

Deradicalization or Disengagement of Terrorists

*Is It Possible?**

by Jessica Stern

Koret-Taube Task Force on National Security and Law
www.futurechallengesessays.com

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia claims to be able to counteract terrorists' radicalization—to turn them away from violence and return them to society. A number of other governments, in the Middle East, in Europe, and in Southeast Asia, have initiated their own similar efforts, aimed at Neo-Nazi and far-right groups, narco-terrorists, and groups affiliated with Al Qaeda.¹ In the face of today's global security threats, these efforts raise a critical question: Is it in fact possible to counter-radicalize terrorists and their potential recruits? This chapter explores efforts to counter-radicalize, disengage, or prevent the recruitment of radical Muslims to Al Qaeda and related groups.

In this essay, the term “deradicalization” will refer to programs aimed at detainees or prisoners suspected or convicted of terrorist crimes; “prevention” will refer to programs aimed at individuals or groups considered vulnerable to recruitment; and “counter-radicalization” will refer to both efforts, as well as to broader public diplomacy efforts that aim to reduce the appeal of terrorist ideologies.

The U.S. government would do well to better understand the successes and failures of counter-radicalization efforts, especially those that target Islamist terrorists. Military action, especially covert military action, is an essential part of the worldwide strategy against the Islamist terrorist movement, but there are limitations to this approach. Research by Laura Dugan and Gary LaFree, professors of criminology and criminal justice at the University of Maryland, suggests that over the long term, harsh counter-terrorism measures can have a backlash effect.² Moreover, the notion of hunting down the killers one by one presumes a finite number of targets within a finite set of

*An earlier version of this article appears as “Mind Over Martyr,” *Foreign Affairs* (Jan./Feb 2010).



organizations.³ It also assumes that terrorists live in places where they can be singled out and hunted down. In fact, terrorists don't fight on traditional battlefields: they live and fight among civilians, making it difficult to know where to aim, and even more difficult to avoid civilian casualties. Their goal is to frighten the enemy into launching attacks that harm Muslim civilians. These attacks are interpreted as proof that the United States and its allies seek to undermine and humiliate Muslims. While the immediate task is to remove terrorist leaders from the battlefield, the long-term goal should be to stop the movement from growing.

The effectiveness (or lack thereof) of other nations' deradicalization programs will affect the security of American citizens. For example, Said Ali al-Shihri, who was repatriated to Saudi Arabia in 2007, graduated from the Saudi deradicalization program. After al-Shihri's release, he became the deputy leader of Al Qaeda in Yemen. Although the details of al-Shihri's return to terrorism have not been publicly released, the Saudi government has reported that eleven of the "graduates" of its rehabilitation program returned to terror, and are now on the Saudi list of most-wanted terrorists.⁴ It is important for us to understand how governments define "success," as well as the variables associated with successful (as well as unsuccessful) deradicalization of detainees. This is especially true in regard to the suspected terrorists held in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. The difficulty of gathering evidence that is usable in court means that some truly bad actors held at Guantánamo will be released (just as some not-so-bad actors have been unfairly held).

The impact of terrorism-prevention programs is also important to U.S. national security. Terrorists are being recruited, or self-recruited, in Europe—not just in Iraq or Afghanistan—and people who carry European passports can enter the United States relatively easily. So the presence of "homegrown" terrorists in Europe—and the effectiveness of prevention programs there—could directly affect the security of Americans. In addition, these programs can serve as models for future prevention programs in the United States.

Until recently, the United States has been relatively immune from "homegrown" terrorist strikes, but this is unlikely to last, and is another area in which terrorism prevention will be crucial. One area of particular concern to the U.S. government is the Somali community in Minnesota, from which some young men have been recruited to fight alongside al Shabab, the radical Islamist organization that controls southern Somalia and claims to be aligned with Al Qaeda. These men do not seem to be plotting attacks in the West, but it is important to think now about how to integrate Somalis into

American society more fully in order to reduce the chances that they will carry out attacks in the United States.

Fortunately for our side, “hard” counter-terrorism efforts have significantly eroded Al Qaeda’s strength. Predator strikes in Pakistan have eliminated key Al Qaeda leaders, disrupting essential communications between core Al Qaeda and affiliated groups, as well as with new recruits. Michael Leiter, director of the National Counterterrorism Center, testified in September 2009 that “Al-Qa’ida has suffered significant leadership losses during the past 18 months, interrupting training and plotting, potentially disrupting plots that are under way, and leaving leadership vacuums that are increasingly difficult to fill.”⁵ Moreover, lack of funding is hurting Al Qaeda’s recruitment and training to a degree that its influence is waning, according to David Cohen, assistant secretary of the Treasury for terrorist financing.⁶

This does not mean the fight against Al Qaeda and related groups is over, however. The Saudi deputy interior minister was nearly killed by a terrorist posing as a repentant militant in August 2009.⁷ In October 2009, French police arrested a nuclear physicist employed at CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, who was reportedly communicating with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb—an Islamist terrorist group aligned with Al Qaeda and the primary force for Islamism in Algeria—to suggest targets in France.⁸ Finally, officials consider the plot they intercepted in New York and Denver in September 2009 to be the most significant since the 9/11 attacks.⁹

Over the long term, the most important factor is the extent to which the terrorists are able to expand their movement. Here the news is mixed but there is reason to be hopeful. Polls continue to show that many people in Muslim-majority states doubt that U.S. counter-terrorism efforts are in fact aimed at protecting the United States from terrorist strikes. For instance, in a 2007 study of public opinion in Egypt, Indonesia, Morocco, and Pakistan, conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland, majorities in those countries believed that Washington’s primary goal was to dominate the Middle East and weaken Islam and its people.¹⁰ In another PIPA poll conducted in 2009, anti-American sentiment remained high, with more than 80 percent of Pakistanis viewing the U.S. Predator air strikes as unjustified.¹¹ More optimistically, the report noted “a sea change” in popular attitudes toward Al Qaeda and other religious militants. More than 80 percent of Pakistanis polled said they thought these groups were threats to their national security; representing more than a 40-percentage-point rise since 2007. The tens of thousands of Muslim civilians killed in Iraq, Afghanistan, Algeria, and elsewhere since the “war on terrorism”

began have tarnished Al Qaeda's reputation as the vanguard of the extremist movement.¹² A number of Islamist leaders who once supported Al Qaeda, including Sayyid Imam al-Shaif, the organization's ideological godfather, have publicly turned against it,¹³ and support for Al Qaeda among ordinary Muslims (not just in Pakistan) is waning.¹⁴ If counter-radicalization of Muslim extremists were ever possible to achieve, this is the moment to try.

I first got involved in counter-radicalization efforts in 2005, soon after the murder of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh by an Islamist terrorist. I was recruited by the city of Rotterdam to help develop a new concept of what it means to be a Dutch citizen. The goal was to include immigrants and their children, as well as Dutch natives. The Dutch government was worried that the idea of "jihad" had become a "fad," among not only Muslim youth but also recent converts to Islam. Then, in 2007, a company under contract with Task Force 134, the task force in charge of U.S.-run detention centers in Iraq, asked me to help develop a counter-radicalization program for the twenty-six thousand Iraqi prisoners held by the U.S. military at Camp Bucca and Camp Cropper. Last winter, together with a group of current and former U.S. government officials and analysts, I visited Riyadh's Care Rehabilitation Center, an institution that integrates convicted terrorists into Saudi society through religious reeducation, psychological counseling, and assistance in finding a job. And in the spring of 2009, I visited a youth center supported by the Muslim Contact Unit, part of the Special Branch of London's Metropolitan Police, which works with leaders of the Muslim community there, including Islamists, to isolate and counter supporters of terrorist violence.

These experiences made one thing clear: Any terrorism prevention or rehabilitation effort must be based first and foremost on a clear understanding of what motivates people to join terrorist movements and what motivates them to leave. Terrorist movements often arise in reaction to a perceived injustice, as a means to right some terrible wrong, real or imagined. Yet ideology is not the only, or even the most important, factor in an individual's decision to join a terrorist group. In interviewing terrorists, I have found that operatives are often more interested in the expression of a collective identity than they are in the group's stated goals.¹⁵ The reasons some people choose to become terrorists are as varied as the reasons other people choose their professions: market conditions, social networks, contact with recruiters, education, and individual preferences. The passion for justice and law that may motivate a young person to become a lawyer, for example, is not necessarily the same influence that keeps him

working long hours at a law firm, hoping to make partner. Likewise, a terrorist's motivation for remaining in or leaving his career changes over time. Counter-radicalization programs need to take account—and advantage—of these variations and shifts in motivation.

Don't Know Much about Ideology

Terrorists—even those in leadership roles—are often somewhat hazy about their group's purported objectives. A “questionnaire” (circa 1990–1993) asked Al Qaeda leaders, “What is your position on battle participation in Afghanistan and for what reasons?” There was virtually no agreement among the five responding Al Qaeda leaders (including Osama bin Laden) about Al Qaeda's goals, calling into question the principal aim of the group. That lack of agreement about the group's goals, coupled with the constant shifts in Al Qaeda's agenda, suggests that we should be skeptical that the group's principal aim is to achieve its stated goals.¹⁶ Perhaps its actual goal, like that of many organizations, is to satisfy the needs—spiritual, social, financial, and physical—of the group's members.

In a survey of 516 Guantánamo detainees, researchers at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point found that knowing another member of Al Qaeda was a better predictor of who became a terrorist than was believing in the idea of jihad.¹⁷ Interestingly, terrorists who claim to be motivated by religious ideology are often ignorant about Islam. Our hosts in Riyadh told us the vast majority of “beneficiaries,” as its administrators call participants, did not have much formal education or proper religious instruction and had only a limited and incomplete understanding of Islam. In the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe, second- and third-generation Muslim youth are rebelling against what they perceive as culturally-contaminated, “soft” Islam, as practiced by their parents and promoted in the local mosque. They prefer the “purer” Islam they discover through their studies on the Internet or in some cases, via imams from the Middle East.¹⁸ Lack of knowledge about Islam makes youth vulnerable to “training” by barely-educated, self-appointed imams. For example, in the Netherlands, the Hofstadt Group—comprised mostly of young Dutch nationals of Moroccan parentage—designed what a police intelligence officer described as a “Do-it-Yourself” version of Islam, based in part on what the group learned about Takfiri ideology on the Internet and in part on the “teachings” of a self-taught Syrian imam who was a former drug dealer.¹⁹

Such true believers are good candidates for the kind of ideological reeducation that was part of Task Force 134's program in Iraq, as well as similar programs in Saudi Arabia and Singapore. A Saudi official told the group of us who visited the Care Rehabilitation

Center in Riyadh that the main reason for terrorism was ignorance about the true nature of Islam. Clerics at the center teach that only the legitimate rulers of Islamic states, not individuals such as Osama bin Laden, can declare a holy war. They preach against Takfiri ideology and the selective reading of religious texts to justify violence. One participant in the program told us, “Now I understand that I cannot make decisions by reading a single verse. I have to read the whole chapter.” The Saudi government refers to ignorance about the true nature of Islam, and “intellectual abnormality” as “the main reason for terrorism.”²⁰

In Europe, Muslim youth describe themselves, often accurately, as victims of prejudice—both in the workplace and in society more generally.²¹ Surveys carried out by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (now subsumed by the Fundamental Rights Agency), showed that minorities and migrants experience greater levels of unemployment, receive lower wages, and are over-represented in the least-desirable jobs.²² After the van Gogh murder, the native Dutch, who are famously proud of their tolerance, grew visibly less so: they started complaining about rising rates of criminality among Dutch Moroccan youth and the rhetoric of radical imams who preach that homosexuality is a sickness or a sin. Rightly perceiving that this growing prejudice against Muslims could become a source of social conflict, local governments and non-governmental organizations put in place various programs to integrate young immigrants into broader Dutch society.

Group dynamics are as important as social grievances. Young people are sometimes attracted to terrorist movements through social connections, music, fashion, or lifestyle; only later do they come fully to understand the group’s ideology and goals. Al Qaeda-affiliated groups have been begun using anti-American hip-hop music or “jihad rap” in their recruitment videos. For example, Abu Mansour al-Amriki has been using hip-hop in the propaganda videos he has made with al Shabab in Somalia. Other music groups promoting violence against the “kufur,” or unfaithful, include Soldiers of Allah (whose music is wildly popular, even though the group is now defunct) and Blakstone, a British rap group. The first- and second-generation Muslim children I interviewed for a study of the sources of radicalization in the Netherlands seemed to think that talking about jihad was cool, in the same way that listening to gangster rap is in some youth circles. Most of these children will not turn to violence, but once youth join an extremist group, the group itself can become an essential part of their identity, maybe even their only community. And so counter-radicalization requires finding new sources of social support for them. The Saudi program takes great pains to reintegrate participants into the families and communities they belonged to before their radicalization by encouraging

family visits and getting the community involved in follow-up after the youth are released. The program rightly assumes that social connections are key to both radicalization and deradicalization.²³

Then there are economics. “Jihad” can also be a job. There is no correlation between poverty and terrorism if we look globally, at least according to the studies carried out thus far.²⁴ But that doesn’t mean that poor people, in countries with high levels of unemployment, aren’t particularly vulnerable to recruitment, especially as cannon fodder. Of the twenty-five thousand suspected insurgents and terrorists detained in Iraq as of 2007, 78 percent were unemployed, and nearly all of them were underemployed, according to General Douglas Stone, who was then in charge of Task Force 134.²⁵ Because these insurgents took up the “job” of fighting a military occupation, typically targeting soldiers rather than civilians, at least some of them could conceivably “rehabilitate” themselves once the occupation ends.

Christopher Boucek, an expert on Saudi Arabia and Yemen at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, says the Advisory Committee, which helps run the rehabilitation program, has reported that detainees are typically in their twenties and come from large lower- or middle-class families, with only 3 percent coming from high-income backgrounds. Boucek says that according to Saudi officials, one-quarter of the program participants who had participated in jihad had prior criminal histories, approximately half for drug-related offenses. Only 5 percent of detainees were prayer leaders or had other formal religious roles.²⁶ For such individuals, job training, career counseling, and assistance in finding productive work may be the best counter-radicalization strategy—at least as important as religious reeducation.

Psychologists who study terrorism have been claiming for decades that there is no terrorist personality and that terrorists are psychologically “normal.” Sometimes experts offer the normal results of the Rorschach tests administered to Nazis at the Nuremberg trials as “proof” that under the right conditions, anyone can become a political murderer of innocent civilians.²⁷ Even if that were true, it seems highly unlikely that a person would remain “normal” after having spent several years killing innocents. This suggests that the normal results may be an artifact of the test, not of the “normal” psychology of those tested. Anyone who has ever sat down with a professional terrorist knows, in her bones, that while group dynamics may be the most important factor, individual psychology is not irrelevant, even if we cannot yet measure how. This suggests that an understanding of the terrorist’s individual psychology is also an important aspect of rehabilitation.

For example, one does not need to spend many days in the Gaza Strip before one begins to get a sense of the impact of constant fear and humiliation—issues that terrorists emphasize in interviews about why they got involved in terrorism.²⁸ If terrorism can be a source of validation, then surely helping adherents come to terms with the humiliation they have experienced could be part of the “cure.” To that end, the Saudi rehabilitation program includes classes in self-esteem.

There has been a great deal of debate about the role of radical madrassas in creating terrorists in Pakistan.²⁹ But one issue that has not been discussed outside Pakistan is the frequency of the rape of boys at the radical madrassas and how important that could be in their radicalization. Sexual abuse of these students is widely covered in the Pakistani press,³⁰ but there has not yet been the kind of outcry that we’ve seen in the West over clergy sexual abuse, perhaps because the abused youth and their families fear retribution. Also troubling is the rape of boys by warlords, the Afghan National Army, or the police in Afghanistan. Such abuses are commonplace on Thursdays, also known as “man-loving day,” because Friday prayers are considered to absolve sinners of all wrongdoing. David Whetham, a specialist in military ethics at King’s College London, reports some personnel in the Afghan police and military have used their security checkpoints to troll for attractive young men and boys on Thursday nights. The local population has been forced to accept these episodes as par for the course: they cannot imagine defying the all-powerful Afghan commanders.³¹ I have felt, in my interviews of terrorists, that there was an element of sexual humiliation, but it was rarely more than an intuition, and I have never explored this issue. Could rape or other forms of violence be one form of the humiliation that leads to contemporary Muslim-extremist terrorism?

Setting aside the question of personal trauma, consider the impact of the terrorist life-style. Exposure to violence, especially for those who become fighters, can cause lasting changes in the body and mind. Terrorists are “at war,” at least from their perspective, and like soldiers, they, too, may be at risk for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Moreover, those who have been detained may have been subjected to torture and left with even more serious psychological wounds. The Guantánamo detainees sent back to Saudi Arabia have posed a particular problem for the Saudi government. It will be critically important to incorporate some of what the U.S. medical community is learning about PTSD to reduce the risk that released detainees will return to terrorism. This is not because terrorists deserve sympathy—they do not—but because understanding their state of mind is necessary to limit the risk that they will return to violence.

Some individuals join terrorist groups or movements as true believers in an idea, but evolve, over time, into professional killers. Once that happens, the emotional and material benefits of belonging can become more important than the spiritual benefits of belief. This suggests that some terrorists might develop enduring reasons—perhaps even a compulsion—to pursue violence. Such individuals should be detained preventively and the keys thrown away, as some governments do with sexual predators. But in cases in which the law precludes indefinite detention, governments may be forced to release suspects. In those instances, officials will have to choose whether to ignore the threat posed by these people or work with other governments to develop tools to reduce the risk of violence. Governments must consider difficult tradeoffs. On the one hand, how great is the chance that graduates of deradicalization programs will return to terrorism or other forms of violent crime? On the other hand, are incarcerated terrorists recruiting in prison among the ordinary criminals or guards, or can preventive detention, or the prison itself, become a symbol of injustice to potential recruits?

This understanding—that ideology is not the only, or even the principal, reason that individuals are drawn to terrorist groups—needs to be incorporated into our counter-terrorism efforts, especially when we consider counter-radicalization. It also makes clear that even if terrorists achieve their purported objectives, they may stick with the fight for the fun or the profit. Successful counter-radicalization also requires understanding that some zealots seem to remain zealots, even if they change their ideology.

Turning Terrorists into Taxpayers: Terrorist Transition Programs in South Asia and Saudi Arabia

In 1974, Robert Martinson, an adjunct assistant professor at the City College of New York, published an essay reviewing 231 offender rehabilitation programs and concluded that “with few and isolated exceptions, the rehabilitative efforts that have been undertaken so far had had no appreciable effect on recidivism in regard to “ordinary crime,”³² sparking a “nothing works” movement throughout the United States. Practitioners and scholars have continued to study rehabilitation, however, and there is now a fairly broad consensus about the attributes of relatively successful programs. The most successful rehabilitation models focus on the individual offender, with intervention based on an assessment of what caused the offender to commit the crime. The ideal model includes prison-based rehabilitation programs, transitional services, and community after-care services.³³ The community’s involvement in after-care programs, in particular, is considered to be essential to reducing recidivism rates.

Terrorists are different from ordinary criminals in many ways, of course, but it is worth nothing that according to the Saudi government, its deradicalization program—which, like the interventions described above for “ordinary” criminals, relies on prison-based rehabilitation programs, transitional services, and post-release services—has been remarkably successful. The Saudi government has not disclosed the total number of people who have completed its program, but as of 2009, eleven graduates had ended up on the country’s most-wanted terrorist list. Still, according to official statistics, the rate of recidivism is only 10–20 percent, which is remarkably low.

The most recent national study of recidivism in the United States found that more than two-thirds of inmates released from state prisons were re-arrested for one or more serious crimes within three years of release.³⁴ An effort to reduce recidivism in Boston, Massachusetts—based on mentoring, social service assistance, and vocational development—reduced the recidivism rate for violent offenders by 30 percent.³⁵ The statistics reported by the Saudi government suggest that it is far more successful, even than the Boston Reentry Initiative. In order to gain a more complete understanding of which deradicalization efforts work and which do not, it will be important for the Saudi government to give outsiders far greater access to the program and its statistics. For example, who is included in the recidivism numbers and after how many years? Researchers have identified associations between offender characteristics and recidivism, among them age, gang membership, substance abuse, and low social achievement.³⁶ Are there similar associations among the terrorist detainees released from the Saudi program?

However, some of the Saudi program’s main features, and thus its results, may be difficult to replicate elsewhere. It is expensive. It is constantly being updated, based on input from the staff and from the beneficiaries. The Care Rehabilitation Center in Riyadh includes psychological counseling, vocational training, art therapy, sports, and religious reeducation. The program aims to address underlying factors that led the individual to choose terrorism. “Beneficiaries” live in dorm-style housing. There is a pool, soccer field, volleyball court, PlayStation, television, and art therapy facility. The guiding philosophy, the leaders of the program explain, is that jihadis are victims, not villains, and they need tailored assistance—a view that would probably be unacceptable in many countries. Matthew Waxman, a former Pentagon and State Department official, reports that government officials in Southeast Asia, where similar programs have been attempted, complained that their efforts were often viewed as “coddling terrorists,” especially when former terrorists were offered financial support of any kind.³⁷

Former Guantánamo detainees who graduate from the Saudi rehabilitation program are supplied with a car, housing, money for their weddings, and even assistance in finding a wife, if necessary. They receive career placement assistance—not only for themselves, but also for their families. There is a significant after-care program as well, which involves extensive surveillance. It is important to point out that Saudi-style monitoring might not be possible to achieve elsewhere, because of the existence of tribal networks as well as the extraordinarily powerful intelligence services in the Kingdom.

Could aspects of the program nonetheless be replicated elsewhere? The U.S. government has been trying to persuade the Saudi government to assist in re-integrating into mainstream society ninety-seven Yemeni terrorist suspects who remained in Guantánamo as of October 2009. According to Ben Wittes at the Brookings Institution, who has written extensively on Guantánamo, some of these Yemenis “include many of the worst of the worst” that remain at the detention facility. Repatriating them to Yemen, Wittes adds, is not an attractive option because of the fragility of the Yemeni state and its notoriously leaky jails, from which ten terrorism suspects escaped in 2003, and twenty-three suspects escaped in 2006.³⁸ And because the Saudi program depends on the involvement of relatives to police the behavior of the detainees once they are released, Christopher Boucek describes the U.S. proposal to send the Yemenis through the Saudi program as “a catastrophically bad idea,” for all but the detainees who grew up in or have relatives in Saudi Arabia. Yemen was one of the first countries to develop a program for rehabilitating terrorists in its jails, but Yemenis widely saw the indigenous program, the Committee for Dialogue, as an attempt to appease the United States, and it was suspended in 2005. Boucek favors U.S. assistance to a new Yemeni program, modeled on the one in Saudi Arabia, although it is not clear, given the weakness of the Yemeni state, whether that would be possible.³⁹

Both radicalization and deradicalization typically involve several steps, including changes in values and changes in behavior. The changes in values do not necessarily precede the changes in behavior, according to John Horgan, director of the International Center for the Study of Terrorism at Pennsylvania State University.⁴⁰ Individuals often join extremist groups for social reasons, and only later acquire extremist views.⁴¹

There is much to be learned from the behavior of gangs and gang members. There are relatively few terrorists in the United States, precluding statistically reliable assessments of the sources of radicalization or deradicalization (whether spontaneous or encouraged

by outside parties). But the universe of gangs and gang members is relatively large, and researchers and police departments have been able to identify what works in preventing gang-related violence. Research on anti-gang programs in American cities suggests that a combination of increased enforcement measures, community mobilization, and the provision of social services can reduce serious youth violence by as much as two-thirds.⁴² Researchers and practitioners involved in Operation Ceasefire in Boston found that only a small number of youths were involved in violent crime and only these youths needed to be removed from the streets through arrest and prosecution. For many gang-involved youths, intervention and prevention were found to be more effective.⁴³

Lieutenant Stephan C. Margolis, officer-in-charge of the Organized Crimes Section for the Los Angeles Police Department, explains his organization's approach to countering gangs. "It is far easier to turn guys before they get jumped in, before they have the investment in terms of their belief system. There is often a ritual—they get beaten into the ground. After that happens, you're seen as 'being someone.' You're part of something greater than yourself. You're part of a larger, more empowered group. You become invested in a new identity," he explains. He has noticed that many of the kids who are brought into gangs don't have a strong father figure. "They are searching for self definition as a male," he says. "We have to address their sociological needs, help them find an overall identity. After the gang members accept them as a gang member, it becomes increasingly more difficult to get out," he says.⁴⁴

Several governments are devising programs to forestall radicalization altogether, with social-welfare interventions that are similar to anti-gang efforts. Youth programs developed by the Institute for Multicultural Development (also known as FORUM) in the Netherlands help adolescents and young adults in the country resist radicalization and recruitment into terrorist groups by encouraging them to express their feelings of exclusion from Dutch society in law-abiding ways, through positive social action. FORUM focuses on problem neighborhoods, which it defines as ethnic neighborhoods with high levels of unemployment.⁴⁵

The Saudi government also runs a terrorism-prevention program that monitors religious leaders, schoolteachers, and Web sites. It recently arrested five individuals for promoting militant activities on the Internet and recruiting individuals to travel abroad for what the government called "inappropriate purposes." Meanwhile, it also supports a non-governmental organization called the Sakinah Campaign (Sakinah means "tranquility"), which helps Internet users who have visited extremist sites

interact with legitimate Islamic scholars online, with a view to steering them away from radicalism.⁴⁶

Such projects may serve as models or at least as a source of inspiration for similar efforts elsewhere. Washington should study them, even though the United States has so far been relatively immune from the kind of homegrown Islamist terrorism that has afflicted Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom, and other European countries. This may be because American Muslims tend to be more fully integrated into American society and tend to be better educated, with higher-paying jobs than the average American.⁴⁷ In the last few years, however, a small number of Somali immigrants who had settled as refugees in the United States, especially in Minnesota, have joined al Shabab in Somalia. (One of them is the first known American to become a suicide bomber.) These immigrants have less in common with other American Muslims and more resemble Pakistanis in the United Kingdom and Moroccans in the Netherlands, who face discrimination in school and on the job market. In the case of the Somali refugees, they face prejudice not only from American society at large, but also from African Americans.⁴⁸

Unlike previous waves of Muslim immigrants to the United States, these Somalis arrived with little knowledge of English or the United States. Partly as a result, they have had difficulty assimilating into American society: according to the most recent census, Somali Americans have the highest unemployment rate among East African diasporas in the United States and the lowest rate of college graduation. U.S. officials devising social programs for Somali American youth can learn not only from previous anti-gang efforts in the United States but also from the experiences of European governments and their efforts to lure lower-achieving immigrant youth away from gangs and terrorist groups. As part of these efforts, it makes a great deal of sense to back anti-jihadi Muslim activists. But that is also a risky move. Anti-fundamentalist groups that get official backing risk being perceived not just as opposing violence but also as opposing Islam. The Quilliam Foundation, an anti-extremism think tank in the United Kingdom founded by two former members of the Islamist organization Hizb ut-Tahrir, has received nearly one million pounds from the British government—and has lost credibility among ordinary Muslims. I have my own example: I was recently contacted by a Somali American community organizer who is deeply concerned about what he sees as radicalization occurring at Abubakar As-Saddique Mosque in Minneapolis and wanted to learn about counter-radicalization programs abroad. He would like to visit the Muslim Contact Unit in London to get ideas. The easiest source of funding for him is the FBI. But he fears that if he accepts funding from that source, he may become suspect in the community he would like to pull away from the radicalization fad.

But there are hopeful signs: in London, former Al Qaeda recruit Hanif Qadir, together with his brother and a former local gang member, created the Active Change Foundation (ACF) in 2003. The organization runs a youth center and a gym in Waltham Forest, a culturally diverse and gang-infested borough of northern London, and is supported by the Metropolitan Police. Qadir told me he had been recruited by Al Qaeda in 2002 and was on his way to Afghanistan expecting to fight when he changed his mind after hearing that volunteers were being used as “cannon fodder.”⁴⁹

Now he encourages youth to express their rage about the mistreatment of Muslims in Iraq, Palestine, and elsewhere and channel it into peaceful political action. Having been involved in local gangs or violent extremist groups themselves, he and the other program leaders know the community well.⁵⁰ “There are many organized groups and individuals who are recruiting our young men and women to meet their own agendas which mainly involve criminal or violent activities. There are other more evil minded agencies who have more sinister intentions and without proper guidance and direction our youth don’t really have much hope,” the organization explains in its literature.⁵¹ ACF addresses the youths’ concerns through group discussions—with and without their parents—and helps them find their identity as British citizens, including by holding meetings with the police.

Terrorism continues to pose a significant threat to civilians around the world. If every terrorist could be killed or captured and then kept locked up indefinitely, the world might well be a safer place. But there are limitations to this approach. Sometimes the only evidence implicating captured terrorists is not usable in court. Moreover, detention is not risk free. Prisons are notorious recruiting grounds for terrorists. The prison itself can become an important symbol, useful for mobilizing new recruits both inside the prison and beyond. Guantánamo is a good example of this. Governments will be forced to weigh risks on both sides. For the most violent terrorist leaders, the clear answer is to keep them locked up. But for lower-level operatives, the risks of release (and of recidivism) must be weighed against the risks of continued detention. Equally important, the destructive ideology that animates the Al Qaeda movement is spreading around the globe, including in the West. Homegrown zealots, motivated by Al Qaeda’s distorted interpretation of Islam, may not yet be capable of carrying out 9/11-style strikes, but they can nonetheless terrorize a nation.

Conclusion

Terrorism spreads in part through bad ideas. The most dangerous and seductive bad idea spreading around the globe today is a distorted and destructive interpretation

of Islam that suggests killing innocents is a way to worship God. Islam itself must refute this ideology, with help from scholars who can base their arguments on theology and ethics. The Saudi clerics responding to the terrorist ideology are providing an important service to the world. But bad ideas are only part of the problem. Terrorists prey on vulnerable populations: people who identify with humiliated and victimized groups and who find their identities by joining extremist movements. Thus governments' arsenals against terrorism must include tools to strengthen the resilience of vulnerable populations. These tools should look more like anti-gang programs and public diplomacy than war.

Saudi Arabia, infamous not only for producing bin Laden but for its financial support for terrorism and for religious schools that preach intolerance, has commenced a national campaign against extremism and terrorism. Although a number of other governments have made similar attempts, Saudi Arabia, perhaps surprisingly, is at the cutting edge. Some four thousand individuals have graduated from the rehabilitation program, and a comprehensive effort is now under way to dissuade youth from joining terrorist groups in the first place. The Saudi approach is an extremely important experiment that may have implications for counter-radicalization programs around the globe—not just for Muslim terrorist groups, but others as well. We may also learn something about how to improve efforts to fight gang violence. This can only happen, however, if the Saudis make their data available to outside observers so we can determine which aspects of its program are critical. Until then, we can only speculate about whether there is more to successful counter-radicalization than ongoing surveillance and finding ex-terrorists wives.

Notes

1 Tore Bjorgo and John Horgan, eds., *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Disengagement from Political Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

2 Gary LaFree and Laura Dugan, "Research on Terrorism and Countering Terrorism," *Crime and Justice* vol. 38, no. 1 (2009): 413-477. This paper summarizes the counter-terrorism literature more broadly. The authors found that threats of severe consequences can be counterproductive and that increasing the certainty of consequences may be more promising.

3 George W. Bush, "Future of Iraq," audiorecording of speech at the Washington Hilton Hotel, Washington, D.C., February 26, 2003, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/02/20030226-11.html>.

4 Robert F. Worth, "Saudis Issue List of 85 Terrorism Suspects," *The New York Times*, Feb. 3, 2009, p. A5.

- 5 Michael Leiter, "Eight Years After 9/11: Confronting the Terrorist Threat to the Homeland," testimony before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, Sept. 30, 2009, http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=Hearings.Hearing&Hearing_ID=5b17b0b6-afce-4488-80a0-0c3db92fe8f8.
- 6 David S. Cohen, "Assistant Secretary for Terrorist Financing David S. Cohen Remarks to the ABA/ABA Money Laundering Enforcement Conference" (remarks, ABA/ABA Money Laundering Enforcement Conference, Washington D.C., Oct. 12, 2009), <http://www.ustreas.gov/press/releases/tg317.htm>.
- 7 "Assassination Attempted on Saudi Prince," CBS NEWS, Aug. 27, 2009, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/08/27/world/main5270628.shtml>.
- 8 Nicola Clark and Dennis Overbye, "Scientist Suspected of Terrorist Ties," *New York Times*, Oct. 9, 2009.
- 9 "Officials: Terror Plot Most Significant Since 9/11," FOX NEWS, Sept. 25, 2009, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,555340,00.html>.
- 10 Steven Kull, "Muslim Public Opinion on US Policy, Attacks on Civilians and Al Qaeda," Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland, April 24, 2007, http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/.../START_Apr07_rpt.pdf.
- 11 "Pakistani Public Turns Against Taliban, But Still Negative on US," Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland, July 1, 2009, <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brasiapacificra/619.php?nid=&id=&pnt=619&lb=bras>.
- 12 Michael McConnell, Annual Worldwide Threat Assessment, Hearing of the Select Senate Committee on Intelligence, Feb. 5, 2008, p. 8.
- 13 Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, "The Unraveling," *The New Republic*, June 11, 2008, <http://www.tnr.com/politics/story.html?id=702bf6d5-a37a-4e3e-a491-fd72bf6a9da1>; Lawrence Wright, "The Rebellion Within: An Al Qaeda mastermind questions terrorism," *The New Yorker*, June, 2, 2008, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/06/02/080602fa_fact_wright; McConnell, Annual Worldwide Threat Assessment.
- 14 Pew Research Center, 2009 Pew Global Attitudes Survey, Pew Research Survey, July 2009, <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brmiddleeastnafricara/591.php>.
- 15 Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*, (New York: Ecco/Harper Collins, 2003).
- 16 "Cracks in the Foundation: Leadership Schisms in Al-Qa'ida from 1989-2006," CTC Report (West Point, N.Y.: Combating Terrorism Center, September 2007). Available online at http://www.ctc.usma.edu/aq/pdf/Harmony_3_Schism.pdf
- 17 Joseph Felter and Jarret Brachman, "An Assessment of 516 Combatant Status Review Tribunal Unclassified Summaries," CTC Report (West Point, N.Y.: Combating Terrorism Center, July 15, 2007). Available online at <http://ctc.usma.edu/csrt/>.
- 18 "Muslim Youth in Europe: Addressing Alienation and Extremism," in report on Wilton Park Conference WPS05/3, (Wilton Park, UK, February 7-10, 2005).
- 19 "Muslim Youth in Europe: Addressing Alienation and Extremism," in report on Wilton Park Conference WPS05/3, (Wilton Park, UK, February 7-10, 2005).

- 20 Talks in Riyadh by Saudi officials who asked not to be identified, March 2009.
- 21 Marcel Coenders, Marcel Lubbers, and Peer Scheepers, "Majority populations' attitude towards migrants and minorities, Report 2," Report for the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, (EUMC, 2003).
- 22 "Annual Report on the Situation Regarding Racism and Xenophobia in the Member States of the EU," Report for the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, (EUMC, 2006), pp. 41-42.
- 23 I have written elsewhere that a natural systems paradigm assumes that the emotional, social, and financial benefits of participating in an organization can eclipse the importance of the group's stated objectives for individuals' involvement in an enterprise. See Jessica Stern and Amity Modi, "Organizational Forms of Terrorism," in Thomas Biersteker and Sue Eckert, eds., *Countering the Financing of Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 2008). For a remarkably similar treatment, see also Max Abrahms, "What Terrorists Really Want," *International Security* vol. 32, no. 4 (Spring 2008): 78-105.
- 24 Alan B. Kruger, *What Makes a Terrorist: Economics and the Roots of Terrorism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007); Alberto Abadie, "Poverty, Political Freedom, and the Roots of Terrorism," *American Economic Review*, vol. 96, no. 2 (2006): pp. 50-56.
- 25 Andrew Woods, "Battlefield of the Mind: A Silicon Valley CEO is turning Coalition prisons in Iraq into a laboratory for the war of ideas" (unpublished manuscript based on interviews with General Stone, Harvard Law School, March 2008).
- 26 Christopher Boucek, "Saudia Arabia's 'Soft' Counterterrorism Strategy: Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Aftercare" (Carnegie Paper, Washington, D.C., Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2008), p. 15.
- 27 N. Grenier and V. J. Nunno, "Psychopaths at Nuremberg? A Rorschach analysis of the records of the Nazi war criminals," *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, vol. 50, no. 3 (1994): pp. 415-429.
- 28 Dalia Mogahed, "The Battle for Hearts and Minds: Moderate vs. Extremist Views in the Muslim World" (Gallup Report, 2006); Stern, *Terror in the Name of God*.
- 29 Peter Bergen and Swati Pandey, "The Madrassa Myth," *The New York Times*, June 14, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/14/opinion/14bergen.html>.
- 30 Aftab Khan, "Psychological Makeup of a Muslim Suicide Bomber" (forthcoming paper presentation, ICSA Annual Conference, 2010); Paul Anderson, "Madrassas hit by sex abuse claims," BBC News, Dec. 10, 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4084951.stm.
- 31 David Whetham, "The ADF and the Ethical Challenges of Coalition Operations" (unpublished manuscript, King's College London at the Joint Services Command and Staff College Defence Academy).
- 32 Robert Martinson, "What Works? Questions and Answers About Prison Reform," *The Public Interest*, vol. 35 (1974), p. 25.
- 33 Curt Bartol and Anne Bartol, eds., *Current Perspectives in Forensic Psychology and Criminal Justice* (New York: Sage Publications, 2005).
- 34 Patrick Langan and David Levin, "Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1994," Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report (US Department of Justice: Washington, D.C., 2002). Cited in Anthony Braga, Anne M. Piehl, and David Hureau, "Controlling Violent Offenders Released to the Community: An Evaluation of the Boston Reentry Initiative," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, vol. 46, no. 4, (2009): 412.

35 Braga, Piehl, and Hureau, "Controlling Violent Offenders Released to the Community," pp. 411-436. This article also discusses the various definitions of recidivism, which include arrest for a new crime, convictions resulting from those arrests, returns to prisons for new convictions, and returns to prison for technical violations. See p. 420.

36 For a summary of this research see Braga, Piehl, and Hureau, "Controlling Violent Offenders Released to the Community," p. 414.

37 Matthew Waxman (member, Hoover Task Force on National Security and Law), interview with author, Jan. 15, 2010.

38 Benjamin Wittes (member, Hoover Task Force on National Security and Law), in personal communication with the author.

39 Scott Shane, "Detainee's Case Illustrates Bind of Prison's Fate," *The New York Times*, Oct. 3, 2009, p. A1.

40 John Horgan, "Individual disengagement: a psychological analysis," in Bjorgo and Horgan, eds., *Leaving Terrorism Behind*.

41 Tore Bjorgo, "Processes of disengagement from violent groups of the extreme right," in Bjorgo and Horgan, eds., *Leaving Terrorism Behind*, pp. 30-48; Abrahms, "What Terrorists Really Want," pp. 78-105.

42 Anthony Braga and Christopher Winship, "What can cities do to prevent serious youth violence?," *Criminal Justice Matters* 75, no. 1, (March 2009); A. Braga, D. Kennedy, E. Waring, and A. Piehl, "Problem-oriented policing, deterrence and youth violence: an evaluation of Boston's Operation Ceasefire," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 38 (2001): 195-225.

43 Anthony Braga and Christopher Winship, "What can cities do to prevent serious youth violence?" *Criminal Justice Matters*, vol. 75, no. 1, (March 2009).

44 Stephan C. Margolis, (Officer-in-Charge of the Organized Crimes Section, Los Angeles Police Department), in personal communication with the author, October 19, 2009.

45 Author's interviews with FORUM personnel, 2006-2007.

46 Government Accountability Office, "Combating Terrorism: US Agencies Report Progress Countering Terrorism and its Financing in Saudi Arabia, but Continued Focus on Counter Terrorism Financing Efforts Needed," September 2009, p. 26.

47 Pew Research Center, "Muslim Americans, Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream," Pew Research Report, May 22, 2007, p. 18; Gallup, "Muslim Americans: A National Portrait," Gallup Report, 2009, p. 39.

48 Brandt Williams, "Somalis in Minnesota," Minnesota Public Radio, Feb. 5, 2002, http://news.minnesota.publicradio.org/features/200202/04_williamsb_africans/somalis.

49 Hanif Qadir, in personal communication with the author, March 26, 2009.

50 Ibid.

51 Active Change Foundation: Changing Lives for the Better, pamphlet.

Copyright © 2010 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University.

This publication is for educational and private, non-commercial use only. No part of this publication may be reprinted, reproduced, or transmitted in electronic, digital, mechanical, photostatic, recording, or other means without the written permission of the copyright holder. For permission to reprint, reproduce, or transmit, contact Ms. Tin Tin Wisniewski (tintinyw@stanford.edu).

Hoover Institution Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

The preferred citation for this publication is
Jessica Stern, "Deradicalization or Disengagement of Terrorists: Is it Possible? (March 2010)", in *Future Challenges in National Security and Law*, edited by Peter Berkowitz, <http://www.futurechallengesessays.com>.

About the Author



Jessica Stern

Jessica Stern is a member of the Hoover Institution's Koret-Taube Task Force on National Security and Law. In 2009, she was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for her work on trauma and violence. She authored Denial: A Memoir of Terror (2010), selected by The Washington Post as a best book of the year; Terror in the Name of God (2004), selected by The New York Times as a notable book of the year; The Ultimate Terrorists (2001); and numerous articles on terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. She served on President Clinton's National Security Council Staff and is a member of the Trilateral Commission and the Council on Foreign Relations.

Koret-Taube Task Force on National Security and Law

The National Security and Law Task Force examines the rule of law, the laws of war, and American constitutional law with a view to making proposals that strike an optimal balance between individual freedom and the vigorous defense of the nation against terrorists both abroad and at home. The task force's focus is the rule of law and its role in Western civilization, as well as the roles of international law and organizations, the laws of war, and U.S. criminal law. Those goals will be accomplished by systematically studying the constellation of issues—social, economic, and political—on which striking a balance depends.

The core membership of this task force includes Kenneth Anderson, Peter Berkowitz (chair), Philip Bobbitt, Jack Goldsmith, Stephen D. Krasner, Jessica Stern, Matthew Waxman, Ruth Wedgwood, and Benjamin Wittes.

For more information about this Hoover Institution Task Force please visit us online at <http://www.hoover.org/taskforces/national-security>.

