

## Heartland Dialogues: Overcoming Hate

By: Joann Wong

Held on 22 June 2019, the Overcoming Hate dialogue session opened with a cheery and informal poll-taking by moderator Mr Mohamed Nassim. Mr Nassim began by asking participants about their age and whether they identified themselves as advocates of racial and religious harmony.

Following this, Mr Nassim shared how a recent IPS study revealed that over 40% of youths surveyed did not mind reading extremist views online, thus emphasising on the importance of having open discussions on the topic of hate, and how we can overcome it as a society. On that note, he removed his blazer, much to the amusement of the audience. This, however, was a symbolic gesture — it was emblematic of the willingness to expose one's vulnerabilities, as well as the desire to break any barriers of formality that might preclude the ability to ask contentious questions on the topic of overcoming hate.



*Moderator Mr Mohamed Nassim engaging the audience in a short activity prior to the speakers' speeches*

## Reflections of a Former Extremist: Mr Christian Picciolini

The dialogue formally kicked off with Mr Christian Picciolini, founder of the Free Radicals Project and a former violent extremist turned peace advocate, as the first speaker.

During his speech, Mr Picciolini shared that he came from a background of immigrant parents, who worked 7 days a week when he was growing up in order to provide for their family, leading to him feeling abandoned as a young teenager.

At the tender age of 14, Mr Picciolini was recruited into the Chicago Area Skinheads, a neo-Nazi American white supremacist group that promised him inclusion and a sense of purpose and identity within their community. However, his viewpoint shifted at age 19 when his band was performing in Germany to a group of neo-Nazis. There, he witnessed the tangible violence his music was promoting and for the first time, he saw the consequences of the path he had chosen.



*Speaking to the audience: Mr Christian Picciolini*

Upon further reflection, Mr Picciolini realised that his hatred for those who were different from him was, in fact, a projected hatred for himself—he had been insecure and yearned for a community he could belong to. Oftentimes, we resort to making other people feel worse as a means of coping with these overwhelming emotions. This could be because projecting our negative emotions outwards is usually the easier alternative to having to unearth the root cause of the hatred we harbour, and facing these emotions head on.

These new revelations were a turning point for Mr Picciolini, who realised that he needed to change his ways. As fate would have it, his first assignment with IBM led him back to his old high school, where he came face to face with an old African American security guard, Mr Holmes, with whom he had once gotten into a fight. When Mr Picciolini apologised to Mr Holmes, Mr Holmes encouraged him to confront his past, share his story, and make sure others did not have to go through what he did.

For the last 23 years, this is exactly what Mr Picciolini has been doing. He believes the misguided decisions we make in our lives, as well as the search for identity and purpose, are what lead people to extremist actions, rather than the ideologies themselves. To help them, Mr Picciolini provides these people with the inclusivity they yearn for, rather than emphasising on their mistakes.

On a closing note, he challenged the audience to find the people whom they thought least deserved compassion, and give it to them. Many a time, they are the ones who have never received it, and who will absorb it best. While this is easier said than done, Mr Picciolini's sharing is a testimony to how a simple demonstration of empathy and graciousness can spark a rippling effect of positive change.

### **Deradicalising and Reintegrating Former Terrorists: Dr Noor Huda Ismail**

Dr Noor Huda Ismail, a Visiting Fellow in the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technical University (NTU), took the stage next. He started off with a short video of his interactions with former terrorists in Indonesia. The video documents how Dr Huda helps former ISIS supporters escape Syria to Indonesia, as well as the emotional turmoil and peril that these groups are made to experience in doing so.

Dr Huda emphasised the influence of stereotypes and assumptions — many often associate those part of terrorist groups to be bloodthirsty, and often engage in physical

profiling of these individuals. However, the video provided a more human perspective to these people — people with ordinary lives, and who loved their families. These assumptions we hold on to can cause us to build walls between ourselves and these individuals, and ultimately prevent us from truly understanding and empathising with their situations. One participant also highlighted the importance of “attaching faces to people who have been radicalised, knowing what’s behind their stories, and seeing them as human beings.”



*Speaking to the audience: Dr Noor Huda Ismail*

“To hate is a process. No one was born with it,” explained Dr Huda. Only through understanding this process can we then help people who have been radicalised to unlearn this hate. He explained a three-prong approach in deradicalisation using the three “H”s.

Firstly, Dr Huda encouraged us to Hear. We can only understand the thought processes of radicalised individuals by listening. At this point, he also aptly reminded the audience that demonstrating a capacity to understand others’ ideologies does not

necessarily mean supporting them. The second “H”, Hand, highlights the need to equip radicalised groups with meaningful skills which would help them to contribute to society, such that they become agents of peace themselves. The last “H”, Head, refers to challenging their ideologies. However, to do this, a trusting relationship must first be formed. Only then will they be willing to have open conversations.

### **Tackling Extremism in Singapore: Dr Mohamed bin Ali**

The last speaker was Dr Mohamed bin Ali, an Assistant Professor at Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies (SRP) Programme, RSIS NTU. Dr Ali gave a more local narrative on how Singapore has come together to overcome the ideology of hate and disengage individuals from bigotry, violence, and hate.



*Speaking to the audience: Dr Mohamed bin Ali*

Terrorism and violence are not new themes in Singapore. In December 2001, the Internal Security Department arrested six Singaporean Jemaah Islamiah (JI) members and detained another 15, thwarting plans to attack Yishun MRT station and several foreign embassies.

Several religious leaders from the Islamic community, including Dr Ali, were given the opportunity to meet with some of the detainees. It was then that they understood that the threat was not only about violence and planned attacks in Singapore, but also about dealing with people whose hearts and minds were filled with hatred.

In order to de-radicalise followers, something needed to be done at an ideological level. This was what led to the formation of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG). The primary objective of the RRG is to rehabilitate detained JI members and their families through counselling and countering their ideological misunderstandings of Islamic concepts. The RRG also seeks to “stimulate the minds of the detainees to understand Islam in the Singapore context”, and “to show that living Islam rightfully in Singapore is practicable and fulfilling”. Dr Ali also addressed the new threat of self-radicalisation in today’s context, and the importance of the psychological and social, on top of religious, aspects in rehabilitation.

## **Q&A Session**

During the Q&A session, questions were posed on the types of approaches used to disengage radicalised individuals, as well as the religious understandings held by those who have been radicalised.

Dr Huda emphasised that an understanding and inclusive society is important in providing these people with a sense of belonging, which in turn helps them to disengage from radicalisation. Similarly, Mr Picciolini added that the reason people turn to extremism stems from a desire to belong to a community, rather than subscription to the ideology itself. Furthermore, he believes that introducing them to the very people they hate could help humanise them, thus enabling them to release feelings of aberration.

With regards to the depth of religious understanding held by radicalised groups, Dr Ali pointed out that those who are radicalised often have little religious knowledge and understanding of Islam. In these circumstances, the RRG becomes extremely important in helping correct misinterpretations of Islamic concepts and countering the erroneous ideologies that extremists have been indoctrinated with.



*Audience engaged in thought as panelists answer questions posed by them*

Many of the questions posed also pertained to how help can be provided to those who have been radicalised, and how to deal with radicalisation in our society. In response, Mr Picciolini mentioned that it is important to replace what these groups would perceived to have lost (i.e. the extremist community they identify with) with something of equal value, yet more positive, during the rehabilitation process. In taking away the extremist community they once found belonging in, we need to in turn give them an inclusive society they can identify with. Mr Picciolini also encouraged everyone to “see the child, rather than the monster” in people, to listen, and to “know that the things they do are not inherent to who they are”. Dr Huda similarly highlighted that it is only when we understand why people turn to extremist groups, that we start to counteract this by creating a warm narrative in our society.

Ultimately, all three speakers emphasised the importance of inclusion, integration, and acceptance in helping radicalised groups disengage and reintegrating them back into society. As participant and Associate Lecturer Ms Sng Bee Bee aptly put, there is a “need to build a community around us in order to connect with one another — after all, social acceptance rather than marginalisation is critical to helping us overcome hate.”

