

# THE LOSING BET

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## ***THE LOSING BET* AND UNCONVENTIONAL COUNTER-RADICALIZATION IN YEMEN**

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In August 2008 the Yemeni film *The Losing Bet* premiered in Sana'a at a ceremony attended by senior government officials and members of the diplomatic community. The film is the most recent unconventional Yemeni initiative to combat violent extremism, and it offers an excellent example of how non-traditional media can be adapted to caution people against involvement with terrorists.

Since 2001, the Yemeni government has engaged in a series of ambitious programs designed to counter Islamist radicalization in the country. In September 2002, the Yemeni government established the Committee for Religious Dialogue. Led by Judge Hamoud al-Hitar, the Committee for Dialogue was created to interact with security detainees held by the government on suspicion of involvement with extremists and terrorists. The committee sought to dialogue with these men, and through their religious discussions and debates demonstrate that terrorism based on religious grounds was impermissible. This initiative was the first such prison rehabilitation program for extremists, a format that has now been adapted in a number of Arab countries. After some initially promising results, the committee was eventually suspended for a variety of reasons. However, it is likely to be reinstated. The film references the dialogue program, and at one point a character resembling Judge al-Hitar speaks out about engagement.

A similar effort was the use of traditional poetry recitals. Based on the Bedouin tradition of oral story telling and recitation, skilled practitioners were deployed to rural areas to praise Yemeni customs of hospitality and openness based on Islam and indigenous historic practice. The use of traditional methods and culturally specific communication practices to spread the word against terrorism and extremism are critical to success. Moreover, it is a creative attempt by the central government to deliver counter-radicalization messages to areas of the country that are otherwise difficult to reach—areas without access to modern mass-communication systems.

Similarly, the internationally-supported “Shaykhs Against Terror” initiative was a program through which government security and religious representatives worked with Yemeni tribal leaders to form a united front against violent radicals. The program was geared to obtain assurances from tribal leaders regarding the protection of government infrastructure and the safety of foreign guests and tourists. Through this effort, the government worked with tribal shaykhs to encourage them to deny safe havens to terrorists and violent extremists, again, drawing on Yemeni-specific conditions.

Critically, all these programs have drawn on the culture and traditions specific to Yemen. While not always as successful as Washington may have hoped, they represent important steps taken by Sana'a: specifically the recognition of a problem and an attempt to develop an indigenous response. It is clear from recent research that successful counter-radicalization programs must be tailored to a specific environment in order to be most effective.

*The Losing Bet* is the most recent Yemeni attempt to demonstrate the dangers of involvement with extremists. The film depicts two Yemeni jihadis who returned from fighting abroad and were dismayed at what they regarded as secularism in their home country. Outraged (and guided by an organization), they recruit and radicalize young men to participate in an attack against Western tourists. One of the film's greatest contributions is the depiction of the radicalization process. Contrary to popular belief, people do not develop an interest in religion and are then radicalized and recruited into extremist organizations. Research shows that the actual process is the reverse: individuals are recruited by a group and then radicalized by an organization; often those recruited have little interest in religion prior to their recruitment. The importance of social connections is also critical, and as the film shows, it is a group of friends who are drawn in together.

The terrorists in the film are motivated by their religious beliefs and the presumption that they are doing God's work. Understanding this motivation is central to any successful counter-radicalization strategy. Individuals frequently want to do good work, but have been subjected to corrupted teachings. Any successful counter-radicalization effort must offer people a positive way to practice their faith in conjunction with taking away the negatives associated with radicalism and violent extremism.

*The Losing Bet* is not a staid documentary but a feature production targeted at young Yemeni men. The film's message is directed not at those who have already made up their minds—the committed or hardcore jihadis—but rather the large numbers who have yet to decide—those with questions, families, and the vulnerable with few options. As the film's director and producer, Fadl al-Oufi, has commented, “we wanted to portray the radicalization process taking place within a community, to alert young people to the signs of extremism and show family members that they can help by informing the authorities about worrying behavior.”

In an effort to encourage Yemeni citizens to cooperate in the fight against terrorism, the Ministry of Interior helped to produce the film with the Rosana Production Company and the Yemeni satellite channel. According to Deputy Prime Minister for Defense and Security Affairs Dr. Rashid al-Alimi, the film “comes in the framework of a strategic security plan for fighting terrorism. It gives a clear picture on the causes of terrorism, and also raises awareness about the dangers of terrorism in society.” Made for under \$50,000, it represents great value for its potential impact. Distribution plans call for the film to be shown in schools and universities throughout Yemen and broadcast on national television, thus reaching the audience that needs to be exposed to the film's message.

*The Losing Bet* is part of a small but growing body of films and TV serials in Arab countries that aim at educating the public about the dangers of extremism. For example, the Saudi government produced in 2007 a program loosely based on the story of Ahmed al-Shayea, a young Saudi who participated in the fuel-truck bombing of the Jordanian Embassy in Baghdad. He survived the blast, but was left burned and disfigured. The program's message is clear: involvement with terrorists will have horrible consequences for you and your family. Al-Shayea now works with the Saudi government in its programs to rehabilitate young men caught up with extremists and caution them off of following his example.

Arabic films and soap operas featuring stories demonstrating the consequences of violent extremism are potent vehicles for educating audiences in creative ways. They do not come across as obvious government public service announcements, and they speak to viewers in a format they appreciate and accept.