

Deradicalization Programs in Saudi Arabia: A Case Study

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Introduction

From the Gulf War to the current US operations against the Islamic State (IS), Saudi Arabia has played a crucial role in facilitating Western interventions in the Middle East. Despite the government's religious conservatism, it faces a serious threat from militant Islamist groups who view the regime as hypocritical and treacherous, primarily due to its close relationship with the United States.¹ As many as 2,500 Saudis have been reported to have traveled to Syria to fight for the IS, a group which has caused tremendous regional instability and potentially poses a direct threat to Saudi territory.² In response, Saudi Arabia has, over the past decade, installed and developed what has been called "the best funded and longest continuously running counter-radicalization program in existence."³ The program aims to "deprogram" jihadist radicals, changing their beliefs and behaviors until they no longer pose a threat to the state. However, despite the program's ostensibly high success rate, which will be discussed in more detail below, it has proven unable to rehabilitate the most radical and dangerous militants. Furthermore, the program's utility as a model for other nations is limited by its reliance on Saudi-specific factors.

Background

Current jihadist groups operating in the Arabian Peninsula developed much of their organizational structure, ideology, and military expertise during the Afghan War. The Soviet invasion in 1979 was strongly condemned by the Saudi population, which witnessed fellow Muslims dying at the hands of foreign atheist invaders. Many young Saudi men traveled to Afghanistan to wage jihad against the Soviets, including future al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. As a consequence, when the Council of Senior Ulama (Saudi Arabia's highest religious advisory body) issued a fatwa (religious edict) authorizing the stationing of American troops on Saudi soil during the Gulf War, Saudis returning from Afghanistan were horrified, and al-Qaeda accused the government of betrayal and treason.⁴ There subsequently followed a period of confrontation between Islamist groups and the government, culminating in bombings in Riyadh in 1995 and Khobar in 1996.⁵ Despite the government's crackdowns, by the turn of the millennium large numbers of Saudi jihadists had traveled to Afghanistan to receive training to assist them in their struggle against the Saudi government.⁶

The programs

In response to the attacks on September 11, 2001, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia escalated its counter-terrorism operations, conducting widespread arrests and interrogations as well as

¹ A.F. Ansary, "Combating Extremism: A Brief Overview of Saudi Arabia's Approach," *Middle East Policy*, vol. 15, iss.2, (Summer 2008): 113.

² "Islamic State: Where key countries stand" *BBC News*, September 16th, 2014.

³ C. Boucek, "Saudi Arabia's "Soft" Counterterrorism Strategy: Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Aftercare," *Middle East Program*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (September 2008): 23.

⁴ A.F. Ansary, "Combating Extremism," 112.

⁵ T. Hegghammer, "Terrorist recruitment and radicalization in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Policy Council* (2006): 40.

⁶ *Ibid* 40.

executing several al-Qaeda leaders.⁷ However, the fruitlessness of these efforts was demonstrated when, in May 2003, al-Qaeda members attacked three residential compounds in Riyadh, killing 27 people. Consequently, the Saudi government decided to augment its traditional counter-extremism efforts with a new “softer” approach, focusing on the deradicalization of convicted jihadist militants.⁸ The first stage of the deradicalization program takes place inside prisons and consists of counseling (al-Munasahah) by Islamic clerics and religious re-education. It was initiated in 2004 by Assistant Interior Minister Prince Muhammad bin Nayef and is run by the Advisory Committee, which is based in Riyadh and has seven regional offices.⁹ Inmates begin by explaining their ideological motivations to the Islamic clerics, who are employed by the program, before then embarking on a religious “academic course of study.”¹⁰ The main objective of the course is to persuade the inmates that their jihadist interpretation of the Qur’an is incorrect.

In particular, the clerics strive to dislodge the concept of *takfir*, or apostasy.¹¹ This strand of Islamic thought can be traced back to the seventh-century al-Khawarij movement, but more recently such ideas have featured prominently in Wahhabism, which was founded in the eighteenth century by Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab.¹² Al-Wahhab intended to halt a perceived decay in the Muslim world by practicing a puritanical form of Islam that he claimed existed during the earlier *salaf* times (the first four hundred years after the Prophet’s death, until 1032 CE).¹³ The theological movement placed a heavy emphasis on the concept of *tawhid*, the uniqueness of God; as such, it strongly condemned practices such as worshiping at shrines and tombs or celebrating the Prophet’s birthday.¹⁴ Muslims who partook in such practices, such as Sufis and Shiites, were condemned as *kafir* (unbelievers). Therefore, groups that hold such an interpretation, such as al-Qaeda, consider themselves to be religiously sanctioned to commit acts of violence toward any Muslim whom they consider a *kafir* and to issue fatwas against them. However, it is widely held by Islamic scholars that such interpretations are based on a narrow and deeply mistaken reading of the Qur’an, which does not allow just any Muslim to issue a fatwa, but only *mujtahid*, qualified scholars who are trained in *ijtihad* (personal reasoning).¹⁵ During the counseling program, the clerics debate with the prisoners in an attempt to persuade them that they were tricked into their jihadist beliefs and to demonstrate how true Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance.¹⁶

Saudi Arabia is the best-suited country in the world to provide Islamic re-education to convicted extremist-sympathizers. The Kingdom holds a special place in Islam, containing the religion’s most holy site, the Kabba in Mecca. The country also possesses an abundance of respected Islamic scholars, mostly themselves Wahhabis, who are passionately motivated to correct warped understandings of Islam.¹⁷ Besides its emphasis on *takfir*, Wahhabism also emphasizes loyalty and obedience to leadership, endowing the clerics with a crucial degree of legitimacy.¹⁸ The legitimacy of these clerics can also be linked to their traditional role within

⁷ A.F. Ansary, “Combating Extremism,” 111.

⁸ C. Boucek, “Saudi Arabia’s “Soft” Counterterrorism Strategy.”

⁹ Ibid 12.

¹⁰ Kimberly Leary, “Engaging Extremists: Diplomacy through Deradicalization,” *Kennedy School Review*, Vol. 9 (2009): 115.

¹¹ The definition of ‘takfir’, however, has lost much of its precision and is increasingly used in Arab states to describe any jihadist ideology.

¹² A. F. Ansary, “Combating Extremism,” 111.

¹³ N. H. M. Keller, “Who or what is a Salafi? Is their approach valid?” *Cambridge Mosque Project* (1995).

¹⁴ Ahmad Moussalli, “Wahhabism, Salafism and Islamism: Who is the Enemy?” *Conflicts Forum* (2009): 4.

¹⁵ Hallaq, Wael B., “Fatwa”

¹⁶ K. Leary, “Engaging Extremists,” 115.

¹⁷ Ibid 12.

¹⁸ C. Boucek, “Saudi Arabia’s “Soft” Counterterrorism Strategy,” 4.

Saudi tribal villages, where they were often the ones called upon to give advice to young people who had fallen foul of the law.¹⁹

In addition to the religious education, the counseling program increasingly contains a vital socio-psychological element.²⁰ Experts, who have often been educated in the West, analyze the behavior of the inmates and provide therapy accordingly.²¹ This is particularly crucial for the prisoners who were previously held in Guantanamo Bay. In order to graduate from the program, the prisoners must pass an exam to demonstrate their abandonment of radical beliefs, as well as be deemed by the psychological and security subcommittees as no longer posing a threat. Regardless of whether they graduate the program, prisoners are still required to carry out their full sentences.

Before being allowed to reenter society, participants in the rehabilitation program spend a period of eight to twelve weeks in the Mohammed bin Nayef Center for Counseling and Advice, outside Riyadh. In this "halfway house," which opened in 2007,²² participants receive further therapy and are able to enjoy art and sport courses, vocational training, and even access to PlayStations.²³ Should prisoners be asked to outstay the usual 12-week duration, detainees are compensated at a rate of 1,000 SAR (267 USD) per day, with the option of legally challenging the decision.²⁴ In all of the 32 cases when a detainee has taken the Ministry of the Interior to court to challenge the extended detention, the detainee has won. Many believe this reflects a deliberate display of compassion designed to reduce hostility toward the government.²⁵

While in the program, generous support is given to the participants' families, who in return are held responsible for the conduct of the participant upon release (demonstrating the program's reliance on traditional notions of family responsibility and honor).²⁶ If prisoners do not have families, the Saudi state provides assistance in finding wives for the predominantly young, male detainees, and pays for the wedding, the dowry and even an apartment and car.²⁷ Since jihadists in Saudi Arabia are usually from impoverished backgrounds and have been socially excluded, such methods aim to reduce their sense of frustration and anchor them more firmly in society, giving them less cause to turn to radical groups for support. Once released from the program, former participants are still subject to surveillance and parole.²⁸

Given that radical groups are increasingly using the internet to disseminate their messages and establish network connections, and that, as of 2014, internet penetration in Saudi Arabia exceeded 60 percent, the government has been paying increasing attention to the prevention and reversal of internet-radicalization.²⁹ In the Sakinah ("tranquility") Campaign, which is run by an independent NGO with support from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Islamic scholars

¹⁹ Ibid 7.

²⁰ A. Speckhard, "Prison And Community-Based Disengagement And De-Radicalization Programs For Extremist Involved In Militant Jihadi Terrorism Ideologies And Activities" *NATO Research and Technology Organization*, chap. 11: 5.

²¹ C. Boucek, "Saudi Arabia's "Soft" Counterterrorism Strategy," 5.

²² M. L. Porges, "The Saudi Deradicalization Experiment" *The Council on Foreign Relations* (January 22, 2010).

²³ A. Speckhard, "Prison And Community-Based Disengagement," 5.

²⁴ C. Boucek, "Saudi Arabia's "Soft" Counterterrorism Strategy," 18.

²⁵ Ibid 19.

²⁶ Ibid 18.

²⁷ Michael J. Williams, and Samuel C. Lindsey, "A social psychological critique of the Saudi terrorism risk reduction initiative," *Psychology, Crime & Law*, Vol. 20, Iss. 2 (2014): p138.

²⁸ C. Boucek, "Saudi Arabia's "Soft" Counterterrorism Strategy," 20.

surf jihadi social networking sites and contact users they believe have been radicalized. In the same manner as the prison counseling program, the scholars ask the site's users to explain their religious interpretation of the Quran before entering into debates to try to change their beliefs. Transcripts of these conversations are posted online to inform other potential radicals of the incompatibility of Islam and violent jihadism.³⁰

Success?

At first glance, the figures of the deradicalization programs in Saudi Arabia are remarkable. In 2007, Sheikh Al-Sadlan, a member of the Counseling Program, announced that 90 percent of its participants had renounced their radical views and that 1,500 of the 3,200 prisoners involved in the program had been released.³¹ Further, in November 2007 Prince Muhammad bin Nayef claimed that there had been only 35 recorded cases of recidivism—equivalent to a rate of less than two percent—and none of the acts of violence resulting from this recidivism occurred within Saudi Arabia.³² However, the small numbers of cases in which individuals have resisted rehabilitation cannot be ignored due to the severity of some of these cases. The most notable example is Said al-Shihri, who, after his release from Guantanamo Bay in 2007, completed and passed the Saudi deradicalization program but then proceeded to become deputy leader of al-Qaeda in Yemen, orchestrating the bombing of the American embassy in Sana'a in 2008.³³ It has been estimated that 10 percent of the incarcerated jihadists, many of whom have been previously detained in Iraq or Guantanamo by the United States, are “hard-core militants with entrenched deviant beliefs.”³⁴ They are likely to refuse to cooperate with the rehabilitation process, dismissing the clerics as having been co-opted by the West-aligned Saudi government;³⁵ as a result, they are probably beyond the reach of any deradicalization program.

This 10 percent “hard-core” figure neatly corresponds with the program’s 90 percent success rate, and would include the most violent and dangerous of the imprisoned extremists. Although these prisoners are unlikely to be released—rehabilitated or not (with al-Shihri’s case being an exception)—it still means that the effectiveness of the rehabilitation campaign is limited mainly to minor offenders and jihadist supporters and sympathizers who may already be looking for a way out of jihadism, having been disillusioned by the circumstances leading to their capture.^{36,37} The results of the Sakinah campaign, which announced in 2007 that they had persuaded 690 individuals from Saudi Arabia and elsewhere to “recant their takfir and deviant views,”³⁸ must be similarly qualified.

There have also been doubts regarding the rigor of the prison rehabilitation program’s release criteria. Individuals might cease to exhibit beliefs that make them likely to carry out acts of violence, but they still might be radical enough to spread their beliefs to others. This has led some to question whether the program makes enough of a distinction between promoting the total deradicalization of individuals and simply their personal disengagement from jihadist

³⁰ C. Boucek, “The Sakinah Campaign and Internet Counter-Radicalization in Saudi Arabia,” *Combating Terrorism Center*, Westpoint (2008): 1-3.

³¹ A. F. Ansary, “Combating Extremism,” 121.

³² C. Boucek, “Saudi Arabia’s “Soft” Counterterrorism Strategy,” 21.

³³ A. Speckhard, “Prison And Community-Based Disengagement,” 5.

³⁴ A. F. Ansary, “Combating Extremism,” 119.

³⁵ A. Speckhard, “Prison And Community-Based Disengagement,” 5.

³⁶ C. Boucek, “Saudi Arabia’s “Soft” Counterterrorism Strategy,” 21-22.

³⁷ Michael J. Williams, “A social psychological critique,” 144.

³⁸ A. F. Ansary, “Combating Extremism,” 122.

activity, a much less ambitious target.³⁹ Nevertheless, the importance of rehabilitating such individuals still should not be dismissed. The efficacy of these approaches in undermining jihadist groups is demonstrated by the attempts of hardened radicals to subvert the prison-based and internet-focused deradicalization programs. For example, they warn users of jihadist sites against talking to clerics working for the Sakinah Campaign, which they clearly regard as an effective threat to their level of support.^{40,41}

Lessons

None of the techniques used by the Saudi government are, in themselves, revolutionary; when the PLO dismantled the radical Black Widow group in the 1970s, it offered 3,000 USD to former members who married and 5,000 USD for those who had children, and also guaranteed jobs and housing.⁴² What is unique about the Saudi program, however, is its scope. Never has a state applied such a range of different programs simultaneously and so thoroughly. By targeting individuals' religious convictions, psychological states, socio-economic positions, family groups, and even romantic lives, the Saudi government is able to reshape all aspects of the detainees' lives, offering them a complete break with their jihadist pasts. This is complimented by thorough post-release surveillance.

What successes Saudi Arabia has experienced may be difficult to replicate in other countries, however. The significant financial cost of the program limits its use as a model for other governments with similar jihadist problems, such as Algeria. Furthermore, as Anne Speckhard succinctly states, "the credibility of the clerics involved is paramount."⁴³ This makes it especially noteworthy that many rehabilitated jihadist leaders are now working for the deradicalization programs in Saudi Arabia.⁴⁴ The programs would hence be difficult to replicate in secular Western countries, where security services would most likely be unable to command the same legitimacy among devout Muslims as the Islamic Saudi government. Nevertheless, governments in Southeast Asia and North Africa, as well as the United States, have started their own programs based on the Saudi model of acknowledging the importance of gaining the trust and respect of the prisoners and focusing on all aspects of their lives, particularly their relationships with family and friendships.⁴⁵ Given the observable lack of progress in winning the global fight against violent Islamic jihadism, the Saudi deradicalization program deserves great attention for being a rare case of real and tangible success.⁴⁶

³⁹ Michael J. Williams, "A social psychological critique," 148.

⁴⁰ C. Boucek, "Saudi Arabia's "Soft" Counterterrorism Strategy," 21.

⁴¹ A. F. Ansary, "Combating Extremism," 123.

⁴² Mark Dechesne, "Deradicalization: not soft, but strategic," *Crime, Law and Social Change*, Vol. 55, Iss. 4 (May 2011): 288.

⁴³ A. Speckhard, "Prison And Community-Based Disengagement," 5.

⁴⁴ C. Boucek, "Saudi Arabia's "Soft" Counterterrorism Strategy," 21.

⁴⁵ *Ibid* 21.

⁴⁶ A. F. Ansary, "Combating Extremism," 112.