

# A New Approach? Deradicalization Programs and Counterterrorism

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On March 16-17, 2010, the International Peace Institute (IPI), the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Arab Thought Forum (ATF) convened a two-day conference entitled “Countering Violent Extremism: Learning from Deradicalization Programs in Some Muslim-Majority States.” This meeting note was drafted by Ellie B. Hearne and Nur Laiq, *rapporteurs*. The conference was held under the Chatham House Rule. The meeting note reflects the *rapporteurs*’ interpretation of conference proceedings, and does not necessarily represent the views of all other participants.

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This report draws on the presentations of a number conference presenters and other participants, and would also not have been possible without their rich inputs—we are indebted to them for that.

## Introduction

Counterterrorism has, in the last ten years, come to the fore of international relations, and remains in the news almost daily. This is due in large part to the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan, which in turn have also prompted something of a backlash against such military or “hard” approaches to countering terrorism. Partly in response, states and civil society have sought out softer, often preventive, measures to deal with violent extremism, many of which have been deemed more successful than military approaches and less likely to foment a new generation of violent extremists. However, problems remain.

“Deradicalization” programs, which are geared toward peacefully moving individuals and groups away from violent extremism, have grown both in popularity and in scope of late, even in just the past five years. While these programs vary widely, with differing subjects (e.g., prisoners, potential terrorists, convicted criminals, repentant extremists), aims (e.g., abandonment of extreme views, disengagement from terrorism, rehabilitation into society), sizes (from just a handful of participants to hundreds), and forms (from arranging jobs, marriages, and new lives for participants, to merely educating them on nonviolent alternatives to their methods), common themes and problems can be discerned. With recent high-profile cases of recidivism by supposedly “deradicalized” individuals, questions are being raised about the efficacy of these programs and about how best to design them.

In light of all of these developments in counterterrorism, and the rise of deradicalization programs specifically, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the International Peace Institute have begun to examine deradicalization programs with a view to observing the challenges faced and discerning the lessons learned. Hamed El Said and Jane Harrigan have spearheaded this research with case studies of deradicalization programs in eight Muslim-majority states, to be published later this year by Routledge. Feeding into this project, and bringing in the experiences of other states, the Arab Thought Forum, IPI, and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs co-hosted a conference in Amman, Jordan, entitled “Countering Violent Extremism: Learning from Deradicalization Programs in Some Muslim-Majority States,” in March 2010.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> IPI’s collaboration with the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on these issues began with the conference “Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement from Violent Extremism,” held in New York in April 2008. See the meeting report from that event for further background: Naureen Chowdhury Fink with Ellie B. Hearne, *rapporteurs*, “Beyond Terrorism: Deradicalization and Disengagement from Violent Extremism,” New York: International Peace Institute, October 2008.

With attendees drawn from foreign and interior ministries, state and nonstate deradicalization programs, academia, and elsewhere, the conference allowed the creators of deradicalization programs themselves to present their programs and share their experiences, and it allowed those studying the programs to present their findings. Other participants were able to critically evaluate the programs and ask questions concerning diverse issues such as program funding, project creation, recidivism, and prospects for emulation elsewhere. This report will summarize the main programs as they were presented in the conference, concluding with a series of policy implications and recommendations for the UN community.

## Background: Definitions and the Radicalization Process

“Violent extremism” and “terrorism” are used interchangeably, but the former is often broader and can include extreme right-wing groups that aren’t always deemed “terrorist.”<sup>2</sup> Both terms, for the purposes of this paper, exclude state-sponsored terrorism, which reflects the use of the terms by the conference speakers and the authors of the case studies. “Deradicalization,” meanwhile, refers to the process of divorcing a person, voluntarily or otherwise, from their extreme views, while “disengagement” refers to the process of moving a person away from their extreme group’s activities, without necessarily deradicalizing that person or changing their views. Most meeting participants did not draw this distinction, but focused primarily on deradicalization, except where noted. “Counterradicalization,” on the other hand, encompasses those measures taken to prevent a new generation of extremists, and is thus less reactive than deradicalization.

Successful deradicalization depends upon an understanding of radicalization itself. Often due to a person’s socializing with radical individuals,

radicalization can take many forms. A detailed study of radicalization is beyond the scope of this report, but a brief consideration of the paths to radicalization is important for the purposes of this discussion.

As participants frequently noted, a sound deradicalization program needs to learn from how individuals become radicalized: indeed, both radicalization and deradicalization lean heavily on family or other social ties, and the Internet is increasingly playing a large role in both. Indeed, a particularly striking feature of radicalization is that today it happens primarily over the Internet. As this report will explore in greater depth later on, an individual need have had no prior contact with a terrorist group, nor have ever traveled to those countries where the group is active, to become directly involved with terrorism. As we have seen with recent cases in the US (“Jihad Jane” and others)<sup>3</sup> and prior to that with the July 2005 bombings in London,<sup>4</sup> terrorists are often radicalized “remotely,” sometimes through the Internet alone. This trend of “self-recruitment” has moved many governments and NGOs to look more closely at the Internet’s role in both terrorism and counterterrorism.

One participant described those generally susceptible to radicalization as having a combination of the following characteristics: trusting a person already involved with a radical group; being “spiritually hungry” and dedicated to their faith, but having limited knowledge of their religion; and being desperate, naïve, or simply in need of money. Those seeking to recruit such people try to cater to their needs and interests.

During the process of radicalization, as described by one participant, the “target’s” characteristics are identified to determine their suitability for terrorism. They are then engaged in dialogue, befriended, and their social, financial, or psychological needs are addressed as a means of gaining

2 Though, as with all these terms, “terrorism” is in the eye of the beholder—one man’s terrorist is, of course, another man’s freedom fighter.

3 In early 2010, Colleen LaRose, an American woman accused of terrorism offences, earned the tabloid nickname “Jihad Jane” for her alleged involvement in Islamic extremism. LaRose, a convert to Islam, gained prominence in extremist internet chatrooms as “Fatima LaRose” and by virtue of her unlikely background as a Pennsylvania housewife, shocked people with her pledge to help “the suffering Muslim people” through her involvement in a terror plot. See Ed Pilkington, “Colleen LaRose: All-American Neighbour or Terrorist Jihad Jane?” *The Guardian*, March 10, 2010, p. 3. Like LaRose, Sharif Mobley, a New Jersey man with no prior connections to radicalism, is being held on terrorism charges in Yemen due to his alleged membership of *al Shabab*, the Yemeni branch of *al Qaida*. See Scott Shane, “Arrest Stokes Concerns About Radicalized Muslims,” *New York Times*, March 12, 2010, p.4-A.

4 The July 7, 2005, terrorist bombings that targeted London’s public-transport system were deemed more shocking by the fact their perpetrators were “homegrown,” though the Internet afforded a strong link with extremists abroad, who even provided online instructions on bomb-making. See Kim Sengupta, “The Police’s Nightmare: Home-Grown Terrorists,” *Independent* (London), July 13, 2005.

their trust. This part of the process closely resembles the initial steps taken in many deradicalization programs. However, throughout the recruitment process, radical groups will often isolate the targeted individual and “educate” them about the cause. If they refuse to participate in violence, they may then be asked to do something seemingly innocuous, like renting a car or an apartment to help out the group. This act is then leveraged to elicit continued participation. For example, they may be told that “the security forces now know about you, and they may torture you.” The targeted individual is consequently drawn closer to the radical group.

## Case Studies

While “hard” approaches to counterterrorism are more militaristic in approach—involving targeted assassinations or even warfare—“soft” counterterrorism programs seek to undo the radicalization process by engineering the individual’s return to moderate society, usually by providing them with a stable support network, probing their original reasons for radicalizing, and divorcing them from their extreme beliefs and social contacts. Other goals of deradicalization, as outlined by conference presenters, include reducing the number of active terrorists; resocializing ex-members; sowing dissent among terrorists; reducing the financial and social costs of imprisonment; boosting government legitimacy; and reducing dependency on repressive forms of counterterrorism. The case studies laid out below examine eight countries’ approaches to soft counterterrorism and the role of the Internet in deradicalization, as relayed at the Amman conference: Algeria, Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Singapore.

### ALGERIA

The Algerian deradicalization program aims to bring a sense of closure to its civil-war period. The approach is based on the *Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation*, which was put to a national referendum in 2005 and then implemented as law in 2006. It involves a three-step program centered on restoring peace; supporting national reconciliation, solidarity, and reintegration; and preventing the reoccurrence of civil discord. The measures are aimed primarily at those involved with the Islamic Salvation Front, but smaller factions have also been

brought in.

The measures taken to promote peace and stability include dropping charges against those who give themselves up voluntarily and willingly denounce violence and hand in their arms. They also focus on giving amnesties and pardons, and, where appropriate, on reducing prison sentences.

The reconciliation and reintegration step includes support at three levels. First, the state acknowledges the disappeared, those individuals whose death has been declared by the judicial order but whose bodies remain unfound. The families of victims qualify for compensation from the state. Second, the state promotes the reemployment of individuals who had been the subject of administrative dismissals as a result of the “national tragedy.” This includes either reinstating them in their former posts, providing compensation, or providing a pension for those who are now of retirement age. Third, the state is investing in health and education support programs. The right to education is emphasized, and primary schools are encouraged to teach children about tolerance and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

It is, however, worth noting that the state does not allow any political rights, including the right to political activity, as part of its reconciliation and reintegration program. Prevention of further civil discord is focused solely on the denial of the right to political activity for anyone involved in “the excessive use of religion that led to the national tragedy.”

Attention is also being paid to challenging the spread of religious indoctrination, both at mosques and in prisons. One speaker noted the current lack of supervision of mosques and the need for educated and well-trained imams who convey messages of peace rather than fatwas promoting extremist views. A step taken toward challenging such views is the state’s inviting religious scholars from around the world to public debates.

In prisons, the state has sought to prevent the spread of extremist ideology by separating those they see as indoctrinators from other inmates. One participant pointed out that a prison policy such as this that seeks to isolate extremists from other inmates is not known to work. However, in tandem, the state has recognized the influence of leaders of movements such as the Islamic Salvation Front and

the Salafist Group for Preaching and Salvation, and has focused on persuading such leaders to reconcile and reintegrate and ask their followers to put aside their arms.

The case of Algeria is distinct from most other case studies because of its civil-war experience and the resulting policies, which for the most part focus on the Islamic Salvation Front, which was already veering away from violent extremism. A speaker emphasized that those deradicalization programs that work most effectively are ones in cases such as these, where the groups in question are already moving toward this goal and thus provide an opening for the state to step in as facilitator. In addition to Algeria, Egypt's experience with *Gama'at al Islamiyya* and *al Jihad* also serves as a case in point.

## BANGLADESH

In all deradicalization programs, a unique combination of challenges is faced and a context-specific set of obstacles needs to be overcome. In Bangladesh's case, these local quirks include its location in a complex region, with sectarian violence in Pakistan, Naxalite extremism in India, and a Maoist insurgency in Nepal; its large population of 144 million; and a lack of funds for education reform.<sup>5</sup>

The Bangladeshi deradicalization program is characterized by a strong state presence. It began in 2005, targets primarily those involved with *Harajat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami* (HuJI) and *Jama'atul Mujahideen of Bangladesh* (JMB), and rests on four pillars: incarceration, intelligence, intellectual intervention (particularly religious discourse to counter radical interpretations of Islam), and investment in all of the above. These “four i's” are at the crux of the program, which operates in three targeted districts identified on the basis of historic events and the recruitment levels of various extremist groups. A grassroots program, rather than prison-based, this one emphasizes prevention achieved through religious and community figures' propagating the true spirit of Islam, the promotion of modern education (including the teaching of English and training in information technology), and the collection and dissemination of information on Islamic issues.

The main targets, or beneficiaries, of the program are madrasa students and those individuals the authorities deem prone to militancy or radicalism. The program leans heavily on events—seminars, workshops, symposia, etc.—which are billed as being about innocuous topics such as “Islam and peace” or “Islam and pluralism,” but actually focus on terrorism. There is a heavy participatory element, and a program representative described this portion of the program to a conference participant as “a covert form of psychological warfare.”

These events are supported, and their impact deepened, by publications, the provision of financial assistance to the unemployed, assistance to participants in getting into further education, and help to some prisoners' families (education of children, for example). The key aim of all of these measures is to prevent hatred and consequent violent radicalism from spreading to prisoners' families and peers. Significantly, the Bangladeshi program has no comprehensive package of incentives for the reason that they may be perceived as “rewarding” terrorism—a common problem for those programs employing incentives.

While the impact of deradicalization programs is notoriously hard to quantify, participants pointed to the declines in terrorism incidents and local-level violence, as well as falling recruitment by religion-based extremist groups. Indeed, Bangladesh's fairly low-budget program is deemed successful by many. But some cautioned that the Asian country's soft counterterrorism measures are reinforced by its parallel iron-fist approach to terrorism, and that it is hard to disaggregate the effects of hard versus soft measures.

## EGYPT

There has been much debate on the role of the state in the remarkable deradicalization success stories of *Gama'at al Islamiyya* in 1997-2007 and *al Jihad* organization in 2007. Success in this case is measured by the fact that neither group has been involved in any violent acts since then. Furthermore, both have denounced terrorist attacks by other groups. The state's role in the deradicalization of these two groups is interpreted in two different ways. The authorities and some others argue that the state had a targeted program

<sup>5</sup> For a deeper analysis of Bangladesh's governance and counterterrorism challenges, see Naureen Chowdhury Fink, “Bombs and Ballots: Terrorism, Political Violence, and Governance in Bangladesh,” New York: International Peace Institute, February 2010.

in place. Others including journalists, lawyers, and the radicals themselves, argue that it is the two groups that initiated a ceasefire that the state merely reacted to. There is a more concrete case to be made for the latter claim than the former; however, most accept that the state had taken measures in facilitating the process, and it is these steps that are examined below.

The facilitation centered almost entirely on the imprisoned members of these groups and focused on giving them both rights and rewards. These included the halting of executions and torture, solitary confinement, as well as state brutality in communities. The rewards centered on prisoner releases, improved prison visits, and imprisonment close to the detainee's home village or town. The state also took an education-based approach that encouraged prisoners to study, allowed access to newspapers and television, as well as interaction among group leaders and followers and those outside the group. It is worth emphasizing that a significant component of the state's outreach work within prisons involved group leaders. These leaders were encouraged to preach a message of moderation and to publicize their ideological revisions through prison tours as well as interviews on television and radio.

The state's promotion of the measures outlined above helped facilitate the deradicalization of these groups. However, it is important to note that the leadership of the groups was united in its call for a ceasefire and, in addition, the state's measures to aid in this were also backed by the media and society in general. The state had not gained such support before, an example being the 1993 attempt made via the Committee of Mediation, when the state tried to use *al Azhar* scholars to tackle extremism. In this case, the state failed on two counts: it did not convince extremists who viewed the *al Azhar* clerics as state sympathizers, and it did not secure the backing of the media, which viewed this attempt at dialogue as the state succumbing to the terrorists.

The Egyptian case study brings to the fore basic measures that can be taken to facilitate the ideological reorientation of extremist groups. Its focus on bringing about change within prisons is laudable, but it is also notable for its neglect of deradicalization activities outside of this. Speakers noted that the state has not encouraged the production of any

literature to combat and delegitimize extremist violence, nor has it set up any rehabilitation programs for the prisoners it has released.

In contextual terms, Egypt's experience is similar to that of Algeria. Like the Islamic Salvation Front, both *Gama'a al Islamiyya* and *al Jihad* had already made the move toward deradicalization when the state stepped in. Egypt's case might also be compared to that of Jordan, as both are thought by some to have ignored the underlying problems of radicalization, such as social and economic inequality, corruption, and the presence of a security apparatus that is beyond the law. The two countries provide an interesting contrast. Jordan has been successful in taking a cultural, or educational, stand in using literature and the media to combat extremism via the *Amman Letter*. The *Letter* was the end product of an initiative launched by King Abdullah in 2004 that tackled the issue of extremism and sought to promote a moderate Islam based on a consensus built by more than 500 Islamic scholars from across the world. However, Jordan has not engaged in prison outreach. In contrast, Egypt has focused entirely on its prison population and has a pronounced lack of literature on the subject of Islam.

## INDONESIA

Indonesia's experience with radicalism was described by one conference participant as being similar to that of Saudi Arabia. Indeed, the motives for individuals' initial involvement in radicalization overlapped significantly, with subjects in both countries citing the media's biased or negative portrayal of the Arab world, Islamic issues, and misinformation about jihad. Similar characteristics of subjects were also cited, with extremists being mostly single, young (aged for the most part in their twenties), high-school graduates, predominantly from middle-class families of above average size (where some have argued that it is hard for parents to control their children), and, in the case of the Saudi program in particular, over half had fathers aged over sixty years, thus it was suggested that where parental control is weak extremism more readily appeals.

In tackling the problem, Indonesia's government engaged in a trial-and-error exercise initially, arriving eventually at deradicalization. In crafting the program, the police had to take into account the

state's island geography, its large population of 250 million (of which around 40 percent is considered "young," and therefore more susceptible to extremism), and the urgency of the problem, with 208 bombings carried out by terrorists between 1999 and 2009. Although terrorism has been a problem in Indonesia since its independence, the counterterrorism program as it is today came about around the year 2000, since which time 471 suspected terrorists have been arrested.

Run by the police's Special Detachment 88 Anti-Terror Unit, the Indonesian program is based on the theory that filling the void that withdrawal from a terrorist group leaves in a person's life will successfully remove that person from the path of violent extremism. As such, the main facets of the program are dialogue, including conversations between program beneficiaries and professors, clerics, and farmers; family involvement, to ensure the beneficiary has a sound support structure beyond terrorism; prayer sessions; medical care; support in starting businesses and other ventures; and even weddings facilitated by the police. Like many other deradicalization programs, this one first studies the prospective participant to determine their commitment to deradicalizing—or their potential to commit—then diagnoses how challenging their deradicalization will be, before tailoring the steps that need be taken to achieve it.

Focusing mostly on splinters from the Darul Islam group and *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI), and on detainees, the program takes advantage of participants' respect for authority (derived from military experience and Islamic teachings), and the important role of social bonding in terrorist groups. In addition, the specific motives of the individuals are taken into account. An interlocutor described these as "spiritual" (the "true believer" in extreme interpretations of his or her religion or cause); "emotional" (a person desiring social interaction and the group bonding that extremist groups can provide); and/or "material" (a person seeking financial or other material gain through involvement in terrorism).

While its creators tout the program's relative successes, they note that certain problems were encountered, including the lack of an interagency

approach to deradicalization, as well as the scant legal basis for it.<sup>6</sup>

## JORDAN

The Jordanian state's approach is based on the premise that violent extremism is not a political issue but rather stems from "misguided youth" taking a "perverse view of Islam." The state has tackled this issue with a two-pronged approach that focuses on military measures and an education initiative. Much of the state's action has resulted from its own experiences with terrorism, especially the 2005 Amman hotel bombings, which have led it to take a more comprehensive and aggressive approach to violent extremism. However, one speaker noted that the real blow against radical groups has come not from the state's deradicalization activities but from the impact of the 2005 bombings, the devastation of which led to a decline in support for extremist groups.

The security steps taken by the state have led to the infiltration and monitoring of these groups as well as crackdowns, arrests, and prosecutions. Jordan also introduced an *Anti-Terrorism Law* and a *Fatwa Law* in 2006, which gives only clerics sanctioned by the state the right to issue fatwas. The *Anti-Terrorism Law* has been viewed by critics as being detrimental to civil society because of the freedoms it undermines.

The cultural initiative to tackle the problem began with the *Amman Letter* of 2004, which confronts Islamist extremism with its presentation of a wide consensus against its ideology. The *Letter* was issued following an accord with 180 prominent Muslim scholars representing a range of schools of Islamic thought. The aim of the initiative was to refute and delegitimize certain radical interpretations of Islam and bring back the focus to disseminating a moderate and apolitical Islam. This has been followed up with conferences as well as media outreach on television and radio.

Interestingly, Jordan has seen a spillover effect from the Saudi deradicalization program in the form of its prison inmates demanding a dialogue with the state. The demand of prisoners for dialogue with religious scholars led to a two-month ad hoc program, which included debates and

6 International Crisis Group in 2007 published an excellent report on prison deradicalization in that country: Crisis Group, "Deradicalisation' and Indonesian Prisons," Asia Briefing No. 142, Jakarta, November 19, 2007.

lectures. However, a speaker noted that the program was not a success, as many inmates felt that the state had not provided tenable, independent scholars—a misjudgment that significantly weakened the program. The need for a credible prison program is particularly urgent in Jordan as studies indicate that its jails have proved to be a hothouse for the growth of extremism.

## MOROCCO

Morocco has a unique place in these case studies as it has not embarked upon an official deradicalization program. Instead, the state is slowly incorporating both deradicalization and counterradicalization measures into its policy agenda, while simultaneously encouraging civil-society organizations to do the same.

The attempt to counter radicalization has been based in part on a focus on human rights with a program aimed at “investigating grave political violations of the past,” including human rights violations, arbitrary detentions, kidnappings, and forced disappearances. The government has set up an Independent Committee, a Committee for Justice and Reconciliation, the Consultative Council for Human Rights, and the Center for the Rights of People with the aim of engaging on these issues.

The state is also attempting to redress the above issues with two sets of measures. The first include the amnesty and release of political prisoners, pardons, and the dropping of charges against exiled individuals, a public recognition of human rights violations by the state, improving the treatment of prisoners by prohibiting torture and allowing prisoners access to their families. The second revolve around providing compensation or reemployment for those who have been arbitrarily detained, kidnapped, or forced to migrate.

In contrast with Algeria, the Moroccan state has put victims in charge of its reconciliation process and has also encouraged them to talk about the violations they have suffered as part of a national dialogue on the television, radio, and the Internet. Television and radio have also been used to provide a platform for programs about Islam that challenge other television programs calling for jihad or that issue fatwas that the state consider to foster extremism.

The state is also focusing on initiatives to counter

extremist interpretations of Islam. These include a national plan to reform mosques, invest in training imams, and to promote a rehabilitation of religious rights and a revival of Islamic culture; as well as to persuade imprisoned imams to preach a more moderate message. A speaker provided an example of a jailed reformed clergyman who has written a book on Islam and its moderate principles, and has also held seminars and a press conference as part of his outreach program from prison.

Finally, part of the state’s indirect approach is embedded in giving more importance to the value of education and youth outreach through literacy programs, the opening of sports clubs and libraries, and the promotion of income-generating projects.

## SAUDI ARABIA

Before Saudi Arabia developed its comprehensive counterterrorism program there was a significant amount of sympathy for extremism among the general population. In countering terrorism, officials realized that the more sympathy there was in society for a group or a cause, the easier that group’s recruitment would be; i.e., a society-wide approach to removing this sympathy was needed. Five years on, and Saudi Arabia’s work on deradicalization is among the most high-profile of its kind, and its creators, while acknowledging some failures, deem it a success.

The Saudi initiative, a two-stage government-run program started in 2005, begins with the suspected terrorist’s arrest. The individual is immediately engaged in dialogue on their reasons for becoming involved in radical causes and about their religion more broadly.

A conference participant characterized the Saudi program as “religious, psychological, and cultural.” Beneficiaries are allowed to attend social events, including family gatherings and sports (often games among beneficiaries, police, and program tutors to foster trust), but are engaged all the while in a program consolidating the “correct notions and concepts” of Islam. The program also encourages participants to marry (with financial support), and to pursue further education. In returning some of the beneficiaries to jobs they held prior to radicalizing, the program seeks to ground repentant extremists in a stable environment. Similarly, allowances, including healthcare and medical treatment, are provided to both the beneficiaries

and their families, to help lessen the appeal of extremist groups (some of which also provide these services). The program's extensive application of incentives has attracted criticism, domestically and beyond, for being "too soft" on terrorism.

In crafting the program, its organizers looked closely at what drives individuals to radicalize in the first place. While many participants cautioned that Islam and terrorism are not synonymous, some also noted that certain mosques remain sources of radicalism, spouting a perverted form of the religion. The Saudi-program organizers suggested that imams can play a very important role in extremism: "it is important to look at the imam; if he is radical, he will radicalize others." Similarly, and perhaps controversially, they take the same approach to teachers, and have now removed approximately 200 to administrative positions, for fear that, if allowed in classrooms, they would radicalize their students.

They also looked to families: brothers radicalize brothers and recruit cousins—families were, therefore, integrated into the program. Community organizations and social groups were also factored into deradicalization: individuals seeking to take part must provide their names, as a means of preventing radicals from "infiltrating" such groups. This measure, though apparently successful, has been called drastic by some.

In another measure that sets the Saudi approach apart from that of other countries tackling extremism, two separate prison systems exist in the country: one for nonextremist criminals and another for extremists and convicted terrorists. The logic being that, if not segregated, the extremists will radicalize the moderates, who, as criminals, in many cases have experience of engaging in violence.

The overarching structure of the comprehensive initiative is an "advisory committee," which coordinates the program through its three subcommittees:

1. **religious subcommittee:** this allows program facilitators to engage in open dialogue with detainees about Islam and facilitates long study sessions that deal with variety of misunderstood topics;
2. **psychological and social subcommittee:** this coordinates evaluations of the psychological and social condition of beneficiaries, as well

as the provision of financial assistance; and

3. **security subcommittee:** this helps gather important information on the person's prospects for release and their safe transition back into society.

Prior to a person's release from the program, they must complete a "prerelease care program," which entails a course on self-development and emphasizes the message that none of the many Islamist movements the world has seen has actually achieved its goals, and that there are peaceful ways to alter the status quo. In sponsoring media programs to discredit extremist ideology, cooperating with civil society and educational institutions to spread tolerant Islam, and encouraging the authorities in social institutions (mosques, schools, etc.) to promote moderate Islam, the Saudi government aims to send a holistic antiterrorist message.

After their release, beneficiaries are encouraged to remain in contact with program tutors, and they receive books, tapes, and text messages to keep them in mainstream society.

An organizer of the program noted three important features or lessons from his experiences: first, the commitment of those involved—project facilitators have a strong sense of ownership of their work; second, financial support to families of beneficiaries was important to success—this helped prevent families of violent extremists from developing into an alienated and bitter group; and third, family loyalty seemed to be stronger than any loyalty to the state, and so focusing on families seemed to generate longer-lasting results and fewer regressions to patterns of violence.

### Sakina: Saudi Arabia's Internet-based deradicalization project

Many speakers noted that, as the Internet has gradually begun to replace books and magazines, *al Qaida* has also begun to use it more, to both advertise and cover their actions, and to discreetly organize people and attacks. This makes it all the more surprising that so few deradicalization programs incorporate an online component. Indeed, the Saudi program is one of the few to do so.

Launched by the Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs in 2003-2004, *Sakina* is a deradicalization initiative based online, where, according to its creators, most radicalization now takes place. A carefully



appointed group of intellectuals visit websites where radicals congregate online and they challenge extreme interpretations of Islam. They also carry out youth dialogues over the Internet, mirroring the use of the Internet by violent extremists to recruit prospective terrorists.

Translated from the Arabic, *al Sakina* literally means tranquility. The program exists to disseminate ideas of peace, which are promoted among youth in particular. The project seeks to “correct” radical ideas and curb terrorist recruitment. Videos are also posted online to graphically show the abhorrent violence of terrorist attacks, which are used to explain, as one participant saw it, “that terrorist violence will never achieve justice and peace.”

The program facilitators encountered many youths with personal and social problems that seemed to contribute to radicalization. For example, many seemed to have grown up in the homes of relatives, without their parents present. To tackle this, *Sakina* incorporated a “social and psychological department” to deal comprehensively with beneficiaries’ problems.

The program has adapted in other ways, too. When Internet extremists’ real names were discovered, the program facilitators realized the increasing involvement by women in extremist Internet fora. As a result, they founded a department to target women extremists. One such beneficiary was nicknamed “Osama,” and became famous for her extreme views and participation in radical Islamism. She is now apparently deradicalized and providing counseling for those undergoing deradicalization.

As part of the broader Saudi counterterrorism program, *Sakina’s* founders emphasize the importance of a state’s different programs complementing one another. One interlocutor added that, in all programs, political and religious awareness must be promoted, to help build trust in government efforts. Civil-society organizations were pointed to as ideal “mediators” in these efforts.

In terms of measuring success, Saudi program creators claim a recidivism rate of 9.2 percent, excluding former detainees from Guantánamo Bay. For the latter, they claim a 20 percent recidivism rate. As cautioned by many conference participants, these figures are difficult to verify.

A Saudi speaker summed up their country’s approach to terrorism by saying, “we try to fight extremist ideology with our own ideology.”

## SINGAPORE

The Singaporean government first reached out to religious leaders when they learned of JI’s activities in Singapore back in 2001. Large cells were operational there, which came as something of a surprise to the government. Indeed, before consultation with experts on Islam, government officials were also surprised by terrorist detainees’ ideology. Understanding this would be key to the success of their counterterrorism policies.

Like the Bangladesh program, the Singapore deradicalization project, founded in 2002, does not employ incentives, nor does it give “time off for good behavior.” Indeed, in Singapore’s case, most participants have been sufficiently well-off that they have had little need for financial support.

The process begins with the screening of a potential beneficiary to determine the soundest approach to his or her deradicalization. Throughout the process, the beneficiary is reviewed by psychologists and finally given a security assessment. If they fail the latter—i.e., are deemed to still pose a threat to society—they will not be released.

The program entails steps taken in some other programs, but with varying emphases on each: community-based religious rehabilitation groups, which help pin down a person’s extreme interpretation of their religion and in essence challenge it; psychological assessment of a person’s treatment; and working with families. The final aspect is particularly emphasized in Singapore. By providing support to families of all detainees (irrespective of their alleged crimes), the program ensures both that the family will not feel isolated or neglected in their relative’s absence and that the relative will not return to a family that has suffered during his or her time in prison. This helps make sure that the family members will not feel moved to commit terrorism themselves, and that the freed convict will not relapse after leaving prison.

Over time, Singapore’s deradicalization program has gained respect, which is something many deradicalization programs, due in part to perceptions of being “weak” on terrorism, struggle to achieve. Somewhat unusually, the program contains no compulsory follow-up or reporting

element; after the program inside detention is completed, beneficiaries are placed under restriction order, renewed once every two years and extended or terminated according to the result of an annual assessment. After the program beneficiary is off restriction order, he or she is completely free. This makes the question of evaluating success all the more pressing. But participants emphasized that success is hard to gauge.

In lieu of monitoring or postprogram follow-up, beneficiaries and their families are made aware of the aftercare that is available to them, so they may seek it out themselves. Part of the reasoning behind this is that they are not stigmatized by continued monitoring and can return to everyday life without “baggage,” but that they may still benefit from further support. Repentant jihadists must reintegrate into society comprehensively, otherwise isolation, or continued ties to their extremist pasts, could lead to recidivism.

One particularly important characteristic of the Singaporean approach is, like other successful programs, its respect for Islam and its creators’ willingness to work with the Muslim community. A speaker elaborated that the government essentially said to Muslim religious leaders, “You have to help Singapore society; the Singapore authorities cannot tell people how to interpret their religion. Rather, the Muslim community has to engage.”

As with the Saudi program, and though achieved in a different way, Singapore seeks to question and undermine the extremist ideology: “If we can challenge the ideology, get voices out there, we can ultimately turn the tide.”

## INTERNET

The past few years have seen the Internet grow in importance to the point that it has now become an indispensable part of an extremist’s toolkit. The relationship was marginal to begin with as the Internet was used primarily as a way to disseminate videos of attacks carried out and, to a lesser extent, as a place to engage in discourse over Iraq and Chechnya. More recently, the situations in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Iraq, and Pakistan have changed this, with *al Qaida* and others now having established themselves on the Internet with the aim of promoting their activities in a more organized and centralized manner. It is argued that the Internet as a tool has gained greater currency

overall and this is something that terrorist groups in both conflict areas and nonconflict countries, such as the UK, have caught on to.

This move took place under the leadership of Ayman al Zawahiri, reportedly *al Qaida*’s number two man, who encouraged national *al Qaida* groups to go online in order to diffuse their message. This has led to a transformation in the way both affiliated groups and individuals sympathetic to the cause use the Internet to (1) fight the media and messaging war; (2) provide a forum for discussion, action, and interaction between individuals at home and in war zones; and (3) render expertise on issues ranging from bomb making to joining the fighting in Afghanistan. In order to tackle this phenomenon, it is necessary to deconstruct and understand it.

The importance of the Internet was underscored by a speaker who argued that it is now taking the place of the mosque and the community center as a recruitment hub. Furthermore, websites such as the *Hizba*, *Faluja*, and *Ikhlas* fora are akin to social networking sites like Facebook in how they function. They are interactive fora that provide participants a space to post videos, chat, argue, and discuss, and become a place of greater value than the real world. More than one speaker posited that the Internet has played an important role in creating a new generation of extremists.

Recent examples of individuals who utilized the Internet to further their activities include the Nigerian Amr Farouq, the American Nidal Malik, and the Jordanian Humam Balawi. They have been influenced by events in the real world, but their alienation and grievances have been incubated on the Internet. One speaker posited that “we are facing a new phenomenon of individual jihad, people who run away from the real world to this world and are more dangerous.” The case of Humam Balawi is particularly striking, for he started out as an extremist blogger who was recruited by the Jordanian security services and the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), thus being “transformed for the first time from an electronic personality to a real personality”—a transformation that enabled him to carry out a suicide attack on a US base in Afghanistan. The benefits of using the Internet are manifold. For the individual, the sites link supporters to each other and to fighters; the use of proxies allows anonymity; and a variety of

fora are widely available. A study of these fora suggests that they are egalitarian and allow freedom of speech, which includes space for dissenting voices. For groups such as *al Qaida*, the sites allow unfettered access to individuals across vast distances, and allow resources to be pooled so that acts which would be difficult to plan by an individual are now easier to plan with the combined labor and knowledge available. They are also a more pragmatic option than training camps, which, once shut down, take months to reestablish. In comparison, websites can be set up again within a period of twenty-four hours.

Speakers acknowledged that it is hard to fight the use of such sites, but it was argued that their Achilles' heel lies in the very ideas that have made them successful. Their accessibility makes them susceptible to spamming and to an overflow of misinformation. The fact that they do not censor discussion means that dissenting voices can be used to penetrate the discourse, to question extremist methods and to pose legitimate questions on political issues and on Islam. The sites can also be monitored to gain information on activities as there are always those who will say too much and give away information. There is no twelve-step program for deradicalization on the Internet, but understanding how these sites function and what makes them attractive is a first step toward being able to engage with this relatively new phenomenon, such as the attempt made via the Saudi *Sakina* initiative.

## Lessons Learned

Deradicalization programs have the potential to be of enormous benefit to governments worldwide. Indeed, successful programs can encourage formerly dangerous individuals to stay away from terrorism and radical organizations; allow disengaged individuals to serve reduced sentences for crimes committed (thus lowering the costs associated with prison overcrowding); and yield valuable intelligence and evidence against active terrorist groups. Furthermore, the programs allow individuals who have left behind violent extremism to distance themselves publicly from such causes (thus reducing support for and credibility of groups) and to meet victims of violence, and even ask for forgiveness. And, given that deradicalization

programs are for the most part cheaper than other approaches to counterterrorism, such strategies are growing in popularity. One example cited in the conference was that of the US's estimated expenditure in the "war on terror": \$150 billion per year; in comparison, the Saudi deradicalization program costs just \$12 million per year. While the latter is used in tandem with a hard approach to counterterrorism and such comparisons are problematic for other reasons, participants seemed to agree that deradicalization represents a more cost-effective approach to counterterrorism.

As the 2006 United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy demonstrates, the UN is well-placed to raise awareness of the problems faced and to share experiences. With its unparalleled convening capacity, the UN is also in a strong position to discretely assist those states in need of deradicalization programs and it encourages them to do so. Furthermore, conferences such as the one this report is drawn from provide opportunities for member states to learn from one another.

Derived from the discussions at the Amman conference, the following recommendations are geared toward UN member states seeking to learn about, support, or even create deradicalization programs:

**Do not regard deradicalization as a panacea.** While military and other "hard" counterterrorism programs aren't themselves an answer, neither are deradicalization programs. Indeed, many participants described deradicalization as just one part of a holistic counterterrorism approach; deradicalization will meet with only limited success when deployed in isolation. Furthermore, speakers, especially those from the global South, stressed the importance of recognizing and addressing the political root causes of radicalization.

**Pay attention to context.** One participant noted that what is appropriate for, and successful in, one context may not be suited to another. While the notion that "one size does not fit all" countries is nothing new, it was added that timeframe may also be significant: deradicalization projects that failed in or were rejected by particular societies five years ago may be adopted in the same places with success today. For example, Iraq's program in 2007 would have panned out very differently had it been deployed there in 2005, due to the different climate

at the time. Deradicalization programs should be tailored to both the communities and climates in which they operate.

**Incorporate improved aftercare into programs.** Most successful programs include a program of follow-up, or even monitoring, for beneficiaries. This ranges from frequent contact with program tutors and daily text-message reminders of why not to fall back into radical habits, to counseling and support. Participants stressed the contribution families can make to aftercare, for they provide a cheap and effective monitoring mechanism, which can protect against recidivism.

**Improve vetting of potential beneficiaries.** While participants noted that recidivism is a persistent problem even for those criminals not involved in terrorism, occasional, high-profile incidences of supposedly deradicalized individuals committing terrorism are frequently cited as evidence of program failure. Better vetting of potential beneficiaries along with improved aftercare was posed as a possible means of achieving lower recidivism rates. It was also suggested that thought should be put into providing support for program facilitators.

**Devise and improve means of measuring success.** A recurring problem with terrorist deradicalization remains that of measuring and quantifying the successes and failures of programs.<sup>7</sup> Yemen's *al Hitar* program may not be able to boast zero recidivism, but, having removed so many people from active terrorist involvement, it can be deemed useful. However, it is difficult to compare programs in these terms, and in all cases, it is important to understand reasons for success and failure. Participants also called for ways to judge value for money in national terms. As firm a set of criteria as possible for both should be established.

**Tailor approach to the individual or group concerned.** A conference speaker posited that, those with "blood on their hands" are often treated differently in deradicalization programs, citing the example of Abu Hamza, who has never killed anyone, but may be deported from the UK for having radicalized dozens of British Muslims. While the 7/7 conspirators by contrast all have

"blood on their hands," they have not been radical for long—thus Hamza would be far more difficult to deradicalize, and would naturally require a different approach. It would be valuable to assess group leaders individually and harness the charisma of those who are willing to further a deradicalization agenda, as seen in the Algerian and Egyptian studies. Similarly, it is important to tailor prison policy to the situation in hand in order to assess whether prisoners should be isolated or allowed to mix with each other and with leaders. This amounts to the argument that prospective beneficiaries for deradicalization should be examined on a case-by-case basis.

**Involve communities affected by radicalization in deradicalization.** If the community doesn't accept that deradicalized individuals are no longer a threat, programs will not ultimately be successful and will lack credibility. When you remove a radicalized individual's sense of companionship and belonging, you must replace them; a community supportive of deradicalization can play a key role in this. Similarly, successfully deradicalized individuals can be utilized in programs to great effect. As one participant noted, repentant terrorists can act as a virus within groups, sowing doubt about violent extremism, and demonstrating the success of their deradicalization experience to those skeptical of the programs. Another interlocutor suggested asking former gang members to share lessons learned about leaving behind their extreme activities and views. Speakers also emphasized the important role civil society can play as mediator, especially where the state does not have the resources or the legitimacy required to undermine extremism.

**Use incentives with care.** Many deradicalization programs benefit from enticing people to leave terrorism behind via incentives (financial, as well as measures such as reduced prison sentencing) that can help stabilize beneficiaries' lives. In other contexts, incentives may fail due to the lack of buy-in from societies who view them as ways of "rewarding" criminals. However, some societies, such as Singapore, do not need financial incentives and their programs function well without them. Again, one size does not fit all, particularly when

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, a similar call for benchmarks and standards was also made in IPI's 2008 meeting report on deradicalization. See Fink and Hearne, "Beyond Terrorism," p. 15.

countries have varying levels of capacity and resources.

## Conclusion

Radicalization is a reality of the contemporary world that will not disappear any time soon. Indeed, some radicals may never leave behind their extreme views, but, if most can be persuaded to, and if more still can disengage from violence, deradicalization programs represent the best means of achieving such progress via soft counterterrorism.

The case studies covered during the Amman conference, as described above, amount to a clear set of lessons for the international community. While a number of facets of each program can be successfully emulated worldwide, much work remains to be done on fully understanding and improving soft counterterrorism, of which deradicalization is a central part. As one speaker saw it, deradicalization, as well as achieving significant success, is a relatively frugal and politically more palatable way of combating terrorism without relying solely on force.

# Conference Agenda

## Countering Violent Extremism: Learning from Deradicalization Programs in Some Muslim-Majority States

March 16-17, 2010 | Amman, Jordan

### March 16th

- 08:45 Depart Marriott Hotel for Arab Thought Forum
- 09:45 – 10:30 **Opening Address: Costs of Conflict, Benefits of Inclusion**  
HRH Prince El Hassan bin Talal
- 10:30 – 11:00 Coffee/Tea Break
- 11:00 – 12:30 **Case Studies of Deradicalization Programs: Preliminary Findings**
- Speakers**  
Hamed El-Said, reader, *Manchester Metropolitan University, UK*  
Jane Harrigan, professor, *University of London, UK*
- Q-and-A session**
- 12:30 – 13:30 Lunch
- 13:30 – 15:15 **Panel 1: Challenges Faced by Deradicalization Programs**
- “Deradicalization,” “disengagement,” and “rehabilitation”: how does terminology reflect the different outcomes anticipated from programs?
  - How does the process of radicalization interact with the potential for deradicalization?
  - To what extent is the current situation, regionally and globally, propitious for the success of deradicalization and disengagement efforts? What evidence exists of the programs’ effectiveness?
  - Are some violent extremists beyond the reach of such programs? How may suitable subjects be identified?
  - Is the scope for such efforts expanding or narrowing in each of these regions and globally? Are the prospects for success bright or dim?
- Speakers**  
Tore Bjørge, professor, *Norwegian Police University College; senior research fellow, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs*  
Peter Neumann, director, *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, UK*
- Moderator**  
Taher Masri
- 15:15 – 15:30 Coffee/Tea Break
- 15:30 – 17:15 **Panel 2: Communities, Clerics, and Families: Key Players in Deradicalization**
- How does the context—cultural, national, religious, ethnic—shape the possibilities for

deradicalization?

- Where and how does radicalization/deradicalization take place? What is the role and function of the subject's societal group?
- Are prisons or correctional facilities appropriate venues for programs? How troubling are accusations of indoctrination of subjects?

#### Speakers

Abdulrahman Alhadlaq, *general director, Ideological Security Directorate, Interior Ministry, Saudi Arabia*

Elhadj Lamine, *Algerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*

Mohamed Zarkasih, *head, Special Detachment Unit 88/Anti Terror, Indonesia National Police*

#### Moderator

Francesco Mancini, *senior fellow & director of research, International Peace Institute*

17:15 – 17:30

Wrap-Up

19:00 – 21:00

Dinner hosted by Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Marriott Hotel

### March 17th

08:45

Depart Marriott Hotel for Arab Thought Forum

09:30 – 11:30

#### Panel 3: Incentives for Change

- How do individual programs harness education and other societal rewards (marriage, employment) as incentives to deradicalize?
- Can cross-cutting themes be discerned and used effectively in other programs?
- What obstacles have such incentive-based programs faced?
- How best can incentives be used to make the most of the subjects' will to disengage?

#### Speakers

A. T. M. Amin, *dean, Media and Mass Communications Department, American University in the Emirates, Dubai*

Omar Ashour, *director, Middle East Studies Program, Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, UK*

John Harrison, *head of terrorism research, International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, Singapore*

Driss Najim, *adviser to the minister of justice, Ministry of Justice, Morocco*

#### Moderator

Jawad Anani

11:30 – 11:45

Coffee/Tea Break

11:45 – 13:30

#### Panel 4: Deradicalization and the Internet

- While the internet is a popular recruitment tool for terrorists, to what extent has it been used successfully in deradicalization processes? Is it being used to its full

potential?

- What are the successes and challenges of existing internet-deradicalization programs? Is the internet best used as a facet of multipronged approaches to deradicalization? Or can internet programs be conducted successfully without parallel noninternet ones?

#### **Speakers**

Mohammed Aburumman, *political analyst, Al Ghad Newspaper, Jordan*

Evan Kohlmann, *terrorism consultant and contributor, Flashpoint Intelligence, United States*

Majed Al-Mersal, *Sakina Team, Saudi Arabia*

#### **Moderator**

Fawaz Sharaf

13:30 – 14:30

Lunch

14:30 – 16:30

#### **Panel 5: Successes and Challenges: Evaluating Implications for Wider Application**

- Is it possible to speak of successes and challenges when each program is very distinct, requiring a tailored approach?
- How may the problem of recidivism be tackled? Are the programs sustainable?
- What parameters are best-suited to evaluating success and failure in deradicalization programs? How can these be improved or strengthened?
- What are some cross-cultural or cross-geographical applications or lessons learned?
- How may international institutions be brought into deradicalization?
- How can states interested in starting such programs begin to develop them?

#### **Speakers**

Richard Barrett, *coordinator, Al-Qaida and Taliban Sanctions Committee, United Nations*

Hasan abu Hanieh, *freelance journalist, Jordan*

#### **Moderator**

16:30 – 17:15

#### **Concluding Remarks**

#### **Speakers**

Hamed El-Said

Francesco Mancini

Anita Nergård, *deputy director general, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*



## List of Participants

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