Rehabilitating Radicals

Muslim states have devised innovative programs to help counter violent extremism

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Terrorism remains one of the major threats facing the world. The death of Osama bin Laden, the former leader of al-Qaida, has not ushered in a new era of peace, free from terrorist threats. Despite that more than a decade has passed since 9/11, which instigated a long "war on terror," terrorism remains a large problem. There is a growing consensus among scholars, state officials and practitioners that we have mismanaged the fight against radicalism and its offspring, violent extremism. One of the main protagonists of this line of argument is former British Foreign Minister David Miliband, who blatantly stated in 2009 that we were "wrong" in our approach to countering these

phenomena, and that the notion of war on terror has led to prolonging the fight against terrorism and "caused more harm than good."

These developments have led to a "renewed interest on how and why terrorism ends" (John Horgan and Kurt Braddock, 2010). This renewed interest in the question of what leads an individual or group to leave terrorism has been encouraged and motivated by the emergence and/or implementation of some innovative approaches, mostly by and in Muslim-majority states. These approaches carry different names and terminologies but are generally known in the West as counterradicalization and deradicalization programs.

According to a 2010 study by the New York-based think tank, the International Peace Institute, "deradicalization programs … have been deemed more successful than military approaches and less likely to foment a new generation of violent extremists." In his work on Saudi Arabia, the late Carnegie scholar Christopher Boucek reached similar conclusions. Petrus Golose, while analyzing the Indonesian deradicalization program for *The Jakarta Post* in 2009, concluded that "deradicalization programs are the best measures to eradicate terrorism and radicalism, as these programs will touch the issues to their deepest roots." The author has recently carried out the largest and most comprehensive study of such programs in Muslim-majority states (El-Said and Harrigan, 2012). This work has shown that "soft" measures implemented under the rubric of counterradicalization and deradicalization have indeed proved more effective than purely military approaches in countering radicalization and violent extremism, particularly in reducing the rates of terrorist incidences and recidivism and have achieved other unintended but no less significant benefits and spillovers.

This article focuses on those counterradicalization and deradicalization policies (counter-de-rad), often also referred to as "soft" approaches to countering terrorism. Section two sheds some light on conditions conducive to successful counter-de-rad programs. The third section of the article describes some of the key components of successful programs. The article concludes with some remarks.

Counter-de-rad programs

Counterradicalization is a term often used to describe measures and policies implemented to prevent the emergence or rise of radicalism and violent extremism in society. Deradicalization, on the other hand, refers to policies and measures that attempt to deradicalize groups and individuals who have already crossed the line and become radicals and/or violent extremists. Although this is not the first time the world faces the phenomenon of terrorism (for details on the history, see Annette Hubschle, 2006, and Walter Laqueur, 2007), this current wave differs from its predecessors in at least three important ways (Michael Czinkota, et al., 2010).

First, the current wave is more global in the sense that no one country is immune to its threat. The previous waves of terrorism characteristically took place at the local or national level. Second, terrorism today is far more brutal, violent, indiscriminatory and sudden, which makes it difficult to predict, plan and prepare for. Today's terrorists have shown an unprecedented willingness to plan and mount devastating attacks with enormous loss of life. 9/11 and the attacks in Madrid, London, Istanbul, Amman and Riyadh, among others, have demonstrated the unpredictability, ferocity and indiscriminatory nature of terrorists. Finally, while previous waves of terrorism were motivated primarily by nationalism, separatism, Marxist ideology and socio-economic inequality, new terrorism is more dutifully and ideologically inspired.

This makes it "especially dangerous" to counter somebody who believes he is engaged in a struggle of good against evil and justifies violence used to achieve his objectives (Czinkota et al., 2010).

"New terrorism," therefore, is more ideologically oriented and religiously inspired. This is true despite the fact that "religion is not the essence," but it is rather used to justify acts of violence (Rik Coolsaet and Struye de Swielande, 2008). As a result, this type of terrorism cannot be won militarily. The terrorists' approach and ideology suffer from a weak ideological standing, one that is politically inept and religiously misinterpreted, distorted and misunderstood. This, therefore, is not a war on terror: It is a battle of ideas, the core of which is an attempt to win hearts and minds. We need to defeat terrorists' ideology and actions not only by theological and theoretical refutation but also by what Ami Angell and Rohan Gunaratna (2011) described as "the use of smart power," which goes beyond the use of a military approach to incorporate "the strategic fight – the battle of ideas." To do this, we first need to understand the ideologies and ideas of terrorists and expose and delegitimize them wherever they exist. We also need to understand the grievances of the communities from which they emerge and on whose behalf they claim to act. It's from these communities that terrorists draw sympathy.

Not surprisingly then, the focus has recently shifted toward how and why terrorism ends. This shift has been motivated by a growing recognition that the war on terror prolonged the fight and dragged on longer than expected, in parallel with the emergence of some innovative "smart" approaches to counter terrorism in some countries. The superiority of smart approaches to purely military strategies and their tendency to avoid fomenting "a new generation of violent extremists" have lent them more exposure and rigor and drawn attention to their mechanisms, components and conditions conducive to creating pathways out of terrorism.

The smart and soft approaches to terrorism that we are about to discuss vary broadly, with differing objectives, subjects, aims, forms, location of implementation, parties involved, resources devoted to them, and social and political settings where they are implemented. All of them, however, are generally oriented and geared toward peacefully moving groups and individuals away from violent extremism.

A survey carried out by the author and published by the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force in 2008 showed that only a handful of member states were engaged in implementing some meaningful counter-de-rad programs that employ "smart" measures. The overwhelming majority of member states had no such policies. These ironically included most Western countries which, despite rhetoric, have not followed through with policies. They continue to rely on a traditional "security first" approach to counter terrorism threats. As Angell and Gunaratna (2011) noted: A strategic smart approach to counter violent extremism "remains the exception worldwide … not the norm."

Pakistani men learn to operate sewing machines in April 2012 at a deradicalization center run by the Pakistani army in Gulibagh in the Swat Valley. Military officers, trainers, clerics and psychologists run three-month courses designed to quell "radical thoughts" of those accused of aiding the Taliban.

Conditions of successful programs

Despite increased popularity of soft counter-de-rad policies, "even the most basic of facts about these programs remains limited" (Horgan and Braddock, 2010). The authors have undertaken the largest inventory of such programs, surveying more than 15 United Nations member states known to have decent counter-de-rad programs (El-Said and Harrigan, 2012). The findings in this article draw heavily on this ongoing research.

Our work has revealed important insights into conditions conducive to successful counter-de-rad programs, both at macro (general environment) and micro (program) levels. At least five macro-environmental conditions seem necessary for the successful implementation of a soft approach to countering violent extremism.

First is the strength of the state. Failed or failing states are magnets for terrorist groups and individuals. They encourage radical and even not-so-radical individuals and groups to take up arms against the state and other factions in society, as in the case of Algeria in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when many individuals and groups simply "feared being on the losing side" (the state). Failing states such as Somalia, Yemen and Afghanistan have also attracted hundreds of terrorists. This led Omar Ashour (2009) to argue that repression is one of three necessary and key factors behind the abandonment of violent extremism (VE) at an organizational level. Repression, however, can lead to further radicalization and violence. Strong states, instead, signal that they are willing and able to defend the status quo. This is why strong states have proven more competent in successfully countering the rise of radicalism in their societies and fashioning effective de-rad programs.

Second, the developmental capacity of the state matters. Not all Muslim-majority states suffer from the threat of VE, or suffer from it to the same extent. Some Muslim-majority states, Malaysia for example, have faced and continue to face a lower level threat of terrorism. While the literature finds a weak correlation between poverty and terrorism, poor economic conditions – including high poverty, unemployment, large inequities and widespread corruption – create conditions conducive to radicalization and VE. The poor economy of Yemen, for instance, continues to create conditions in which terrorists find fertile ground to maintain and nurture their activities. Many Muslim communities in Western societies are also disadvantaged relative to the general population: economically, educationally and professionally. A recent report by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR 2012) has concluded that soft counter-de-rad programs cannot be isolated from the external environment in which they are implemented. Strong developmental states (states that manage high growth, create jobs, control corruption, and manage relations with their ethnic groups) are not only threatened less often by terrorism but also are capable of facing the threat more effectively when and if it arises. This is mainly because economic success confers political legitimacy and credibility and undermines one of the key claims of terrorists regarding general economic mismanagement, corruption and deprivation.

A third important condition is prison policy and environment. The safety of prison environments and preventing them from becoming schools for radicalization and VE are top concerns for security officials throughout the world. Many countries are content with separating radical and violent extremist prisoners from other inmates and even from one another. Separation alone is insufficient as prison policy. It's more likely to lead to further radicalization of inmates. Careful and targeted interaction of VE detainees with other moderate inmates can sometimes have a significant moderating effect. Some prisons in developed and

Saudi ex-prisoners listen to a Muslim cleric at a religious course at an Interior Ministry rehabilitation center north of Riyadh. Six months before release from prison, Saudis are taken to this center for an intensive program of rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

emerging countries alike suffer from overcrowding, gang crime, drugs, corruption, violation of human rights, and poor and humiliating conditions. In such circumstances, deradicalization will be difficult to implement. Violent extremists, by providing protection, food and humanitarianism aid, can find fertile recruitment ground. Although conversion to Islam is not necessarily a radicalization sign, more attention needs to be given to the links between radicalization, deradicalization and prison conditions because, as the International Crisis Group (ICG) noted in 2007, "the gains of the one can be undermined by the poor performance of the other."

Fourth, it is difficult to isolate the impact of events taking place outside detention centers on the prisoners and prison environment itself. For example, the presence of widespread corruption among state officials, repression and brutal suppression of opposition will undermine rehabilitation policies inside prisons (see next section), particularly in attempting to convince detainees that the regime is clean, "Islamic," peaceful and cares about the economic well-being of its citizens. As the ICG argued in 2009, it is difficult to delink and isolate the impact of developments taking place inside and outside prisons. By extension, what happens in regional and international contexts can influence the prison environment and deradicalization policies. As a high-ranking Saudi official once told me in Riyadh, "Whenever something happens in Palestine, Iraq or Afghanistan, the level of radicalization in Saudi Arabia, both inside and outside prisons, skyrockets." A former, repented radical Yemeni, while commenting on the impact of U.S. drone attacks in Yemen, asked me, "Where are the American hospitals, clinics and health centers? All that we get is bombs and explosives." Drone attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan have also had a similar impact in undermining counter-de-rad efforts and discrediting local governments as "collaborators with the

Americans" (from a personal interview with a high-ranking Pakistani military officer in Germany, August 2012).

Finally, the rigor and dynamism of civil society are important. Civil society is a key source of soft power because it mediates between state and society, and also because it possesses extra resources that the state lacks. Civilians understand better how their members, including radicals and violent extremists, think and behave. They can, therefore, act and behave more acceptably to society than the state, enjoying more credibility and legitimacy. Countries with dynamic communities and civil society, such as Singapore, are also more successful in designing and implementing counter-de-rad programs than countries with weak and nondynamic civil society.

Components of counter-de-rad programs

A good understanding of the macro environmental conditions conducive to successful reforms is necessary but doesn't answer the key question: What are the components or elements that constitute successful, smart counter-de-rad programs? There is no silver bullet, nor is there a one-size-fits-all formula. The various legal, political, social and cultural systems suggest that what works in one place might not work elsewhere, and that it will require modifications and adaptations. Transplantation is not advisable. What we describe here is a combination of practices/measures that have been implemented successfully in certain environments, particularly in Muslim-majority states. With some adaptations, some of these policies have also proved successful in some Muslim-minority states such as Singapore. Timing also seems to be an important factor. Some practices were attempted and failed in earlier periods or different contexts but succeeded later on. In addition to the timing of counter-de-rad programs, practices that proved most effective were those that derived from and were consistent

with national culture, norms and values. We can identify at least seven practices/measures that appear to constitute what Golose referred to as successful deradicalization or "Deradicalization [that] works."

The first such practice is religious rehabilitation. All programs studied in Muslim-majority states and Singapore included a religious dialogue program. Observers seem to agree that, while other components are also important, a religious rehabilitation/dialogue program is perhaps the most indispensable. There is good logic behind this line of thinking. Most terrorists rely on misinterpreted and misunderstood religious excerpts to justify violence. Also, evidence shows that most terrorists have not been rigorous in acquiring religious knowledge, which makes them vulnerable to the propaganda of the radical preachers. Religious rehabilitation is therefore necessary to delegitimize the actions of terrorists and refute their theoretical and ideological justifications.[1] Saudi Arabia has the best-known religious dialogue program. Each day, detainees debate and discuss with competent scholars, in individual and group formats, such issues as jihad, the relationship between Muslim and non-Muslims (both states and individuals), international treaties and other subjects that are often used by the terrorists to justify their actions.

Effective religious programs require the presence of a sufficient number of competent, knowledgeable, "moderate," and highly respected scholars. This is no easy task. In Yemen, most scholars refused to take part in the dialogue committee with the detained radicals. In Malaysia, some detainees turned out to be more knowledgeable than scholars in certain areas. In Jordan, the incarcerated radicals refused even to talk to, eat with or pray behind scholars chosen by the government. Only Saudi Arabia seemed able, for historical and cultural reasons, to provide a sufficient number of competent and semi-independent scholars. In non-Muslim majority states, this task is expected to be more difficult.

Psychological programs are the second component. Although the literature finds no correlation between psychological diseases and terrorism, many terrorists and detainees suffer from several psychological issues related to family or friendship relations, work difficulties or lives disrupted by occupation and war. A large number of Saudi detainees, for example, suffer from psychological problems caused by the nature of Saudi society and culture, which permits and encourages polygamy and extended families. This creates problems related to jealousy, inheritance and inequity among siblings. Detainees with psychological and physical

GETTY IMAGES
Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, left, and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton meet before the Global Counterterrorism Forum in Istanbul in June 2012.

problems might require different treatments since they often suffer from lack of self-esteem and confidence, and this status might undermine their absorptive and collaborative capacity. Some might even have physical problems that might prevent them from participating fully in the program. There is a need therefore to identify and classify detainees according to their psychological and physical status. The best-known psychological programs exist in Singapore and Saudi Arabia. There, psychological testing, classification and treatment have been made an integral part of deradicalization programs involving some of the most competent psychologists in society.

A third component is a social program. Detainees come from different social and economic backgrounds. While some are more financially solvent, others suffer from deprivation. In many cases, the main breadwinner of the family is detained, thus jeopardizing the family's livelihood and economic and social mobility. In particular, the needs of the detainees' children for education, health, food and shelter must not be undermined as a result of their fathers' acts. The statement "if we don't reach family members the terrorists will" is repeatedly heard from officials in Riyadh, Sanaa, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. Neglecting the economic and social needs of the detainees and their families will alienate them, turn them against state and society, and guarantee the emergence of future generations of violent extremists. Saudi Arabia obviously has the most comprehensive, generous and financially sustained social program. Social and economic needs of the families of the detainees – children and parents alike – are met, including education, health and shelter. In Singapore and Turkey, the social and economic needs of the detainees and their families are met by community and societal organizations, thus saving public money.

Family rehabilitation programs are also important. There is a strong case to be made to mentor and involve family members in deradicalization efforts. Many families are unaware of the reasons and conditions that led their sons to embrace terrorism and the psychological and mental changes that they underwent as a result. Some families are radicalized themselves, which raises the risk of recidivism among released detainees. There is a need to train and mentor families to enable them to deal with their "new sons" correctly, ensuring that the environment to which detainees return will not lead to re-radicalization and recidivism. Involving families can also lead to winning their support

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for the deradicalization efforts, an important strategy given the significance of social milieu in terrorism and family relations in the Muslim world. The Saudi family rehabilitation program is the most internationally touted and praised. Families are invited by the state, at the full expense of the government, to participate in the deradicalization program and to encourage their sons to repent. They are also trained and mentored in how to talk to their sons while in prison, and how to deal with any possible contingencies after release. An important hidden strategy behind involving families in the deradicalization program is to witness the good treatment of their sons by the state, which helps to refute rumors by al-Qaida that "if someone gives up or is arrested, they will be tortured along with their families by the government."

A fifth component is education and training programs. Deradicalization should also take into consideration reintegrating released individuals into society. Detainees with insufficient education, skills and training demanded by the local market face special difficulties finding jobs and reintegrating. "Education is everything," a high-ranked Saudi official involved in the country's deradicalization program once told me. In particular, education and training should intensify towards the end of incarceration. Six months before release, for example, Saudi violent extremists are transferred to a purpose-built halfway house where religious debate, general education and training (including on such issues as how to handle life difficulties, solve problems, make decisions, deal with others, etc.) are intensified. Their exposure to society,[2] family members, relatives and friends also increases during this period.[3] Families are encouraged to visit their sons more regularly. The aim of these measures is to prepare the detainee gradually to return to his society and family.

A post-care/release program is the sixth component. A large number of released detainees lack education, training, savings, jobs, pensions or rich family members to support them after release. Some even have a large number of family dependents that they themselves need to support. Social pressure, stigmatization and state regulations can sometimes prevent released extremists from finding jobs, or working in certain sectors. This environment, without assistance, provides a recipe for recidivism. Indeed, lack of such support caused a large number of Yemeni detainees to return to al-Qaida after they were discharged from prison in 2005. The Saudi government goes further to help released detainees in finding new jobs, enrolling them in, and subsidizing, their education. It also helps them establish new businesses and even helps arrange marriages for single men, paying all the costs involved, including accommodation, furniture and transportation. The government also provides a monthly stipend of 2,000-5,000 Saudi riyals ($400-$1,000) for almost one year, or until they manage to stand on their own feet without government support.

A final component falls under what we term "miscellaneous elements." Counter-de-rad is evolutionary and continuously developing. It needs to take into consideration new and emerging needs of detainees, the prison and the general environment. For example, Saudi officials suggested the need for a history program because many detainees seemed "ignorant" of historical events, particularly concerning the life of the prophet, who they wrongly believe spent most of his life engaged in jihad. They also felt that many detainees have difficulty expressing themselves verbally, and so suggested using art as therapy. The result was two new programs in history and art. They also made physical education and sports an integral part of deradicalization, encouraging scholars and security officers to join detainees in playing soccer or volleyball. It is a well-established fact that healthier individuals (including detainees) are more productive. Healthier and happier detainees operating in a cordial environment can also be more cooperative and receptive to information and advice from scholars and mentors. In most cases, training will be required for everybody involved in counter-de-rad programs, including scholars, sport instructors, and security and parole officers. As Angell and Gunaratna noted in 2011, training is a "collective" process that should exclude nobody. The Turkish government has created the best, most comprehensive counter-de-rad-tailored training programs among the 15 country case studies.

Conclusions

Nobody claims that smart counter-de-rad is an easy process. This article suggests that it might be even more difficult than is generally thought. Successful programs require conditions conducive to successful rehabilitation and reform. They also require religious, psychological, social and family rehabilitation, as well as educational, post-release, and miscellaneous programs that take into consideration requirements of detainees, scholars, and local and national environments. These policies and conditions are intertwined. Lack of one could undermine performance of another. Counter-de-rad is a package made up of many elements, all equally important and complementary.

Despite the demanding nature of counter-de-rad programs, they remain much easier, more effective and far cheaper in terms of financial resources and human lives than traditional military approaches. The counter-de-rad approach is "also more humanitarian," and, particularly when implemented in the context of Western countries, "will have other benefits; it will reduce humiliation, abuse

John Baird, minister of Foreign Affairs of Canada, from left, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and UN General Assembly President Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser participate in the "Understanding and Countering the Appeal of Terrorism" seminar in June 2012. The event was held in partnership with the Counter Terrorism Implementation Task Force and the UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute.

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and torture, and in the process remove another justification from extremist indoctrination about how the West tortures Muslims in detention" (Angell and Gunaratna, 2011). Good counter-de-rad policies have also led to a generation of vital information that saved lives and protected public property and goods. A great deal of this information came from the families of the radicals themselves and community members who were encouraged to act. They were empowered by the soft and humanitarian nature of counter-de-rad programs (El-Said and Harrigan, 2012).

Yet counter-de-rad programs remain the exception and not the rule. There is a need to promote smart counter-de-rad programs globally and to encourage United Nations members to pursue and mandate them by law, just as Turkey has done. Counter-de-rad policies are highly motivating. The more countries that pursue them, the higher the level of motivation will be and other countries will emulate their success. Pride and the desire to look good in the international community will spur countries and their officials to outdo one another. Knowledge will accumulate about best practices and conditions conducive to success or failure. Knowledge accumulation will make it easier to measure and compare performance because different countries face similar threats, although they might be implementing their policies under different circumstances. In addition, results will be more valid.

It is very encouraging to see the United States' recent promotion of smart approaches to counter terrorism. This is evident from the establishment in the summer of 2012 of the Global Counter Terrorism Forum (GCTF). The United States was the driving force behind GCTF, based in the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) in Torino, Italy. The United States, however, seems not to have fully and seriously bought into soft approaches, particularly at home. As a new report on preventing VE in America concluded: "There still is no domestic equivalent of Countering Violent Extremism policy seeking to prevent young Americans from being radicalized at home … the lack of a coherent approach toward domestic counter-radicalization has left America vulnerable to a threat that is not only diversifying, but arguably intensifying" (NSPG, 2011). A similar trend has

also been noticed in Western Europe, which has also failed to embrace a comprehensive "smart" approach toward the threat of VE (ICSR, 2010). As long as the "super power" and other Western countries do not get on board, America will have difficulties preaching what it does not practice. ▫

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1. It is important to note, however, that the intensity and scale of the religious rehabilitation efforts have varied tremendously among countries. While Saudi Arabia, for example, provided intensive religious dialogue on a daily basis, Malaysia provided only one religious session every month by an imam from the local community.
2. Prominent members of society, for example, are invited regularly to the center to deliver lectures and seminars on different subjects of interest to detainees.
3. Sometimes detainees are allowed to have a weekend off, which they spend with their families, or are even allowed to attend a social event, such as a wedding or funeral, or visit ailing parents in the hospital. This happens without a police escort. Prominent family members are asked to take responsibility for the return of their relative to the detention center after the end of the social event.

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