



# “Salad Bar” Radicalisation: Rethinking Rehabilitation in the Age of Composite Violent Extremism

*Mohamed Bin Ali*



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## **“Salad Bar” Radicalisation: Rethinking Rehabilitation in the Age of Composite Violent Extremism**

*By Mohamed Bin Ali*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The recent issuance of Internal Security Act (ISA) orders against two self-radicalised Singaporeans underscores a significant shift in the domestic threat landscape. This development warrants a deeper analysis of the evolving role of the Religious Rehabilitation Group.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Singapore's Internal Security Department (ISD) recently announced [two further cases of Singaporeans dealt with under the ISA](#) for terrorism-related activities. The cases involve a 30-year-old who was issued a Detention Order and a 19-year-old student who was placed under a Restriction Order. Both individuals were influenced by narratives surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which re-escalated following the October 7, 2023, attacks.

However, the case of the 19-year-old exposes a more complex security challenge – Composite Violent Extremism, often referred to as ["salad bar" extremism](#), a phenomenon previously examined by Kumar Ramakrishna in the context of [youth radicalisation](#). As the contemporary threat trajectory shifts from centralised, structurally coherent terrorist networks to highly idiosyncratic, digitally mediated belief systems, traditional counter-terrorism frameworks must adapt rapidly.

This development fundamentally alters the mechanics of early intervention, rehabilitation, and long-term community integration. It creates a critical need for community-led initiatives – most notably the [Religious Rehabilitation Group](#)

(RRG) – to expand their theological toolkits beyond mainstream counter-narratives and adopt a multi-layered, multi-disciplinary approach.

### **The Genesis of CoVE and the “Salad Bar” Phenomenon**

An act of Composite Violent Extremism, or CoVE, occurs when an individual selectively draws on a range of disparate, sometimes philosophically contradictory extremist ideologies to assemble a deeply personalised hybrid worldview that justifies violence – a “salad bar” of ideological eclecticism.

The 19-year-old student’s ideological paradigm was not anchored in a single, established extremist group such as ISIS or Al-Qaeda. Instead, it comprised a complex mix of pro-Hamas sentiments, anti-LGBTQ animus, anti-Western rhetoric, violent incel (involuntary celibate) subcultures, and Islamist accelerationism. This is a fringe philosophy that advocates violence to induce societal collapse and impose a theocratic global order as envisioned by extremists — one that has no legitimacy within mainstream Islamic thought.

These dynamics challenge the historical template for radicalisation, in which an individual typically follows a linear path towards a single coherent ideology.

Under CoVE, online echo chambers function as digital “salad bars”, allowing vulnerable minds to assemble a personalised justification for violence from a spread of disconnected extremist content. The lack of a unified or logically consistent theological structure does not reduce operational risk; rather, it makes individuals harder to detect. The overarching catalyst remains a powerful external grievance, which serves as connective tissue, binding disparate prejudices into an actionable justification for violence.

### **Transforming Early Intervention Strategies**

The rise of CoVE demands an immediate pivot in early intervention protocols. Historically, indicators of radicalisation were relatively distinct: an individual adopting a specific extremist inclination, pledging allegiance to known entities, or strictly consuming identifiable propaganda. However, when an individual’s radical profile is a hybrid of an attraction to violent online content, the behavioural red flags become highly fragmented.

Intervention must therefore shift from looking purely for specific organisational affiliations to detecting generalised markers of accelerationism, online violent ideation, and acute anti-social behaviours. Schools, parents, and peer networks form the frontline of this defence.

In the case of the 19-year-old, his radical path did not manifest in overt physical preparations or in confidences shared with family, but rather in discrete online posts and isolated fantasies of school violence. Early digital literacy programmes must be redesigned to teach young people to recognise how geopolitical grief can be algorithmically co-opted by niche, violent online subcultures.

## **The Evolving Mandate of the Religious Rehabilitation Group**

Since its inception in 2003, the RRG has been widely recognised for its success in ideologically rehabilitating detainees, with a primary focus on correcting misinterpretations of Islamic concepts such as *jihad* (struggle) and *khilafah* (caliphate). This strategy proved effective against structured ideological threats such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and ISIS. However, CoVE requires the RRG to expand its traditional operational scope significantly.

When dealing with a CoVE client, a purely theological counter-narrative is necessary but no longer sufficient. For instance, while an RRG counsellor can systematically deconstruct the misapplication of *jihad* in relation to Hamas' actions, that intervention alone does not address the client's parallel consumption of violent incel ideologies or secular anti-Western accelerationism.

The evolving threat landscape requires the RRG's counselling methodology to be as composite as the extremist ideologies it seeks to counter. This involves:

1. *Interdisciplinary Counselling*: RRG religious scholars need to work in lockstep with psychologists and social workers. The psychological vulnerabilities that attract a young person to incel forums must be resolved alongside the correction of distorted religious beliefs.

2. *Deconstructing Secular Extremism*: Religious counsellors must be trained to identify and address secular far-right or accelerationist concepts that are fused with religious texts. An understanding of how online subcultures operate and the ability to recognise terms and memes that signal an individual's drift toward hybrid radicalisation are required.

3. *Grievance Management*: Given that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict acts as a potent emotional multiplier, the RRG should provide constructive, legitimate avenues for individuals to process geopolitical distress. The rehabilitation process must distinguish between legitimate humanitarian concern and the exploitation of that concern to justify violence.

## **Re-imagining Integration and Community Resilience**

The integration process becomes uniquely complex under the shadow of CoVE. For ISA detainees, successful rehabilitation is demonstrated by their safe reintegration into the broader multi-religious fabric of Singapore. Because CoVE individuals harbour biases against multiple demographics simultaneously, their societal reintegration requires a more comprehensive reconditioning of social boundaries.

Integration efforts must move beyond macro-level multicultural events towards sustained, micro-level community engagement. Relational networks within schools, workplaces, and neighbourhoods must be leveraged to rebuild the social capital that the radicalised individual sought to destroy.

Furthermore, community resilience ought to be fortified against the polarising effects of foreign conflicts. Singaporeans should be equipped to engage in robust, empathetic discussions about global issues without allowing foreign conflicts and polarising narratives to compromise domestic social cohesion.

## **Conclusion**

The recent cases serve as a stark reminder that the digital age has democratised and decentralised radicalisation. The emergence of CoVE represents a more fluid, unpredictable phase in the threat landscape.

For key stakeholders such as the RRG, this development does not invalidate past successes; it calls for a more sophisticated mandate. By combining deep theological correction with strong psychological care, adaptive digital literacy, and sustained community resilience, Singapore can ensure that its defence against extremism remains as dynamic and resilient as the threats it faces.

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*Mohamed Bin Ali is a Senior Fellow at the Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies (SRP) Programme, at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. He is also the Co-Chairman of the Religious Rehabilitation Group.*

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**S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore**  
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798

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