



COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN SINGAPORE

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Abstract:

The article focuses on the influence of global violent extremism in Singapore, and the efforts and successes of this country in preventing and countering violent extremism. The author argues that terrorism cannot be defeated solely through military action. Instead, it is necessary to expand counterterrorism toolkits to include a variety of 'soft approaches'. In this vein, the article presents Singapore's response to violent extremism, explaining the distinct efforts displayed by the Internal Security Department, including strong border security, well-equipped law enforcement and security agencies, close monitoring of online platforms, the promotion of secularism, pluralism and non-identity politics, as well as liberal education, the promotion of greater understanding through interfaith dialogue, legislative reforms and active community engagement to help, prevent and respond to terrorist attacks.

Keywords: Singapore, counterterrorism, PCEV, border security, on-line platforms, non-identity politics, secularism, liberal education, interfaith dialogue, community engagement, law enforcement.

Titulo en Español: Contrarrestando el extremismo violento en Singapur

Resumen:

El artículo se centra en la influencia del extremismo violento global en Singapur, así como en los esfuerzos y los logros de este país en la prevención y la lucha contra el extremismo violento. El autor sostiene que el terrorismo no puede derrotarse únicamente mediante la acción militar. Por el contrario, es necesario ampliar el conjunto de herramientas antiterroristas para incluir una variedad de «enfoques no coercitivos». En este sentido, el artículo presenta la respuesta de Singapur al extremismo violento, explicando los esfuerzos concretos realizados por el Departamento de Seguridad Interna, entre los que se incluyen una fuerte seguridad fronteriza, fuerzas del orden y organismos de seguridad bien equipados, una estrecha vigilancia de las plataformas en línea, la promoción de la laicidad del Estado, el pluralismo y la política no identitaria, así como la educación liberal, el fomento de un mayor entendimiento a través del diálogo interreligioso, las reformas legislativas y la participación activa de la comunidad en la prevención y respuesta a los ataques terroristas

Palabras Clave: Singapur, lucha contra el terrorismo, PCEV, seguridad fronteriza, plataformas en línea, políticas no identitarias, laicismo, educación liberal, diálogo interreligioso, participación comunitaria, fuerzas del orden.

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1. Introduction

The struggle to prevent and counter violent extremism has pushed nations to research and learn from countries that have managed to mitigate and contain the threat of terrorism. The UK Home Office emphasizes that keeping people safe is the first and most sacred duty of government. Violent Extremism (VE) is one of the main constraints for global development, economic stability, tourism, human security and freedom of citizens². Global Islamist terrorist organizations like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda maintain their enduring intent to conduct or inspire attacks³.

The first Bali bombing on 12 October 2002, conducted by Al-Qaeda linked Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in Indonesia killed 202 civilians. This was a serious wake-up call to Singapore, that all nations are vulnerable to terrorism. Singapore, a key hub in global economy, had long been seen as an “iconic” target for VE⁴. Following the Bali bombings, Singapore enhanced its national security by focusing heavily on intelligence sharing and regional cooperation. The Internal Security Department (ISD), with the coordination of other agencies, expanded its surveillance and identified JI militants linked to AQ. Singapore was able to neutralize the JI network by advancing its security upgrades, community vigilance, strict law enforcement and strong rehabilitation and re-integration process.

Southeast Asia comprises eleven countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. External Islamic conflicts and the virtual Islamist caliphate pose a threat to the region’s security⁵. Following 9/11 and the subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it became clear that terrorism cannot be defeated solely through military action. Instead, countries began to expand their counterterrorism toolkits to include a range of “soft approaches”⁶.

Singapore emerged as a sovereign state in 1965. When separation took place between Malaysia and Singapore on 9 August 1965, religious and racial tension between the majority Chinese and minority Malay communities emerged as a serious threat to the country’s survival⁷. In March 2025, a pro-ISIS poster titled “The Call to Truth” labeled the government of Singapore as an “apostate” for oppressing Muslims. Muslims were urged to “take up arms” against Singapore. The Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report (2025) identifies the two main extremist ideologies in Singapore as Islamic Extremism (IE) and Far-Right Extremism (FRE). This article focuses on the Global VE influences in Singapore and the effort and successes achieved in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) within the last six decades.

2. Self-Radicalization

Self-radicalization remains a key domestic terrorism threat in Singapore. Fuelled by geopolitical conflicts and the easy accessibility of various extremist ideologies online, Self-radicalization continues to be the primary driver of domestic terrorism in Singapore.

² Selim, George: “Approaches for Countering Violent Extremism at Home and Abroad”, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 668, n° 1 (2016), pp.94-101.

³ “Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2025”, Singapore, International Security Department.

⁴ Ramakrishna, Kumar: 'Commentary: 20 years after the Bali bombings, the stakes of a terrorist attack in Singapore remain high', *Channel News Asia*, 12 October 2022, at <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/bali-bombings-2002-terrorism-singapore-ji-attack-stakes-3000261>.

⁵ Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2025, *op. cit.*

⁶ Pendleton, Paul E.: *Countering terrorist ideologies a rational actor and game theoretic analysis of deradicalization programs for Al-Jemaah Al-Islamiyah prisoners in Singapore and Indonesia*, Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School, December 2008, at <https://calhoun.nps.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/a915aa3f-7d7e-4e29-a6c9-e3bad7f6cc6f/content>

⁷ Kuan Yew, Lee (2000): *Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew, From Third World to First*, The Singapore Story 1965-2000, Singapore, Singapore Press Holdings.



Approximately sixty self-radicalization cases have been reported since 2015-2025, involving 48 Singaporeans and 12 foreigners⁸.

3. Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) in Singapore

The Internal Security Department (ISD) is the main agency responsible for PCVE in Singapore. Singapore's response to VE comprises four key elements: Firstly, state policies do not allow groups to promote extremism and chaos in society. Secondly, intelligence and security agencies have adopted a policy of neutralising extremist elements by monitoring their activities and separating them from the mainstream population. Secondly, the education system promotes tolerance, coexistence, and harmony. Thirdly, robust economic and commercial activities discourage individuals from exploiting ethnic and religious sentiments to fulfil their own ulterior motives. Over the last six decades, Singapore has transformed from a third-world nation into a first-world country by embracing a capitalist approach that encourages talent, merit, enterprise, motivation and challenge in order to ensure productivity and growth. Finally, Singapore promotes the intermingling of cultural and religious groups to encourage mutual understanding and tolerance, thus discouraging majority-minority conflict. In Singapore, cross-cultural and religious identities are embraced as a source of strength⁹.

Singapore has embraced the politics of pluralism. It has chosen the path of secularism and rule of law in religious and cultural matters¹⁰. Nation building is the prime concern of Singapore through modernization and multiculturalism¹¹.

Singapore's PCVE efforts can be identified under the following subtopics:

1. Improved response capabilities
2. Strong border security
3. Close monitoring on online platforms
4. The policy of secularism, pluralism and non-identity politics
5. Well-structured re-habilitation and re-integration processes
6. Liberal education
7. Interfaith hub - Harmony Center
8. Legislature reforms
9. Active community engagement

3.1. Improved response capabilities

Singapore maintains its operational readiness in PCVE through well trained, highly skilled and well-equipped law enforcement and security agencies as mentioned below.

- Singapore Police Force (SPF)
- Singapore Civil Defense Force (SCDF) Safety and Security Watch Group (SSWG)
- ISDF's Special Operation Group (SOG)
- Special Tactics and Rescue Unit (STAR)

⁸ Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2025, *op. cit.*

⁹ Ahmar. Moonis: "The Challenge of Extremism in Pakistan: Are There Lessons to Be Learnt from the Experience of Singapore", *IPRI Journal XI*, n° 2 (Summer 2011), pp. 44-63, p. 44

¹⁰ Chee, Tham Seong: "Religious Influences and Impulses Impacting Singapore" in Lai Ah-Eng, Lai (ed.) (2015): *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, Singapore, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

¹¹ Kuan Yew, Lee, *op.cit.*



- Police Coast Guard's Special Task Squadron (STS)
- Gurkha Contingent's Gurkha Special Action Group (GSAG)
- SPF's counter-unmanned Aerial system (UAS)
- Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore (CAAS)

3.2 Strong border security

The Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) has enhanced its capabilities at Singapore's borders, optimising cargo clearance procedures by utilising AI-powered screening to intercept suspicious items before they enter the country. Through regular exercises, the ICA has improved its operational coordination and command and control. Since May 2024, the ICA has implemented a new clearance concept (NCC) involving automated immigration clearance. Contactless clearance using facial and iris recognition enhances the accuracy of identity verification. Additionally, the NCC enables the application of data analytics to generate risk profiles, supporting officers in threat assessment ¹².

3.3. Monitoring of online platforms

Online platforms are used by extremists for:

- Enabling Radicalization - disseminate extremist ideologies targeting global audiences. The first encounter with online extremist material may have happened unintentionally.
- Accelerating Radicalization - act as catalyst for radicalization. Prior to 2015, an average of 24 months consumed to make a person radicalized. However now it has accelerated to 12 months and in some cases only a few weeks.
- Facilitating recruitment - to recruit men in engaging of violent extremist activities.
- Preparing and mobilizing individuals to engage in armed violence - to conduct research, planning, and preparation of armed violence, domestically, regionally and globally.

Increased cooperation between the public and private sector is followed to create a safe online environment. Technology companies in Singapore have stepped up the efforts to prevent and disrupt abuse of online platforms and services by extremists¹³

3.4. The policy of secularism, pluralism and non-identity politics

Singapore is a highly diverse, multicultural city-state that has been managed through a deliberate model of mutual accommodation and integration. It embraces diversity, including various ethnicities and religious ideologies, and promotes mutual respect. Racial and religious harmony is one of Singapore's five official shared values ¹⁴.

Article 15 of Constitution is the basis of secularism in Singapore. It states that "Every person has a right to profess and practice his religion and to propagate it". As a secular country, Singapore follows the principals of religious freedom and tolerance ¹⁵. In Singapore, religion is separated from the country's national and political affairs. Ordinary social and political activities of the state are free from religion. Public policies are formulated based on secular principles ensuring equal treatment for all faiths. The religions in Singapore recognize as the source of social services and moral guidance. Cross cultural and religious identities in

¹² Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report, 2025, *op.cit.*

¹³ *Idem*

¹⁴ Ahmar, Moonis, *op.cit.*

¹⁵ *Idem*



Singapore are used as a source of strength rather than a weakness so as to promote merit and multiculturalism¹⁶.

Singapore actively rejects identity politics; political activities conducted based on race or religion. The government emphasizes an inclusive of multi racial national identity over divisive, race-based and religious-based politics. Politicians in Singapore are warned not to engage in identity politics for short-term gain which leads to divisions, particularly disadvantaging minorities¹⁷.

3.5. Well-structured rehabilitation and re-integration process

The Singapore de-radicalization program is a multifaceted approach designed to irradicate violence in the country. These programs address prisoners' violent motivations through discrete processes that have shown success in reducing the virulence of extremist ideologies. Law enforcement focuses on reducing the capability of extremist groups but it does not address the root causes of extremism¹⁸. The objectives of counter-ideology is to immunize Muslims against extremism, persuade members of terrorist groups to abandon the violent radical ideology, rehabilitate detained terrorists and minimize the suspicion and anxiety of non-Muslims by presenting alternatives to extremism¹⁹.

De-radicalization is not necessarily the same as counter-radicalization. De-radicalization targets at psychological, social and religious rehabilitations, and counter-radicalization involves preventing individuals from being drawn into radical movements²⁰. Singapore's ISD adopts a comprehensive and holistic approach in rehabilitation²¹. All of the counselings are conducted by one-on-one meetings with trust, care and sense of belonging. The de-radicalized prisoner is convinced on his misguided radical Islamic interpretations and rejoined in Islamic mainstream²².

In April 2003, Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) was formed to help on counseling of the detainees²³. Singapore Religious Rehabilitation Program (SRRP) outlines one of the best practices in the world that focuses on providing care not only for detainees, but also for the spouse and children, in preventing them from the radicalization²⁴. Religious rehabilitation in Singapore is carried out in a secure captive environment with detainees and on a voluntary basis with their families to moderate their extreme views. The RRG and the Inter Racial and Religious Community Circles (IRRCC) conduct community engagement programs and conferences in public forums in order to encourage correct and peaceful interpretation of Islamic scriptures.²⁵.

Volunteers from the Singaporean asatizah are solicited to administer the counselling with the goal of correcting their dangerous misconceptions of Islam²⁶. The government and other

¹⁶ *Idem*

¹⁷ "Singapore PM's Unusual Warning to Islamists; 'Won't Tolerate, Our Country...' | Singapore Election.", *Times of India*, 1 May 2025, at <https://youtu.be/c628UgLVXBc>

¹⁸ Pendleton, Paul E. *op.cit.*

¹⁹ Ahmar Moonis, *op.cit.*

²⁰ Hafez, Mohammed (2008): "Putting It All Together: Lessons Identified and the Way Forward", in *Countering radicalization in Saudi Arabia, in Radicalization: Foresight and Warning*, Center for Excellence in National Security, Global Futures Forum Workshop Conference Report. Singapore. 3-5 February 2008, p. 19, at https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/ER080203_Radicalization.pdf

²¹ Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report, 2025, *op. cit.*

²² Pendleton, Paul E. *op.cit.*

²³ Ahmar, *op.cit.*

²⁴ Gunaratna, Rohan (2025.) *Staunching The Rise of Terrorist Fighters: RSIS*, Nanyang Technology University, Singapore. No.005.

²⁵ Pendleton, Paul E. *op.cit.*

²⁶ Montlake, Simon: "US tried rehab for religious extremists". *The Christian Science Monitor.*, 9 October 2007, at <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/1009/p01s04-woap.html>



agencies provide financial assistance for educational expenses and day today commodities of detainee's family. In addition, basic job skill training is provided for the wives. This approach provided an incentive to undergo rehabilitations with detainees who resisted the RRG counseling²⁷.

3.6. Liberal Education

One important way of dealing with extremism in Singapore is through liberal education. Education has long been used in Singapore to promote social cohesion and integrate communities. Other than the handful of madrassas, which have an annual student intake of 400, there are no special schools based on race²⁸.

Education is one important component to fight against terror. Education enables people to liberate themselves from the trap of dogmas, intolerance and the social divide. Quality education improves the quality of life, self-governance and social mobilization by minimizing intolerance and radicalism²⁹.

3.7. Interfaith Hub Harmony Centre

The Interfaith hub Harmony Centre at an-Nahadhah which was officially opened on 7th October 2006 serves as an integrated hub for the promotion of greater understanding and engagement of people of all faith communities. The objectives of the Harmony Center are to strengthen the social cohesion in Singapore, promoting the interfaith dialogue among religions, while shaping the religious life of the community and bringing people together in mutual understanding³⁰.

The key focus of the center is:

- Training - to build capacity in interfaith dialogue and engagement
- Learning - to deepen understanding of the different faith
- Engagement - to build bridges and relationships among the faith groups

3.8. Legislature reforms

Singapore has relied on clearly articulated laws, policies and procedures to keep peaceful ties intact between the different races and religions of its inhabitants. Followings are the key legislations to prevent the VE and radicalization in Singapore.

- Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) – 1990
- Sedition (Repeal) Act – 2025
- Undesirable Publication Act – 1967
- Maintenance of Racial Harmony Act – 2025
- Penal Code – 1871
- Internal Security Act of Singapore (ISA) – 1960

3.9. Active Community Engagement

Singaporeans have confidence in the government's ability to protect its citizens. Community support is vital, to counter the developing global and regional threats. No terrorist attack can

²⁷ Pendleton, Paul E. *op.cit.*

²⁸ Ahmar, Moonis, *op.cit*

²⁹ *Idem*

³⁰ An-Nahadhah Harmony Centre, (n.d.), at <https://annahdhah.org/harmony-centre>



take place if everyone is oriented towards detecting suspicious indicators, signs, and clues of radicalization and report them to the authorities³¹.

The most effective way to defeat extremist forces is to develop a counter-ideology that promotes stability and peace in society and gains people's support³². The results of national level survey revealed that 90% of Singaporeans would stand united regardless of race or religion if a terrorist attack happen in Singapore, while 97% of respondents saw themselves as having a role to play in preventing and dealing with a terror attack³³.

The Community Engagement Program (CEP) was introduced by the government of Singapore in 2006, in order to foster communal peace³⁴. The SG Secure National Movement was introduced in 2016 with the goal of educating, preparing and enlisting Singaporean's community to help, prevent and respond to terrorist attacks by practicing community vigilance, cohesion and resilience³⁵. Public vigilance is critical in combating the threat of terrorism. The Community Response Roundtables (CRRT) was introduced in 2019 to enhance community-level preparedness against terror threats. CRRT members play a crucial role in dissemination critical information and supporting residents during a crisis³⁶.

4. Lessons from Singapore in PCVE

VE is a global challenge that requires a holistic approach. Within the last six decades, following the independence, Singapore achieved first world country status, economically, politically and socially.

The following points are invaluable in guiding PCVE efforts in the region:

- Maintain operational readiness in PCVE with improved response capabilities of their enforcement agencies by strengthening the manpower, reliable equipment and continuous trainings.
- Restrict and counter the threat at the borders, to prevent the threat entering into the country. AI powered cargo clearances procedures, automated immigration enhanced operational coordination, and regular exercises with line agencies heavily mitigate the threat prevention into the country.
- Closely monitor online platforms and social media which operate as a catalyst and enabler of radicalization accelerator. Public-private cooperation is required to build a safe online environment, by disrupting the abuse by extremists for recruitment for armed violence.
- Secularism, pluralism and non-identity politics are the fundamentals of governance in Singapore. Every citizen has the right to profess and practice one's religion. The religion is separate from the country's national and political affairs. Singapore embraces the diversity and promotes mutual respect. Identity politics which lead to divisiveness and disadvantages minorities is prohibited in Singapore.

³¹ Gunaratna, Rohan: "Staunching the Rise of Terrorist Fighters": RSIS, Nanyang Technology University, 14 January 2025, C0 2505.

³² Ahmar, Moonis, *op.cit*

³³ Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report, 2025, *op. cit*

³⁴ Ali Shah, Syed Saqib (2023): "Comparative Appraisal of CVE Initiatives in Pakistan and Singapore", Journal of Terrorism Research (PJTR), Vol. 5, n° 2 (2023), at <http://pjtr.nacta.gov.pk/index.php/Journals/article/view/31>

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report, 2025, *op. cit*



- Countries should have a strong rehabilitation and re-integration process with a sense of belonging, trust and care.
- Liberal education promotes self-governance and social-cohesion by integrating communities. A quality education enables people to liberate themselves from the trap of dogmas which leads to intolerance and a social divide.
- The Harmony Centre, an interfaith hub, is an effective initiative which can be applied by states in order to promote greater understanding and to strengthen inter-personal cohesion.
- A country needs clearly articulated laws, policies and procedures to enforce the law. Strong legislature reforms and strict enforcement of law discourage and prevents VE.
- Community is the biggest strength in PCVE. The country's counter ideology policies should be based on the community participation. Communities take the initiative and contribute to the PCVE effort when they have the confidence in the mechanism.

One effective approach to tackling extremism in Singapore is liberal education. Education has long been used to promote social cohesion and integrate communities in Singapore. Apart from a few madrassas with an annual intake of 400 students, there are no special schools based on race.

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