

Rehabilitating terrorists

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Abstract:

Can Jihadis be rehabilitated? Is it possible to 'de-radicalize' terrorists? This article will look at what some prison systems around the world are doing to answer those questions. The research, like the programs, is still in its infancy, so no firm conclusion is possible. However, initial signs indicate that correctional systems have a part to play in the de-radicalization of terrorists and thus could be a contributor to the fight against terrorism.

Keywords: *terrorists, prison systems, correctional systems, fight against terrorism.*

Definitions

Organized world bodies and individual governments have great difficulty defining what is meant by terrorism and, thus, who is a terrorist. This article will not get into that political/philosophical debate, but will use the definition established by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation: *Terrorism is the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives.*"

"Rehabilitation" in this article is defined as the process where individuals or groups cease their involvement in organized violence and/or terrorism. The process can involve de-radicalization and/or disengagement. While de-radicalization aims for substantive changes in individuals' ideology and attitudes, disengagement concentrates on facilitating behavioral change.¹ "The disengaged terrorist may not be 'de-radicalized' or repent at all. Often physical disengagement may not result in any concomitant change or reduction in ideological support"²

The difference, according to Nikos Passas³, between politically motivated offenders and 'ordinary' criminals lies in the intention. While 'ordinary' criminals commit crimes in pursuit of selfish and/or personal goals, politically motivated offenders believe that they are acting on behalf of a certain group, society or humanity as a whole. Politically motivated offenders commonly distinguish between 'legality' and 'legitimacy', arguing that breaking the law is justified when a particular policy or the entire political or legal system are illegitimate.

¹ The Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), Kings College, London, UK.

² John Horgan, 'Individual disengagement: a psychological analysis' in Tore Bjorgo and John Horgan (eds.), *Leaving Terrorism Behind* (London and New York: Routledge 2009), p. 27.

³ 'Political Crime and Political Offender: Theory and Practice', *Liverpool Law Review*, 8(1) (1986).

Lisa Andrews, writing in the Developmental Psychology Student Newsletter from Mesa Community College's Psychology Department⁴, based on her studies, provided a very good overview of what motivates terrorists. "In reading some of the research that has been done on terrorism, I have come to understand that every terrorist act has a specific, premeditated goal, with a predicted outcome." The categories she identified were:

Change: These acts of terrorism are motivated by the achievement of a goal. This goal may be related to social, religious, or political change.

Religious: This group believes it is justified because of religious commands found in the Bible, Torah, Koran, and they use these same religious beliefs to recruit more followers.

Social: Other groups are motivated by purely social causes. Its object will be to overthrow not governments, but the economic and technological basis of the present society.

Political: The leaders of the given idea or movement come together, in the form of a militia or rebel group, and bring about political change in order to rid society of an undesired ruling power.

Revenge: There have been many instances where terrorism has been used as a means to avenge what is considered an unjust or offensive act.

Attention: Terrorism has been used as an effective means of gaining attention from the public eye using fear.

Symbolism: One thing that is important to acknowledge when speaking of terrorism is the importance of symbolism. Every terrorist act is designed to convey a specific message. Even randomly seeming terrorist acts are conveying a specific message, "We can get you anywhere, at any time. There is no one to protect you" (The Center for Mental Health Services, 1996).

Ms. Andrews summarized her paper, "Most terrorists have several motives for committing terrorist acts and several, if not all, of those mentioned above can be used in order to try to explain their motives. The only true way to determine their motives is to ask the terrorists themselves."

Nations involved in rehabilitation programs

Programs to rehabilitate/de-radicalize terrorists are in operation in several nations including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Pakistan, Yemen, United States, United Kingdom, Netherlands, Singapore, Northern Ireland, Israel, Phillippines, Spain, Algeria, Canada, Malaysia, Nigeria, and Sweden.

The programs vary in terms of methods, audience, support and funding. For example, some nations (Egypt, Algeria, Israel) look at the terrorists as a group where other nations (Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Afghanistan) work with the terrorists in their prisons⁵ on an individual by individual basis. Another area of difference between correctional systems is whether to separate violent extremists from other inmates or to integrate them. Israel has separate prisons or wings designated for *security prisoners*, the Netherlands has a 'terrorism wing' in the Vught high security prison for their small number of inmates classified as terrorists whereas the the UK and Spain disperse their terrorist prisoners and place them in any of their high security prisons.

⁴ <http://www.mesacc.edu/dept/d46/psy/dev/Fall01/terrorism/motivation.html>.

⁵ "terrorists in their prisons" is used as opposed to convicted terrorists because the individuals involved in the programs range from detainees to convicted to those being held without charge.

Saudi Arabia

A comprehensive counseling/education program is the heart of the Saudi program “designed to combat the intellectual and ideological justification for violent extremism.” The program uses intensive religious debates and psychological counseling. It is based on the belief that those recruited by terrorist groups often have little formal religious education, and while they are in prison, they are encouraged to discuss and debate Islamic law with sheiks and scholars. This type of religious counseling seeks to correct the detainees’ interpretation of Islam through open dialogue.⁶

Though the program begins in prison, it continues at the Care Rehabilitation Center, located in a former resort, just outside the capital city of Riyadh. Typically, the stay at the Center is eight to 12 weeks and the prisoners participate in a wide variety of activities from Koranic studies to art therapy. There is a swimming pool on the grounds and other recreational activities. The correctional staff do not wear uniforms and inmates have 24-hour access to telephones. After leaving the Care Rehabilitation Center, the Saudi government monitors the progress of the inmates and offers support. Christopher Boucek wrote in his paper for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “One an individual satisfactorily renounced his previous beliefs, assistance is provided in locating a job, and receiving other benefits, including additional government stipends, a car, and an apartment. Success of the program . . . is based in part on the recognition that being a radical is not inherently a bad thing. Acting on radical beliefs with violence, however, is, and that is the behavior that needs to be modified.”

As of February 2010, nearly 300 men completed the Saudi rehabilitation program. Of that, nearly 80 percent have been absorbed into normal society without any incidents. However, one failure that made news was Mohamed al-Awfi who, after six years of detention in Guantanamo by the United States, was released to Saudi Arabia, and entered the Center’s program, taking classes in anger management, Islamic law, history and art therapy. During his time at Guantanamo, Awfi claimed he was tortured and mistreated. Shortly after his release from the Center, Awfi decided to take revenge on the United States and fled to Yemen. Saudi officials visited Awfi’s family and instead of threatening them, the officials told the family that they did not hate Awfi, only his behavior and though he made a mistake by running to Yemen, if he came back he would receive help. The family began to call Awfi in Yemen and not long after Awfi turned himself in.

The Saudi “soft” approach to the rehabilitation of terrorists has been copied by other nations, but few have equaled the Saudi’s in the investment of time, talent and money and their initial success rates appear less impressive.

Egypt

Unlike the Saudi program that was initiated by the State, Egypt’s program of terrorist rehabilitation began in May 1997 when the leadership of *a-Gama’a al-Islamiya*⁷ declared an initiative to denounce the use of violence in Jihad except in self-defense. In November 2007, *al-Jihad al-Islamiya*⁸ adopted the already successful model established

⁶ “Saudi Arabia’s ‘Soft’ Counterterrorism Strategy: Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Aftercare” by Christopher Boucek, Carnegie Papers, 2008. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C.

⁷ One of the largest and most violent extremist Islamic movements in Egypt.

⁸ The second most important Egyptian Islamist Jihadi movement, whose former leader was Ayman al-Zawahiri, purported to be the number 2 man in Al-Qaeda after Osama bin Laden.

by *a-Gama'a al-Islamiya*. Though the Egyptian security authorities were initially skeptical and hesitant to support the inmate initiated program, they have come to accept and support it. The leadership of *a-Gama'a al-Islamiya*, after consulting with Islamic scholars from Al-Azhar University, released twenty-five volumes of revisions to their initial philosophy, entitled *Tashih al-Mafahim* (Corrections of concepts). The revisions include arguments that Islam does not permit killing or terrorizing non-Muslim civilians and discusses the dangers that Al-Qaeda poses to Muslims worldwide.⁹

Iraq

The *Munasaha*¹⁰ program began on March 9, 2011 to rehabilitate prisoners in Anbar and Baghdad. Much like the Saudi program it is designed to educate inmates about the damage terrorism causes to Iraqi society and that terrorism violates the law and is considered a sin by all religions.¹¹ Previously, Task Force 134, the United States unit charged with overseeing coalition detainee operations in Iraq utilized an approach of segregating extremists, nurturing moderates and ensuring good care and custody for each detainee. Beginning with a classification process¹² to separate recruiters¹³ from other inmates, the program includes religious discussions conducted by U.S.-vetted Iraqi imams, basic literacy education, and work programs. According to U.S. authorities, the education component is particularly effective.¹⁴

Singapore

With 16% of the inmates Muslims, Singapore established the *Religious Rehabilitation Group* (RRG) to de-radicalize terrorists.¹⁵ Nearly forty Islamic scholars and religious leaders make up a group dedicated to “deprogramming” detainees. By approaching the jihadists on religious terms, the RRG seeks to treat the problem at its root. As one security officer explained, “Once you take an oath to God, it will take another man of God to undo it.”¹⁶

Singapore is also home to the Behavioural Sciences Unit (BSU), Home Team Academy¹⁷ which conducts research into terrorism and programs to counter it. The BSU, in addition to its own research, holds conferences and publishes books, newsletters and practical guides for academics and practitioners.

Observations and Conclusions

Though programs in other nations differ in various ways, the above programs provide the general approach most follow. New programs and variations continue to

⁹ *www.Islam Online.net*, July 9, 2007.

¹⁰ *Munasaha* (Advisory Committee) is also the name of the 2004 Saudi terrorist de-radicalization initiative.

¹¹ Mohammed al-Qaisi, *www.Al-Shorfa.com* 12 March 2011.

¹² Background check, psychological evaluation, analysis of education, skills, motivation and religiosity.

¹³ Inmates who look for other prisoners to radicalize.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Azarva, “Is U.S. Detention Policy in Iraq Working?” *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2009, pp. 5-14.

¹⁵ In 2001-02, more than 30 members of the Southeast Asian branch of *Jemaah Islamiyah* (Islamic community) were arrested for plotting attacks on diplomatic missions in Singapore.

¹⁶ Katherine Seifert, *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2010, pp. 21-30, Philadelphia, PA USA.

¹⁷ Training institute, under the Ministry of Home Affairs, for the Singapore Police, Civil Defense Force, Central Narcotics Bureau, Prisons Service, Immigration and Checkpoints Authority and the Internal Security Department.

emerge as new research arrives and is evaluated. Using summaries of the reports and research of others, following are some generally accepted conclusions¹⁸:

- **Prisons matter.** They have played an enormous role in the narratives of every radical and militant movement in the modern period. They are 'places of vulnerability' in which radicalization takes place. Yet they have also served as incubators for peaceful change and transformation.

- Much of the current discourse about prisons and radicalization is negative. But prisons are not just a threat – they can play a positive role in tackling problems of radicalization and terrorism in society as a whole. Many of the examples in this report demonstrate how prisons can become net contributors to the fight against terrorism.

- Terrorists are not 'ordinary' offenders. They often use their time in prison to mobilise outside support, radicalise other prisoners, and – when given the opportunity – will attempt to recreate operational command structures.

- There are no hard and fast rules about whether terrorist prisoners should be concentrated together and/or separated from the rest of the prisoner population. Most of the countries that were included in the sample practice a policy of dispersal and (partial) concentration, which distributes terrorists among a small number of high security prisons. Even within such mixed regimes, however, it rarely seems to be a good idea to bring together leaders with followers and mix ideologues with hangers-on.

- The 'security first' approach of most countries results in missed opportunities to promote reform. Many prison services seem to believe that the imperatives of security and reform are incompatible. In many cases, however, demands for security and reform are more likely to complement than contradict each other.

¹⁸ The Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, *Prisons and Terrorism: Radicalisation and De-radicalisation in 15 Countries*, Kings College, London, UK, 2010.