusuf? If you are strong you will go back to terrorism?

Yusuf Adirima (smiling): That allegation is baseless. Indeed, I was fighting for two years in the conflict area in Mindanao. I carried an AK-47 every day; it was like my second wife. When I came back to Indonesia in 2002, I was asked by my senior Abu Tholut to find a house, where he

stored explosive materials in a sealed box. I was in jail because of this. I met Pak Huda in 2003 when he interviewed me as a journalist for the Washington Post. *After my release, I contacted him and we started this café together. My priority is now around family and this café business. This is my new jihad. I don't want to go back to violence anymore.*

TV Anchor: Why don't you want to go back to violence?

Yusuf (after a pause): My intense interaction with many difference people has taught me that the use of violence isn't the best way to achieve what we want. I never regret my jihad in Mindanao because Muslims were oppressed and it was in the medan jihad *[jihad front], but I don't think Indonesia is now* medan jihad. *There is no conflict here.*

Neo-Democrazy program, Metro TV, Jakarta, April 14, 2012[32]

That moment of epiphany for Yusuf Adirima, occurring as it did on live television, earned him the approval and admiration of peers that he never obtained fighting with a combined JI-Moro Islamic Liberation Front unit in the Mindanao jungles in 2000 to 2002, even though "it was the best time of my life, as I was able to live fully as a Muslim."[33]

Within days of his appearance on Metro TV, Yusuf had received more than ten calls from people he knew in East and Central Java. These men had been egged on by families and friends who wanted their sons and loved ones to learn from him how to succeed as an entrepreneur. Some asked him to open new restaurants in their locations so they could work for him, he said in an interview a month after his television debut.[34]

A jailed JI member from his Mindanao cohort texted Yusuf, asking him to bring him and his fellow prisoners food from the restaurant so that they could sample his steak and bakery products.

Yusuf, whose real name is Machmudi Haryono, became convinced that Islam was being oppressed when a religious teacher in his hometown of Jombang, East Java, showed him a video of Bosnian Muslims being attacked by Christians. When communal fighting broke out in Ambon and Poso in the late 1990s and mosques in Jombang issued leaflets calling on Muslims to go to the conflict areas, he was swayed by their message that defending Muslims in oppressed places was the greatest level of jihad. After joining JI, however, he was sent to Mindanao for military training, where he fought alongside the MILF in a number of direct military confrontations with the Philippines Army.

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[32] Transcript and photo provided by Noor Huda Ismail.

[33] Interview with QIASS CVE I team, Jakarta, August 29, 2010.

[34] Author interview, Semarang, May 12, 2012.

Yusuf was able to evade capture on his return to Indonesia, but he was arrested and sentenced to seven years in prison when JI Mantiqi III leader Abu Tholut told the Indonesian police that he had left a suitcase of explosives in a house rented by Yusuf in Semarang. (Yusuf has always claimed he did not know the suitcase contained explosives and is convinced that Abu Tholut received a lighter sentence of only five years for selling him out.) Disappointed by his own leader's betrayal, Yusuf decided to leave JI, but there was no help available until he reached out to Noor Huda Ismail, then a *Washington Post* reporter who had interviewed him in prison.

"I was a fine prisoner," Yusuf said. "And I learnt that there was almost no program to reform us. So when I came out, I realized I needed to inform people in the network how to get out." His spontaneous rejection of violence on TV was "to inspire friends in the network to leave violence."

> *There are some people in the network who want to get out. But there is no guidance on how to do so. Who to talk to. I now know how to lead a normal life. I want to help others. Many have already been out of jail longer than me, but I am more accepted. They can learn from me. …*
>
> *Friends who really want to get out were pleased to see me on TV. They called me to ask what I have achieved. Some of course were suspicious why I have been able to achieve so much so quickly. I told them I work as a team. …*
>
> *Now if I have a chance to go back to Mindanao, I will, but to do* dakwah *[missionary work]. I will tell them to do what I can do—run restaurants.*
>
> *I have a new identity—I am an entrepreneur.*

Yusuf's employer, Noor Huda Ismail, is a terrorism researcher. He had his moment of epiphany ten years ago, when he realized that one of the Bali bombers was a former roommate from the Ngruki boarding school, the incubator of most of Indonesia's terrorists. Ismail considers Yusuf's public renunciation of terrorism a validation of his rehabilitation efforts.

"The fact that Yusuf expressed his remorse publicly without my pressure suggests the viability of disengagement initiatives by civil society, because the study of terrorist engagement, disengagement and reengagement holds important lessons for academicians and policymakers," he said in a separate interview.[35]

Ismail, who decided to start his own Food for Peace program to provide employment to jihadis released from prison after Yusuf's appeal for help, realized that they needed a sense of empowerment to cope with feelings of ostracization from society and their old

[35] Author interview, Semarang, May 12, 2012.

network. Working with Yusuf, he started Dapoer Bistik, which serves traditional Indonesian food.

> *Food can provide an excellent platform for nearly everyone to start engaging with each other. In Indonesia, food has been widely used to promote peace. One of the examples is the celebration of Padungku in Poso, where Muslims and Christians eat together to thank God during harvest time.*

Since the opening of Dapoer Bistik in Semarang, Yusuf has recruited other former radicals to work with him. Says Ismail: "It is like a multilevel marketing system where a member gets other members to participate in this disengagement initiative."

One of Noordin Top's former lieutenants runs another Dapoer Bistik in Solo. He is empowered to train and bring in former radicals but is supervised by a manager hired by Ismail.

Ismail now dreams of setting up a food network around Indonesia. He wants to open more Dapoer Bistiks to teach ex-jihadis to cook so they will have jobs and be able to support their families and not be forced by circumstance to return to their radical networks. He says that the Food for Peace program does no overt ideological deradicalization; despite his early education at Ngruki, he does not feel equipped to engage his patrons and clients in theological discussions.

But the café as a social enterprise is potent counter-radicalization. By serving all faiths and religions, it helps radicals break out of the us-versus-them mentality that is intrinsic to their continued radicalization.

Since Yusuf's celebrity moment on television, he has also begun to attract those on the periphery of the extremist movement who are looking for alternatives to the violent influences they are surrounded by.

Is Yusuf more credible and more effective than police-sponsored dropouts like Ali Imron and Nasir Abas? He is confident that he is. Nasir Abas, he says, has been widely rejected since he began saying the Bali bombing was wrong. "It is irritating that he's so open in discussing the Bali bombing. It's vulgar."

Ali Imron, on the other hand, is more acceptable because he is serving time in prison and his denunciations of violence are more subtle. "Nasir Abas says this is wrong. Ali says I don't agree with this action but this is my opinion," Yusuf explains, raising an interesting conundrum about conditional disengagement. Extremists are usually indoctrinated to see the world in Manichean terms—good versus evil, us versus them—and yet Imron's more nuanced rejection of the Bali bombing is more acceptable than Abas's categorical denunciation, even for someone like Yusuf, who has publicly declared that violence does not work.

Six Practical Lessons for Policymakers

As their memoirs and utterances make clear, Nasir Abas, Ali Imron, Khairul Ghazali, and Yusuf Adirima are terrorist dropouts on their own terms; their disengagement is conditional on their being accepted as jihadists, with the caveat that they will fight only in defense of Muslims in conflict zones and only against soldiers. That is, they consider that fighting in Palestinian territories, Russia, Afghanistan, and the southern Philippines is justifiable.

Leveraging them for CVE raises three strategic issues for policymakers:

1. By providing such terrorist dropouts with what amounts to a pulpit to preach against violence directed at civilians, will governments be mainstreaming their idea of armed jihad as an obligation for Muslims in defense of other Muslims and the establishment of an Islamic state? In other words, can we accept that the strategy to undermine the popular narrative of JI is to accept the legitimacy of its goal to create an Islamic caliphate throughout Southeast Asia—by force, if necessary?

2. Who decides what constitutes a conflict zone? Should governments turn a blind eye to citizens who take up arms to fight foreign soldiers in other lands? What is to stop them from deciding that local communal conflicts fit the definition of *medan jihad*? For instance, clashes that started over petty disputes between Christians and Muslims in Ambon in the late 1990s and Poso in the mid-2000s became more violent and protracted when JI and various radical organizations in Jakarta declared jihad and sent volunteers to the islands to defend Muslims.

3. How do we even calculate the cost-benefit analysis of such conditional disengagement?

Obviously, these are problematic issues for any society. For majority Muslim countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, a certain amount of ambivalence is to be expected. Anger against Israel and the West is sufficiently prevalent that the instinct is to say to detained extremists, as a Malaysian STF officer acknowledged he does: "Malaysia is not under attack. Palestine is. So go die in Palestine."[36]

Accepting any definition of armed jihad amounts to a government's agreeing to give up its monopoly on violence to a group claiming religious grounds. Even if a government is prepared to turn a blind eye to its citizens engaging in violence overseas for geostrategic or political reasons, it is rare for a state to officially sanction it.

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[36] Interview with QIASS CVE II team, Kuala Lumpur, November 2, 2011.

As a law-and-order solution, leveraging terrorist dropouts can offer immediate gains. The intelligence and insights the former terrorists offer on their groups and former colleagues can prevent attacks and save lives. In the medium term, by exposing the hypocrisy and reality of terrorist organizations, terrorist dropouts will perhaps dissuade the young from going down the path to violence. Some of these gains are measurable, others not.

For policymakers trying to navigate potential minefields, the Southeast Asia experiences offer six practical lessons:

1. The Counternarrative

It is clear that no self-respecting former terrorist will deliver a counternarrative that is unambiguously against the use of violence as a religious duty. They are dropouts with serious doctrinal, tactical, and emotional differences with their former colleagues; they are not pacifists. As some of the cases described here show—in particular, as Nasir Abas and Ali Imron's cases show—many did not set out to join a terrorist group but saw themselves in a heroic light, as "Muslim warriors" (in Abas's words) fighting Soviet oppression in Afghanistan.[37] Indeed, both Abas and Imron begin their memoirs with accounts of studying at the Afghanistan Mujahidin Military Academy in Sadaa, Pakistan, and the thrill of fighting alongside the Afghan mujahidin during "study holidays."[38]

Imron was motivated to follow in the footsteps of the brother he was closest to, Ali Ghufron (one of the executed Bali bombers), who he knew had joined an "organization which had a program of military practices."[39]

Ten years after leaving southern Mindanao, Yusuf Adirima still lights up when he talks about the two years he spent with the MILF fighting Filipino soldiers whose government, he said, had "declared war against Islam." He was "compelled to go there" by the circumstances and has no regrets about having done so.[40]

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[37] Interview, November 3, 2011.

[38] Nasir Abas, *Inside Jamaah Islamiyah: A Former Member's True Story*. Abas, who was in the fifth batch at the Mujahidin Academy, said that the Indonesians were not permitted to "join the battle on the frontmost line," where the infantry troops are, but that each year, a small group of students was selected to join the Afghan mujahidin for a month at the front. After he became a small arms instructor at the academy, he went to the battlefront a few more times. Imron, who went to Afghanistan in 1991 along with Imam Samudra in the eight batch, never had the opportunity, as the communist government in Kabul had by then been defeated. He was instead sent to the practice camp of the practical war unit in Towrkham to learn bomb-making. (Ali Imron, *Ali Imron Sang Pengebom*.)

[39] Ali Imron, *Ali Imron Sang Pengebom*. He also made this point in his interview with the QIASS CVE I team in 2010.

[40] Interview, May 12, 2012.

The way they tell their life stories, their path into terrorist violence was a sad deviation from holy warrior to baby killer engineered by unscrupulous leaders, namely Hambali and Abu Tholut. The details that the former terrorists provide are the stuff of soap opera. Nasir Abas, for example, sounds like a jealous spouse when he complains that Hambali, citing the difficulty of raising funds, would not give him money to buy PCs for his camp in the southern Philippines. "But if I had a plan for bombing churches in Kota Kinabalu, he'll find the money. He has no money for training. But for operations, he'll find money in one night."[41]

They also humanize their stories by describing the pain they feel not only in being betrayed by their superiors but in seeing friends and relatives in custody. Imron describes watching his brothers Ali Ghufron and Amrozi "curled up in a cell, handcuffed and flanked by guards"—a humiliation he could not bear to witness, he says.[42]

The authenticity that these men bring to the propaganda war is indisputable. They are real bad guys with blood on their hands who have seen the light. At the same time, policymakers should be aware of their limitations and use their stories appropriately. Such counternarratives can be misconstrued and can have the effect of exciting participation rather than serving as cautionary tales. A graphic novel featuring Nasir Abas was produced by the nonprofit organization Lazuardi Biru in cooperation with the police. Entitled *Kutemukan Makna Jihad* (*I Found the Meaning of Jihad*), its opening pages are filled with images of men, armed only with assault rifles, fighting modern tanks. The comic book also features the victims of suicide bombings as well as a suicide bomber. Perhaps the most powerful panels are those in which the bomber's tearful parents apologize for their son's actions and denounce as cowards those who sent their son on a suicide mission. But these panels appear on page 130 of a 138-page book that is designed to educate schoolchildren. As yet, it is not part of any school curriculum.

Clearly, given the terrorist dropouts' underlying radical interpretation of jihad, such materials need to be part of a larger public education campaign involving community leaders who can provide context and demonstrate normal values versus extremist beliefs. (See also Lesson #6.)

Highlighting these stories in a larger hearts and minds campaign is a double-edged sword. As Noor Huda Ismail says of Nasir Abas and Ali Imron:

> *Both persons are useful to counter violence ideology for people who are not in the network, the commoners. They have … legitimacy … because of their past experience. Continuing to support them to disseminate their story to the general public is crucial. However, they are not effective enough for*

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[41] Interview, November 3, 2011.

[42] Ali Imron, Ali Imron Sang Pengebom.

those who are still in the network because both of them are seen as [an] extension of the government's interest and the puppets of the police.[43]

2. The Messenger

As those studying terrorist disengagement well know, there is no consensus on the question of whether we need to deradicalize terrorists in order to reduce the risk of their reengaging in violence. Horgan and Altier (2012) argue that the assumption that changing detainees' beliefs about violence will result in a change in their behavior might in fact be unrealistic.

> *Aside from the fact that attitudes and behavior rarely correlate in a reliable fashion, a phenomenon that is well-documented in the field of psychology, there is a broader looming issue of far greater importance. We cannot reliably predict if people will re-engage in terrorism without knowing how or why they dis-engage and re-engage.*[44]

Nasir Abas and Ali Imron are examples of terrorist dropouts who have been very cooperative without being completely deradicalized. Their moment of cognitive dissonance in jail allowed them to see the tragedy of their past, but not the error of their belief system.

Jacobson (2010) makes a telling comment about Nasir Abas that rings true for anyone who has interviewed him:

> *… by dropping out, Abas effectively traded one leadership role for another, going from terrorist commander to outspoken JI critic. This new role likely fulfilled his need to feel important in the same way that being a key member of JI had.*[45]

Just as Yusuf Adirima has reinvented himself as a restaurant entrepreneur, Abas too has reinvented himself as a counter-radicalization entrepreneur, using his knowledge of JI to peddle ideas to government agencies and philanthropic groups desperate to try something. But it is not just self-importance that motivates Abas; most of his ideas are about helping his erstwhile colleagues, particularly the former mujahidin fighters he trained with or instructed, reintegrate into society—with him as their leader, of course.

A Malaysian citizen, Nasir Abas has also reaped real rewards from his cooperation with the Indonesian police. He is now a free man, removed in 2008 from the United Nations Security Council Al-Qaida and Taliban Sanctions Committee's Consolidated List, which

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[43] Email to author, April 18, 2012.

[44] Horgan and Altier, "The Future of Terrorist De-Radicalization Programs."

[45] Jacobson, "Terrorist Drop-outs: One Way of Promoting a Counter-Narrative."

had subjected him to an assets freeze, a travel ban, and an arms embargo.[46] Still wanted for arrest by the Malaysian police, he does not have a valid passport to travel beyond Indonesia but is said to have applied for Indonesian citizenship. The implicit assumption is that an Indonesian passport is contingent on his continued good behavior and cooperation.

It is also about second chances. As Faiz Abu Bakar Bafana, now a successful businessman with a family, pleads: "We have been detained and punished. Give us a second chance to come back to the people. Allow us to be loved and guided. We'll appreciate the kindness." He believes other extremists deserve a second chance, and he is helping the Malaysian STF rehabilitate other detainees.

A Malaysian cleric who works with the STF told the QIASS CVE II team in 2011 that second chances are what rehabilitation is about. "Even the bad ones still have a sense of humanity. Look at them as humans with potential to repent and turn back," he said. "Talk to them as Muslim brothers gone astray. Tell them they have a second chance to go back."[47]

Is there a serious risk that terrorist dropouts could reengage if conditions, in their mind, change such as to allow them to circumvent their current definition of armed jihad and advocate terrorist violence? Several countries engaged in terrorist rehabilitation, like Singapore, do not consider the risk of giving products of their programs a public platform to promulgate their new views worth taking. But the public platform is perhaps more constraint than opportunity. Terrorist dropouts who change their minds could be rearrested for inciting violence or (for those still under detention) could lose certain liberties. Ali Imron, asked to explain Abu Tholut's reengagement with the extremist movement after his early release from jail, scoffs that the police should have kept better tabs on him. "He should have been controlled by all levels of society," he declared.[48]

Unless dropouts who have gone public (Abu Tholut had not) can offer a compelling reason for their flip-flop that benefits the extremist movement—for example, by alleging police coercion or torture—they also risk becoming objects of ridicule.

Policymakers can minimize the risk of flip-flops by banning the use of coercive measures to compel cooperation from those suspected of terrorist activity. Indeed, the practice of torture provides the extremist movement with a useful tool to dismiss defections as government lies. On the other hand, decent treatment from the point of arrest helps

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[46] "Security Council Al-Qaida and Taliban Sanctions Committee Approves Deletion of One Entry From Consolidated List," SC/9458, September 26, 2008, http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/sc9458.doc.htm.

[47] Interview with QIASS CVE II team, Kuala Lumpur, November 2, 2011.

[48] Interview, November 4, 2011.

convince detainees that the costs of a voluntary exit from terrorism might not be prohibitive but rewarding. Nasir Abas is a case in point.

3. The Audience

On the tenth anniversary of the public disclosure of JI's existence in Singapore, The *Straits Times* (Singapore) ran this headline: "What Jemaah Islamiyah Did Was Wrong, Convicted Terrorist Says" (January 7, 2012). In the piece, former detainee M talks about discussing his treatment in jail with his wife and children during weekly family visits:

> *"During these visits, I told them that I was allowed to perform my religious obligations, and my rights as a Muslim were well respected."*
>
> *It was not what he had expected. While in the JI, he explains, it was drummed into him that the authorities would treat him harshly and prevent him from performing his religious obligations should he be detained.*
>
> *What M encountered was quite different: He was given a prayer mat, and the sign showing the direction of Mecca, to which Muslims face during prayers, was already drawn on the floor of his cell. "A Gurkha guard would knock on my cell door and inform me of prayer times," he adds.*
>
> *During the fasting month of Ramadan, arrangements were made for him to have his meals at the specified times – after dusk and before dawn. Dates were also provided for him to break his fast.*
>
> *"As I was permitted to keep a copy of the Holy Qur'an in the cell, I read it daily, and often complete reading the entire Qur'an on a weekly basis," he recounts.*

The Singapore ISD does not generally encourage former detainees to talk publicly about either JI or their experiences in detention. Yet media requests for interviews with former detainees have selectively been acceded to—for example, to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the Religious Rehabilitation Group, a network of volunteer clerics and Islamic scholars who counsel detainees on Islam. Judging from the article contents and headlines, the objectives are twofold—to emphasize the continuing threat of terrorism and religious extremism, and to demonstrate that the religious rights of detainees are respected in custody.

For a secular state like Singapore with a minority Muslim population, showing that Muslims are not oppressed is seen as crucial, especially since JI's political ideology demonizes non-Muslims.

Even in Malaysia and Indonesia, where Muslims are the majority, Muslim police officers in the security services also go out of their way to showcase their religious credentials, using their shared religion as a bonding tool with detainees, praying and breaking fast

with them during Ramadan. Detachment 88 has been known to bring extremists in its custody to orphanages and shantytowns. Help them instead of fighting the so-called infidel, they tell the extremists; this is how good Muslims should help other Muslims.

Empathy not only helps reduce resistance, offering terrorist dropouts a reason to find an alternative pathway from violence, but also demonstrates that the police champion the cause of Muslims and are not *thagut*.

Policymakers should remember, in crafting counternarratives, that their audience is not only those inside extremist movements or on the periphery, about to take the plunge, but also society at large. Communities at risk, in particular, need to be reassured that they are not supporting abusive or repressive policies. In Malaysia, public pressure forced the government to repeal the Internal Security Act, which had been used to detain terrorist suspects for investigation and to neutralize security threats, but which the public believed to have been abused by the federal government for political purposes. These perceptions have also deprived the STF of larger community support for its counter-radicalization programs.

4. The Terrorist Landscape

Do terrorist dropouts have a shelf life? Nasir Abas and Ali Imron, even Yusuf Adirima, are from a generation of terrorists nurtured by a hierarchical organization that indoctrinated recruits through a structured process of religious study and military training and organized itself in geographic and functional units. By 2007, this JI no longer existed, as documents seized from JI leader Abu Dujana by Detachment 88 showed.[49]

Today's terrorists are either self-radicalized through exposure to extremist websites on the Internet or are radical activists who graduated from smashing bars and vice dens in Central Java to suicide bombing.

A survey conducted by the Setara Institute for Peace and Democracy in October 2011 in Central Java and Yogyakarta showed that the majority of Indonesians do not support radical organizations. Another survey, conducted in mid-January 2012 following a suicide bomb attack against a police station in Cirebon in April 2011 and a bomb attack on a church in Solo in September of the same year, both committed by young men known to have been active in Muslim youth groups, found that "a number of radical Muslim

[49] Karnavian, "Explaining Islamist Insurgencies: The Case of Al Jamaah Al Islamiyah and the Radicalization of the Poso Conflict, 2000–2007."

activists in Central Java cities have become jihadists," suggesting that "radical youth groups are acting as 'incubators' for new jihadists who later become terrorists."[50]

The Setara Institute attributed the shift from activism to terrorism to a profound hatred of those who are not Muslims (for example, Christians) and of Indonesian security forces. Many young radicals were also involved in raids against nightclubs and vice. Their motivations:

> *A strong hostility towards those who in their views were responsible for wrongdoing against Islam motivates attacks against the police and members of other religious confessions [groups]. Strong anti-Americanism is another feature.*
>
> *Without quick and radical change in the country, the study said, these radical youth organizations will not hesitate [to use] force in violent actions to reach their political goals, including imposing the Sharia.*[51]

The narratives have not changed, but there is an increased focus on the near enemy—the *thagut* government and police. Decapitated and stripped of bomb-making and planning skills by a decade of police action, the extremist movement no longer has the wherewithal to carry out big operations. Yet the hatred has not diminished.

Neither has the importance of leadership. Until 2009, those intent on violent actions in Indonesia gravitated toward Noordin M. Top, who planned the post-2002 suicide bombings in Indonesia. Now their hero is Aman Abdurrahman, a young ideologue who first made his name translating the works of contemporary jihad thinkers such as al Maqdisi and Abdul Qadir bin Abdul Aziz while in prison for several years for organizing a bomb-making class in 2004. Some 70 translated works, as well as his 30 prison essays on *tawhid* and jihad, have been uploaded onto a website that attracts 100–200 readers a day. Some of Abdurrahman's papers have been published, in book form, by the Jazeera publishing house in Solo.

Back in prison a second time, Abdurrahman is now focused not only on encouraging attacks on the police but also on countering the Indonesian government's counter-radicalization initiatives. He issued, from prison, a swift and robust rebuttal of Khairul Ghazali's second book on the concept of *thagut*, cheekily titling his *Ya, Mereka Memang Thagut* (*Yes, They are Indeed Evil Oppressors*). Abdurrahman's book has attracted thousands at road shows organized by a JI publishing house. A book discussion in Bima, Lombok, alone attracted 400 fans in March 2012.[52]

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[50] "Study Shows How Young Radical Indonesian Muslims Become Terrorists," *Asia News*, February 1, 2012; http://www.setara-institute.org/en/content/study-shows-how-young-radical-indonesian-muslims-become-terrorists.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Confidential source, April 2012.

The best policy response to Aman Abdurrahman is perhaps not to enlist a dropout to engage him in a verbal fistfight but rather to muzzle him. He has been convicted of terrorist offenses and is in prison. There is no reason to accord him the same liberties to write and publish as the more cooperative terrorist dropouts.

5. The NGOs

In a speech at a counterterrorism conference in Jakarta in October 2012, Noor Huda Ismail issued this powerful appeal for help to develop his Food for Peace program:

> *I hope my work can be useful as a possible model that can be leveraged and modified to tailor to the needs of each local space, cultural differences and context. Further, considering the significant amount of time and financial investment needed, particularly with newly released convicted terrorists, I [am not] capable of engaging with them effectively all at once. Therefore, the state must commit to support social enterprises that help to integrate those released from prison. Alone I can help perhaps 10 at a time. But what if we have a network of 10 volunteers and NGOs? Or 50? Together we will be able to reach out to 50 Yusufs, and through them, help 500 former militants re-enter Indonesian society, so that they will not return to lives of violence.*

The prospect of government sponsorship for a network of social enterprises employing former terrorists raises the same objections Ismail himself had to leveraging Nasir Abas and Ali Imron for CVE: the audience they need to reach—potential terrorist recruits—will not listen to those they consider government puppets. Is it possible to support NGOs without showing the hand of government? Yes. But can policymakers live with the lack of prudential controls this implies?

6. The Mainstream Moderates

In countries that have felt the pain of terrorist attacks, the urge to punish those responsible, to demand retributive justice, is strong. Rehabilitation can be perceived as a weakness, the response of soft-hearted liberals who want to treat terrorists as victims instead of criminals.

Putting terrorist dropouts on a pedestal, even if this response is carefully calibrated, can be controversial and offensive to families of victims. Policymakers should not only restrain from lionizing dropouts, but they should also balance the scales by focusing public attention on the volunteers who work with them.

The Singapore terrorist rehabilitation program, for example, has attracted attention since it was unveiled in 2004 because it focuses not on terrorists or the zero recidivism rate but

on the volunteers, particularly the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), who assist in their rehabilitation.

As former ISD Director Benny Lim recalls, it was "ordinary people in the community, from the Malay-Muslim religious community, who stepped forward to work with us to craft the rehabilitation approach.

"Although it's lauded today, at that time it was untested, uncharted territory and went against the grain of conventional views. It's a measure of their conviction and courage that they stepped out and I really admire them."[53]

Moderate community leaders who exemplify mainstream thinking are the enduring partners in any CVE work and should not be overlooked in the search for ever creative approaches to fighting terrorism.

[53] Wong Sher Main, "Life Is More Complicated than Black and White," *Challenge,* March 13, 2012, http://www.challenge.gov.sg/2012/03/life-is-more-complicated-than-black-and-white/.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the following, who made this paper possible: Police Major General Tito Karnavian, Chief of the West Papua Police and former Head of Detachment 88, who shared invaluable insights and allowed access to terrorist leaders in police custody; Noor Huda Ismail, who introduced me to his Food for Peace program and its clientele and continues to educate me on the Indonesian jihadist scene; Dato' Ayob Khan Mydin Pitchay, Deputy Director of the Malaysian Special Task Force (Ops/Counter Terrorism), and DSP Mohd Zaini Mohd Akhir, also of the STF, who provided very comprehensive briefings on their work; Ali Soufan, CEO of The Soufan Group, who demonstrates daily how private sector national security research can be of value to national counterterrorism efforts, and who introduced me to a great CVE team: John Horgan, Steve Kleinman, Thomas Neer, Stephen White, Barry McManus, Dan Freedman, and Don Borelli—and especially Robert McFadden, who gently kept this paper on track and offered very constructive comments. And of course, friends in Singapore who do not wish to be named but whose work in pioneering CT initiatives inspire me always. All errors are mine alone.

About the Author

Susan Sim is Vice-President for Asia of The Soufan Group. She is also a Consultant and Adjunct Lecturer at the Home Team Academy of the Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore, and Associate Fellow of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.

Ms. Sim started her career as an Inspector in the Singapore Police Force. She subsequently became a senior intelligence analyst with the Internal Security Department of the Ministry of Home Affairs in Singapore, where she headed the counterterrorism and counterespionage research units.

She then joined *The Singapore Straits Times*, where she had an award-winning career as the Indonesia Bureau Chief in Jakarta, where she covered the fall of Suharto and the emerging political landscape from 1996 to 2001.

Ms. Sim joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2002, where she was the Senior Deputy Director in charge of the Indonesia Desk. She then took up post as Deputy Chief of Mission at the Singapore Embassy in Washington, DC, from July 2003 to July 2006. On returning to Singapore, she spent a year as a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), where she remains affiliated as an Associate Fellow.

Ms. Sim joined the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, as a Senior Fellow in 2008. She was later appointed Coordinator of the Civil and Internal Conflict Programme. She expanded the ambit of this program to include research into radicalization processes in cyberspace, in conflict zones and through migration networks and prison communities. She edited a quarterly report on the Jihadist Web as well as the Afghanistan Update and the RSIS Policy Backgrounder for the policy and intelligence community in Singapore. She left in June 2009 to found Strategic Nexus Consultancy, a boutique research firm specializing in home front security and counterterrorism issues.

Ms. Sim is Consulting Editor of the Home Team Journal published by the Home Team Academy, and on the Editorial Board of Police Practice & Research, an international journal that presents current and innovative police research as well as operational and administrative practices from around the world. She is the author of Making Singapore Safe: Thirty Years of the National Crime Prevention Council (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2011) and editor of Building Resilient Societies. Forging Global Partnerships (Singapore: NCPC, 2012). She has also contributed to NATO books on counterterrorism.

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INFO@QIASS.ORG
WWW.QIASS.ORG
DOHA | QATAR