

## **Singapore's Muslim Community -Based Initiatives against JI**

By Muhammad Haniff Hassan

*Note: This article is first published in IDSS Commentaries (4/2006), 16 January 2006, and subsequently in The Straits Times, "A S'pore lesson in fighting terrorists", 18 January 2006. It is published here with post-script commentary to update the initiative to November 2007.*

Since the discovery of Jemaah Islamiyah's (JI) plot in Singapore, the Muslim community has taken commendable initiatives in response to the continued threat. In light of the constant calls for moderate Muslims to speak out and come forward to tackle the problem, it is important to highlight these initiatives not only as a recognition of the work done but also as a form of assurance to other Singaporeans. Indeed, these initiatives and their lessons learned can act as pertinent case studies for other countries.

### **Singapore Muslim Community Response**

Although the discovery of JI and the arrests of its members came as a shock, Singapore's Muslim community did not swing into a denial mode. Earlier, Muslim organisations had come out to condemn the September 11 attacks and initiated public debates on the importance of moderation amongst Muslims. Not surprisingly, they were quick to condemn JI's plots in Singapore as well as its ideology and links with Al Qaeda.

The condemnations came in two waves. In the beginning, public statements were made by individual Muslim organisations and leaders. In a show of collective concern, 122 Muslim leaders led by the imam of Baalwi mosque, Habib Hassan Alattas, came together in October 2002 to make clear where the community should stand. The leaders condemned terrorism and rejected ideological extremism, while reinforcing their commitment to the Singapore nation-state. Significantly, this crucial act against terrorism was done long before the Muslims in England, America and Australia rallied their respective communities to express their strong disapproval of the London attacks last year.

The statement was one of the earliest signals that the Muslim community leaders were committed and united in the battle against extremism in their midst. It also sent a strong message to members of the Muslim community to stay clear of extremism that promotes violence and poses a security threat to the country.

In early 2003, a book entitled "Muslim, Moderate, Singaporean" was jointly published by two Muslim bodies. The book proposed six principles of moderation as guidelines for Singapore Muslims in making their ideological stand on various issues. The six principles are the rule of law; recourse to peaceful means; democracy; being contextual in thinking and practices; respect for the opinions and rights of others; and upholding Islamic teachings.

In September 2003, Pergas, the association of Muslim scholars in Singapore, undertook a direct counter-ideological initiative against Al Qaeda and JI ideology by organising the Convention of *Ulama* (Muslim scholars). The objective of the convention was to rally Muslim scholars to define and combat extremism. The gathering led to a book entitled “Moderation in Islam in the Context of the Muslim Community in Singapore”.

The book is particularly relevant to counter-ideological efforts in two respects. It highlights key extremist thinking and misinterpretations of Islam and offers rebuttals using the same arguments employed by al-Qaeda and JI. Secondly, it offers a 27-point “Charter of Moderation” for the Muslim community in Singapore. The charter has been useful in guiding the community to practise Islam in the context of Singapore, particularly for Muslim scholars and religious teachers in their drive to promote moderation.

Another important initiative was the development of a system to self-regulate religious instruction. A collaborative effort between Pergas and the Islamic Religious Council (MUIS), the Asatizah Recognition System was launched in December 2005. The proposed system laid down the pre-requisites for the certification and registration of asatizah or religious teachers who provided the public with guidance and lessons on Islam. Initiated several years earlier, the proposal became more urgent following the JI arrests and subsequent inclusion in the 2003 White Paper on JI of measures necessary in countering terrorism. While such a self-regulatory system by the community cannot be enforced by law, a person can be struck off from the database of recommended religious teachers if he was found guilty of misconduct.

Pergas was not alone in efforts to counter ideological extremism. Many other Muslim institutions -- from mosques to civic groups, such as the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) and Jamiyah -- initiated cultural and inter-faith exchanges and dialogues between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. They also organised visits to places of worship to promote better understanding amongst them.

### **The Religious Rehabilitation Group**

One of the most important initiatives taken by the community was the formation of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), which was launched on 23 April 2003. Following the detention of the first batch of JI members, the security authorities approached local Muslim scholars to assist in the counselling detainees, which resulted in the formation of the RRG. Among other roles, the RRG offers expert opinion on JI’s misinterpretation of Islam, produces counter-ideological materials on relevant religious matters, and conducts public education for the Muslim community on religious extremism.

To date, twenty religious counsellors who are local Muslim scholars have volunteered to do RRG work. Many others are providing secretariat support for the group. In the beginning, the counselling programme covered JI detainees and supervisees (those under Restriction Order). This was later extended, on a voluntary basis, to the family members.

As of June 2005, 93 counselling sessions were held for the detainees, 139 for the supervisees and 14 for the family members.

Apart from Muslim groups, various non-Muslim organisations were also briefed on the efforts taken by the RRG to continuously update and, in the process, assure the non-Muslim community. Since June 2005, the RRG has stepped up its public education programme. It has teamed up with local Muslim organisations and mosques to organise talks such as the recent seminars related to certain misconceptions of jihad. The RRG has written a manual on rehabilitation work related to JI's ideology for counsellors. Generally, the response to the religious counselling programme has been positive. Four detainees have been released and placed under Restriction Order; two others who were under the Restriction Order did not have their restriction extended due to their positive response to the counselling.

Because most of the detainees were the sole breadwinners and their wives were homemakers, their arrests meant that the families experienced financial difficulties. Several local Muslim groups; such as AMP, the Young Muslim Women's Association (PPIS), and the Mendaki and the Khadijah mosque, have provided psychological, emotional, and financial support to the families. Ensuring that neither the education of the children was not disrupted nor their future jeopardised was a key goal of the organisations.

These initiatives are important in helping to win over the hearts and minds of the detainees and their family members and to integrate them back into society. It is particularly important to minimise the risks of the children being radicalised in the future by the detention of their fathers or by economic marginalisation arising from disruptions to their education and loss of financial security.

### **Conclusion**

Admittedly, the JI threat in Singapore is not as big as that in Indonesia or Philippines. But this should not undermine the significant impact of community-based initiatives undertaken by the Muslim community in reducing the threat of terrorism in Singapore. The community-based initiatives symbolise the close cooperation between the state and the Muslim community in counter-terrorism. Particularly significant, as a lesson to other countries, is the proactive role of the Muslim scholars in this drive. The community-based initiatives have made counter-terrorism in Singapore a good case study for others.

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### **Post-Script**

Since it was first reported in January 2006, the Singapore Muslim community has created many new initiatives to combat extremism and terrorism in the country. The new initiatives showcase the community's exemplary and unrelenting vigilance against extremism and its commitment to preserve peace and stability for the country.

Singapore's community-based initiatives against extremism have been commended by researchers, policy makers, and frontline security agencies from all over the world, and have been a source of inspiration for many counter-ideology programmes. Interest remains high; in 2007 alone, representatives of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), the main body that spearheads counter-ideology work in Singapore, and its affiliates have been invited to present their work to 9 conferences in the United Kingdom, Belgium, Austria, Germany, Malaysia, Egypt, Australia, and the Philippines.

In October 2006, a book titled *Unlicensed to Kill: Countering Imam Samudra's Justification for the Bali Bombing* was published to counter misinterpretation of jihad. [1] The book offers a point by point rebuttal to Imam Samudra's book *Aku Melawan Teroris (I'm fighting terrorist)*. Imam Samudra was the head of the first Bali bombing operation, and he is currently in prison on death row.

Another publication initiative was the book *Fighting Terrorism: The Singapore Perspective* edited by Abdul Halim Kader, the President of Taman Bacaan. [2] The organisation also collaborated with the RRG to organise two conventions for students of government and local Islamic schools in January and July 2007.

Young Singaporean Muslims are also taking up the initiatives. Muslim students from the National Junior Colleges and Mendaki organised separate dialogue sessions in 2007. Those in attendance of both sessions included a representative of the RRG and a senior officer of the Internal Security Department.

In order to assist the public in understanding the meaning of jihad, two local Muslim scholars jointly published a booklet titled *Questions and Answers on Jihad*. The booklet contains 22 questions and answers on jihad and terrorism. It was published in English and Malay and by the end of 2007 will be produced in Tamil. [3]

The Islamic Religious Council (MUIS) also launched major initiatives to promote moderation and combat extremism among Muslim communities in Singapore. Additionally, MUIS has periodically been issuing Friday sermons to remind Muslim congregations of the danger of extremism and highlight the deviant tendency of the extremist ideology.

The council established the Harmony Centre, in the newly built An-Nahdhah mosque on 7 October 2006. The centre aims to counter exclusivist tendency and intolerance espoused by extremist ideology. The Harmony Centre has two broad aims: (1) to promote understanding about major religions in Singapore among Muslims so they can better relate with fellow Singaporeans; and (2) to promote better understanding about Muslims and Islam among non-Muslim Singaporeans so outsiders will not have prejudices towards Singaporean Muslims. The Centre is designed like a mini museum for Islamic civilisation. It provides exhibits, audio-visual and artefacts divided into four sections: images of Islam, civilisational Islam, essence of Islam and Islamic lifestyle.

MUIS also seeks to lead the Singapore Muslim community beyond simply promoting moderation and tolerance. It aspires to create a progressive and modern Muslim identity rooted to Singapore and well-integrated with fellow Singaporeans. After much consultation, MUIS has constructed for Singaporean Muslims a “10 Desired Attributes” documented titled *Risalah (Document) for Building a Singapore Muslim Community of Excellence*. [4] The 10 attributes have become the basis for answering the question, “What does it mean to be a Muslim Singaporean?”

Singapore has also recognized that one of the critical areas for extremist propaganda is the internet. Therefore, in an effort to counter this medium of the extremist ideology, various initiatives were taken by individuals and organisations in the country. Some of these initiatives include:

- A dedicated counter ideology blog, <http://counterideology.multiply.com> ;
- A counter ideology blog based on a woman’s perspective, <http://2jay.wordpress.com/avata/>
- The launch of RRG’s official website: <http://www.rrg.sg>. The site has quickly gained popularity and international attention; attracting visitors from Japan, the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia to name a few.
- MUIS has developed three websites –
  - a religious query platform located at <http://www.iask.com.sg> for Muslim youths with the objective of preventing them from seeking religious guidance from wrong websites,
  - a sharing portal to reach out to young Muslims at <http://invoke.sg/cms/portal/Home.aspx>
  - a dedicated website to counter extremist ideology and promote moderation at [http://radical.mosque.sg/cms/Radical\\_Ideology/index.aspx](http://radical.mosque.sg/cms/Radical_Ideology/index.aspx)

Although MUIS is a government statutory body established by The Administration of Muslim Law Act, the initiatives can be viewed as community initiatives. Most critically, the bulk of the Council’s annual budget comes from the money contributed by the community, not from the government, thus illustrating how integrated the council is with the community. [5]

Between 2004 and November 2007, the RRG has participated in various community engagement programmes. It has made 33 presentations to various local grassroots organisations. The RRG made ten public forums at stadiums and mosques and three conventions for local youths, students from government schools, and students from local *madrrasah* (Islamic schools). During the same period, the RRG conducted 816 counselling sessions, 718 of which were for detainees and supervisees and 98 for their family members. [6] There are currently no direct methods to measure the effectiveness of the programmes. However, there are several proxy indicators that can be used to ascertain their effectiveness.

Despite the presence of local Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) cells in Singapore, and its close proximity with its base in Indonesia, the security situation in Singapore remains relatively

calm. Singapore has not experienced home-grown attacks and self radicalised individuals like Europe. Finally, from late 2001 till 1 December 2007, 19 (37%) out of 51 persons were released after being detained under the Internal Security Act for their affiliation with JI or other armed groups after an average of only three years of detention. This figure does not include those who were investigated and subsequently put under Restriction Orders, without detention. Although, the number of releases is not conclusive evidence that the detainees have been rehabilitated, it does however provide an indicator based on the assumption that the authority would never approve their releases until they had made significant progress in religious rehabilitation.

There is always room to improve the existing programmes. It is imperative to study radicalization more thoroughly in order to better understand the process in detail and to identify at risk groups. This effort at pre-emption will enhance the effectiveness of counter-ideology work by reducing the number of potential radical recruits. The Muslim community should be lauded for its efforts and commitment to date. Hopefully, the dedication and energy will continue to develop innovative solutions to the critical problems facing the community, and the nation as a whole.

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NOTES:

[1] Muhammad Haniff Hassan, *Unlicensed to Kill: Countering Imam Samudra’s Justification for the Bali Bombing*, Peace Matters, Singapore, 2006.

[2] Abdul Halim bin Kader (ed.), *Fighting Terrorism: The Singapore Perspective*, Taman Bacaan, Singapore, 2007.

[3] Muhammad Haniff Hassan and Mohamed bin Ali, *Questions & Answers on Jihad*, 2007. Available for download at [http://counterideology.multiply.com/video/item/11/Q\\_A\\_on\\_Jihad\\_English\\_version](http://counterideology.multiply.com/video/item/11/Q_A_on_Jihad_English_version) (17 October 2007).

[4] Office of Mufti, *Risalah for Building a Singapore Muslim Community of Excellence*, Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, Singapore, 2006.

[5] For more information about the council, visit <http://www.muis.gov.sg> (17 October 2007)

[6] Interview with Mr. Mohamed bin Ali, Secretariat of the RRG, on 4 Dec. 2007.

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### **Abu Yahya's Six Easy Steps for Defeating al-Qaeda**

By Jarret Brachman

In his 10 September 2007 video release, Shaikh Abu Yahya al-Libi offered the United States several unsolicited tips for better prosecuting its 'war of ideas' against al-Qaeda.[1] Although his comments brought al-Qaeda propaganda to new heights of arrogance, the fact is that Abu Yahya's recommendations are nothing short of brilliant. Policymakers who are serious about degrading the resonance of the Jihadist message, therefore, would be remiss in ignoring his strategic recommendations simply because of their source.

Abu Yahya, a senior member of al-Qaeda, is one of the world's foremost experts on the strengths and vulnerabilities of the contemporary Jihadist Movement. He became a household name within the counterterrorism community when al-Qaeda began marketing him in their propaganda following his July 2005 escape from detention at Bagram air base in Afghanistan. In the past two years, Abu Yahya has become the al-Qaeda High-Command's attack dog, chastising a variety of Muslim groups for failing to follow the proper path: with the Shia, Hamas and the Saudi royal family seemingly bearing the brunt of his rage.[2] Al-Qaeda has also promoted Abu Yahya's softer side, showing him reciting poetry and informally dining with his students. He has become, in a very real sense, the Jihadist for all seasons.

Abu Yahya's decision to volunteer strategic advice to the United States was neither out of goodwill nor self-destructive tendencies. Rather, his comments embodied the explosive cocktail of youth, rage, arrogance and intellect that has made him a force among supporters of the Jihadist Movement. By casually offering his enemy a more sophisticated counter-ideological strategy than the U.S. has been able to implement or articulate to date, Abu Yahya's point was clear: the U.S. lags so far behind the global Jihadist Movement in its war of ideas that al-Qaeda has little to fear any time soon.

Abu Yahya's strategic plan for improving America's counter-ideology efforts centers on turning the Jihadist Movement's own weaknesses against it. He first suggests that governments interested in weakening the ideological appeal of al-Qaeda's message should focus on amplifying the cases of those ex-Jihadists (or "backtrackers" as he calls them) who have willingly renounced the use of armed action and recanted their previously held ideological commitments. Using retractions by senior thinkers and religious figures who already have established followings within the Jihadist Movement helps to sow seeds of doubt across the Movement and deter those on the ideological fence from joining.

Although Arab governments, most notably the Saudis and the Egyptians, have successfully leveraged this approach for decades, there may be particular value in amplifying these retractions in the West. In November 2007, for instance, the legendary Egyptian Jihadist thinker, Dr. Sayyid Imam Sharif, released a book renouncing his previous commitment to the violent Jihadist ideology.[3] As could be expected given Sharif's senior stature in the Movement, the story made front-page news across the Arab

world. In the English-language media, however, the story was little more than a minor blip. The media's non-coverage of such a major ideological victory against global Jihadism is due to the fact that few in the West appreciate Sayyid Imam's significance to groups like al-Qaeda.

Abu Yahya suggests that the public media can play an effective role in publicizing ideological retractions, particularly by conducting interviews with those reformed scholars, publishing their articles and printing their books. The media's effort to promote the retractions helps to redirect public attention away from the role of the host government in prompting those retractions in the first place. The more distance these reformed scholars have from their host governments the more they are likely to be perceived as legitimate.

Abu Yahya also recommends that the United States both fabricate stories about Jihadist mistakes and exaggerate real Jihadist mistakes whenever they are made. These may include blaming Jihadist terrorism for killing innocents, particularly women, children and the elderly. But he does not stop there. Jihadist mistakes should not simply be highlighted as being anomalous or extraordinary: rather, governments ought to characterize them as being at the core of the Jihadist methodology. In short, governments need to convince their populations that the murder of innocent people is a core part of global Jihadism.

The most effective way to pursue this strategy, he contends, is to exploit mistakes made by any Jihadist group, whether they are al-Qaeda or not, by casting that action as being emblematic of the entire Jihadist Movement. Abu Yahya calls this strategy of blurring the differences between al-Qaeda and other Jihadist groups when it serves propaganda purposes, "widening the circle." Pursuing this strategy offers the United States significantly more exploitable opportunities for discrediting the actions of the Jihadist Movement writ large.

Abu Yahya provides two clarifying examples of existing counterpropaganda initiatives that he found to be effective in damaging the Jihadist Movement's credibility. The first example is the rumor about an al-Qaeda constitution that stated that death should be the penalty for quitting al-Qaeda. Although Abu Yahya claims that the rumor is fabricated, he concedes that it has effectively painted al-Qaeda in a negative light within the Islamic world.

He also points to how the Saudi and Algerian governments successfully characterized Jihadist terrorist attacks against government targets in their countries as actually being attacks against the people of those countries. By downplaying the iconic significance of the buildings and focusing instead on the human victims, casting them as powerless and ordinary, both the Saudis and the Algerians were able to "move emotions" and "whip up storms" across the public against the Jihadist Movement.

Abu Yahya's third strategic point deals with the government's prompting of mainstream Muslim clerics to issue *fatwas* (religious rulings) that incriminate the Jihadist Movement



and their actions. Abu Yahya shudders at other Muslims' use of "repulsive legal terms, such as bandits, *Khawarij* (literally, "those who seceded," refers to the earliest Islamic sect) and even *Karamathians* or *al-Qaramitah*, ("extreme fanatics") in referring to the Jihadists. Abu Yahya is not the first to make these points, however. In fact, followers of the Saudi Salafist shaikh, Rabi bin Hadi al-Madkhali, frequently used the following terms in order to assault the Jihadists:

- **"Jihadi:"** Anyone who believes that Jihad is a purely individual duty to fight
- **"Takfiri:"** Anyone who excommunicates Arab rulers or Muslims
- **"Khariji Bandit:"** Anyone who actively seeks to overthrow Arab rulers
- **"Qutubi:"** Anyone who reveres, quotes or even positively mentions Sayyid Qutb (an early hard-line Egyptian thinker)
- **"Hizbi:"** Anyone who participates in anti-establishment activist group
- **"Dirty Groundhog":** a traitor to one's religion, used specifically against Saudi hard-line cleric, Shaikh Hamoud bin Uqla as-Shuaybi in the 1990s
- **"Rabid Dogs":** a generic label for extremists
- **"The Dog":** referring specifically to Usama Bin Ladin
- **"Perennial Defender of Innovators":** an attack against extremists for rejecting centuries of accepted historical teachings and interpretations of Islam
- **"Betrayer of the Salafi Way":** used to attack hard-line clerics who step outside the bounds of mainstream Islamic conservatism.[4]

Abu Yahya also points to the effectiveness of special committees of scholars who try to deprogram Jihadists in prison. These rehabilitation programs, which are now operating in Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, have become a central part of these countries' efforts to weaken the Jihadist Movement, at least in the war of ideas.[5]

The fourth component to Abu Yahya's proposed grand strategy is strengthening and backing Islamic movements far removed from Jihad, particularly those with a democratic approach. Beyond supporting them, he counsels governments to push these mainstream groups into ideological conflict with Jihadist groups in order to keep the Jihadist scholars and propagandists busy responding to their criticisms. This approach is designed to strip the Jihadist Movement of its monopoly on the dialogue and instead unleash a "torrential flood of ideas and methodologies which find backing, empowerment, and publicity from numerous parties" against them.

There is no doubt that the Jihadist thinkers are most threatened by groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas as well as mainstream Salafists. This is because these groups draw on many of the same religious texts and appeal to the same constituencies for recruitment and financial support.[6] The methodologies of groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, however, are significantly more palatable to their host governments than Jihadists. This bitter rivalry between Jihadists and those more moderated groups could be usefully exploited by governments interested in wearing down al-Qaeda's stamina.

Next, Abu Yahya's recommends aggressively neutralizing or discrediting the guiding thinkers of the Jihadist Movement. His point is that not all Jihadists are replaceable: there

are some individuals who provide a disproportionate amount of insight, scholarship or charisma. These individuals include key ideologues like Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatada or Sayyid Imam Sharif; and senior commanders like, Khattab, Yousef al-Ayiri or Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

In order to effectively degrade the Jihadist Movement's long-term capacity, Abu Yahya suggests that these Jihadist luminaries need to be silenced, either through death, imprisonment or perceived irrelevance, thereby leaving the Movement "without an authority in which they can put their full confidence and which directs and guides them, allays their misconceptions, and regulates their march with knowledge, understanding, and wisdom."

The consequence of this power vacuum, he argues, is that "those who have not fully matured on this path or who are hostile to them in the first place, to spread whatever ideas and opinions they want and to cause disarray and darkness in the right vision which every Mujahid must have."

Finally, Abu Yahya advises the United States to spin the minor disagreements among leaders or Jihadist organizations as being major doctrinal and methodological disputes. He suggests that any disagreement, be it over personal, strategic or theological reasons, can be exacerbated by using them as the basis for designating new subsets, or schools-of-thought. These fractures can also serve as useful inroads on which targeted information operations can be focused: such an environment becomes a "safe-haven for rumormongers, deserters, and demoralizers, and the door is left wide open for defamation, casting doubts, and making accusations and slanders," he explains.

This "war of defamation" as he terms it, leaves the Jihadist propagandists almost impotent in that no matter how they try to defend themselves, dispel misconceptions, and reply to accusations, their voice will be as "hoarse as someone shouting in the middle of thousands of people."

In the case of the 10 September 2007 video, Abu Yahya may have let his ego undermine his goal of intimidating the West by offering useful strategic advice. Abu Yahya's most important contribution is identifying that the best way to defeat al-Qaeda is by tying it up in knots: Al-Qaeda must be continuously forced into a series of compromising positions from a variety of angles so that it hangs itself over the long term. The challenge for the United States is that it is not currently positioned to implement many of Abu Yahya's strategies, which is why he most likely felt fine sharing them. The fact is that the U.S. is speaking from a non-Islamic perspective, which discredits anything it says regarding the Islamic faith. Furthermore, there is little the U.S. government can say to the Islamic world that will be viewed as anything other than propaganda in support of its military occupation of Iraq as long as it maintains forces on the ground there. The U.S., therefore, must be open to, and innovative with, creating and leveraging a variety of flexible partnerships in its global efforts to degrade the appeal and legitimacy of al-Qaeda over the long-term.

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## NOTES:

[1] Abu Yahya al-Libi. 93-minute video tape. Produced by *As-Sahab*. Recorded early *Sha'ban 1428*.

[2] See Michael Scheuer, "Al-Qa`ida's Theological Enforcer" in the Jamestown Foundation's *Terrorism Monitor*. Volume 4, Issue 25 (July 31, 2007) for an in-depth examination of Abu Yahya's recent statements.

[3] The book, *Rationalizations on Jihad in Egypt and the World*, is being released in serialized format by the Egyptian daily newspaper, *Al-Masry al-Youm*, November and December 2007.

[4]"Summary of the Deviation of The Madkhalee 'Salafiyyah.'" *At-Tibyan Publications*.

[5] See Christopher Boucek's "Extremist Reeducation and Rehabilitation in Saudi Arabia" in the Jamestown Foundation's *Terrorism Monitor*.

[6] For a more in-depth discussion of these dynamics, see *The Militant Ideology Atlas*. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. <http://ctc.usma.edu/atlas/> .