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*Deradicalization: Approaches and
Models*

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Introduction

Several terms are used to refer to the phenomenon of deradicalization, including 'desertion,' 'demobilization,' 'defection,' 'rehabilitation,' 'reconciliation,' 'dialogue,' and 'disengagement.' The main reason for the use of different terms in different societies seems to be a realization of the socio-political activities attached to each term. But two of these terms, deradicalization and disengagement, are used more frequently. The former is mainly used in Asian societies, and the latter in European ones. Deradicalization and disengagement can be defined as the process of individual and collective withdrawal. Disengagement refers to a behavioral change, whereas deradicalization implies a cognitive shift, i.e. a fundamental change in understanding.ⁱ

The 9/11 terrorist attacks triggered the global war on terror led by the United States. A large number of terrorists were killed, captured and imprisoned. But, ironically, prisons themselves became centers of radicalization and recruitment. Imprisoned terrorist leaders and activists successfully used their interaction with other prisoners to motivate and bring them into the fold of their respective groups.

This led to the recognition that the war against terror is a war of ideas as well, which cannot be won solely through killing and arresting terrorists, collecting intelligence or securing borders. It was realized that efforts were needed to eliminate hatred, intolerance and extreme interpretations of religion.

In that context, deradicalization and rehabilitation programs have been launched in many parts of the world. A deradicalization or rehabilitation program is generally seen as "an important and effective strategy to combat terrorism and extremism." Several countries have developed such programs to win the hearts and change the minds of the radicals.ⁱⁱ

This paper is aimed at reviewing the various approaches and models of deradicalization practiced by different states and societies.

Distinguishing between successful and unsuccessful strategies of deradicalization is not easy. Various countries have developed their own deradicalization models according to their own circumstances. So far there has been no consensus on the effectiveness of any single deradicalization program, mainly because of diverse conceptual contexts.

All of these programs, however, converge at least at one point – they are focused on changing the views of the detainees and other radicalized individuals. Furthermore, all these models are based on the assumption that radicalization is a matter of ideology originating from a misinterpretation of religion and leading to deviant social and psychological behaviors.

Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Morocco, and Iraq, and European states, including Norway, Germany, and the United Kingdom have launched deradicalization and rehabilitation programs. The United States, Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia are also among the countries that have their own deradicalization programs. Through such programs some Western countries keep an eye on involvement of diasporas in radical movements. A closer look at such programs launched by different states reveals diverse approaches and models.

Singapore

A deradicalization program, called the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), was launched in Singapore in 2003, when the country was facing internal threats from Jemaah Islamiyah, a Southeast Asian militant organization also accused of the 2002 bombings on the Indonesian island of Bali.

Counseling for detained militants is the main plank of the RRG strategy. In group discussions, Muslim clerics try to rebut the extreme views about Islam held by the detained militants. The success of this program is indicated by the fact that many of the detainees, who had been members of the Jemaah Islamiyah, have been released. It demonstrated that a well-structured rehabilitation program can be fruitful in neutralizing the effects of extremist indoctrination and bringing extremists back into the mainstream of society.ⁱⁱⁱ

A group of 30 Muslim clerics was engaged for re-educating the radicals. These clerics strive to prove the violence-oriented interpretation of Islam as incorrect and illegitimate. Ustaz Muhammad bin Ali, who is among the group of clerics engaged for rehabilitating the detained extremists, argues that Jihad has several meanings – one is “to fight, but fighting on a legitimate battlefield. So what these guys are doing is not Jihad.”^{iv} Families of the detainees were also engaged in the process.^v

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has the best-known deradicalization program in the Middle East. The program aims at bringing the radicalized individuals, who have not taken part in any violent activity, back into the mainstream. Its “soft” approach has three components:^{vi}

- a) Prevention: to deter individuals from getting involved in violent extremism.
- b) Rehabilitation: to encourage supporters and sympathizers to renounce violence.
- c) After Care: To prevent recidivism and to reintegrate people into society.

‘Social support’ initiatives for the prisoners are the main strength of the program. Rehabilitation helps the individuals find jobs, housing and spouses. Members of various committees working under the program travel to different parts of the country, to visit prisons and meet the detainees.^{vii} The religious subcommittee is the largest and most prominent component of the program’s Advisory Committee.^{viii}

Religious scholars re-educate the detainees in the light of Quran and other religious teachings. Detainees’ families are warned that they would be held accountable if the individuals rejoined the terrorist cause.^{ix}

Around 2,000 prisoners were enrolled in the religious counseling program in 2004. Around 700 of the 2,000 had been released by 2007. However, nine had been rearrested.^x Proponents of the program argue that releasing the rehabilitated detainees effectively counters militant propaganda.

Yemen

A deradicalization program launched in Yemen in 2002 comprised a committee made up of Yemeni clerics and judges. The committee focused its attention on intellectual debate and dialogue, with religious scholars trying to change the ideologies of Jihadists.^{xi}

Dialogue is the first step in the program. The next is reintegrating former militants into society. A one-page manual, resembling a social contract of sorts, is the real strength of the program. Based on the principles of equality and respect, the manual is quite different from western manuals used for interrogation. Voluntary participation is a prerequisite. Under the deradicalization program, 364 suspects had been released until June 2005.^{xii}

Morocco and Egypt

In 2008, Search for Common Ground (SFCG), an NGO, launched a deradicalization program in Morocco. It engaged youth and prisoners in Maghreb prisons in a constructive dialogue and capacity-building strategies. The SFCG aims to promote moderation and engages prisoners in positive civic participation.^{xiii}

A group of religious clerics has been assigned the task of deradicalizing young Moroccans and preventing them from being radicalized. The efforts on part of these clerics also involve a spiritual dimension for rehabilitating jailed Islamists.

Extraordinary efforts have been made for training the trainers. Study tours across the UK were planned for cross-fertilization. Holding of monthly discussions and dialogues, and systematic monitoring of the program's achievements was also planned. The SFCG plans to offer a separate training program for prison staff so that they build a sustainable relationship with the prisoners who are at risk of being radicalized.^{xiv}

Deradicalization in Egypt refers essentially to the renunciation of violence by Egyptian jihadi organizations, mainly the Gama'a al-Islamiya and the Jihad. Their reconsideration involves "a rereading of the ideas propagated by the two groups in the past and a rereading of that past itself."^{xv}

Indonesia

The deradicalization program in Indonesia aims to neutralize the ideological fundamentals of the militants. The program is based on the belief among deradicalizers that the police can change the Jihadists' assumption that government officials are anti-Islamic. The police not only treat Jihadist prisoners kindly but also support them financially.^{xvi} The program focuses on moulding the Jihadists' mindset on two fundamental issues: (a) killing of civilians; and, (b) the need for an Islamic state.

The police keep in contact with the prisoners' families and the communities they used to live in. The police also acquire information through ex-prisoners.^{xvii}

Malaysia

The main Malaysian deradicalization initiative, the Religious Rehabilitation Program, is guided by the Internal Security Act (ISA) of 1960.^{xviii} The program relies on re-education and rehabilitation. Re-education focuses on correcting political and religious misconceptions of the militants, while the strategy of rehabilitation is adopted for thorough monitoring of the militants after their release. Family members of the detainees are also engaged in the process. Families are supported financially when the militants are in detention. After their release, militants are also assisted with reintegration into society.^{xix}

The program also has another dimension. Coercion and threats are also resorted to in order to deter the militants from reengaging in militancy and terrorism. Fear and threats of harsh punishments are a key component of the Malaysian deradicalization program. The militants are beaten, tortured and subjected to long periods of solitary confinement in addition to other punishments.^{xx}

United States

A number of initiatives have been taken in the United States to address the problem of radicalization. The US Bureau of Prisons has designed a rehabilitation program, which is based on traditional methods of supporting radicals in developing skills necessary for successful reintegration into society.^{xxi}

Additionally, police are provided training in areas related to particular dimensions of religion and cultural traits of the country's main communities. Prison Radicalization Task Force and US Senate Subcommittee on Terrorism are among the bodies aimed at countering radicalization.

The US also launched a deradicalization program in Iraq at a large scale in 2007.^{xxii} Under the program, detainees are engaged in religious discussions as well as imparted occupational skills like carpentry, art and farming, allowing them alternative sources of income and social support. As with programs in other countries, the US deradicalization program in Iraq also engages families of extremists.

Norway

Norway's deradicalization program is administered through local agencies. Around 700 people have been trained successfully so far. Families of the activists are also involved in the process. The Norwegian program has been ranked among the most successful in the world.^{xxiii}

Germany

Germany's disengagement program is based on multiple initiatives. A high level of cooperation and coordination among various agencies like police, municipal corporations and NGOs is deemed the program's basic strength and the basis of its success.^{xxiv}

Online Deradicalization

In addition to conventional deradicalization means, the Saudi Arabia-based Al-Sakinah (tranquility) Campaign is one of the initiatives, which focuses on the Internet as the avenue to deradicalize those who surf the Web and indulge in radical chats.^{xxv} Initiated by volunteers, the campaign was subsequently adopted by the Saudi Ministry of Religious Endowments after it proved successful in persuading extremists to renounce their views.

Trained scholars engage extremists in online dialogues to persuade them to change their radical views. The campaign's target audience is the individuals who use the Internet to learn more about Islam, not the extremists, states one of the campaign's founders.^{xxvi}

Al-Sakinah launched its own website to give a boost to its activities. The website is designed to serve as a source of learning for *imams*, *mashaikh* and others. Noticing the popularity of the Al-Sakinah, other countries, including Algeria, the US, and the UK have also launched web-based counter-radicalization programs.

In UK, the Internet is used as an avenue to support mainstream voices and to promote an understanding among the followers of various religions in the country. Radical Middle Way project in the UK has a website, Islam-online (www.islamonline.net/), where a wide range of views and opinions from all major Muslim schools of thought can be accessed. Under the project, seminars are also organized on the subject of combating terrorism and radicalization through the Internet. One of the aims of the project is to undermine the capacity of extremists to propagate their ideologies through the Internet.^{xxvii}

Conclusion

It is quite clear that the approaches adopted and the models implemented in various countries converge at some points and diverge at others. Many of these approaches have received considerable success.

However, they cannot be termed as successful or unsuccessful in isolation and without reference to context.

Some of the programs, which have not been that successful, might have delivered better had they had been financed appropriately. Though, the models practiced in Saudi Arabia, Malaysia and Singapore have been widely praised, it does not mean that they have no shortcomings? However, much can be learnt from the success of these programs and the lessons used to improve their impact.

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