



## Changing Jihadist Behavior: The Saudi Model

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The US, together with most other countries, has begun paying considerably more attention to countering terrorist ideology. In many cases, this effort has been more theoretical than practical, and stress has been placed on changing attitudes among larger populations rather than terrorist group members. One program that has in fact focused on actually trying to change individual behaviors and attitudes of terrorist group members and supporters has been that conducted by Saudi Arabia over the last several years. Since the Saudi program is one of the few organized efforts to change terrorist attitudes at the grass root level, it is worth examining for its operations and results thus far.

### Organization of the Saudi Program

In 2004, the Saudi Interior Ministry started the Munasaha, or Advisory Committee, program, to reform prison inmates convicted of involvement in jihadist extremism. The Saudi government reportedly initially kept the program secret to avoid premature media attention, but has recently become more open as to its goals and operations.<sup>1</sup> The Advisory Committee works in prisons across Saudi Arabia with detainees. Although organized under the auspices of the Interior Ministry, members of the Advisory Committee stress – particularly to detainees – that their religious scholars and counselors are not members of the Ministry of Interior or security services. It is organized with four subcommittees: Religious, Psychological, Security, and Media. The Religious Subcommittee is the largest with about 150 clerics and religious scholars.

The Psychological Subcommittee uses a mix of psychologists, psychiatrists, and other social scientists who focus on the social background of detainees and any psychological problems they might have. There reportedly are about 30 members of this subcommittee. Their primary purpose is to improve the detainees' self esteem. The Security Subcommittee determines any security risks involved in releasing prisoners at the end of their programs, provides instructions to the detainees on expected behavior after release, and monitors them after they leave prison. The Media Subcommittee provides material both for the program and for public education in schools and mosques.

### Running the Program

Detainees who have been selected for the counseling program have included both those who have been arrested by Saudi authorities and those who have been turned over from Guantanamo. Boucek has described eligibility for the program by the detainees:

Ministry of Interior officials stress, however, that individuals who have ‘blood on their hands’ and who complete the rehabilitation programme still will not be released early. Furthermore, individuals that have gone before a judge and been sentenced are not eligible for release until they have finished their sentence. Finally, even after completion of the programme, if the authorities have reason to believe that an individual will reoffend, then they simply will not release them.<sup>ii</sup>

Since January 2007, counseling has been conducted at vacation compounds in the Riyadh suburb of al-Thumama. There are now about six small compounds, each holding about 20 men, that collectively are called the Care Center for post-detention rehabilitation. Two programs are provided. The first involves short sessions lasting about two hours. Although the exact purpose of these sessions is not stated, they likely mostly involve a quick evaluation of which detainees present the most promising opportunities. Most prisoners then are selected for what are called Long Study Sessions. These programs last six weeks and involve two religious scholars and a social scientist working with 20 detainees. Together with the formal component of the program, additional one-on-one conversations and counseling continue throughout rehabilitation.

The religious component of the program is a course called Understanding Jihad. Reportedly, at least some of the counselors are former proselytizers for jihad. Stress is placed on “right jihads” versus “wrong jihads.” The scholars also try to stress that there is a “proper time” for jihad, and that Muslims should avoid takfir, or avoiding accusing other Muslims of heresy.<sup>iii</sup> The program also covers loyalty to legally appointed rulers and the Islamic precepts of allegiance to rulers. Clearly, the focus is on dissuading the participants from attacks in Saudi Arabia and against other Muslims rather than on changing attitudes toward terrorism in general.

The religious counseling is supported by psychologists and social workers. As the Center’s staff psychologist, T. M. Otayan, notes, “We use Western psychiatric techniques together with Islamic techniques.” Among other procedures, the Center uses art therapy, led by a graduate of Penn State. According to Otayan, many of the detainees have been diagnosed as having antisocial personality disorder, but serious mental illness is “rare.”<sup>iv</sup> Much of the counseling reportedly centers around building self esteem and in dealing with the detainees’ problems in dealing with their families. There also is an effort to support detainee feelings of having been tricked into violent actions, but the emphasis is on arguing that there still are opportunities for the detainees to turn their lives around.

Zoepf provides a good description of the overall atmosphere of the Care Center program:

On arrival, each prisoner is given a suitcase filled with gifts: clothes, a digital watch, school supplies and toiletries. Inmates are encouraged to ask for their favorite foods (Twix and Snickers candy bars are frequent requests). Volleyball nets, PlayStation games and Ping-Pong and foosball tables are all provided. The atmosphere at the center — which I visited several times earlier this year — is almost eerily cozy and congenial, with mattresses and rugs spread on stubby patches of lawn for inmates to lounge upon.

The role of the family is given prominence throughout the program. In large part, this is due to traditional Saudi stress on the importance of extended families. Also, as discussed below, many

of the detainees have histories of having significant family problems. Program managers encourage relatives to visit the detainees and to be involved in the counseling. New prison facilities have been built designed to accommodate family visits, including shared meals and meetings with religious scholars.

Upon release, both the detainee and the head of his family must sign a pledge renouncing violence. The persons released are provided financial stipends, assistance in finding jobs, apartments, and frequently cars. They also are given money to help in getting married. As argued by Bruce Hoffman in “All You Need is Love”, marriage for younger jihadist sympathizers, the responsibilities of marriage and raising a family may not end jihadist sympathies, but may dissuade sympathizers from active terrorist activities.<sup>v</sup> The Saudi government also emphasizes that their families are responsible for keeping them under control.

### **The Detainees**

According to the Saudis, most of the detainees have not had religious education as children and have developed an “incomplete” understanding of Islam.<sup>vi</sup> In two formal studies – one focusing on non-violent offenders within the Kingdom (although many having engaged in jihadist activities abroad), and the second focusing on those who had actually been involved in terrorism within Saudi Arabia – the Saudis determined that the first group had a very poor knowledge of Islam, and about a quarter had previous criminal records, many for drug offenses. The second group – certainly of more concern to the Saudi government – suggested that many had weak family backgrounds, and the detainees had had previous problems in dealing with authorities.<sup>vii</sup> At least anecdotally, some of the detainees have joined terrorist groups largely because of personal issues. For example, one Saudi detainee claimed to have gone to fight in Iraq because his girlfriend married another man; he refused to commit suicide for religious reasons, but hoped to die as a martyr.<sup>viii</sup> Other released detainees have said that despite completing the program and getting good jobs, they don’t feel the same sense of purpose as they did before. Yet others, as noted above, have had problems with either their families, authorities, or both.

John Horgan has argued that many recruits don’t join terrorist groups for ideological reasons: “We’re finding that they don’t generally join for religious reasons...Terrorist movements seem to provide a sense of adventure, excitement, vision, purpose, camaraderie, and involvement with them has an allure that can be difficult to resist. But the ideology is usually something you acquire once you’re involved.”<sup>ix</sup>

Although Horgan’s views certainly are not universally shared, they reflect a similar pattern to that observed by Frank Kitson in dealing with the Mau Mau movement in Kenya. Although Kitson admitted that it was a “gross oversimplification,” he argued that most members of the Mau Mau could be divided into three categories. The first was what might be termed the “true believers,” for whom “the only thing to do was to give him away as soon as possible.” The second category was those who “had merely joined because all their friends had done so, and because life was getting rough in the Reserve.” The final category was “the Africans who joined the gangs from a spirit of adventure.”<sup>x</sup>

Clearly, there are significant differences between the types of recruits joining the Mau Mau and jihadists and different dynamics between the groups, but the point is that there almost certainly are various reasons for individuals joining terrorist groups. The concept that many recruits join solely because of religious views seems to grossly one dimensional. After joining jihadist groups, there certainly is the opportunity for mobilization and indoctrination – whether deliberate or simply through in-group dynamics – but there almost certainly are pre-existing differing factors for recruits leaning toward such groups in the first place.

## **Judging the Program**

According to Saudi government sources, some 2,000 detainees have participated in the program, with around 700 renouncing their jihadist beliefs and being subsequently released. About 1,400 prisoners have refused to participate.<sup>xi</sup> Apparently using different sources, the same author states that of 1,400 participating detainees who have been released, only 35 have been re-arrested for security violations, leading to about a two percent recidivism rate. Likewise, using a similar program for reintegrating Saudis released from Guantanamo, an earlier Saudi report stated that 117 were repatriated, with none reoffending.<sup>xii</sup>

The last report on Guantanamo former detainees has had to be changed considerably by the Saudi government earlier this year. The Saudi Interior Ministry released a list of 85 wanted alleged terrorists, many suspected of joining foreign groups. According to Saudi officials, eleven men on the list were former detainees at Guantanamo Bay who had gone through the counseling program. The most prominent name among the ‘graduates’ was Said Ali al Shihiri, who has been identified as the deputy leader of al Qaida in Yemen.

Even with the latest public setback for the program, the stated recidivism rates appear excellent, especially in comparison with the average recidivism experienced in the prison systems of most countries. In part, this may be due to some particular advantages that Saudi Arabia possesses. The Saudi religious establishment has an extensive network of scholars that it can draw from. The traditional structure in which the government and the religious network are viewed as co-equals in maintaining social stability is particularly important. Religious scholars can present themselves as being independent actors even if their goals are to maintain the current social and political structures. In many other Islamic countries, religious scholars who support the existing government are very easily viewed as stooges of the government by those who are in opposition. Although there have been some elements of this view in Saudi Arabia by jihadist members, it seems much less pronounced and rather alien to traditional views.

The Saudi security services also provide an advantage to the government in ‘rehabilitating’ jihadists. Although the Saudi government initially minimized the jihadist threat inside the country, once internal attacks escalated, the security services became very active in trying to counter the threats. The size and capabilities of the various security services, together with fewer concerns as to civil rights, mean that they are well situated to monitor released detainees. Despite these advantages, the Saudi claims of rather spectacular success in their rehabilitation program probably should be taken with a grain of salt. First, of course, the program is somewhat self-selecting. Only those terrorists or their supporters who are careless enough to be caught are subject to the program. Even among this population, it is probable that the major success stories

are likely to be wannabes and newer recruits. The significant number of detainees who either have refused to participate in the program or who are deemed ineligible suggests a large number of irreconcilables.

The second potential problem is how long lasting individuals' renunciation of terrorism may be. The program has been in existence for only a few years, so this factor is still not clear. As already noted, at least one 'successful' individual has noted that his current life simply is not as emotionally meaningful as his time as a jihadist; this may certainly be a broader trend. Trying to settle into a conventional middle class life may be difficult for a number of jihadists. On a more practical level, any potential jihadist who has been released has a vested interest in keeping a low profile, knowing that he is under observation by Saudi security. As time passes and the level of surveillance likely decreases, some of the 'rehabilitated' jihadists may re-emerge as security threats.

Finally, the Saudis seem to have an almost exclusive focus in the counseling program of countering internal terrorism. Displacement of Saudi terrorists may be a significantly increasing problem. 'Successful' graduates of the program have been identified as operating in Yemen. Given apparent previous Saudi government attitudes, such movements of Saudi terrorists probably are not viewed with special concern by the Kingdom's government. From the Saudi standpoint, minimizing or ignoring the exodus of the program's failures to other countries probably is preferable; from the larger regional and international standpoint, of course, this is hardly optimal.

### **Can the Program Succeed Elsewhere?**

Even with the above caveats, the Saudi Counseling Program represents a creative attempt at countering jihadist ideology. The religious component, with its discussions of "right jihads" versus "wrong jihads", can create some nervousness in other environments in which jihad is viewed as a critical threat. In fairness, however, this approach may be considerably more effective than trying to end terrorist sympathies completely. It can provide a means through which the counselors can gain rapport with the detainees in an effort to change their behavior. The religious, secular counseling, and post-release benefits and monitoring components of the Saudi program would seem to provide an excellent combination of approaches to change attitudes and behavior.

The issue becomes how well such a program might work elsewhere. The British government reportedly has begun studying the Saudi program to determine if it could be adapted for the United Kingdom. If the Saudi program continues to show a reasonable degree of success, it is probable that other Western countries will also show interest in similar techniques. There are, however, likely three major hurdles for Western countries in adopting the Saudi approach. The first is whether Western countries have an adequate Islamic religious establishment from which to draw. The relatively limited number of Islamic scholars in the West may be a limiting factor. This is further exacerbated by the key qualifications of the scholars required: not directly connected to the government yet willing to work with it, and with the credibility to be listened to by prisoners. To a lesser extent, the same issues arise with the social scientists who might be associated with the program.

The second hurdle is the probable lack of an extended strong family structure among jihadists in the West. Most of the younger terrorist supporters likely will be second or third generation immigrants, probably with weaker family ties. The lack of extended families immediately at hand can impact both the counseling system and the post-program use of families as controlling mechanisms. The last point is associated with the final hurdle. Most Western countries are unlikely to have as an obtrusive security monitoring system as do the Saudis, with stronger civil and human rights restrictions. Although in theory perhaps not actually required – if terrorists actually do change their beliefs, monitoring merely verifies their compliance – in reality, this portion of the program likely is critical.

Although probably difficult to implement in the West, some variation of the Saudi program would seem to be suitable for other Muslim-majority countries. The presence of extended families and existing security systems generally can provide two legs of the tripod. The weakest support probably will be the actual counseling component. Independent respected religious scholars who are not viewed as simply tools of the government usually will be in shorter supply than in Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, most Islamic countries should have assets sufficient to run similar programs even if not as extensive as the Saudi system.

Perhaps the most critical role that the US and other Western countries can play is to provide support to Muslim countries in implementing and running these deprogramming counseling programs. Direct visible US support would certainly be counterproductive, with a strong US fingerprint likely destroying the credibility of the counselors. Nevertheless, there are several aspects in which the US could be very helpful. The first is simply as an information clearinghouse, providing coordinated details on what works and what doesn't. The second is to provide quiet financial support for those countries which may need it. A particularly useful support function that the US could provide would be training and education for the various social scientists who might be involved with the program. As with other support, the less the overt US Government involvement, the better chance there is of local success.

The Saudi program has not yet proven its long-term success. Nevertheless, it represents a creative way of countering terrorist ideological support. It is unlikely to have a significant impact on dedicated, experienced terrorists, and should find its greatest success among younger terrorists and loosely affiliated wannabes. In many ways, this may in fact be more important in reducing the next generation of militants. If combined with other efforts to reduce sympathies for militants and jihadists, modifications of the Saudi counseling system could prove to be a useful tool.

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<sup>i</sup> Christopher Boucek, “Extremist Reeducation and Rehabilitation in Saudi Arabia”, *Terrorism Monitor* 5/16, Jamestown Foundation, 16 August 2007.

<sup>ii</sup> Christopher Boucek, “Counter-Terrorism from Within: Saudi Arabia’s Religious Rehabilitation and Disengagement Programme”, *RUSI Journal* 152/6 (December 2008), p. 60.

<sup>iii</sup> Katherine Zoepf, “Deprogramming Jihadists”, *New York Times*, 9 November 2008

<sup>iv</sup> Zoepf.

<sup>v</sup> *The Atlantic*, December 2001.

<sup>vi</sup> Boucek, *Terrorism Monitor*.

<sup>vii</sup> Boucek, *RUSI Journal*, p. 63.

<sup>viii</sup> “Powers of Persuasion”, *The Economist*, 17 July 2008.

<sup>ix</sup> Quoted in Zoepf.

<sup>x</sup> Frank Kitson, *Gangs and Counter-Gangs*, London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1960, p. 126.

<sup>xi</sup> Boucek, *Terrorism Monitor*.

<sup>xii</sup> Boucek, *RUSI Journal*, p. 61. Similar figures, with a claim of about 3,000 detainees participating, are cited by Susan Mohammed, “To Deprogram a Jihadist”, *Macleans*, 2 February 2009, at <http://www2.macleans.ca>