Since the 911 attacks of 2001, a rise in religious extremism has threatened global security. How can cities deal with such threats to liveability? Koh Buck Song from the Centre for Liveable Cities looks at how Singapore is addressing this issue through the work of the Religious Rehabilitation Group.

In 2001-2002, radical activists from Jemaah Islamiah were detained on suspicion of plots to attack diplomatic missions and a train station.
The Challenge

“Resilience” is often considered in environmental or social equity terms, such as preparing for natural disasters or addressing wealth gaps. In fact, social resilience also encompasses religious harmony. This connects with a major concern today – religious extremism.

Extremism has become more pervasive in the post-911 world. In 2001 and 2002, a number of activists of the radical group Jemaah Islamiyah were arrested under the Internal Security Act for seeking to create chaos in Singapore. Some of them had trained in terrorist camps in Afghanistan. Dealing with such threats is vital to the security of any country. It is especially crucial for small cities like Singapore, whose livelihood depend on keeping its borders open to trade, tourism, investment and, increasingly, immigration.
The Solution

After the Jemaah Islamiyah arrests, the Singapore government approached community leaders Ustaz Ali Haji Mohamed and Ustaz Mohamad Hasbi Hassan in 2003 to help counsel the detainees, drawing on their previous work with the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (Pergas) and the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis). The two men enlisted the help of a few Islamic scholars and teachers, and this led to the formation of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG).

This voluntary organisation seeks to address the religious aspect of the rehabilitation of those arrested. The two other components in the rehabilitation process are psychological and social. To address the detainees’ social needs such as helping their families cope with life while they are under detention, RRG works with a few partner organisations. These community bodies include Khadijah Mosque, Council for the Development of Singapore Malay/Muslim Community (Mendaki), the Singapore
Malay Youth Library Association (Taman Bacaan) and the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP).

Integrating former offenders back into normal life requires the support of the rest of the society. In this way, RRG’s work within the Muslim community has many similarities with another secular national initiative called the Yellow Ribbon Project, which aims to change the mindsets of employers and society to give former offenders a second chance in life, to return to their families and find new jobs.

RRG’s resource counselling centre supports research on subjects such as the Syrian conflict, as well as training, public education and information-sharing. Its community outreach has touched thousands of people, including those in schools, churches, community centres and Chinese clan associations. The centre, which has a multimedia visitor gallery, has become a must-see stop on the Geylang community heritage trail for grassroots groups.

RRG’s 39 counsellors spend time with detainees to identify and correct misinterpreted Muslim concepts that have been used to justify political objectives, for example, wrongly applying Quranic verses about “jihad” to advocate random acts of killing. The counsellors also help the detainees better appreciate living amongst Singapore’s multi-racial and multi-religious harmony in a secular state.
The detainees are usually suspicious at first. They open up only when they realise that the counsellors are not paid government officers, but volunteers who care about the well-being of society and the good name of the Muslim community, according to Ustaz Mohamed Ali, RRG’s volunteer vice-chairman, who is an academic at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research. In a recent interview with The Straits Times, he said that RRG’s “counter-ideological approach” of re-education works because “no one is born a terrorist, a radical or extremist. It’s through a process of radicalisation that these people become like that.”

RRG’s counsellors are certified by a selection board, and they work towards a specialist diploma in counselling and psychology while doing their work. They have to be well-read in geopolitics and engage effectively in discussions on global developments. For instance, since the recent rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), RRG’s outreach has included more online platforms such as a Facebook page, Youtube videos of detainees recanting false ideologies, and a mobile app to provide accurate, scholarly interpretation of the Quran.

The work of RRG is built on a foundation of longstanding trust between the community at large and the government, and also among religious communities. As Salim Mohamed Nasir, an academic in international relations and volunteer head of RRG’s secretariat, says, “Respect and acceptance of diversity are key. It’s about helping one community for the greater good.” The Singaporean approach to addressing religious issues has always been supported by a broader country-wide grassroots network. For example, all constituencies have Inter Racial and Religious Confidence Circles, inter-faith groups of leaders who come together to share information and maintain harmony in the community. These networks of people form a system that facilitates quick response and easy communication between groups from different faiths and state organisations in times of need. Such conditions, in some ways unique to Singapore’s multi-racial society, facilitate RRG’s work of fostering a more cohesive, resilient nation.
The Outcome

Since 2003, RRG has conducted hundreds of counselling sessions. After months, sometimes years, of counselling, the detainees begin to embrace “wasatiyyah” (moderation) and let go of earlier mistaken beliefs of hate and violence, when the Quran, in fact, condemns suicide and murder. Supervision programmes for former offenders help them break away from violent ideologies and rebuild normal lives.

Singapore has a well-established social network, ready to address extremist threats to society. Since 2002, more than 60 people have been detained for involvement in terrorism-related activities. To date, more than two-thirds have been released. There has been only one case of recidivism so far – and this is a credit to RRG and the Muslim community’s efforts to help nurture the religious harmony that is a vital facet of any liveable city.

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01 Informational and awareness material produced by RRG are used in the community’s educational and outreach efforts.

02 RRG regularly hosts student visits at their Resource and Counselling Centre.