



10 Deradicalization and rehabilitation programmes targeting religious terrorists and extremists in the Muslim world

An overview

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Introduction

The international response in the immediate aftermath of the attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001, particularly in the West, was shaped largely by a desire to strike back and to improve defences against further acts of terror; it led to the development of a range of measures that were primarily designed to suppress terrorism rather than to undermine its appeal. The period was dominated by a sense that there was a finite number of terrorists and that their capture or elimination would remove the threat of further attacks.

This muscular approach has given way to an understanding that some level of terrorism will continue to exist for many years and that policies pursued to eliminate terrorists may, if poorly thought out or clumsily applied, lead to the problem getting worse rather than better. Emphasis has shifted towards understanding and dealing with the reasons that people become terrorists; why a small number of otherwise ordinary individuals see violence as the best or even the only way to express their views. Coupled with this, the capture of many terrorists and their supporters has given rise to concern about their longer-term future; rehabilitation and reintegration issues have taken on added importance as the number of prisoners has increased and as prisons themselves have become major centres of radicalization and recruitment, allowing leaders to establish cells based on strong personal ties between hardened individuals who are already on the margins of society.

In recognition of these problems, several states have begun to develop practical programmes aimed at countering the appeal of militancy, changing attitudes and getting repentant terrorists back into society. These programmes are increasingly seen as essential elements of an integrated counter-terrorism strategy. While acknowledging that each case is specific to its local cultural and political setting, increasing numbers of other states have shown a growing interest in benefiting from the general lessons provided by these early programmes.





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This chapter offers some general comment and an overview of some of the key elements of deradicalization and rehabilitation programmes as they exist today in the Muslim world. These examples, and the terms used to describe them, should not be taken to imply that it is only in Muslim countries and among Muslim communities that such effort is desirable or even required. The same principles may be applied to any individual or group of individuals that has seen violence as a way to resolve problems, whether personal or political, within a wider movement. The fact is that the Muslim world has been much quicker to see the need and value of designing such programmes, and the interested audience of other states is now mainly in the West.

The examples cited represent just some of the national programmes that exist and should neither be seen as offering best practice nor as covering all possible approaches. As will be seen, some of the programmes are in their very initial stages of development or implementation, and are quite specific to the local environment, while others involve elements that seem important to all such initiatives. These include programmes which have an element of collective disengagement, involving groups of people rather than just treating the individual. Some programmes are better known than others, and some are discussed in more depth later in this volume. For all of them it is fair to say that they continue to evolve and adapt according to the knowledge of the people who run them and the reactions of those who pass through them.

Some general observations

Terrorism itself has changed considerably since 2001, with much more radicalization and recruitment happening in the virtual world, and operational planning happening at a local level rather than being centralized and controlled by a recognized leadership. The investigation and capture of terrorists or aspiring terrorists has provided authorities with a far better understanding of the processes of radicalization than they had when the programmes began. The more successful ones have benefited from this, and have shown a commendable flexibility of approach with increasing emphasis on the wider and less openly acknowledged reasons that an individual may become radicalized. All the programmes discussed here work on the premise that they must address an element of misguidance, offering a form of 're-education' based on a close examination of the narrative that the individual has accepted. But while this has become an important component common to all, the approach and emphasis differs between them.

In almost all cases it is still too early to judge the long-term impact of these programmes. It is important to keep in mind what *exiting terrorism* really means. It may be a complete and final renunciation of violence, it may be a conditional renunciation, dependent on what happens next, or it may be a pragmatic and temporary renunciation based on the expectation of immediate benefit but without any fundamental change of attitude. The actual political setting and factors such as proximity to conflict may play a





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role here in that the intensity of suppressive measures may encourage a terrorist to give up, either because he realizes the hopelessness of his cause or because he decides to live and fight another day. Alternatively, there may have been sufficient political reform for the terrorist to believe that the issues of disenfranchisement and marginalization for which he fought no longer apply; or that whatever other rationale existed for his grievance has disappeared. Studies of individuals who have exited terrorism have sometimes shown that changes in the person's life situation, such as family setting, marriage, etc. have brought about the change in behaviour.¹

These lessons have also been brought into coordinated programmes. By focusing on the personal circumstances of the terrorist, a rehabilitation programme can encourage a family, peer and community-based involvement that locks him into another, more peaceful lifestyle. The individual may therefore have made a choice to disengage for a reason that has nothing or little to do with his conscious reasons for taking up terrorism in the first place. Indeed, some of those interviewed who have explained their decision to exit as personal and related to their current life situation, have spoken of continued passive membership or non-active engagement, by which they imply that should their situation change, or should they feel the call again, it will not be difficult for them to return to their old ways. But here lies an opportunity: these are people who are particularly susceptible to a system that recognizes that embracing terrorism can be an expression of a social need rather than purely the adoption of a political agenda.

It appears to be quite common that many deradicalization and rehabilitation programmes find in their targets incipient feelings of disillusionment or desire for an alternative narrative. It is important to spot this as it offers an obvious basis to build on. The appeal of the terrorist message has begun to erode, particularly in the Muslim world, as the consequences of terrorism have become more evident. Deradicalization efforts can fairly point out that most victims of terrorism are co-religionists or come from the same community as the terrorists themselves, whether as direct victims of the attacks or of the repression or economic consequences that follow them. Also, the positive political results from terrorist campaigns have not been obvious. Many terrorists may therefore harbour doubts or misgivings about their radicalism at some level of consciousness, and the possibility of a new direction, reinforced by actual stories of others successfully building a new life after leaving a militant movement, can offer hope and a way forward. It has to be recognized, though, that violence is in itself an attraction for some, and such individuals may continue to seek other forms of violence after abandoning terrorism. Identifying and dealing with the motivator is therefore essential, as is recognizing the commonalities between terrorist groups and other types of violent cults or gangs.

Any discussion of radicalization should examine what processes people go through to become sufficiently radicalized to take up violent means. Different push and pull factors will apply. Analysis of the argumentation and





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decision-making processes involved, at both an individual and a group level, offer useful material when designing a reverse procedure. There may be similar processes and avenues both for radicalization and deradicalization/disengagement. Radicalization to violence happens by stages, some of which may trigger a change beyond which there may be less chance of return, or for some, no return at all. Indeed, some highly experienced counter-terrorist officials are firmly of the view that once a radicalized individual crosses into violence, there is no point in trying to rehabilitate him, and that any appearance of rehabilitation will be deceitful and short-lived.

Also worth noting is that people take on different roles in a militant organization; some may take on a very passive role and not want to, or not have the capacity to go further or to get more involved. Others may be impatient to be as active as possible, and not care too much about justification or target. By taking a closer look at the different roles played by members of an organization it is possible to design approaches that match the characteristics and specific motivations of the individuals concerned; it may also be possible to identify certain types that are more vulnerable and more inclined towards change than others. These are issues that many programmes also consider.

There is growing appreciation in the counter-terrorism environment that there is a broader value and need to draw lessons from dealing with people who have joined terrorist groups or participated in terrorist acts, both with a view to bringing them back into society and to enlisting their help to dissuade others from taking a similar course. Providing examples for further international discussion can help states develop their own programmes and identify similarities and differences, pointing out both what can work and what may not.

It is clear that one size does not fit all, and success in one setting may not necessarily be replicated elsewhere. Some programmes will be culturally specific and some will emphasize certain aspects within a political context. Much depends on who the actors are and the level of the conflict and, importantly, society's (the victims') readiness to forgive.

In examining the programmes, it appears that some States have well-developed and rather broad initiatives while others employ a case-by-case approach. Many are in the process of developing their programmes, and are seeking lessons from other countries. The best-developed programmes (mostly targeting detained terrorists, sympathizers and support personnel) rely on a number of mechanisms, such as:

- 1 the role of a go-between who can influence the terrorist (often from family or peer group);
- 2 ideological tools (such as counter-fatwas, dialogue with well-known imams and muftis);
- 3 repentant terrorists taking an active part;
- 4 social measures (facilitating economic and social reintegration of the repentant terrorist);
- 5 some form of continued/subsequent monitoring to avoid recidivism; and





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- 6 emphasis on family and peers, both as a support group and as a group towards which the repentant has responsibility, as a father, son, husband, friend, etc.

Perhaps even more important than attempting to rehabilitate people who have already stepped over into terrorism, and certainly complementary to rehabilitation efforts, are programmes that target individuals in the process of becoming terrorists. It is often hard to spot such individuals and requires an awareness and concern on the part of the community and, more especially, the family and others in the person's immediate circle. Information from repentant terrorists may also be of value. Programmes in which individuals considered to be at risk are invited to retreats where they can communicate informally with officials to examine grievances, beliefs and alternative solutions so as to avoid further radicalization may provide useful lessons for wider application at a national or international level.

Equally important is the role that successfully rehabilitated (and properly repentant) individuals have played in providing security authorities with valuable insight into the workings of terrorist organizations, including methods of recruitment, which otherwise might have remained impenetrable.

Any government-run programme is likely to suffer from the disadvantage that its targets will see it as closely associated with the enemy and be slow to trust its intentions. However, as the programmes develop, and produce advertisements of success to which other militants can relate, they will gain credibility. But there are also programmes designed and run by non-governmental organizations or societies, some of which may be government-sponsored. Here the role of civil society and different forms of victims groups can assume particular importance.

While all programmes have achieved progress, even despite growing experience it is still too early to say with any certainty that any have been fully successful. There are no established criteria of success and no standards that apply across cultures. States are still reluctant to publish objective statistics, although they are increasingly willing to discuss their experience on a bilateral basis. This may remain the case for some time, not only because success cannot be judged by a mere declaration of repentance without any longer-term evidence of sincerity, but also because most programmes recognize that, faced by exactly the same arguments and influences, each individual will react differently. As more militants are taken into the programmes and more complete them with a need for follow-up, the resources required will cause more people to ask whether they are worthwhile. In all countries that run such programmes, there are people who argue that imprisonment or even execution for acts of terrorism may have a quicker, more effective and cheaper deradicalizing effect than the soft approaches adopted by the programmes. To this extent, widespread international support for the programmes, and discussion of their elements and objectives, will be important for their continued development.





Examples of projects and programmes

Below is a selection of existing programmes.² They are different in form and outreach, but they have certain characteristics in common. This is not an exhaustive list and the programmes themselves are not described in depth, nor are they evaluated for their effectiveness. Some have received a fair bit of publicity and are already well recorded; others are less well known. All are current programmes which form a part of broader coordinated national efforts to reduce radicalization and promote rehabilitation and disengagement. While almost all have developed according to the particular nature of the local terrorist threat, and all have changed over time according to experience and circumstances, they may yet provide pointers to what works and what does not.

There are, broadly speaking, four types of method used within the programmes. As will be seen, some of the programmes are single-method programmes, while others take a more comprehensive, multi-method approach:

- 1 *Re-education and rehabilitation based on providing a different truth* to undermine the terrorist narrative and deconstruct the ideology on which it is based. This is the war of ideas against violent extremism in which various tactics have been seen, from media and information campaigns, the use of clerics to challenge religious assertions, the use of youth heroes as alternative influences, and/or the use of former terrorists speaking out against their rejected beliefs. It may also include dialogue with extreme radicals, especially those in prisons, and among religious personalities and/or elders. The Saudi example of this (see chapter 13 of this volume) is perhaps the best known and while it may represent a very Saudi solution to a Saudi problem, incorporating many traditional (national) methods of conflict resolution and conflict management, it is not without imitators.³ Indeed the Saudi authorities are aware that their experience may be of direct relevance and value to other states. In Egypt too there has been considerable success in encouraging radical leaders to rethink their views (see chapter 7). The public rejection of terrorist violence in late 2007 by Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, a former leader of the Egyptian Jihad group and ex-colleague of Ayman al-Zawahiri, is just one of the many recantations of note by Egyptian extremists.⁴
- 2 *The creation of space and opportunity to vent frustration* outside terrorism has also found a place in some disengagement and deradicalization programmes. A resort to violence may be seen in some instances to result from a lack of other means to express grievances or dissatisfaction. Creating space where disaffected groups may meet, express and organize themselves through non-violent means is an underlying feature of, for instance, the Tajik Secular-Islamic dialogue project (Tajikistan).
- 3 *Programmes that provide an alternative lifestyle* may also take into account the need to relocate a repentant terrorist for security reasons, or to remove him from malign influences. Such programmes also aim to





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build hope for the future by providing education or a job, helping the individual to marry, re-engaging him with his family and so providing basic support for the future and creating new reference points. Establishing a sustainable livelihood and both social and financial networks are important factors in most programmes. They are also seen as key factors to avoid recidivism.

- 4 *Amnesty programmes* take the above to another level where a certain kind of forgiveness is offered by society (or certain parts of society), providing a new start and helping people reintegrate into their community. In some instances these programmes also provide protection against possible acts of vengeance from victims or non-repentant group members. Some programmes also include elements of restorative justice by bringing victims into the process and giving them a recognized role, often also allowing them to confront their persecutors. The issues of amnesty and reconciliation in these cases, however, depend very much on the scale of the violence, the cultural context and the legal traditions of the society concerned. These programmes, such as in Algeria, do not include people guilty of major crimes such as mass murder or rape. Other programmes may not exempt people who are serving a prison sentence.

In addition to the above, most prison-based programmes have also placed a special focus on the most radical and most militant elements. This may include isolation from other prisoners, a lack of privileges enjoyed by less radical elements, especially those in the rehabilitation process, or other mechanisms that send a message that terrorism is not under any circumstance acceptable and will be punished. The Moroccan strategy takes this approach. Another way of underlining that terrorism is beyond the tolerance of society is to emphasize the extremism, criminality and egregious violence of non-repentants against a template of normal society and behaviour.

Afghanistan – Takhim-e Solh – the strengthening the peace programme⁵

The Afghan programme known as Takhim-e-Solh (Strengthening the Peace – PTS) is very much a product of the unique history and political composition of the country. It combines elements of a rehabilitation project with those of a national reconciliation initiative. The programme is a Government of Afghanistan initiative to undermine the insurgency and to reintegrate former combatants into Afghan society. The participants are mostly former Taliban combatants, but not exclusively so. While the PTS incorporates an outreach programme, those who join have to make contact and sign up on a voluntary basis; they may often do so through tribal or other intermediaries. Those who wish to participate do not receive amnesty but they agree to stop all action against the Afghan Government, to accept the constitution and to abide by the law. The PTS was first introduced by President Karzai in February 2004.





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Since then he has appointed a National Independent Commission for Peace and Reconciliation, led by Professor Sibghatullah al-Mojaddedi, to support his call for Afghan insurgents to return to their homes and take part in the reconstruction of their country. The programme offers basic services and protection to those who come forward. Often they come in groups, and with their entire families. In the Afghan tradition, those entering the programme generally do so very publicly, turning in their weapons and making a formal declaration. In theory, their tribe acts as guarantor of their future behaviour.

One key element of the programme is the need to provide protection, whether from other insurgents or from former enemies. But as the numbers increase the Government hopes that the insurgency may be split by weaning away those who merely seek a better life, or harbour some manageable grievance, from those who are die-hard opponents of the regime, whether for ideological or other reasons. The fluid nature of Afghan politics presents particular challenges to the PTS, but the respect with which Professor Mojaddedi is held personally, and his determination to ensure that insurgents know that there is an escape route should they wish to take it, has kept the programme alive, and a steady trickle of insurgents continues to join.

*Yemen – the Yemen committee for dialogue*⁶

The Yemen Committee for Dialogue was established in August 2002, when the President of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, gathered together senior clerics who subsequently formed the nucleus of this enterprise. The process involves two steps: first dialogue between the clerics and the militants, and then the reinsertion/reintegration of the former militants into society. Sessions between appointed clerics and militants discuss ideological themes, unfolding the narratives and questioning the religious assumptions on which they are based. Furthermore, reintegration into society is seen as essential so as to avoid recidivism, and the programme puts considerable emphasis on the second step of helping the individual to find a job, receive education, or even to find a wife. The Committee offers assistance on all these fronts. The Yemeni programme is discussed in more detail in chapter 11 of this volume.

*The Philippines – the resettlement of MNLF*⁷

A very different case of rehabilitation is the government-run programme in the Philippines, mainly directed at the Muslim National Liberation Front (MNLF) rather than the several other militant groups that have a presence there. The programme is managed by the Ministry of Interior, and focuses on creating new communities for former MNLF militants (predominantly Tausugs from Jolo island in the Sulu archipelago) who have given up and renounced their armed struggle for independence and accepted the Philippine nation-state. The programme has mainly been a group effort, engaging whole communities and extended families. Interestingly, the foundation of the new





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communities has involved the resettlement of the fighters and their families from their homelands to other islands in the archipelago.

Tajikistan – the Tajik Secular-Islamic dialogue project⁸

The Tajik Secular-Islamic dialogue project is a government-run project which was created in 2003. The programme has largely been facilitated by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), but run by the Tajik Commission for National Reconciliation. The dialogue project has involved representatives from various groups, both religious and secular. Through regular sessions, representatives have sought means of coexistence and to identify and discuss issues that create mistrust and tension. A key rationale behind the initiative is to create an environment for discussion and establish meeting places where issues can be raised, and, as trust develops, solutions found. The programme is seen as successful to a large extent, but it is criticized by international observers for being government-run, only involving moderates, and therefore not reaching out to those that should be included.⁹ However, the programme does provide a useful platform for dialogue among the various groups that constitute Tajik society.

While the Tajik case is special in terms of a history of civil war, much of Central Asia presents particular problems for a political dialogue in that opposition is frequently cast as extremist or separatist. This has led to those who oppose the governments or their programmes finding few outlets to express their opposition and the Tajik dialogue project may also be seen as a counter-radicalization initiative as well as a deradicalization initiative.

Indonesia – Government-backed deradicalization policies¹⁰

A relatively recent Indonesian initiative was announced in February 2007 when the country's Parliament backed government deradicalization policies aimed at stopping the creation of hard-line religious groups and countering terrorism.¹¹ Lawmakers urged the government to focus on poverty alleviation and unemployment projects. At the same time, emphasis was put on the need to deny radical groups and terrorist networks the opportunity to develop and spread propaganda material to recruit members in the name of religion. Mainstream religious groups have been instrumental in promoting these initiatives, united in preventing radical elements from inventing a religious justification for terrorism. The programme is dealt with in detail later in this volume (chapter 12) but one notable feature that reflects the nature of Indonesian society is the close personal involvement of senior police officials.¹²

Singapore – religious rehabilitation programmes¹³

Singapore has placed a particular religious focus on its programmes.¹⁴ The first stage of the process has involved counselling within prisons, seen to be a





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major staging post for both first-time radicalization and sustained radicalization. The programmes initially engaged Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) detainees and their immediate families but have been extended into the wider community, involving other family members, community leaders, elders and religious personalities. As with other programmes in South East Asia, the role of the family is seen as almost more important than any other factor and reconnection with family is often a persuasive element in deradicalization.

Malaysia

In 1960 Malaysia passed an Internal Security Act (ISA), Act 82. The ISA was enacted pursuant to special emergency powers under the Federal Constitution to counter the communist insurgency, subversive elements and threats prejudicial to national security. Under the Act the Malaysian authorities are required to conduct re-education and rehabilitation initiatives focused on correcting political and religious misconceptions. Importantly, the detainees are carefully monitored after release.¹⁵ Most parts of the rehabilitation programme (also covered in chapter 12) are designed and conducted by the Police and Prison Department in collaboration with the Department of Malaysian Islamic Development (JAKIM). For those detainees who have shown a positive response and have renounced their militant struggle and ideology, there is then a special intensive programme, which is finally followed up by an observation and evaluation programme to ensure that the detainee is fully rehabilitated.

Saudi Arabia – changing a narrative¹⁶

Some of the most recent, best-known and successful rehabilitation programmes have been launched by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi programmes have had a heavy educational and ideological focus and a key element has been countering the narrative with the help of clerics and through the internet. The Saudi Government has since 2003 been engaged in work to counter the al-Qaeda ideology through educational programmes in the mass media, through university curricula, and through repentant terrorists and extremists who negotiate and argue with potential recruits on relevant websites and in other media. Two large-scale projects using this approach are under way. The first is a counselling programme for radical prisoners. The other is the al-Sakinah (tranquillity) campaign, which aims to initiate online dialogue with extremists in an effort to lead them to renounce their views. In parallel the Saudi security authorities have worked with repentant terrorists to identify other militants and to ensure their speedy capture. A more detailed analysis is offered in chapter 13 of this volume.





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Other programmes not covered

There are a number of other programmes and initiatives omitted from this brief survey. For example, *Algeria* launched a national reconciliation programme following a referendum in 2005 and *Bangladesh* has established a disengagement programme that claims success in rehabilitating hundreds of militants. In *Egypt* the action leading to the collective disengagement of the two main terrorist groups (Islamic Group and Jihad) contains important elements of a disengagement programme. Outside the Muslim world, several European countries, like *the United Kingdom* and *the Netherlands*, have also developed deradicalization programmes.

In search of a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy

The key to any successful rehabilitation initiative appears to be engagement with the individual, addressing both his way of thinking and his circumstances. Many of the current rehabilitation projects focus on the need to challenge the narrative of extremism and/or deconstruct the story being told. The narrative, whether created as a result of national circumstances or through a perversion of religion, has been instrumental in both the structuring and the deconstruction of the struggle. Media and information campaigns involving persons of respect, often elders, clerics or other role models, have been essential tools. Coupled with this has been the need to provide a sustainable future for those who decide to return to society.

Various amnesties have been offered, most importantly involving some protection against vengeance. This is an area which could do with further study. In some cases, both in collective and in individual cases of disengagement, there is a need to isolate the people involved, providing them with new lives and new identities.

Finally, although most people who have passed through a deradicalization programme have distanced themselves from the use of violence as a political weapon, they may yet remain sympathetic to the cause. This may mean that they are willing to seek alternative, legal methods to reach their goals, which the state should ensure are available, but further monitoring of their activities and attitudes is sensible.

The main aim of any deradicalization, rehabilitation and disengagement programme must of course be to prevent further acts of terror, whether directly by the person concerned or through his influence. Carefully designed and conducted programmes can also help enlist repentant terrorists to dissuade others from taking a similar course. Furthermore, successfully rehabilitated individuals can provide counter-terrorism officials with valuable insights into the workings of terrorist organizations, and can thus be seen as adding further to the overall counter-terrorism strategy.

