Yesterday Sept 11 marked the 11th anniversary of the 911 terrorist attacks on US by Al Qaeda. Despite the many battles won in the fight against transnational terrorism since 911, the threat of terrorism remains as alive as ever. Regional terrorists have also shown resilience in the face of sustained security action by regional governments.

I would like to divide my speech into three parts:

1. Discuss how the threat of terrorism has evolved.
2. Briefly share the Singapore experience in countering terrorism.
3. Conclude with some thoughts on the ideological fight against terrorism.

The Persistent and Evolving Terrorist Threat

Terrorists groups have been innovating and adapting their strategies to respond to the changing security environment. Operationally, terrorists groups have been modifying their modus operandi to circumvent security measures, improving on their bomb craft.

Besides evolving their attack hardware, terrorists elements have also been improving and expanding their outreach to people at large using new methods.

They have been conducting sophisticated media campaigns, increasingly through the Internet, in an ideological battle to gain recruits and supporters for their agenda, and even share terrorist tradecraft.

They are broadening their efforts in reaching out to an international audience. In the past, websites supportive of Al Qaeda were mainly in the Arabic language. In recent years, however, more English language sites and English-speaking radical preachers are emerging in cyberspace.

Such online activity has heightened the threat of radicalisation. Disturbingly, this trend has also contributed in part to the phenomenon of self-radicalised individuals who act outside terrorist organisations. They pose unique security challenges. As communities worldwide become increasingly connected via the Internet, the threat is likely to rise.

2. The Terrorist Threat to Singapore
Despite sustained security operations against terrorists, Singapore remains a potential target of the Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist network, which is linked to Al Qaeda and its affiliated groups.

In Singapore, the JI network has been disrupted with many of the leaders and foot soldiers of the Singapore network detained over the years.

However, we assess that Singapore continues to be a potential terrorist target of the regional JI and their affiliates. For instance, Indonesian authorities recovered a map of Singapore’s Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) commuter network (with the Orchard station marked out) and a map of the Orchard area from known JI-affiliated terrorist Ahmad Sayid Maulana, who was killed during a raid by Indonesian police in Jakarta in May 2010. In Jul 2011, Indonesian officials reportedly said that several suspects arrested had wanted to attack the Singapore embassy in Jakarta, specifically targeting Singaporeans leaving the compound.

Close working relationships with our foreign partners have resulted in collaborative efforts that have facilitated the arrest and repatriation of several Singapore JI fugitives hiding abroad. These arrests and actions are testament to the close operational collaboration between Singapore’s security agencies and their foreign liaison partners, and represent continuing efforts to counter the regional terrorist threat.

Given the complexity and persistence of the terrorist threat, counter-terrorism measures need to be dynamic and relevant to effectively meet these security challenges. Apart from keeping up operations to neutralise threats, we must step up efforts to counter the spread of radical ideology in the real world, and also the virtual world, which fuels the jihadist movement.

As it is not possible to block out the Internet, the next best thing is to educate our people so that they can identify terrorist ideology and be on their guard against radical ideas. They can also be our eyes and ears on the ground, helping to keep the country safe by reporting radical behaviour and activities.

It is important to treat extremist behaviour not only as a law-and-order problem but also as an ideological problem.

In the Singapore context, Muslim community leaders themselves play a key role, and have undertaken efforts on several fronts to counter such radical ideology. These include drawing up a register of approved religious teachers (or asatizahs) as a source of reference for the Singapore Muslim community. The register called the Asatizah Recognition Scheme, set up by the country’s Islamic authority (Islamic Religious Council), helps to ensure that Singapore Muslims do not unwittingly engage radical religious teachers to teach them or their children.
Several respected moderate Islamic teachers in Singapore have also taken the initiative to reach out to the wider Muslim community in an effort to debunk extremist ideology. They are members of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), a group of volunteer religious teachers who provide counselling for JI detainees and their families, as well as those who have been self-radicalised. The RRG’s experience with the detainees have convinced them of the vulnerability of the community to the religion-based terrorist threat we face today and they have developed an ideological counter to extremist ideology which is aimed at the wider community.

Taking their fight online, our Muslim leaders have also launched websites which debunk terrorist teachings and provide a platform for youth to ask questions on Islam.

With roots firmly in Singapore, the Muslim leaders and religious teachers could draw on the realities of multiracial life in the country to show that the state and citizens at large are not enemies of Islam.

Equally important, if not more so, is to deepen trust and confidence between the different communities and groups at all times, and to provide them a safe political space to discuss sensitive issues to foster greater mutual understanding. We set up the Inter-racial and religious confidence circles in our constituencies to foster inter-racial and interfaith dialogues. The aim is to build trust and confidence between religious leaders of the different faiths in each constituency, linked through the local MP.

In conclusion, all over the world, terrorists are constantly trying to subvert state institutions, disrupt the democratic process, and foster hatred, anger and violence in our societies.

We have to be on our guard and stay united against terrorism, as terrorists spread their tentacles further and faster abroad, especially through the Internet.