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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## DE-RADICALISATION PROGRAMMES: CHANGING MINDS?

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*A de-radicalisation or rehabilitation programme is an important and effective strategy to combat the current wave of terrorism and extremism. Several countries have developed such programmes to eliminate the ideology that has been rooted in the minds and hearts of the extremists and replace it with positive ones.*

COUNTERING THE ideology of violent Islamist organisations has become a priority in the national landscape of many countries today. Looking at the significant role that ideology plays in extremist movements, there is a need to move forward and search for a new and strategic approach to eliminate their ideology. The process of elimination of this negative ideology can be conducted via rehabilitation or re-education. The recent release of five former Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) members from detention in Singapore shows that a well-structured rehabilitation programme can help negate the effects of extremist indoctrination and allow such individuals to return to society.

### Can Jihadists be rehabilitated?

There are some who believe that “once a terrorist, always a terrorist”. This implies there is little hope of changing the mindset of those committed to violence and denies any positive effect of corrective or rehabilitative work on these individuals. This line of thinking assumes that people who have joined militant networks like Al-Qaeda have done so in environments where relationships mean a great deal, and the dedication to the ideology is very strong and impossible to break.

However, there are others who believe that terrorism can be addressed by changing the terrorists’ attitude and way of thinking. Richard Clarke, the former counterterrorism advisor to the US National Security Council, considers that the way to end terrorism is not just via operational means but also through communicating a different set of values to the extremists.

This is not a new idea; there is a long record of effective rehabilitation of criminal offenders. While terrorists and criminals have different motivations, the rehabilitation process is similar. Successful programmes are intensive, and are based on cognitive and social learning theories, and target anti-

social attitudes and values. There is however, a key dimension to violent Islamism that also needs to be addressed: that of misunderstood Islamic religious concepts upon which they base their violent thoughts and acts.

## **Why rehabilitation?**

What does rehabilitation mean for ex-jihadists? For them, rehabilitation is a special form of punishment. They understand that society views their acts as wrong, and there is a need for punishment; what they do not want to face is the challenging of their core beliefs. No one enjoys being told that their values are wrong, and thus their justification for action is immoral. But in order for the jihadists to re-integrate into society, they must see the errors in both their actions and thinking.

## **Case Studies**

In Singapore, after the first wave of arrests of JI members in December of 2001, the authorities designed a programme that both de-radicalises and rehabilitates the detainees. The programme approached the problem from both the psychological and religious aspects of the problem. The religious aspects have been addressed through the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), a group of 30 Muslim *asatizah* or clerics who have volunteered to assist in illustrating to the detainees where their violence-oriented interpretation of Islam is wrong.

The RRG's success has enabled it to expand its mission. First, it has extended its counselling sessions to the spouses and families of the JI detainees. This is a critical move, as extremism or terrorism usually runs through the family and active methods to break this vicious cycle can prevent the initiation of many future terror recruits. The RRG has also reached out to the public to explain the abuse of Islamic concepts by terrorists, so that other Singaporeans will not unwittingly fall for the terrorist propaganda.

Singapore is not the only country using a rehabilitation model. Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt are all critical countries in the counter-radicalization effort and have their own approaches. In early September of 2002, a group of Yemeni clerics and judges formed the Committee for Religious Dialogue, which was designed to exchange views on topics of mutual interest, and then using that exchange to rehabilitate detainees. For example, the detainees were challenged to prove to the scholars that the Quran allows indiscriminate killing of non-Muslims, and why they regarded Yemen as a non-Muslim state.

More often than not, the views of the extremists were rebutted by the judges who were well-qualified to deal with religious issues. Unfortunately, due to the large number of extremists compared to the clerics, these mass sessions were usually less effective than one-to-one sessions which can target specific problems of individuals more effectively.

Following the May 2003 Al-Qaeda attacks on Riyadh, the Saudi government began to adopt a strategic response as part of their security measures to fight terrorism. The programme was initiated for 2,000 detainees who were captured for their terror-related activities. More than 100 clerics and 30 psychologists were deployed to conduct counselling sessions for the 2,000 detainees.

These sessions de-radicalise extremists by engaging them in intensive religious debates and psychological counselling. There is also a subcommittee to provide attention to the detainees' social needs while incentives and benefits are given to those who have successfully undergone the rehabilitation process and have satisfactorily renounced their previous beliefs.

In Egypt, key leaders of the two principle terrorist organisations, Al-Gamaa Al-Islamiyya and the Al-Jihad Al-Islami, have undergone ideological reversal as a result of the Egyptian programme. The

leaders of the organisations have taken steps to renounce violence and to promote peaceful co-existence with the government. They have also repented and apologized for the past attacks that led to the killing of many innocent civilians, including tourists. In addition, they have gone to great lengths to counter and argue against Al-Qaeda's violent ideology and to restrict its influence on Muslims.

## **Conclusion**

Contrary to suggestions that jihadists and hard core terrorists cannot be rehabilitated, the programmes that have been developed by the countries mentioned above have shown that they are capable of change. The successes of de-radicalisation have shown the promise of these programmes. However, a rehabilitation programme for the terrorists is a complex, long term effort. Problems involving deviant ideologies are far-reaching and have deep consequences for the community and its interaction with other communities.

Some scholars have argued that the primary target of the ideological response is not the terrorists themselves but the Muslim majority. The need to provide the community with a correct understanding of Islam, so that they will not be easily influenced by the terrorists' propaganda, is the critical battle. The lead group to receive this effort should be the particularly vulnerable youth. Even as governments catch and kill terrorist leaders, the concern has to be whether the seeds have already been planted for their regeneration.

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