

**“DE-RADICALIZATION AND REHABILITATION PROGRAM:  
THE CASE STUDY OF SAUDI ARABIA”**

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By

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ABSTRACT

With extremist *jihadist* ideologies, militants seek to inspire new generations of terrorists to perpetuate the terrorism cycle. Shortly after 9/11 terrorist attacks, thousands of arrests of *jihadis* prompted states to devise "de-radicalization programs" aimed at balancing traditional security efforts with techniques that address ideological sources of violent extremism. Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Singapore and Indonesia have all devised ideological-based de-radicalization programs to delegitimize the radical ideologies of extremists. These programs are increasingly seen as part of a wider counterterrorism effort and a broader spectrum of policy options in "the war of ideas" that helps promote the internal fragmentation of violent radical groups and delegitimize their rhetoric and tactics. Various approaches are adopted by these countries, contingent upon their resources, preferences and political context. One major finding common to all rehabilitation programs is that while they have succeeded to deprogram scores of former *jihadis*, the programs have mostly focused on minor offenders failing to address hardcore terrorists. Hailed as one of the most advanced de-radicalization programs in the world, Saudi Arabia claims some significant degree of success for its rehabilitation program. However, it is unclear how much the switch was based on a genuine ideological transformation rather than on pure strategic calculation. In addition, due to the newness of de-radicalization programs, it is too early to ascertain with veracity the effectiveness of such programs. Methods to evaluate recidivism or to assess the effectiveness of those programs have yet to be established and are subject to further research.

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## Introduction

Much of the reaction to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, especially in the West, had an almost cosmetic character to it. It stifled terrorism, with various degrees of effectiveness, on a military level, but did little to undermine its ideological appeal. The dominant idea at the time was that the capture of terrorists would remove the threat of further attacks. Over time, policy makers began to realize that this approach could only be so effective until it was coupled with programs to address the ideological underpinnings that foment and foster violence—force alone could not wipe out the threat of terrorism so long as its radical ideology remained intact. With extremist *jihadist* ideologies, militants seek to inspire new generations of terrorists to perpetuate the terrorism cycle. Moreover, al Qaeda has become an increasingly decentralized and loose organization held together by strong ideological bonds. What is more, even the capture and imprisonment of terrorists and their supporters gave rise to another concern, that these prisoners could be further radicalized or recruit more supporters while in a prison environment.

In response, states devised “de-radicalization programs” aimed at balancing traditional security efforts with techniques that address ideological sources of violent extremism. These programs seek to persuade less fanatic members of terrorist groups to abandon the ideology; create doubt within terrorist organizations, rehabilitate imprisoned terrorists, and lessen non-Muslims’ anxiety and suspicion by presenting alternatives to terrorist ideology.<sup>1</sup> These programs are increasingly seen as part of a wider counterterrorism effort and a broader spectrum of policy options in “the war of ideas” that helps promote the internal fragmentation of violent radical groups and delegitimize their rhetoric and tactics. One critical component of this new approach is the rehabilitation of extremists in prison through religious reeducation by bringing moderate

Muslim clerics to convince radicals of the fallaciousness of their views and direct them toward a more thoughtful version of Islam.

These programs vary from country to country depending on the preference and political context of the state concerned; some are nascent while others are mature and well-developed. Typically, a religious cleric engages the inmate in a religious debate but some states favor repentant terrorists. In some states like Yemen, no-after care programs or surveillance mechanisms are put in place to monitor fresh graduates, thereby raising the likelihood of recidivism. In contrast, in Saudi Arabia and Singapore, mechanisms are in place including families, tribes, security apparatus and program staff who remain involved in the life of the released graduate to help reduce the chance that they will return to terrorist activity.

The case of Saudi Arabia is of interest for several reasons. Fifteen of the nineteen hijackers ultimately responsible for the September 11, 2001 attacks were from Saudi Arabia. Al-Qaeda has received large amounts of funding from charities in Saudi Arabia and the mastermind of the worst terrorist attack on the United States in its history, Osama bin Laden, was from Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has also allowed the country's vast oil wealth to be used in part to spread *Wahhabist* ideology through the establishment of fundamentalist mosques and schools, called *madrassas*. It is therefore interesting to examine how the Kingdom's cooperation with the US in pursuing, arresting and indicting terrorists has steadily increased over time since the September 11, 2001 attacks, and even more so in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks that struck the Kingdom in May 2003.<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that Saudi Arabia has seen unprecedented levels of extremism and terrorism in recent years, the country's struggle against the dual threats of extremism and terrorism has yielded significant success on its soil. This is not only due to the effectiveness of its security measures, but also by its softer approach in addressing radical

ideologies. After September 11, 2001, Saudi Arabia embarked on a very aggressive counterterrorism campaign. Following the 2003 May bombings, the Saudi government decided that security measures alone were not enough to address the challenge presented by extremism, and that it was essential to take measures to target the role of radical ideology in motivating terrorists and fostering violent extremism. Saudi Arabia has since developed one of the world's most advanced programs to de-radicalize terror suspects. Its success lies in the combination of various elements that target the behavior of the inmate in order to facilitate psychological and physical disengagement.

The main research question of this thesis is whether Saudi Arabia de-radicalized its Islamist extremists through its rehabilitation program. To answer this question, many of the writings on disengagement and de-radicalization in the terrorism literature will be used to provide a background for, and basic understanding of these two key concepts. The cases of Yemen, Singapore and Indonesia will serve as illustration.

The paper will also address how this de-radicalization program works and whether it is successful. The thesis will also draw from literature on de-radicalization and extremism prevention strategies in Saudi Arabia provided by the Kingdom and American think tanks. The paper will also use news and journal articles, new media sources and interviews conducted with Saudi officials, think tank scholars and terrorism experts.

However, it is unclear how much prisoners' recanting of their extremist views was based on a genuine ideological transformation rather than on pure strategic calculation. Even as the Saudi rehabilitation program was hailed as a success as its graduates appeared to reintegrate into society, there was some anecdotal evidence of terrorists, including two al Qaeda leaders in Yemen, who graduated from the Saudi program and subsequently engaged in further combatant

activity against the United States and its allies. However, the newness of de-radicalization programs demands the enormous challenge of assessing their effectiveness which is too early at the present time. Methods to evaluate recidivism rates, which depend on reliable data on recidivism from countries, are currently lacking. Similarly, mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of these programs have yet to be established and are in need of further research. In addition, de-radicalization efforts are further complicated by the fact that they can be influenced by different economic, political and cultural factors.

The first chapter of this paper provides an overview of de-radicalization and disengagement in terrorism literature with a key distinction of these two concepts.

The second chapter examines de-radicalization efforts in Yemen, Singapore and Indonesia, and how these countries apply the concept of disengagement and de-radicalization and draw lessons from the Saudi case.

The third chapter uses the case study of Saudi Arabia's de-radicalization program, a country which has suffered from unprecedented levels of extremism and terrorism. In addition, Saudi Arabia is the most influential state in Sunni religious matters as al Qaeda and its offshoots are Sunni groups. The Saudi government's "soft approach" to counterterrorism in adopting both de-radicalization and counter-radicalization programs have shown remarkable progress in combating the threat of extremism and terrorism inside the Kingdom.

The fourth chapter makes an assessment of the Saudi de-radicalization program, draws out the implications of the analysis, and suggests responses on the effectiveness of the program targeting Islamist extremists.

The paper concludes with an assessment of lessons for successful de-radicalization programs and recommendations to Saudi officials for improving their de-radicalization efforts.

## Chapter I. De-Radicalization and Disengagement in Terrorism Literature

### Overview of Radicalization and Extremism

Radicalization and extremism are complex and multifaceted phenomena that have been successfully exploited by terrorist groups in spreading their ideology, even among the most disenfranchised segments of the population throughout the world. This is further exacerbated by the strategic use of a variety of media, including the internet, which provides them with the ability to disseminate a broad-ranging corpus of indoctrination and propaganda, fostering the ideal environment for a virtual *ummah*<sup>3</sup> where all are connected regardless of their geographical location. Radicalization is by definition a process of change in which non-violent individuals come to endorse and promote violent activity. As terrorism expert Brian Michael Jenkins states, “Terrorists do not fall from the sky...they emerge from a set of strongly held beliefs. They are radicalized. Then they become terrorists.”<sup>4</sup> Individuals are drawn to killing their fellow citizens through acts of terrorism because their beliefs and grievances have been exploited to become a driving force to carry out such attacks. According to Rohan Gunaratna, a renowned international terrorism expert, “Individuals are ideologically driven and not operationally driven”.<sup>5</sup>

Radicalization requires that the individual enter a mental process that is transformative, with a personal change that conditions him to violent behavior. In other words, “radicalization comprises internalizing a set of beliefs, a militant mindset that embraces violent *jihād* as the paramount test of one’s conviction”.<sup>6</sup> The growing number of detainees in jails, most particularly of violent extremists, contributes to further entrenching radicalization among inmates, providing a safe-haven for recruitment and development of the *jihād* narrative.<sup>7</sup> The more ‘experienced’

ones become ring leaders, filling the ideological vacuum with *jihadi* rhetoric that is further buttressed by the numerous lapses of the justice system (in the Middle East).

The ideology is therefore the real enemy. Hence any counterterrorism strategy must be able to challenge extremist discourse by undermining the ideology. At best, the use of force against terrorists provides a short-term and superficial solution that is more a reaction than an action addressing the conundrum.

### **Key Distinction between Disengagement and De-Radicalization**

De-radicalization programs seek to address the ideological challenge and thwart the appeal of militancy, transforming attitudes and seeking to rehabilitate individuals into mainstream society. However, due to the newness of the subject, the lack of academic debate over theories of de-radicalization in terrorism literature remains problematic. Hence there is some opacity about the concept and significance of de-radicalization, and difficulty calculating the risk of return to combat activity.

Of great relevance is the need to comprehend the complex relationship between attitudes, beliefs and behaviors.<sup>8</sup> The question of determining why individuals move away from terrorism has also prompted little interest, hence suffering of a general apathy from analysts in the field. The practice of de-radicalization initiatives has nonetheless enjoyed considerable attention from counterterrorism initiatives worldwide for their alleged outcomes and successes.<sup>9</sup>

It is of course difficult to de-radicalize an individual who is a violent extremist unless he has experienced some kind of doubt (cognitive opening) and some disengagement.<sup>10</sup> According to Renee Garfinkel, a renowned psychologist, the decision to de-radicalize was often an individual decision and reference to role models was often cited as an important factor in distancing from

radical beliefs. In the radicalization process, experiencing trauma was identified as an element that precipitated the decision to de-radicalize.<sup>11</sup>

The key foundation of reeducation and rehabilitation programs is ideological, encompassing the reinterpretation of theological arguments to “delegitimize the use of violence against the state, the society, and the “other”.”<sup>12</sup>

Another potential venue of research is the psychological rewards that one could attain through adherence to the de-radicalized versus the radicalized belief systems. For instance, the prospect of being released from prison and leading a normal life might represent compelling rewards, motivating individuals to embrace the de-radicalization arguments. In contrast, prospects of rejection by comrades may induce a negative motivation.<sup>13</sup>

State-run programs encourage two types of important, yet different psychological and social processes<sup>14</sup>: de-radicalization and disengagement. While de-radicalization is ideologically-based, disengagement is behaviorally-based.<sup>15</sup> Omar Ashour, a political scientist and author of “The De-Radicalization of *Jihadists*”, defines the concept of de-radicalization as “a process that leads an individual or group to change his attitudes about violence—specifically about the appropriateness of violence against civilians”.<sup>16</sup> He argues that disengagement requires the abandonment of violence. De-radicalization seeks to de-legitimize the ideological reasons which permit society’s norms to be violated. In other words, de-radicalization results from a change in beliefs or ideology, whereas disengagement refers to changes in actions with an end of violence. More specifically, in disengagement, the individual has left the group, but has not necessarily altered or renounced his ideology.

As a result, disengagement is not sufficient to guarantee de-radicalization, but it often can precede de-radicalization.<sup>17</sup> While de-radicalization programs are a relatively new concept,

disengagement is not. Another leading terrorism expert, John Horgan, concurs with Ashour on the issue of disengagement. He describes disengagement as “a process in which the individual’s role within an organization changes from violent participation to a less active role”.<sup>18</sup> Horgan further notes that disengagement alone does not necessarily beget de-radicalization, nor is de-radicalization a “necessary accompaniment to disengagement.”<sup>19</sup> At the same time, by understanding the key factors of successful practices in disengagement, a better understanding of the crucial elements needed to devise a better de-radicalization program can be contemplated.

### **Basic Elements of Disengagement**

According to Horgan, disengagement includes both physical and psychological factors. Psychological factors may entail a change of priorities in the individual’s mind towards the group, including developing negative sentiments or disillusionment with the political aims and actions of the organization. Physical disengagement entails a move away from opportunities to engage in violent behavior. Arrest, imprisonment and death are characteristic of the typical kinds of disengagement.<sup>20</sup>

Abundant research on disengagement processes involving different types of groups has been carried out, the most prominent being the deprogramming of individuals belonging to cults. With regards to disengagement of individuals from cults, a number of best practices have been identified; these practices are broadly applicable to other groups as well. First, the exposure of a cult member to the outside society was more likely to influence his behavior and lead him to defect the organization.<sup>21</sup> Second, the intimate relationship of a cult member with a person outside of the cult lessened an individual’s obligation to the cult and augmented the likelihood of defection.<sup>22</sup> Third, if the cult member did not consider the demands of the cult to be vital to the

mission, the likelihood of defection from the cult increased. Fourth, if the cult failed to satisfy the emotional needs of the member, or failed to create strong group cohesion, defection was likely imminent. Fifth, family disapproval was an important factor in the decision to defect from the group.<sup>23</sup> Many of the factors encountered in the disengagement processes from cult groups are similar to those of extremist and terrorist groups.

Undoubtedly, the disengaged extremist may not necessarily be repentant or ‘de-radicalized’ at all.<sup>24</sup> Tore Bjorgo, author of “Leaving Terrorism Behind”, identifies two factors as essential in the decision of the terrorist to leave the group: the “push” and “pull” factors.<sup>25</sup> The “push” factors are essentially negative circumstances, such as a lack of commitment towards the organization. Either the individual is no longer enticed with the ideological motivations that initially had radicalized him, or he has received parental or social disapproval. Conversely, the “pull” factors are opportunities carrying a more promising potential, such as a job. Educational prospects that could be jeopardized if an individual’s group membership were known and a desire to establish a family were also identified as some of the strongest motives for leaving a militant group.<sup>26</sup> Bjorgo identified several factors in support of the disengagement process, including a public rupture from the organization even when the ideology remains strong and a gradual retreat from the group.<sup>27</sup> Conversely, Bjorgo also found that individuals may be adamant to leave a group for fear of lacking social ties outside of the group or lack of employment opportunities, given that many join terrorist groups for opportunistic or economic reasons.<sup>28</sup> The individual may also fear retaliation and lack of protection, which often causes him to delay his decision to leave the group.<sup>29</sup>

## **Chapter II. Applications of De-Radicalization and Disengagement in Programs of Selected Countries**

State-sponsored de-radicalization programs have been established in Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Algeria, Tajikistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Colombia and the United Kingdom, each of which has developed its own approach to promoting disengagement from terrorism, with their strategies tailored to their local political culture.<sup>30</sup> The complexity and multi-dimensional approach of de-radicalization of extremists and terrorists implies there is no one “silver bullet” answer to the issue.

Given intricacies of human psychology, an interdisciplinary approach is necessary to understand the minds of extremists who can be influenced not only by psychological factors but also by many other variables including political, social, religious, historical, and economic factors, as well as the ideology that characterizes the leadership of the organization.<sup>31</sup>

The following comparison of these programs will take into account whether the states in question have included in their programs elements of psychological and physical disengagement designed to change the detainee’s behavior and attitude. This chapter offers an overview of some examples of de-radicalization and rehabilitation programs as they exist in Yemen, Singapore and Indonesia. These examples are given in hopes of illuminating the practical application of de-radicalization programs, the need for which in the Muslim world is ever more pressing in light of the occurrence of terrorism in the region. The selection of these countries can also be attributed to the fact that such programs involve interpretations of the Islamic religion though the analysis also includes a non-Muslim multi-cultural country in Singapore.

## **Application of Disengagement and De-Radicalization Factors in the Case of Yemen**

**Application of disengagement factors.** Yemen was one of the first to launch a de-radicalization program following the return of *jihadis* who had fought in Afghanistan against the Soviets in the late 1980s. Upon returning to their homeland, *jihadis* represented a great destabilizing factor due to the radical extremist views they had adopted while in Afghanistan. Disengagement in the Yemeni de-radicalization program included apprehending returnees from Afghanistan as well as other potentially violent extremists.<sup>32</sup>

A psychological factor often identified in disengagement process is the detachment from the ideology of the organization.<sup>33</sup> In the Yemeni case, the successes of the psychological aspect of the disengagement process resulted in some participants being influenced enough to change their rhetoric, and beginning to inspire others not to participate in criminal actions. Some minimal effort was also made to provide employment to the former prisoners. However, due to scarce resources, Yemen was not proactive in setting up aftercare programs to rehabilitate detainees into mainstream society, nor did the government provide social support or other services to detainees upon their release. Similarly, no surveillance mechanism was put in place to monitor detainees after their release, allowing for a greater likelihood of recidivism. The program did not track recidivism rates among released detainees.<sup>34</sup>

**Application of de-radicalization factors.** Yemen's central approach was heavily religious, using clerics to debate with prisoners about their understanding of Islam. The exchange between detainees and clerics (often one cleric for three to seven detainees) occurred either in prison or outside prison,<sup>35</sup> creating an environment more conducive to building mutual trust and respect. The debate revolved around the legitimacy of jihad and its correct interpretation according to the Qu'ran. It is significant to note that clerics found that the most zealous terrorists who had fought

in Afghanistan were more challenging to engage with in open dialogue.<sup>36</sup> This is a critical point that will be common to all programs analyzed which suggests that de-radicalization programs, as currently designed, fail somehow to address appropriately hardened terrorists.

**Brief assessment of the program.** Due to high recidivism rates, the program in Yemen ended in December 2005 and was considered a failure due to the high number of graduates who returned to violence after their release.<sup>37</sup> From the Yemeni case, it is apparent that a sustained effort by the state to track and influence detainees both inside and outside of prison is needed; otherwise, former detainees may rapidly return to their old organization and radical beliefs.<sup>38</sup>

### **Application of Disengagement and De-radicalization Factors in the Case of Singapore**

**Application of disengagement factors.** Unlike neighboring countries, Singapore was not the theater of direct terrorist attacks. The main impetus for the Singaporean program was to protect the Muslim population from radical ideologies. The state made an early commitment to a religious rehabilitation of *al-Jamiyah Islamiyah* (JI) members.<sup>39</sup> A significant physical disengagement factor in the program was the arrest and imprisonment of extremists of JI and disrupting their operational capabilities. Other elements of disengagement included the provision of employment and education to detainees' families. To further ensure that former detainees did not return to terrorism or re-engage in violence, the government closely monitored their activities. As part of a wider effort of counter-radicalization of the population at large, the government initiated a campaign targeting young people and the influence of internet, which was used as a medium to encourage radicalization. The Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) set up its own website to counter various erroneous misinterpretations of Islam and any other extremist deviant ideologies.<sup>40</sup>

**Application of de-radicalization factors.** In Singapore, the RRG was founded by the government in 2003 to provide religious counseling for detainees and their families.<sup>41</sup> In other words, the “moderate” Singaporean Muslim Community is responsible for interpreting and teaching the “correct understanding of Islam”. The Singaporean Muslim Community has spearheaded efforts in combating extremism in the country with methods created within the community.<sup>42</sup> The main body representing the community’s efforts is the RGG established shortly after the apprehension of the first terrorist cell of JI in Singapore.<sup>43</sup> The government’s objective was to solicit the community’s assistance in counseling terrorists.<sup>44</sup> The RGG composed of Islamic religious scholars, a judge from the Singaporean Islamic *Sharia* Court and Muslim volunteers serving as religious counselors.<sup>45</sup> Another feature of the program includes counseling the detained sympathizers while providing simultaneously assistance to their families. In fact, the government, through the RGG, is creating a dependence of the terrorists on the Muslim community.<sup>46</sup>

Another similitude with Yemen is that counseling worked best with minor offenders who had held supporting roles within Jemaah al Islamiyah, rather than actually being involved with acts of terrorism.<sup>47</sup> Having only occupied support roles seemed to correlate with a lower commitment to the group. Being older or having established a family were two other factors that helped detainees defect from the group more easily. The support provided to the families of detainees was another important factor in the de-radicalization process, as it prevented the likelihood of further radicalization. However, it is not known how successful the RRG has been in changing the ideologies of the detainees.<sup>48</sup>

**Brief assessment of the program.** One of the specificity of the Singaporean program’s approach is that the government and Muslim community work in concert to create an hostile

environment for *jihadist* ideologies, dubbed by Stephen Biddle, a top defense policy expert, “the center of gravity in the war against terrorism...politically uncommitted Muslims”.<sup>49</sup> One of the greatest impediments to its rehabilitation program is the fact that some of the leading religious clerics in the program are Sufis, who are considered a heretical sect by Salafi *jihadis*. Most importantly, they are regarded as being co-opted by a non-Muslim state and therefore not true Muslims. Released detainees may remain deterred from extremist activity due to close monitoring by program staff.<sup>50</sup> Approximately 60% of Singapore’s rehabilitation program’s detainees have been released, although some are still under close surveillance.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, there is a lack of recidivism amongst detainees, an indicator that close monitoring of former detainees is working. The financial resources of the country are also a significant factor in implementing the program.<sup>52</sup>

### **Application of Disengagement and De-radicalization Factors in the Case of Indonesia**

**Application of disengagement factors.** The Indonesian de-radicalization program was initiated after a series of violent suicide attacks, carried out by the terrorist group JI in the heart of the country between 2002 and 2005. As in Yemen, the apprehension of senior leaders of JI and their cooperation in the de-radicalization program was seen as a major achievement and a significant factor in future disengagement. Unlike the Singaporean program, the Indonesian program is specifically aimed at incarcerated terrorists, including those involved in major terrorist attacks.<sup>53</sup> The Indonesian program is keen on “deprogramming” hardcore terrorists.

The specificity of the Indonesian program is the use of co-opted terrorists (who can also be of great use in gathering intelligence with former terrorist connections) to influence other inmates in relinquishing their views as they can easily relate to them.<sup>54</sup> Reformed radicals are viewed as

having more credibility with extremists than the moderate religious clerics used in programs like Singapore and Saudi Arabia.<sup>55</sup> In addition, the program presumes that in the minds of radicals, “all *ulema* have already failed because they failed to establish an Islamic state”.<sup>56</sup> Another feature of the program is to create a new image of the police as helpers, who intervene to assist families of the *jihadis* in the program from paying education fees to providing medical care. In conjunction with reformed radicals, the anti-terrorist unit of the police is also mandated to recruit *jihadis* who disagreed with methods employed with JI, especially with the killings of innocent civilians.

**Application of de-radicalization factors.** As did other countries’, Indonesia’s approach to de-radicalization focused on changing the ideologies of imprisoned extremists through the use of repentant *jihadis* on the basis that *jihadis* regard scholars or clerics employed by the government with suspicion, inhibiting trust and jeopardizing any de-radicalization efforts.

**Brief assessment of the program.** Indonesia’s program has yielded some success by enlisting the cooperation of high-profile terrorists like Nadir Abas and Ali Imron as co-opted terrorists.<sup>57</sup> However, the success of this approach remains to be seen. The success of changing the *jihadis*’ mindset has been limited and in many cases those who participated in the program were inmates who were opposed to violence in the first place. For example, Bali bombers were not interested in participating in the program when they were approached.<sup>58</sup> This is an important finding that shows that such programs as in the case of Yemen and Singapore tend to be more effective for less zealous radicals. The assumption that only former radicals can change the mindset of other extremists is short-lived as ultimately those reformed radicals will be viewed as cooperating with the police and therefore will be discredited.

In addition, while the program focuses on imprisoned extremists, there is no aftercare program to rehabilitate detainees once they are released from police custody.<sup>59</sup> This, paired with the lack of program resources, reduces the likelihood that the police will provide support to the graduate upon his release. Hence the former JI member will seek other opportunities, including in his former circles. Another major problem that jeopardizes the de-radicalization efforts is the Indonesian prison system, where radicalization is spreading from *jihadis* to non-*jihadis*.<sup>60</sup>

### **Chapter III. Case Study: De-Radicalization and Rehabilitation Program in Saudi Arabia, a Multifaceted Approach to Shifting Extremists' Mindset**

Saudi Arabia's de-radicalization and rehabilitation program is the most ambitious and complete effort examined in this limited analysis. The program incorporates elements similar to those from Yemen, Indonesia and Singapore but it far exceeds these programs with the sweeping efforts of the Saudi government to reach the population at large. The first part of this chapter will provide an overview of the background situation of terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia which constitutes the impetus of the Saudi government's counterterrorism efforts, especially against radical ideologies. Then, the second part will analyze how Saudi Arabia launched a successful counter-radicalization program targeting the mindset of the population at large and preventing terrorism from unfolding. Finally, the third part will focus on the de-radicalization program which targets incarcerated terrorists.

## Background

Saudi Arabia's religiosity, which the White House once considered an asset, has become a political liability. A generation of hardcore radical extremists vehemently opposed to the United States and overtly critical of the traditional *ulema*'s<sup>61</sup> passivity became emboldened to demand greater influence over all aspects of Saudi society, including foreign policy.<sup>62</sup> Seven years ago, the terrorist attacks of May 12, 2003 in Riyadh occurred, killing 34 including seven Americans, and wounding another 200 people.<sup>63</sup> These attacks were the most violent ever seen in the country, and were aimed at both foreigners, especially Americans, and the regime. The Saudi government was determined to combat what was eventually perceived as the greatest menace to the regime's survival. Massive resources and absolute political determination have been deployed to understand, pursue, deter, punish and kill al Qaeda leadership and its constituents on Saudi soil.

While terrorism is not new to Saudi Arabia, the attacks of May 2003 revealed a new form of terrorism that jeopardized the internal stability of the Kingdom. In turn, the Saudi government's response entailed a far-reaching reorganization of key government agencies to adapt to the new challenge exhibited by Islamic terrorism. The strategic framework articulated by Saudis to defend the homeland, win the long war, promote security and deter terrorism domestically required exceptional means and capabilities. From intelligence to security, education, religion, financing and media, Saudi authorities were resolved to confront the threat in order to bring it to a level where it no longer endangered national stability. The "3Ms formula" articulated by the Saudi authorities to pursue the "Men, the Money and the Mindset"<sup>64</sup> constituted the core of their strategic framework. In view of the May 2003 attacks, it is critical to analyze how the Saudi

government handled the terrorist and extremism challenge and assess the effectiveness of its de-radicalization and rehabilitation program as a part of its counterterrorism strategy.

### **Counter-Radicalization Program Targeting Population's Mindset**

To counter radicalization, the government took numerous steps to raise awareness and change the mindset of the population, most specifically targeting the youth, who are vulnerable to extremists' recruitment and message of militancy. The government deployed unprecedented efforts to set up several programs in the Kingdom to educate the public about radical Islam and caution against the dangers of extremism. The programs were designed to convey that extremism was a "corrupted" version of Islam and to promote a more moderate interpretation of the religious doctrine.

**Religious campaign delegitimizing extremism and terrorism in the Kingdom.** Given the complexity of influencing and changing an individual's ideology, Saudi authorities targeted the powerful iconic figures in the clergy, who are responsible for propagating violent ideology in the first place. In the aftermath of the May 2003 attacks, the Saudi government took proactive steps to ensure that the clergy refrain from violent rhetoric and abide by a tolerant discourse that teaches the legitimate values of Islam and that "promotes what by Saudi standards are moderate interpretations of Islam".<sup>65</sup> Religious-studies curricula were also restructured to espouse more tolerant views and eradicate any reference to religious hatred. In light of the power struggle between the regime and some of the most virulent figures of the clergy, the counter-radicalization program was a golden opportunity for the regime to weaken the growing influence of some of the preachers viewed as more dangerous than the terrorists themselves".<sup>66</sup> A campaign against radical ideology was also undertaken to monitor preaching and review

sponsored publications.<sup>67</sup> The issuance of identification cards to imams also helped ensuring that unauthorized religious clerics were barred from the delivering Friday sermons. As a result of the May 2003 bombings, many religious clerics were dismissed from their functions for delivering radical sermons.<sup>68</sup>

**Extensive campaign through educational reform.** Shortly after 9/11 terrorist attacks, there was a flurry of criticisms of Saudi school textbooks and curriculums that contained inflammatory language. In response, the Saudi leadership established a more open approach to diversification of the curriculum while remaining within the boundaries of a conservative, yet non-aggressive, religious framework.<sup>69</sup> In addition, the educational system became strictly controlled by the government, which allowed it to use its power to limit any excess that might challenge the regime. However, the greatest source to the extremist radicalization within the education system, according to C. Boucek, came from “deviant teachers” who abused their position by discussing extracurricular issues involving politics and religion and by advocating extremist positions. In response, the government put in place the teacher monitoring process whose role was to dismiss any teacher who stepped outside of his role.<sup>70</sup>

**Unprecedented media campaign against terrorism and extremism.** One of the most constructive approaches to counter terrorists’ violent rhetoric was the establishment of a large-scale media campaign to portray the positive work of anti-terrorist programs, denounce the criminal activities of extremists and relay sermons to educate the Saudi society, especially young people, on the “correct” teaching of Islam. This was a successful campaign that eventually impaired al Qaeda’s recruitment process. Among the various methods employed, broadcasting detainees, terrorists and extremists publicly recanting their past beliefs and actions was a very successful tool.<sup>71</sup>

**De-radicalization through the internet: “Tranquility Program”.** The internet has become a powerful media platform used by extremists to propagate their radical ideologies and support propaganda, fundraising and recruitment efforts worldwide. In response to this, Saudi authorities developed, “The *Sakinah* Campaign” to combat internet radicalization and recruitment. Operating as an independent non-governmental organization, the *Sakinah* Campaign enlists Islamic scholars<sup>72</sup> to interact online with individuals who seek to expand their knowledge of Islam in an attempt to drive them away from deviant extremist groups. Those who work online consist of *ulema* and other religious clerics and repentant extremists who work as volunteers. Another important feature of the campaign involves exposing the extremists’ “manipulation of Islam,” and “calling upon internet users to recant their ‘corrupted’ understandings of Islam.”<sup>73</sup> To buttress its security measures, the Saudi government enacted a law that penalizes anyone accused of propagating extremist or radical material online. Violators could face penalties of up to 10 years in prison and/or a fine of up to five million SAR (approximately \$1.3 million USD).<sup>74</sup> While it is difficult to gauge the success of this campaign, it acts as a deterrent in using the web to recruit, carry out fundraising and spread radical ideologies.

**Co-opting terrorists and extremists and enlisting their support to deter other terrorists.** Another component of Saudi counterterrorism efforts has been enlisting former extremists and terrorists to become partners in the struggle against terrorism. One of the methods that proved useful was to set up “false” websites and open a channel of communication with other terrorists. This allowed security forces to foil several plots.<sup>75</sup>

## **In prison: The Counseling Program Targeting the Mindset and Behavior of Extremists**

**De-radicalization for incarcerated terrorist sympathizers.** The central approach to countering radical ideologies of imprisoned extremists is the creation of counseling programs aimed at de-radicalizing detainees and reeducating violent extremists and sympathizers through intensive religious debates and psychological counseling. Unlike the Indonesian program, the Saudi program does not focus on hardcore terrorists and prohibits them from participating; it focuses on terrorist sympathizers.<sup>76</sup> The Saudi decision to exclude hardcore terrorists is due to the fact that they consider them as individuals who cannot be reformed. The program rather focuses on supporters who have not yet participated in violence.<sup>77</sup>

The Saudi program is based on intense religious and psychological debates with terrorist sympathizers. The counseling process of detainees takes place inside and outside jail. Initially, sessions are conducted on a one-on-one basis, especially those held in prison.<sup>78</sup> The main objective of the program is to make radical prisoners relinquish their ideological underpinnings, especially the doctrine of “*tafkir*” when a Muslim declares other Muslims or the state as impious believers who can be executed.<sup>79</sup> The antagonizing views promoted by extremists are put in question and replaced with a more pluralistic vision of the world founded on the tenets of Islam.

One of the key points of the program is based on a presumption that offenders were duped by extremists in the true interpretation of Islam and were unjustly exposed to violent extremist ideologies.<sup>80</sup> The Saudi’s approach resembles that of a number of other countries in dealing with de-radicalization of imprisoned extremists, most notably Yemen. However, the Saudi program remains the most comprehensive, best funded and most known.<sup>81</sup>

Unlike the Indonesian program which uses co-opted terrorists as its primary tool, the organizational structure of the counseling program is the Advisory Committee under the Ministry

of Interior and comprised of Islamic scholars, academics, psychologists and others. The Advisory Committee consists of four subcommittees: the Religious Subcommittee, which is the largest, the Psychological and Social Subcommittee, the Security Subcommittee and the Media Subcommittee.<sup>82</sup> Given the danger posed to Islam and to the state by the intolerant version of Islam promoted by radical extremists, Saudi officials spared no means to help those young men abandon extremist views and resume a normal life.<sup>83</sup> Sympathizers are eventually offered an opportunity to reintegrate to mainstream society if they successfully complete the re-education program. Another important component of the program is the psychological and social subcommittee composed of psychologists and psychiatrists, responsible for evaluating the emotion, motivation, personality, behavior and interpersonal relationships of a prisoner; and monitoring the prisoner's behavior and compliance throughout the program. The Media Subcommittee, which produces materials for that dismantle the image that extremists have created for themselves to be used in schools and mosques, is essential. Targeted outreach is another core component, especially for young men drawn to the message promoted by extremists.<sup>84</sup>

**Disengagement factors: the aftercare program.** The multifaceted approach to de-radicalization adopted by the Saudi government contains several factors that facilitate the disengagement processes that are a core element in counter-terrorism.

First, *jihadis* are arrested and detained by security services, which directly puts an end to the violent behavior. As seen earlier, arrest, imprisonment represent the most obvious kinds of physical disengagement.<sup>85</sup>

Second, upon successful completion of the rehabilitation process, prisoners are transferred to the external rehabilitation facility, the Care Rehabilitation Center<sup>86</sup>. A halfway house designed

specifically to accommodate the rehabilitation process, its high maintenance costs make this element of rehabilitation a luxury that not all countries can afford. The aftercare program (extended to returnees from Guantanamo Bay) aims at facilitating their transition back to society. Returnees from Guantanamo focus more on psychological counseling and reintegration to Saudi society rather than dialogue and instruction.<sup>87</sup> Another important factor that helps ease prisoners into non-violent behavior and a normal life is the variety of activities enjoyed at the rehabilitation center. Prisoners are exposed to different entertainments, including sports that facilitate teamwork. This is considered important in the de-radicalization process. The individuals who are more involved in activities focus less on serious political work. Disillusionment is replaced by entertainment, distracting prisoners from discussing ideology, producing and disseminating political propaganda and building effective political organization or clandestine terrorist cells. These are the “push factors” identified by Horgan.<sup>88</sup> One of the most innovative rehabilitation activities offered to young radicalized men is art therapy (this activity is replicated in the de-radicalization program in Afghanistan). Young men tend to embrace this activity, even as it is considered taboo in Islam. From family ties to friends or staff centers, the extremist’s behavior is inevitably influenced by a new network of mentors.<sup>89</sup> The center allows also prisoners to make a brief trip out of custody for a determined period of time (typically 8 to 12 weeks).<sup>90</sup> Similarly, many of the counselors live with detainees, which allows for confidence building measures to be established.

Third, after successful completion of the program, the Saudi government remains involved through the Advisory Committee and through the prisoner’s larger family network by offering a sustainable future to the released prisoner and his family. This is crucial to prevent recidivism. According to Horgan, the “status and position in the organization becomes replaced by the

family”. The Psychological and Social Subcommittee is responsible for determining what support the prisoner and his family may need during and after the release in order to offset any hardship due to the incarceration and to avoid further radicalization. This aspect of the program is considered a positive and important factor in the Saudi “war of ideas”. The “sustainable future” offered may be a job, an education or a car. However, these benefits are withheld by the government if the fresh graduate is involved in any illicit activity.<sup>91</sup>

Fourth, the government maintains rehabilitated prisoners’ good behavior and engages with them in a stringent follow-up process that requires former detainees to meet periodically with authorities after their release.

Fifth, the government requires rehabilitated prisoners to settled down, marry and have children. This is considered important, as creating a “longing for the freedoms of a normal life”<sup>92</sup> in youth is crucial so they do not get involved in extremism. One of the strongest motives for leaving an organization is to establish a family. Such a situation involves establishing new bonds, new loyalties, and setting new priorities. Loyalty to spouse and children will often take priority over loyalty to organization.<sup>93</sup> The government makes sure to finance weddings and to furnish apartments.

Sixth, a unique aspect of the reintegration of these fresh graduates to society is their continued monitoring, with strong reference to Saudi culture. “Participants are released into society against guarantees from both their family and tribe, who jointly provide an informal round-the-clock surveillance capability...”<sup>94</sup> The use of family and tribal affiliations is key to prevent recidivism. This process uses several important Saudi cultural mores, including social responsibility and notions of honor. This is very context-oriented and allows for a close

monitoring of the individual which is difficult to emulate elsewhere without a similar societal structure.

Seventh, as a monitoring, preventive and protective measure for the participant not to be exposed to extremist groups, rehabilitation clerics and psychiatrists remain in contact with released prisoners. Maintaining a social network and a presence is extremely important to prevent fresh graduates from contacting extremist groups once they leave the center. Periodic visits by members of the Advisory Committee to former program participants also continue after their release to prevent recidivism. In addition, the heavy involvement of the family in the design of the program and following prisoners' release is an indication of the relative success of the rehabilitation program. Upon completion of the program, former *jihadis* must sign a pledge renouncing extremist views. An important task of the Security subcommittee and a powerful deterrent element is monitoring after the detainee is released.<sup>95</sup> Additionally, inmates are required to regularly check in with the subcommittee.<sup>96</sup> This not only helps to prevent the newly graduate from reconnecting with his old extremist networks, but also protects him from retaliation and negative sanctions from the organization because of his earlier defection.

#### **Chapter IV. Assessing Effectiveness of the Saudi De-radicalization Program**

##### **Saudi Rehabilitation Program: Successful in Theory**

In theory, the program is successful because it implements all the elements of disengagement that are crucial to effectively help an inmate walk away from terrorism. The presence of religious counselors, psychiatrists, researchers, social staff and others is important, as is the fact that these people will remain involved in the life of the inmate upon his release.

The role of the family in the design of the program, as well as families' monitoring the incarcerated sympathizer after his release, is critical. The rehabilitation program fosters behavioral change and constructs new relationships that will help the inmate replace his old extremist networks.

The numerous economic, financial, educational and social incentives provided to the inmate facilitate the rehabilitation process, and are essential to reintegration into mainstream society.

Prisons have been reformed and new ones are being constructed to avoid radicalization. In sum, the Saudi government spared no money, and no effort to tackle the ideological threat of extremism which is at the heart of terrorism.

The central issue in the rehabilitation of extremists is how to get individuals to relinquish their violent ideology. The success rates of de-radicalization programs, though reportedly high in some cases, have yet to be substantiated. Saudi Arabia has implemented a very well funded program of 8 to 12 week duration in which, Saudi officials report, almost 3,000 prisoners have participated and about 1,400 have renounced their former beliefs and been released.

Approximately 1,000 prisoners remain incarcerated.<sup>97</sup> The Saudi government claims that only 20% of those who pass through the program have returned to combat activity.<sup>98</sup> Another testament of this relative success is an apprehension in 2007 of terrorist cells in the Kingdom which were preparing for attacks.<sup>99</sup>

### **Saudi Rehabilitation Program: Limited in Practice**

However, in practice the Saudi de-radicalization and rehabilitation program is limited for several reasons. While programs refer to de-radicalization, they are in practice more focused on disengagement, given that they rarely achieve “de-radicalization” as a desired outcome. Instead,

they reduce the risk of the individual's to re-engaging in terrorism or any similar illicit activity.<sup>100</sup>

Though the Saudi de-radicalization and rehabilitation program deprogrammed scores of former *jihadis*, a major finding is that those who have been released through the counseling program have been relatively minor offenders who have, for example, committed an extremist offense on the internet. These minor offenders have been released and for some reason “rehabilitated”, but the same program that helped them has reportedly not succeeded with true believers and hardcore zealots. Critics claim that the program fails to change the attitude of terrorist sympathizers and it simply uses a combination of pressure and generous financial incentives to persuade individuals to abandon the use of violence inside the kingdom, while ensuring they will be unable to export it elsewhere”.<sup>101</sup> However, the program may have also succeeded in preventing terrorist sympathizers from further radicalizing which is an achievement on its own. Other de-radicalization programs, notably in Singapore, have also targeted minor offenders and not hardcore extremists. Even in programs like Indonesia that has been designed to target hardcore terrorists, success has been insignificant. Similarly, in Yemen, it has proven difficult to engage with hardened terrorists.<sup>102</sup> While the program shows promise, it has yet to face the difficult test of being applied to more committed militants, including those who have carried out violent attacks within the Kingdom, because they presumably have a rooted ideology that is extremely difficult to de-radicalize, regardless of what benefits are offered. They are the real challenge. It may be a matter of time, or perhaps more than counseling is needed in order for these programs to be successful against hardened zealots. At present, the Saudi de-radicalization program focuses on radicalized individuals who have not yet taken violent action

and endeavors to reintegrate them into Saudi society. Some extremists cannot be rehabilitated and do not wish to be.

Another important question to address is whether the conversion is genuine, permanent, and whether the true motivations of the minor offenders in rehabilitating were not only ideological but also economic, financial or social. It is difficult to ascertain whether a former detainee is fully rehabilitated, or is simply practicing the jihad principle of *takeyya* in which disinformation and deception are justified if their well-being or Islam is threatened.<sup>103</sup> Hence, the effectiveness of the program remains to be seen.

The Saudi rehabilitation program is hardly applicable to other countries for several reasons. The far-reaching effort in the Saudi's soft approach to counterterrorism was possible because of Saudi Arabia's massive oil resources, which enabled the Kingdom to construct new prison facilities for its inmates to avoid further radicalization. Likewise, new facilities have been built to rehabilitate its prisoners and to offer them an environment that is different from the prison and in which they can enjoy a variety of activities tailored to spur disengagement.

The Kingdom's resources also allowed disbursing for any expenses related to the future of the fresh graduates, from finding them a job to financing their wedding and financially supporting their families while they are being rehabilitated. It is unlikely that many developing countries such as Yemen would have the financial means to replicate such a model.

Another limitation resides in the fact that the relative success of the program is influenced by and based within the Saudi context and makes heavy use of Saudi culture, tradition and community ties. Attempts to use a similar program in Malaysia, for example, have not translated successfully.<sup>104</sup>

In addition, challenges posed by radical groups in the West are different from those of radical groups in countries as Saudi Arabia or Yemen, where the traditional “*ulema*” has more influence. Saudi clerics use the *Qu’ran* and other religious teachings to challenge extremists’ thinking and reeducate them. However, this model is not easily replicable in the West because the Saudis put a significant amount of pressure on the individuals’ families, threatening to hold them accountable if the fresh graduate were to return to terrorist activities. The role of the family is instrumental in the rehabilitation process of a detainee.<sup>105</sup> Saudi officials relied heavily on the family to take responsibility for the new graduate’s actions, and the country's security apparatus to monitor his activities after release. This includes monitoring in and out of the center, ongoing documented evaluations, and regular assessments by staff members.<sup>106</sup>

After January 2009, the Saudi officials announced that at least eleven former Guantanamo detainees returned to terrorist activity after graduating from the program. The Saudis now admit that as many as 10 to 20 percent of those released may return to illicit activity.<sup>107</sup> Accuracy of any estimate of recidivism is still questionable, particularly since there has not been enough time to study long-term effects of de-radicalization. Recently, two alumni of the rehabilitation program announced that they had returned to jihad in an online video posting. There are two Saudi, Said al-Shihri and Abu al-Hareth al Oufi (former Gitmo detainees) who had become leaders of al Qaeda in Yemen. In addition, a new list of 85 terrorists operating outside Saudi Arabia was issued by Saudi authorities, asking for the help of Interpol and urging the suspects to turn themselves into a Saudi embassy abroad under an amnesty offer.<sup>108</sup> Boucek argues that measuring the relative success of the counseling program is not an easy task, especially so soon after the program started. The program, like the others, has been in operation for a relatively short period of time.

## **Chapter V. Lessons for Successful De-radicalization Programs and Recommendations**

It would be difficult to extend lessons beyond the Saudi de-radicalization program given the specific cultural and political contexts within which these programs are constructed. The recommendations are specific to the Saudi program with potential lessons for other countries to be further studied according to their cultural, political and economic contexts.

### **Basic Elements for Successful De-Radicalization Programs**

The key to any successful de-radicalization and rehabilitation programs appears to be the engagement with which the individual addresses his thinking process, his circumstances and those of his family.

- Using high-profile and respectable religious clerics and elders to counter extremists' radical and "corrupt" understanding of Islam is extremely important. Saudi Arabia's vast pool of notable religious scholars and clerics is a great advantage that many Western or non-Muslim countries lack. The need to have moderate religious clerics who speak the language of the prisoner is paramount.<sup>109</sup>

Often, religious clerics in Europe, for example, only converse in Arabic. This language barrier constitutes a serious challenge for young extremists who are only proficient in a Western language. Given the large amount of its respectable religious clerics, Saudi Arabia can send some of its clerics to train in foreign language overseas and help those non-Muslim countries to make use of them in the context of their de-radicalization programs.

- The instrumental role of family members (spouses, parents and relatives) in de-radicalization is critical. Partners, spouses and family obligations can be a driving force in

disengagement. This has been proven in exit programs in Norway<sup>110</sup> and can be easily replicated elsewhere. Moreover, the financial support to the families of detainees is vital to prevent the extremist group from stepping in to provide for the family. Saudi Arabia extends financial support to the prisoner as well as to his family to prevent further radicalization and because families play a critical role in the disengagement of violent activism.<sup>111</sup> Some countries like Yemen have been too constrained financially to extend such assistance to the family of prisoners. Though an important element of de-radicalization programs, the economic situation of the country will dictate whether or not this component can be replicated.

- The importance of financial, educational, social incentives have proven essential in rehabilitating scores of former *jihadis* into mainstream society. Saudi capital has helped substantially to reintegrate many former extremists to society. This aspect may be replicable elsewhere depending on the availability of resources of the country concerned.

- The relative success of the Saudi de-radicalization program is partly because of the use of cultural values, norms, family hierarchies, community leaders and tribes. The heavy use of family, communities and tribes to influence and monitor the sympathizer's behavior is unique to Saudi context and has helped monitor and contain the behavior of fresh graduates. However, due to its cultural specificities, this aspect is hardly applicable in other countries without a similar societal structure, such as the United States.<sup>112</sup>

- The use of social networks is important to prevent both recruitment and radicalization.<sup>113</sup> It is therefore extremely likely that this factor will play a key role in de-radicalization. Decker and Van Winkle underscored that the lack of a "receiving group" was an important obstacle to a sense of identity and belonging, but also for protection from both random and reprisal-related violence.<sup>114</sup> These findings suggest that the existence of alternative social networks could be a

critical factor that is currently missing in discussions of de-radicalization from terrorist groups. In the Saudi case, the program allows detainees, upon their release, to continue meeting regularly with the same religious study group and imam to whom they were assigned during their detention. This was most likely a contributing factor to success in averting recidivism.<sup>115</sup> This component is easily applicable in other countries by creating new social networks for the fresh graduate and maintaining the link between program staff and inmates upon their release.

- The aftercare program is also very important in rehabilitating inmates into mainstream society. The rehabilitation is facilitated by activities carried out in centers different than the prison environment. In this regard, the Saudi program offers the most developed setting in which detainees can enjoy a wide variety of games, sports, activities, networking and controlled family visits that facilitate their transitioning back into society. The Saudi program also encourages participants to continue counseling and studying with their former imams and scholars after release. The aftercare program was not emulated in many countries due to lack of funding— for example, in Yemen. Though the Saudi rehabilitation program is sophisticated, as it includes a separate facility from the prison with a variety of activities, other states can perhaps substitute the rehabilitation center with activities that could be undertaken within the prison facility.

- Monitoring is extremely important after the release of the detainee to prevent the occurrence of recidivism. It is therefore important to ensure that the former detainee is well monitored after his release, and that he is surrounded by a circle of family and friends and not left to his own devices. Tight control mechanisms and strict monitoring by Saudi security apparatus in addition to family, friends, peers and staff help account for the relative success of the Saudi de-radicalization program. It is paramount that states put in place similar mechanisms

or at least minimal security monitoring upon the release of the graduate, failing which previous efforts to rehabilitate him will be doomed to fail.

- Reform of prison structure is important for rehabilitation efforts. The potential of prisons as recruiting ground for terrorists is a serious concern for authorities. Prison facilities and structures are key for rehabilitation and de-radicalization efforts. Reforming prisons should therefore be a priority. Prison officials overwhelmed with poor conditions and overcrowded cells find themselves underresourced to prevent radicalization as seen in the Indonesian and Yemeni programs. This situation will only negatively impact any de-radicalization attempts in countries such as Yemen, for example, as de-radicalization programs targeted towards its detainees in its prisons will have limited effects given the prison structures and limited resources. Saudi Arabia, in contrast, has had the resources to address its prison concerns by building additional facilities to support its de-radicalization programs, unlike most other countries. The Saudi government has also invested in five new prison facilities to segregate inmates according to their crimes in order to avoid radicalization.<sup>116</sup> The reform or construction of new prison facilities is again subject to funding availability of each country.

### **Recommendations to Saudi Officials**

- Recruit the best psychiatrists to prevent any attempts of manipulation by the inmate. It is difficult to ascertain that the “rehabilitated” inmate is actually “de-radicalized” or whether he is simply practicing the jihad principle of *takeyya* for deception purposes.<sup>117</sup> As Saudi Arabia is well aware of this practice, its religious clerics are doing their utmost to discard any attempt of manipulation. However, recruiting psychiatrists and counselors as well as religious clerics who are best trained in recognizing those techniques can help reduce the risk of such deceptions.

- Develop a pilot project and comprehensive evaluative model for empirical assessment of the program in the interest of planning, evaluating, and refining the program. This would include recidivism rates, how programs are implemented, how they are successful. The results of these evaluations, including statistical information related to recidivism, should be made publicly available. Little research has been done on recidivism and risk assessment in the context of terrorism. Without further research, it will be impossible to provide any meaningful evaluation of the claimed successes in promoting or facilitating disengagement, de-radicalization and/or effective and sustainable recidivism risk reduction from terrorism.<sup>118</sup>

Given that some de-radicalization programs such as Indonesia's have successfully enlisted the cooperation of senior leaders of terrorist groups in renouncing their ideologies and influencing the attitudes of other inmates. This example from the Indonesian de-radicalization program could help the Saudi program in targeting more of its hardcore zealots. In addition, successfully rehabilitated individuals can provide counterterrorism officials with valuable insights into the workings of terrorist organizations, and thus can be seen as valuable to the overall counterterrorism strategy.

- Build a better understanding of radicalization and de-radicalization processes so as to developing effective policies. Saudi Arabia should press for a comprehensive assessment of all aspects of the radicalization cycle: why do people choose to leave terrorist organizations, and how do radicalization and de-radicalization processes differ in the United States and other countries? In addition, Saudi Arabia can deter the spread of violent extremism and prevent radicalization by helping its regional partners increase their counter-extremism efforts domestically and providing assistance, whether overtly or covertly, to exploit al Qaeda tactical failures immediately when they occur. Radicalization is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that

requires a comprehensive and integrated strategy that includes coordination of multiple branches of the government and the private sector.

- View de-radicalization processes in the wider political and economic context. In the broader context of its de-radicalization program, Saudi Arabia should counter extremism through supporting democratic and economic reform, more transparency, less corruption and offset the region's deep structural challenges so as to reduce the pool of potential recruits to radical extremism.<sup>119</sup>

- Create a "de-radicalization forum" where the policymakers and practitioners from countries engaged in these efforts can compare notes and best practices.<sup>120</sup> Saudi Arabia should in particular learn from other strategies and ensure that it fully grasps their de-radicalization strategies in order to enhance its own and determine viable findings to apply at home. This organization could also perform independent assessments of each country's success and press for needed improvements.

- Develop well-designed de-radicalization program targeting hardcore extremists. Saudi Arabia should work with other states to devise specific programs and advanced techniques to target hardcore extremists. Listening to their grievances and allowing them to have a voice is a first step in the right direction.

## **Conclusion**

The broader understanding of terrorism has come a long way since September 11, 2001, but there is still much to learn regarding the processes of individual and collective disengagements from terrorist activity. This will assist states in better understanding how these processes relate to

their counterterrorism strategies and capacities. It is clear that de-radicalization of prisoners is a complex issue. There is a strong potential for the targeted prisoners to abuse such programs.

The programs share many commonalities and reflect a number of disengagement factors which helped to deprogram scores of *jihadis*. The Saudi and Singaporean programs both focus on the circumstances of the incarcerated inmate and his family. Both programs also seek to raise awareness among the population at large, targeting specifically young people and the influence of internet which was used as a medium to encourage radicalization.

The Saudi and Yemeni programs all make use of the moderate religious clerics to delegitimize the extremist's rhetoric. While Indonesia favors co-opted terrorists. Whatever the approach might be, it is not known whether the programs have been successful in changing the ideologies of detainees.

While all countries examined adopted a different approach in their religious instruction and release of rehabilitated extremists, Singapore and Saudi Arabia imposes stringent follow-up mechanisms, whereas Yemen and Indonesia have no structured aftercare programs once graduates are released.

The Saudi program is the most comprehensive due to its wealthy resources. The Saudi program is thorough in its use of family and community ties to help in the de-radicalization process as well as in the reliance it creates towards the inmate and his family in terms of livelihood which avert further radicalization. The program heavily engages the family in the monitoring process of the fresh graduate upon his release. It also put in place all mechanisms inside and outside the prison to counter the extremist ideology of *tafkir* through intensive religious debate and psychological counseling as well as monitor and prevent former *jihadis* to return to combat activity. However, the anecdotal evidence suggests that some have returned to

conduct terrorist activity, in which case the program needs to be revisited to identify the shortcomings and improve the process.

The main common finding is that all programs examined in this thesis have been quite successful against only those extremists who have engaged in minor offenses rather than hardcore terrorists. Hailed as one of the most advanced de-radicalization programs in the world, Saudi Arabia claims some significant degree of success for its rehabilitation program. However, it is unclear how much the switch was based on a genuine ideological transformation rather than on pure strategic calculation. In addition, due to the newness of de-radicalization programs, it is yet premature to assess recidivism rates and the holistic effectiveness of these programs, particularly given the vast disparities in resource availability, and political, religious, and social contexts between various countries' programs. However, states should nonetheless attempt to begin such evaluation.

It bears repeating that military measures alone cannot defeat extremism and terrorism. In today's security environment, extremism and radical ideology are no longer issues that states can ignore and states will gain more interest in developing such programs which require money, time and sharing best practices, learning lessons from each other, and helping one another. De-radicalization programs are a necessary tool to today's states' counterterrorism strategies. There is also a need to improve our knowledge of how different de-radicalization programs should be tailored to different groups including hardened terrorists to ensure that incentives, curricula and courses are designed to successfully address specific groups, whether these groups are distinguished by age, or, more importantly, on the intensity and scale of group members' radicalism. Certainly, the Saudi government is enhancing its programs, expanding its prison facilities, ever seeking creative ways to improve the program. However, six years after the Saudi

de-radicalization program was first put in place, it is time to assess the program, publish recidivism rates, and allow for more transparency that can prompt constructive criticism and, ultimately, improvements. Though the Saudi government regards the rehabilitation program as its legacy, it is time to allow for a greater scrutiny of the program for better results in the future.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Hassan Muhammad & Pereire K, “Key Considerations in Counterideological Work against Terrorist Ideology,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, no. 6 (2006).

<sup>2</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, “Saudi Arabia: Friend or Foe in the War on Terror?,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XIII, No. 1 (Spring 2006). In this article, the author argues that effective strategies to deal with terrorism and extremism means addressing two key strategic issues that go far beyond the so-called war on terrorism. One is whether the Arab world can recognize the need for reform and achieve it. The second is whether the West, and particularly the United States, can learn to work quietly with nations for effective reform, rather than seeking to impose it on an entire region.

<sup>3</sup> “In Islam, the belief that all human beings are part of a worldwide community, with responsibility to care for each other as equals under God”

<http://encyclopedia.farlex.com/Islamic+Ummah> (accessed on April, 20, 1010).

<sup>4</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross & Laura Grossman, “Homegrown Terrorists in the US and the UK, an Empirical Examination of the Radicalization Process,” *Division of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, (2009).

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Hoffman, William Rosenau, Andrew J. Curiel, Doron Zimmermann. “The Radicalization of Diasporas and Terrorism.” A Joint Conference by the RAND Corporation and the Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich, RAND, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Brian Jenkins, *Building an Army of Believers: Jihadist Radicalization and Recruitment*. Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives (Committee on Homeland Security), 2007.

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<sup>86</sup> At the rehabilitation center is divided into three sections: domestic security offenders; individuals caught trying to go to Iraq or returnees from Iraq and returnees from Guantanamo Bay. The three groups are kept separate in separate houses and follow separate rehabilitation programs.

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