

Spiritual rehab for terrorists

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Call it spiritual detox for terrorists.

In some parts of the world, there are retreats where militants are immersed in moderate Islamic thinking as mainstream clerics confront their beliefs and debate with them.

They listen to music and enjoy art while forgiving family members visit to remind them of a life away from maiming and murdering.

Such programmes are part of an emerging suite of strategies aimed at reforming terrorists and reclaiming those on the brink of being swayed by deviant militant thinking.

These efforts, in such diverse places as Saudi Arabia and Singapore, are still largely experimental and piecemeal.

It is also too early to say how successful they have been - one recanting terror agent is all it takes to undo years of work.

Two weeks ago, 200 terror analysts and clerics came together for a conference to review such efforts. Organised by the **S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)** and Singapore's Religious Rehabilitation Group, it was billed as the first international meet on de-radicalisation. The event will likely be held next in Riyadh and perhaps London.

From a survey of the work so far, some countries, such as Singapore, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, are clearly in the lead.

Each has poured in considerable resources and devised 'aftercare' - read that to mean life after detention - options to wean militants off their old thinking.

But there are places where such programmes have only just begun. Attempts are often also constrained by a lack of funds.

In Pakistan, for example, programmes which entail long hours of counselling and making suspects and would-be suicide bombers watch videos showing the brutality of terror attacks have apparently made some change their outlook.

But the schemes cannot be expanded due to a lack of funds. They are also a drop in the ocean compared to the teaching of distorted ideas in religious schools led by militant mullahs.

Rehabilitation is also a long- drawn process.

'Many religious terms have been abused,' said Ustaz Mohamed Ali, an associate research fellow at RSIS. 'In the Quran, jihad means to strive. It is moral, but those detained have come to associate it with militancy.'

'You need to deconstruct each of the concepts during discussions. It takes a long time.'

Pioneering work began in Egypt in 1997, after a gruesome attack on foreigners in Luxor left

62 dead, forcing the government to enter into negotiations with the most violent militant group then - the Gama'a Islamiyaa (Islamic Group).

The group, which was responsible for the assassination of former Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, agreed to a ceasefire.

Members of the group went through a de-radicalisation process that took place on the behavioural and ideological levels, said Dr Omar Ashour, a lecturer at University of Exeter, Britain.

'Behaviourally, the Islamic Group shunned the path of political violence; ideologically, it de-legitimised it,' he said.

Five years later, the militant group's top ideologues came out with their own views on Islam.

In all, 25 volumes of revisions were published in a series called the Tashih al-Mafahin (Corrections of Concepts).

'Part of the reason for the success was because of the strategy to address the religious leaders and keep the group's leadership intact,' said Mr Lawrence Rubin, associate editor of the Terrorism and Political Violence Journal, Brandeis University, the United States.

'The leaders were then given enough resources to convince the rank-and-file.'

However, today, the programme is not actively pursued, the conference was told. It is not clear why.

Cairo, meanwhile, suffered a crude bomb attack in a bazaar last month, in which a French teenager was killed and close to two dozen people were injured.

Yemen took a radically different approach to counter extremist ideologies: intellectual sparring between Muslim clerics and prisoners.

According to a paper presented at the conference, the cleric would hold a dialogue with a prisoner on condition that if he could convince the prisoner on the true interpretation of Islam, the prisoner would have to give up his extremist beliefs.

The detainee could try to convince the imam too.

Reports say that several prisoners, including Al-Qaeda members, were released because of the programme, before it was stopped in 2005. The number of attacks within Yemen by then had gone down significantly.

But, in an interview with The New York Times, Nasser al-Bahri, a former driver for Osama bin Laden, said it was more like a raw bargain: Exempt Yemen from your jihad and you will be left alone.

Among the best funded is Saudi Arabia's scheme which has counselled 3,000 prisoners.

Detainees are sent to a resort outside Riyadh. There, they get to swim, play soccer and volleyball, and express themselves through art. They also attend lectures in 10 subjects with clerics and social scientists, during which relevant Islamic concepts are discussed.

After some weeks, students take an exam. Those who clear a certain grade are released.

The government helps them find jobs, houses and cars. Sometimes, it pays for their weddings too.

The success rate, according to the Saudis, is between 80 and 90 per cent.

Iraq's government, supported by the US, studied the Saudi programme and Singapore's initiative before devising its own scheme for detainees.

Singapore's Law Minister K. Shanmugam told the conference that two-thirds of the country's detainees, or close to 40, have been released and so far none has returned to terrorism.

But those who remain in detention point to the inability of transforming all who take to terror. Hence, most efforts focus on those at the periphery of militant networks or are new to militancy.

Another concern: Governments sometimes release detainees without sending them for such programmes.

'There is real danger in releasing them without a focused effort,' said RSIS Professor Rohan Gunaratna. 'Without the programme, the detainees are not likely to change their minds or goals.'

High on the Pentagon's watch list right now is Guantanamo detainee and Saudi national Said Ali Al-Shihri, who was released to Riyadh in 2007 and went through the kingdom's rehabilitation programme. Shihri has now emerged as Al-Qaeda's deputy leader in Yemen.

In South-east Asia, it is not clear if former Jemaah Islamiyah senior Abu Bakar Bashir went through any such programme before his release.

He was recently in the news encouraging young Indonesians to support Palestinians and join the war against Israel.

Earlier, as the three Bali bombers were being prepared for their executions, the cleric urged Muslims to follow in their footsteps. The bombers were Islamic heroes who had brought honour to themselves, he said.

Indeed, a complete detox will take time.