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Saudi Arabia's "Soft" Counterterrorism Strategy:

Prevention, Rehabilitation,
and Aftercare

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CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

WASHINGTON DC ■ MOSCOW ■ BEIJING ■ BEIRUT ■ BRUSSELS

Middle East Program

Number 97 ■ September 2008

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Contents

Summary	1
Introduction	3
Program Framework	3
The Kingdom’s Soft Counterterrorism Policy: PRAC Strategy	4
Structure and Strategy Organization	4
Background on Strategy Components	6
Prevention	8
Prevention Programs in Schools	8
Public Information and Communication Campaign	10
Rehabilitation	11
Counseling Program Organization	11
Program Participants	14
The Counseling Process	16
Aftercare Programs	17
Care Rehabilitation Centers	17
Social Support	19
How Successful Is the Program?	21
Notes	25

Summary

In the aftermath of a wave of deadly terrorist attacks that began in 2003, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia launched a wide-ranging counterterrorism campaign. Central to Saudi counterterrorism efforts has been the use of unconventional “soft” measures designed to combat the intellectual and ideological justifications for violent extremism. The primary objective of this strategy is to engage and combat an ideology that the Saudi government asserts is based on corrupted and deviant interpretations of Islam. The impetus for this soft approach came in large part from the recognition that violent extremism cannot be combated through tradition security measures alone. This Saudi strategy is composed of three interconnected programs aimed at prevention, rehabilitation, and post-release care (PRAC).

Although only in operation for the past four years, the Saudi strategy—especially the rehabilitation and counter-radicalization programs—has generated very positive and very intriguing results. To date, recidivist and rearrest rates are extremely low, at approximately 1 to 2 percent. Similar programs designed to demobilize violent extremists and their supporters are increasing in popularity, with a number of countries adopting comparable counter-radicalization programs. Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia have all established rehabilitation and engagement programs, as has the U.S. military through Task Force 134 in Iraq. As such, the importance of understanding the Saudi strategy, and counter-radicalization broadly, is increasing in relevance in the fight against violent radical Islamist extremism.

Introduction

The indirect Saudi “soft” counterterrorism policy seeks to address the underlying factors that have facilitated extremism in the hope of preventing further radical violent Islamism. A central goal of the kingdom’s efforts has been to solidify the legitimacy of the ruling order and to eliminate violent opposition to the state by reinforcing the traditional Saudi interpretation of Islam, which stresses obedience and loyalty to the state and its leadership.

This paper examines the structure and process of Saudi Arabia’s soft counterterrorism campaign, which is designed to eliminate the intellectual support for Islamic extremism. Although in operation for only a few years, the program—in particular the rehabilitation and counter-radicalization components—has been quite effective. By far, the majority of individuals released through the counseling program have not been rearrested on security offenses. Prevention programs are more difficult to evaluate, and much more time will be required to accurately measure their effectiveness. In addition to the soft counterterrorism programs discussed in this paper, the kingdom has launched initiatives to combat radicalization via the Internet and to create a special court to try terrorism suspects. It has already implemented programs to retrain and remove suspect teachers and imams.

Rehabilitation and counter-radicalization programs are increasing in number and popularity across the globe. Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia are among nations that have begun similar programs to demobilize violent militant Islamists and their sympathizers. Rehabilitation is also being adopted by some Western governments, including the U.S. military through Task Force 134 operating in Iraq. These other programs have been influenced, either directly or indirectly, by the Saudi experience with the best funded and longest continuously operating rehabilitation program. Understanding the Saudi program is important for the insights it offers into counter-radicalization generally, as well as the numerous other programs being run by other countries.

Program Framework

The government of Saudi Arabia views the struggle against violent extremism as part of a “war of ideas” centered upon issues of legitimacy, authority, and what is

permitted in Islam. To achieve victory, the government strives to cast extremists as illegitimate for having perverted true Islam. The government frames the issue as centering on notions of authority and understanding of religious doctrine, and it argues that extremists lack both. It was an evil ideology, the government asserts, that misled the extremists, many of whom it considers to be well-intentioned men who wanted to do good works. Through this focus on authority and an understanding of religious doctrine, the state aspires to help misguided believers return to the correct understandings of Islam. This strategy melds nicely with the Saudi concept of *da'wah* (call to faith) as a governmental obligation.

Central to the Saudi strategy is the message that the use of violence within the kingdom to affect change is not permissible. Only legitimate scholars and knowledgeable authorities, the government argues, can engage in such activities as authorizing a permissible jihad. These objectives dovetail with many of the traits of Wahhabi Islam practiced in the kingdom, which stresses such attributes as loyalty, recognition of authority, and obedience to leadership.

The Saudi "war of ideas" also stems from a recognition that violent radical Islamist extremism cannot be defeated by traditional security means alone. That recognition has resulted in the implementation of the soft counterterrorism policies examined in this paper. Essential to victory is the defeat of the ideological infrastructure that supports and nurtures political violence. As such, the Saudi campaign strives to prevent exposure to *takfiri* beliefs; to refute those ideas and encourage the rehabilitation of offenders; and to promote policies that prevent relapses. It takes on these challenges through time-tested Saudi policies such as co-optation, patronage, and coercion.

The Kingdom's Soft Counterterrorism Policy: PRAC Strategy

The Saudi policy for tackling extremism and radicalization is outlined in a plan termed the PRAC strategy, which stands for Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Aftercare. The strategy outlines goals and challenges for Saudi authorities, and it identifies ways to combat the spread and appeal of extremist ideologies. The strategy is composed of three separate yet interconnected programs aimed at deterring individuals from becoming involved in extremism; promoting the rehabilitation of extremists and individuals who get involved with them; and providing aftercare programs to facilitate reintegration into society after their release from custody.

Structure and Strategy Organization

Before these three components are analyzed, it is useful to note the basic organization of the policies within the government. The Ministry of Interior is the primary government agency charged with promoting public security in Saudi Arabia, and it oversees most of the programs discussed in this paper. The minis-

try is responsible for a wide range of security- and safety-related tasks, including domestic security and counterterrorism, civil defense, criminal investigations and counterespionage, prison administration, passports and border security, and infrastructure protection. It is run by Prince Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz, who took over leadership of the ministry from his elder full brother, the late King Fahd bin Abdul-Aziz, in 1975.

The kingdom's counterterrorism campaign is directed by Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, the assistant minister of interior for security affairs. Serving as the No. 3 at the ministry since 1999, Prince Muhammad is responsible for the uniformed internal security services, including the kingdom's counterterrorism special forces units. Increasingly since 2003, he has been recognized by his international counterparts for his dedication to fighting domestic terrorism and violent extremism. In addition to carrying out conventional law enforcement and security efforts, Prince Muhammad's office administers the kingdom's prevention, rehabilitation, and reintegration programs.

Several components of the PRAC strategy are organized under Prince Muhammad's office. The Advisory Committee, for instance, implements the prison counseling and extremist dialogue program. Another office evaluates the social needs and conditions of rehabilitation program participants and their families to help fill those needs while a detainee is incarcerated. This office aims to identify and deliver assistance before it is needed. Prince Muhammad considers that assistance important to help deter family members from becoming radicalized by the hardship they suffer as a result of a prisoner's detention. Additionally, Prince Muhammad's office coordinates the activities of an anti-radicalization section made up of top-level, Western-educated social scientists, doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, and statisticians who analyze terrorism broadly. The number and quality of the people assembled to work on the strategy is indicative of the state's commitment to implement change in society. Prince Muhammad's office also operates an ideological security unit that promotes sound religious information and strategies to undercut extremism. In addition, the office works closely with King Fahd Security College and Prince Nayef Arab Academy for Security Studies in creating some of their curriculum and in training public security officers.

At its core, the strategy features a decentralized campaign to combat terrorism, extremism, and the ideological infrastructure that supports and breeds violent Islamist extremism. In addition to the Ministry of Interior, a number of governmental ministries and agencies have been involved, including the Ministries of Islamic Affairs, Endowment, Da'wah, and Guidance; Education; Higher Education; Culture and Information; Labor; and Social Affairs. While not exhaustive, this list illustrates the breadth and scope of the strategy; were this not a serious endeavor, the state would not expend as many resources as it has.

A primary aspect of the Saudi strategy has been to encourage the various ministries and government agencies to get involved in the effort to educate

the public and combat the ideology that fosters extremism—even to the point of fostering informal competition with each other. Prince Muhammad's office frequently provides to other governmental agencies resources and information in the form of speakers and written material, advice on program creation and implementation, and training and education sessions on radicalization and extremist thought and behavior, and it encourages them to develop and implement their own programs. In essence, the ministry has stated to other agencies: "If you think you can contribute something to the fight against terrorism, then please do so." The government repeatedly makes the argument to ministers and senior leaders that the fight against extremism—especially in the "war of ideas"—is the responsibility of not just the Ministry of Interior but everyone throughout society. Furthermore, this perspective reflects the belief that the struggle to eradicate support for extremism is not one to be waged solely as a security contest but as one that will require a concerted effort by the entire state apparatus, from schools and mosques, to local and provincial administrations, the mass media, and social service providers and organizations.

After the Ministry of Education completes a series of events in primary schools, for instance, the Ministry of Interior will turn to other agencies and say, "This is what is being done in schools. What could be done in your ministry?" Because it is understood that the government has made the PRAC strategy a top priority, various ministries are thus challenged to champion their own efforts in an attempt to curry favor and improve access to senior stakeholders. This kind of informal competition to advance governmental objectives can be found throughout the Saudi system, not just on counterterrorism.

Background on Strategy Components

The counseling program draws on several Saudi traditions, including notions of co-optation and persuasion, a history of rehabilitation and reintegration programs for criminal offenders, and the use of religious figures in the prison system. The counseling program has its origins in a focused public engagement campaign launched several years ago by the Ministry of Interior to address prisoner welfare issues in Saudi prisons. The ministry selected ten clerics from each province to visit prisons and interact with prisoners. According to Prince Muhammad, the sheikhs chosen to participate in the program were critical of the nation's prison system and were relatively distant from the regime. The clerics' independence and their nongovernmental status increased their credibility when they met with family members after their prison visits and shared their impressions of prison conditions and related details about incarcerated loved ones. The sheikhs were able to reassure prisoners' families and set aside many allegations of widespread prison abuse and torture. Through this process, and the subsequent rapport that the process helped establish, the Ministry of Interior was able to communicate to prisoners' families that their relatives were being treated satisfactorily by the state.

The counseling program draws on this experience as well as on other precedents for a sheikh or religious scholar to visit a prisoner or detainee. Asking a religious figure to intercede after the arrest of a loved one and to make inquiries after his welfare is not an uncommon practice. In rural Saudi Arabia if a son or nephew is arrested, it is acceptable to ask the village imam to visit the detainee and ask how he got into this situation. More generally, asking a cleric to speak to misguided youth transcends religions and culture.

Religious figures frequently engage with prisoners in other ways as well to promote reform, repentance, and piety. Prison administrators, working with the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, organize Islamic lectures and Quranic recitation lessons, and prisoners have received early release for memorizing the Quran. In addition to these jailhouse ministering activities, Muslim clerics have been enlisted by Saudi security personnel during investigations to “intellectually interrogate” suspected militants by engaging them in theological remonstrations. Religious figures have successfully been used to encourage suspected Islamist militants to confess or to urge defendants to cooperate with authorities. This practice was employed before the May 2003 Riyadh compound bombings, and its use has increased since then.

Like rehabilitation efforts, Saudi aftercare programs draw on an established culture of prisoner reintegration programs in Saudi Arabia. A number of social programs and organizations exist, based on traditions in Islamic jurisprudence, to help convicts reintegrate into society after leaving prison. This work is done by several committees drawn from various government departments, including the General Directorate of Prisons and the Ministries of Labor; Social Affairs; Islamic Affairs; and Health. Several specialized organizations, such as the Committee for Supporting Prisoners and their Families; the National Committee for the Protection of Prisoners; the National Committee for the Care of Prisoners, Released Prisoners, and their Families; and the Family Reconciliation Committee also work with prisoners, ex-convicts, and their families. These organizations—some public, some quasi-public, and some private, voluntary groups—all provide essential rehabilitation and reintegration services for prisoners in Saudi Arabia. They operate programs to facilitate marriages (including institutionalized support to help find spouses for women convicted of immorality offenses) to increase the delivery of social services, and to support the families of incarcerated breadwinners. Other initiatives such as the Centennial Fund grant loans that allow released prisoners to start their own businesses. Charitable organizations often work with the government to establish schools and training programs to help prisoners gain employment, while other nongovernmental organizations frequently help released prisoners and their families with groceries, clothes, and toys for Ramadan. Another noteworthy program, the “Best Mother Award,” supports women who have children and whose husbands are serving time in prison.

Prevention

Hundreds of government-run programs in the kingdom are aimed at prevention, according to Abdulrahman al-Hadlaq, an adviser to Prince Muhammad. This includes activities to educate the public about radical Islam and the dangers of extremism, as well as programs designed to short-circuit radicalization by providing alternatives. Many of these programs, implemented through the “guidance department” at the Ministry of Interior, are designed to confront extremism through the promotion and propagation of a more judicious interpretation of religious doctrine—absent *takfir*, the accusation of another Muslim of being an apostate—and are focused on strict jurisprudence of recognized scholars and authorities. The primary audience is not extremists themselves, but the larger population that may sympathize with extremists and those who do not condemn the beliefs that lead to extremism.

To deter the radicalization and recruitment of young men, activities have been created to keep them busy and away from radicals. Research has shown that many young people have been drawn in with extremists during unsupervised free time, such as after school and during term breaks. This recruitment has been facilitated by a scarcity of social outlets for young Saudis. The government now supports a series of activities, such as sporting events, car racing, camel racing, and desert 4x4 excursions, to compete with the summer camps and questionable religious retreats that had been more frequently organized in the past by extremist groups to expose young men to their ideologies. Sporting clubs in particular have been identified by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs as playing an important role in impeding recruitment to extremism. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education ordered in July 2007 that outside volunteer seminar leaders with questionable credentials be kept out of summer camps to prevent the propagation of “deviant” interpretations of Islam.

In other programs aimed at prevention, the Ministry of Culture and Information has initiated a series of projects—some for youths and some for adults—utilizing television, newspapers, and other forms of communication. Experts are loaned out to schools and mosques to speak about the dangers of extremism. Similarly, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs sponsors lectures and classes at mosques throughout the country, utilizing speakers and materials recommended by experts on extremism. Also, weeklong evening discussion and lecture series have been organized around different themes, featuring different sheikhs every evening.

Prevention Programs in Schools

The Ministry of Education runs lectures and programs throughout the kingdom's schools to educate and warn students from a very early age about the dangers of extremism and the effects of terrorism and violence. Through the books, pamphlets, and materials distributed at the events, the programs also

aim to enlighten students' parents and families; according to the Ministry of Interior, printed materials distributed in schools and brought home are read by an average of five people. Schools also run writing contests and art competitions in which all students are encouraged to participate. In these exercises, students depict different topics such as the impact of terrorism on the population or the role of the public in protecting the country from terrorism. Typically, at the beginning of the week a topic is announced that will be the focus of the activities, and at week's end awards and recognition are given to the best essays or pictures. Described by Saudi officials as similar to American drug awareness programs or "drink milk" campaigns, these activities are run alongside the general curriculum and carried out in turn throughout the country, province by province. These programs seek to educate students about the dangers of terrorism and aim to promote nationalism. Other activities have included debates and presentations supported by the Ministry of Interior in schools and universities and special sessions featuring employment information opportunities to encourage young men to join the security services to serve their country and help protect the public from extremism. As an example of this, in November 2006, the newspaper *Ar-Riyadh* noted how a college theater production was used to promote messages of moderation.

Under this broad campaign, programs and activities are going on in Saudi schools every week. By some government estimates, about seven different activities aimed at reducing the tacit and implicit support for extremism occur each day at thousands of schools throughout the kingdom each day.

The government has also taken steps to combat recruitment inside schools. Saudi officials often assert that the greatest source of extremist radicalization within the education system comes from "deviant teachers" who abuse their time with students by discussing extracurricular issues such as politics and religion and by advocating extremist positions. A teacher monitoring process has been implemented, under which problematic educators are eventually sent to King Fahd Security College for retraining. After attending a series of five classes about extremism and terrorism, teachers who continue to stray from the curriculum in dangerous ways are placed in administrative positions away from students, and those who cannot be retrained at all are apparently dismissed. As has been noted elsewhere, the curriculum is undergoing a review process that has included the deletion or clarification of passages the government finds objectionable. The editing process has been hampered by allegations that some material removed during the review process has been reinserted by others opposed to the curriculum edits. In August 2006 the newspaper *al-Watan* reported that the Ministry of Education implemented new restrictions on school outings to prevent students' exposure to "unauthorized views."

Provinces and regional governments have participated in this broad campaign. In Asir province, the regional government under Prince Khalid Al-Faisal, the governor at the time, worked with the Ministries of Education and Culture and

Information and the local media to produce a book about what Asir had done to raise awareness for the dangers posed by extremism and radicalization. In December 2006, *al-Madinah* reported that Prince Abdul Majid bin Abdul-Aziz, who was then governor of Makkah province, endorsed the launch of an antiterror drive in the province's schools. The Ministry of Education organized lectures and meetings with security officers to discuss their work, and radio broadcasts highlighted the year-long program. Similar programs have taken place in Jizan province in September 2006 and in the cities of ar-Rass and Hail in spring 2007.

In addition to the measures outlined above, the state has been involved in a number of other soft counterterrorism efforts designed to counter the appeal of extremist Islam. These have included general steps such as education reforms and poverty reduction efforts and recent steps to strengthen state institutions. Reforms in the judicial system and the move to restructure the prison system have also contributed. Five prisons have been built; all are designed to facilitate the rehabilitation and reintegration of extremists and militants.

Public Information and Communication Campaign

An essential aspect of the Saudi prevention program has been a large-scale public information and awareness campaign. The goals of these efforts are to foster cooperation between the state and the public; highlight the damage done by terrorism and extremism; and end public support and tolerance for extremist beliefs.

In the aftermath of the 2003 Riyadh bombings and the ensuing campaign by the al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula organization, the Saudi government put up signs and billboards throughout Riyadh focusing on the evils of terrorism. Billboards along major roads and signs hung from overpasses all drew attention to carnage of the attacks. Some juxtaposed images of the faithful praying at Kaaba in Mecca with photos taken at the scene of some of the attacks. Typical slogans included "Our religion rejects terrorism" and "We all say no to terrorism." Others depicted the wreckage of car bombs and asked: "Are these the actions of the sons of our nation?"

Other signs were intended to foster greater cooperation between the police and public security officers and the general public. One image featured two clasped hands, one belonging to a person in a traditional *thobe* and the other in uniform. This image and others were designed to urge the public to cooperate with security personnel and demonstrate that the government and the people were acting together to preserve public safety. The extremists and their sympathizers thus were cast as outsiders acting not in the best interests of the people but to advance their own agendas. Some photos highlighted the actions of armed security personnel participating in raids, engaging in shootouts with terrorists, and carrying officers wounded in action. Other photos depicted security and emergency workers at the hajj (pilgrimage) helping children, elderly, and infirm pilgrims. All pictures sought to convey the idea that the state protects Muslim civilians and works to advance their well-being.

The campaign has also sought to highlight sacrifices made by security officers. One poster featured photos of all the policemen and security officers killed while fighting terrorism. The caption read: “These men died protecting you from terrorists.” It was widely distributed throughout the kingdom, as were similar posters, all of them prominently hung in public spaces.

Rehabilitation

The centerpiece of Saudi Arabia’s rehabilitation strategy is the counseling program, a comprehensive effort to rehabilitate and reeducate violent extremists and extremist sympathizers through intensive religious debates and psychological counseling. The objective of the program is to de-radicalize and demobilize individuals and to encourage extremists to renounce “terrorist ideologies,” especially the doctrine of *takfir*. Detained security offenders—regardless of their individual offenses—are invited to participate in the rehabilitation process. Once the process is completed, those determined to have renounced their former beliefs are eligible to be released from custody. Ministry of Interior officials stress, however, that individuals who have “blood on their hands” and who complete the rehabilitation program still will not be released early.

The counseling program is based not on punishment or retribution but on a presumption of benevolence; that is, the state does not seek to exact revenge through this program. It begins from the assumption that the suspects were lied to and misled by extremists into straying from true Islam. Saudi security officials assert that extremists prey on people who want to know more about their faith, then corrupt them through exposure to violent extremist ideologies. The manipulation of naive individuals—including those who merely seek to become more pious—is a recurring theme in Saudi counterterrorism programs. The government repeatedly tells detainees and their families that it wants to assist security prisoners in returning to the correct path. Counseling is thus presented as help for victims of radicalization, not as punishment for transgressors.

Counseling Program Organization¹

The counseling program is administered by a group called the Advisory Committee, located in the Ministry of Interior under Prince Muhammad bin Nayef. The Advisory Committee is headquartered in Riyadh and has permanent representatives in seven major cities. Members travel to visit prisons across the country and meet with detainees. Four subcommittees comprise the committee: the Religious Subcommittee; the Psychological and Social Subcommittee; the Security Subcommittee; and the Media Subcommittee.

The Religious Subcommittee is the largest. It is made up of approximately 150 clerics, scholars, and university professors, and it directly engages in dialogues with prisoners, as well as in the religious debates and instruction that make up the counseling process. Individual clerics are typically approached on

a personal basis and asked if they would like to participate in the committee's activities and meet with detainees. Communication style is one of the most important factors in selecting subcommittee members. When talking with a detainee, a cleric must not lecture, but engage in dialogue. One of the criteria used to evaluate communication style is whether the scholar speaks with a detainee like "his own brother" and whether he is motivated by love, compassion, and a drive to help the detainee. Several subcommittee members have not been invited back to work with detainees after their style was found to be not conducive to dialogue. Moreover, if a member cannot successfully engage a detainee, another cleric will be selected to speak with him.

Because of the large number of religious experts and scholars in Saudi Arabia, the committee is able to draw on a sizable pool of potential participants. According to interviews with Saudi officials, participating scholars have recognized the danger posed to both the faith and the state by "corrupted understandings" and "misinterpretations of correct doctrine," and thus are driven to help guide young men back to the correct path.

The Advisory Committee does not release the names of the participating sheikhs and scholars. Some individual members speak publicly and grant interviews, but most prefer to work quietly. Some who shun publicity do so because they believe that they are engaged in this work only to serve God and that they will be more richly rewarded by God if they do not seek recognition. Some work quietly because they fear violent reprisal if their association with the counseling program were revealed or because they do not want to be seen as taking part in government initiatives. Meanwhile, some scholars and academics are eager to participate so as to promote themselves; they have not been approached by the Advisory Committee.

The Psychological and Social Subcommittee is composed of close to 50 psychologists, psychiatrists, social scientists, and researchers. They are responsible for evaluating a prisoner's social status, diagnosing any psychological problems, and assessing the prisoner's behavior and compliance throughout the program. Members of this subcommittee participate in some of the counseling and dialogue meetings, in particular the long study sessions. Social scientists and psychologists continually interact with detainees and are therefore able to assess their progress. This subcommittee also evaluates detainees' participation in an attempt to determine whether the rehabilitation is genuine. Because many of the counselors live with or spend considerable time with the detainees, they get to know them quite well. It is said that this close contact, in combination with the regular psychological and sociological testing and other evaluation methods, helps reduce the number of opportunistic or insincere revisions.

The Psychological and Social Subcommittee is also responsible for determining what support the prisoner and his family may need during and after release to offset physical and social hardships caused by incarceration and to lessen the chances that other family members will become radicalized. The government

also wants to demonstrate that it is not seeking to punish detainees or their families. This attitude reinforces the benevolent perception of the program and is considered a critical aspect of its success. To preserve the framework of compassion and rehabilitation, the government is very careful in how it engages with family members. According to Prince Muhammad, the family needs to feel that everything is being done for them and their loved one; the more a family is involved in the rehabilitation process, the more likely it will participate in it.

Through this program and others, the Saudi government works hard to drive home the point that the extremists do not care about the individual, that they seek merely to use misled youth to advance their own—frequently violent—agendas. Conversely, the Saudi government works hard to demonstrate that it cares deeply about each person and that it will therefore do whatever it takes to support and care for someone. This is an essential aspect of the program, and it is a central argument that the government makes in its “war of ideas.”

The Security Subcommittee performs several functions, not all of which are publicly known. The subcommittee evaluates prisoners for security risks and, with input by the Religious Subcommittee and the Psychological and Social Subcommittee, makes release recommendations. This subcommittee also advises prisoners on how to behave upon release and how to avoid future run-ins with the authorities. Central to the work of this subcommittee is monitoring detainees after they leave prison. Soon to be released graduates of the program are told that they will be monitored overtly and covertly and that their continued freedom is dependent upon staying away from their old associates and habits. They are advised whom they can associate with, whom they cannot associate with, and they are required to regularly check in with the subcommittee. It is understood that released program participants check in regularly

Members of the Religious Subcommittee and the Psychological and Social Subcommittee also remain in contact with program graduates. Clerics will visit with their former dialogue partners, and former detainees will frequently continue to study with the sheikhs who were counseling them in prison. Upon release, graduates are encouraged to maintain this contact and to call on either the sheikhs or the doctors if they are ever in need—something that occurs with some regularity, according to members of the Psychological and Social Subcommittee. Periodic visits by Advisory Committee members on former program participants continue after release to ensure that everything is on track and that there are no problems. While many of the Advisory Committee would readily do so, especially those clerics who believe they are doing God’s work, it is also their responsibility to keep tabs on former security prisoners.

The Media Subcommittee, which is focused on outreach and education, produces materials for the program and other educational materials for use in schools and mosques. The subcommittee did extensive research on the Internet, radio, television, and print media and determined that the most efficient way to reach its target audience—young Saudi men, who are most vulnerable to

recruitment by extremists—was through *Jumu'ah* prayers. As such, much of the committee's work is conveyed to the public through mosques and events like lectures and study circles held at mosques.

Through its materials, the subcommittee seeks to reinforce several messages. These include the concept that extremists will use its recruits to advance their own cause and that those who fall in with militants have misunderstood the basic tenets of Islam. One example of the type of materials produced by the Media Subcommittee was a television program that featured a character who was recruited for a terrorist attack. When the character, a young Saudi man, learned that this was to be a suicide attack, he refused to carry it out, but the extremists deceived him and detonated the explosives remotely. The character in the program survived but was left severely disfigured. The message of the program was clear: Involvement with terrorists will result in tragic consequences, for you and for your entire family. This story line bears similarities to the real-life story of one of the rehabilitation program's more famous participants, Ahmed al-Shayea, a young Saudi who was involved in the Baghdad fuel truck bombing of the Jordanian Embassy that killed twelve people. A number of similar stories were reported in early 2008 involving the manipulation of two mentally disabled Iraqi women in Baghdad suicide bombings.²

The Media Subcommittee also produces books, pamphlets, and other materials used in the program. In coordination with the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and the Ministry of Education, the subcommittee helps coordinate lectures and speakers for mosques and schools. Through these efforts, the Advisory Committee has been able to deliver its message to a wide range of audiences in mosques and schools and at summer camps and clubs.

Program Participants

According to a major research study conducted by the Advisory Committee, the vast majority of detainees who have participated in the rehabilitation program did not have a proper religious education during their childhood. The study examined the backgrounds and upbringings of 639 program participants who were active in the kingdom up to 2004, though none of them had engaged in terrorist violence domestically. According to this study, detainees were typically young (usually in their twenties), and came from large, lower- or middle-class families (with seven to fifteen siblings), and their parents typically had limited educations. Only a small number were determined to have come from more affluent families. It was found that roughly one-third of the study participants had gone abroad, primarily to Afghanistan, Somalia, or Chechnya, to wage jihad. Most of the program participants had an incomplete understanding of Islam. This is a critical point to note, and one that Saudi officials cite for the relative successes of the rehabilitation program to date. The Advisory Committee's research showed that most detainees did not complete much formal education or proper religious instruction. Moreover, the majority of security offenders in

the kingdom have been radicalized through a now well-known path: extremist books, tapes, videos, and, more recently, the Internet.

Several interesting facts emerged from the study. First, it found that one-quarter of the 639 program participants had prior criminal histories. Of those, approximately half had been arrested for drug offenses. The second fact to emerge had to do with their knowledge of religious matters. According to program officials, many of the detainees in the program knew relatively little about Islam, and it was their desire to become more religious that led them into contact with the extremists who propagated a corrupted understanding of Islam. Interestingly, and contrary to assumption, it was found that only a very small minority (5 percent) were employed in so-called religious professions, such as prayer leaders or as members of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice.

Members of the Advisory Committee argue that because these individuals did not correctly learn the tenets of their faith originally, they were susceptible to extremist propaganda. Therefore, the counseling program seeks to suppress detainees' misunderstandings of Islam and to reintroduce and reinforce the official state version of the faith. This is done through a complex process of religious dialogue and instruction, psychological counseling, and extensive social support.

Central to the success of the dialogue process has been the ability of the Saudi state to muster its considerable religious authority to confer legitimacy on the process. The presence on the Advisory Committee of some former militant figures and of regime critics carries credibility with many participants in the program, since it was their *da'wah* that led them on the path toward radicalization. This factor cannot be understated: Detainees do not sit down with religious figures who lack credibility in the eyes of fundamentalists and their admirers.

The attention given to a detainee's social needs is also a critical element, not only of the counseling program, but also throughout many of the kingdom's soft counterterrorism programs. The Psychological and Social Subcommittee evaluates each participant to determine how the Advisory Committee can best assist him and his family. For instance, when a breadwinner is incarcerated, the committee provides the family with an alternate salary. This amount of the replacement income varies on a case-by-case basis. Other needs, including children's schooling and family health care, are also provided and facilitated. This aid is intended to offset any hardship and further radicalization brought on by the arrest and detention of family members. The government recognizes that if it fails to provide this support, it is very possible that extremist elements will move in and do so. Focusing on the social needs of a detainee's family is not restricted to participants in the counseling program. The needs of others are assessed as well, including returnees from detention in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba; intercepted suicide bombers; and those who went to Iraq to fight or tried to go

there. As described earlier, a separate unit within the Ministry of Interior under Prince Muhammad is responsible for assessing the social conditions and needs of their families in an effort to prevent future radicalization.

Some Westerner observers and media reports, as well as periodic articles in the Saudi press, have suggested that in providing such services, the Saudi government is simply buying off or co-opting troublesome elements. Such allegations focus only on the financial and physical aspects of the kingdom's rehabilitation efforts. Those efforts, to be sure, should not be dismissed. But they need to be viewed in perspective along with the large amount of intangible support—spiritual, psychological, emotional, and intellectual—that is provided to program participants and their families and that critics make little, if any, reference to. Many of the needs addressed by the Advisory Committee are unseen, hence the disproportionate emphasis on social support.

The Counseling Process

The counseling process takes place both inside and outside prison. Rehabilitation begins inside prison, and eventually participants are transferred to an external rehabilitation facility. When members of the Advisory Committee initially meet with a prisoner, they stress that they are not employed by the Ministry of Interior or associated with the security forces but that they are independent and righteous scholars. When the counseling program started, meetings between counselors and detainees did not go well. Several committee members said that detainees refused to meet with clerics and accused them of collaborating with “infidels.” The government was accused of using trickery to deceive vulnerable and pious men in prison, and anyone who participated in the counseling program was accused by militants of being a government spy. Detainees often assumed that the dialogue process was another form of interrogation. Numerous Ministry of Interior officials deny that the dialogue and counseling process has anything to do with interrogations. In fact, a detainee can enter into the counseling program only after the interrogation phase has ended.

Over time, as the program became better known, hostility decreased and initial contact with detainees became easier. Now, in their first meeting, Advisory Committee members simply listen to the prisoners. They ask about what they did, why they did it, and the circumstances that led to their being in prison. Subsequently the scholars engage prisoners in discussions about their beliefs and then attempt to convince them that the religious justification for their actions is wrong and is based upon a corrupted understanding of Islam. First they demonstrate how what the prisoners were tricked into believing was false, and then they teach them the state-sanctioned interpretation of Islam. In a September 2005 interview with the newspaper *Asharq al-Awsat*, Sheikh Abdul Mohsin al-Obaykan succinctly described the counseling process: “The advice is given through discussion sessions in a suitable place. The prisoner is asked to express all the suspicions he has and the evidence on which he relies, and then

these are discussed with him, and he is introduced to the truth and to the meaning of this evidence.”

Initially dialogue sessions are conducted one-on-one, especially those held in prison. (At the outset of the program, several sheikhs would meet with a detainee simultaneously. This practice has since been abandoned as nonproductive.) These first discussions can be either formal or informal, with much of the counseling process depending on the personalities and preferences of those involved. Later, especially after a detainee has moved to the Care Rehabilitation Center (see below), sessions do not just take the form of religious lectures; according to Sheikh Ahmed Jelani, discussions and dialogues are encouraged. While some counseling sessions take place in classrooms, others occur in very informal settings, often involving very subtle negotiations and dialogue about everyday affairs. However, all the while the committee staff is evaluating program participants.

The Advisory Committee runs two programs. The first consists of short sessions, which typically run about two hours. Although some prisoners recant their beliefs after a single session, a detainee usually attends several sessions. The other program, called long study sessions, consists of six-week courses led by two clerics and a social scientist for up to 20 students. Ten subjects are covered, including instruction in such topics as *takfir*, *walaah* (loyalty) and *bay'ah* (allegiance), terrorism, the legal rules for jihad, and psychological courses on self-esteem. Instruction is also given on the concepts of religious leadership, the centrality of scholarly jurisprudence, the importance of authority and the need to recognize legitimate sources of knowledge, as well as tutoring on how to avoid “misleading” and “corrupting” books and influences. Topics such as treason, sedition, and the permissibility of violence are stressed, as are topics termed “ideological security” by Saudi authorities. At the end of the course, an exam is given; those who pass the exam move to the next stage of the process, the release recommendation phase (providing they are eligible for release); those who do not pass repeat the course. The process is not, however, always clearly defined.

Aftercare Programs

Aftercare programs run by the Ministry of Interior consist of several initiatives. These include a halfway house program for detainees to ease their release into society; programs to reintegrate returnees from Guantánamo Bay; and policies to help keep released detainees from committing new offenses. All programs make use of an individual’s extended social network, such as securing the family’s cooperation in helping to keep a released detainee on the right path.

Care Rehabilitation Centers

Prisoners who have successfully completed the rehabilitation process to the satisfaction of the program sheikhs, doctors, and psychologists are transferred to a

specialized external rehabilitation facility called the Care Rehabilitation Center to facilitate the transition back to society. This residential rehabilitation facility, which was established several years ago, offers a very different environment than a traditional prison. Detainees live communally in dormitory-type housing, prepare group meals, and have open access to grassy courtyards and open sky—the latter most definitely a switch from prison life. Moreover, guards at the center do not wear uniforms and they frequently mix with program participants, including playing such sports as soccer and volleyball. Numerous recreation and other leisure activities also are available to detainees. Such activities are considered important in the counter-radicalization process, because they not only build teamwork but also encourage acceptance and develop notions of inclusion. One of the most revolutionary rehabilitation activities is art therapy. Getting radicalized young men who previously would have rejected any type of visual art as forbidden by Islam to participate in art therapy is a major accomplishment. And for the government to engage in art therapy, absent rebuke from religious conservatives and staunch social traditionalists, is indicative of the progressive nature of the rehabilitation program as a whole.

The Ministry of Interior has plans for several new permanent purpose-built care centers, to be located in Riyadh and Jiddah, and in the Eastern Province, but for now the only one is housed in a rented complex of former desert resorts just outside Riyadh. It was conceived to serve as a middle ground between incarceration and release. Residents are restricted to the facility, although they may be released temporarily into the custody of their families. Similarly, family members can visit their loved ones at the center, and telephones allow detainees to speak with their families around the clock. These efforts are designed to ease a detainee back into life in Saudi society. They also provide opportunities for program staff members to observe a candidate for possible release in a variety of situations and test the sincerity of his rehabilitation.

The center provides brief and recurring exposure to life outside the state's custody, made possible through furloughs and day trips with the center's staff. It is the last phase of the program, and before arriving, detainees are informed of exactly how much time they will be spending there, which is typically 8 to 12 weeks. If it is determined that a detainee is not ready to be released by the scheduled date—if, for instance, the authorities believe that he would benefit from more counseling or if it is understood that he has plans to engage in violence—he is entitled to seek compensation from the ministry at the rate of 1,000 SAR per day (approximately \$267). Beginning about June 2005, released program participants who felt they were incarcerated at the center longer than their initial term have been able to take the ministry to court. As of November 2007, according to Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, the ministry had been taken to court 32 times, and it has intentionally mounted weak defenses on every occasion leading to 32 consecutive losses. This has been a deliberate strategy—part of the kingdom's larger soft counterterrorism strategy—designed to demonstrate

that a system is in place to redress detainee grievances and that it is possible to win against the alleged most powerful ministry in the country. It delivers a very important message, effectively telling radicals that the system they despise actually works in their favor.

Residents at the rehabilitation center are divided into three sections: domestic security offenders; individuals caught trying to go to Iraq or those who have returned from fighting in Iraq; and returnees from Guantánamo Bay. The three groups are kept separate, housed in separate facilities, and go through slightly different rehabilitation programs. For instance, returnees from Guantánamo focus on reintegration in Saudi society, while the other two groups devote more time to dialogue, counseling, and instruction. Guantánamo returnees also receive more psychological counseling, and they participate in activities designed to help them adjust to freedom and deal with the changes that have taken place in Saudi society since their incarceration.

The establishment of the Care Rehabilitation Center, the residential rehabilitation facility, grew out of necessity. After one individual turned himself in to take advantage of an amnesty offer and cooperated with authorities in 2005, it was realized that much more could be gained by treating him well. Protective custody was determined to be the safest place for him; incarceration would have exposed him to imprisoned extremists and *takfiris*, risking further radicalization. As a compromise, Sheikh Ahmed Jelani was asked to live with him and spend several months discussing religion and Islamic doctrine. Over time, the detainee became more open and more cooperative; this conversion demonstrated that there were great benefits to be had in treating suspects well. Jelani was chosen because of his easy demeanor and his ability to engage in both instruction and discussion. Moreover, although very observant and knowledgeable, he is not an extremist; he does not object to radio or television, and he participates in sports and other leisure activities. He and the detainee gradually went out more frequently, for increasingly longer periods. All the while, Jelani was evaluating his behavior and gauging his reaction to a variety of situations. After several months, Jelani told the Ministry of Interior that as a result of the instruction and their discussions, the detainee had renounced his previous beliefs and has to date not been rearrested. Sheikh Jelani now heads the Care Rehabilitation Center.

Social Support

Social support originally extended during incarceration continues upon a detainee's release from the Care Rehabilitation Center. The continuation of these services is intended to prevent recidivism by addressing social concerns before they become grievances. Once an individual has satisfactorily renounced his previous beliefs, assistance is provided in locating a job and receiving other benefits, including additional government stipends, a car, and an apartment. The job assistance has included placement in both government jobs and the private sector. The former is noteworthy because many demobilized extremists

had previously refused to work with the government, which they viewed as illegitimate and un-Islamic. The Ministry of Interior also helps individuals who previously held government jobs regain their positions.

In April 2007, the newspaper *al-Jazirah* reported that Prince Muhammad ordered the introduction of educational training outside prison for released detainees, repentant prisoners, and Guantánamo returnees. And recently, the Advisory Committee began working with local chambers of commerce and other certification organizations to establish training courses for program participants. Under this scheme, detainees would be able to learn skills and earn qualifications while in the rehabilitation program that would qualify them for better, more substantive, employment upon their release than they previously had. The government hopes that this training, when paired with government start-up funds, will empower released detainees to start their own businesses, such as travel agencies, automotive garages, and professional support offices.

Once released, former detainees are required to meet periodically with authorities. They are also encouraged to continue meeting with the scholars they were dialoguing with while in prison. According to program staff, many often continue to attend their study circles at mosque after being released. Rehabilitated prisoners are encouraged to settle down, marry, and have children, in part because it is understood that it is much less likely that young men will get into trouble once they become obligated with family responsibilities. The government has facilitated this process by paying for weddings, donating dowries, and covering other essential pre-marriage costs such as furnishing and stocking apartments. Program staff members remain involved in former detainees' lives, as both friends and counselors, and senior officials from the Ministry of Interior and the Advisory Committee frequently attend the weddings of former detainees. Thus in many ways, the program works to help get detainees past the period in their lives when militant activity is most appealing.

The success of the program is further secured by the Advisory Committee's involvement of a prisoner's larger family network. The Ministry of Interior extends social support programs to the family and tribe, and thus marshals its support in keeping the detainee on the right path upon his release. The connection is not subtle; the ministry makes it known that it will hold the extended family responsible if a released detainee commits new offenses. According to interviews, the government uses the threat of withholding access to collective benefits, such as jobs or social advancement, to obtain a commitment from a detainee's larger social network that he will stay out of trouble.

This process makes use of several important Saudi cultural mores, including social responsibility, notions of honor, and the recognition of traditional family and extended family hierarchies. For instance, when a detainee is furloughed for family events such as weddings or funerals, three family members must come forward to guarantee his return; should the detainee not return, those three family members would have to take his place. To date no prisoner has

ever used this temporary family release opportunity to escape. The use of Saudi social networks, familial obligations, and extended responsibilities reinforces and adds further legitimacy to program objectives once a detainee has left the committee's formal oversight.

How Successful Is the Program?

Since the inception of Saudi Arabia's rehabilitation and demobilization campaign after the 2003 domestic terrorist attacks, roughly 3,000 prisoners have participated in portions of the counseling program, and about 1,400 of them have renounced their former beliefs and been released, according to Prince Muhammad bin Nayef. Exact numbers are extremely difficult to come by, but approximately 1,000 prisoners remain incarcerated; this figure includes those still going through the rehabilitation process and those who have completed the process and are still serving their sentences, as well as those who either attempted and failed or refused to participate altogether.³ Saudi authorities have acknowledged that some prisoners have sought to actively work against the program within Saudi prisons. These prisoners typically are individuals who know they will not be able to get out and feel that they can do the most good for their cause by attempting to frustrate the authorities' attempts to co-opt other prisoners. In many respects, their desire to work against the counseling program from the inside demonstrates that they believe the program has been effective.

All of the released detainees who have participated in the program while in prison have been men; it was revealed in July 2008 that a few female security suspects have gone through a similar counseling program. According to accounts in the Saudi media, the women's program was conducted in their respective homes, in the presence of their family members, rather than in prison. Despite official claims that no female extremists are being held in Saudi prisons, it is understood that some women remain incarcerated on terrorism-related charges. Most were captured with their spouses or male relatives and are accused of being accomplices after the fact.

Thus far, the program has produced promising results, with Saudi authorities claiming a success rate of 80 to 90 percent. Included in the 10 to 20 percent failure rate acknowledged by Saudi officials are detainees who refused to participate in the program, as well as those who failed the rehabilitation program. It is difficult to independently measure the relative success of the counseling program, especially so soon after the program started. Typically five years are needed to properly gauge recidivist rates. However, according to Prince Muhammad, as of November 1, 2007, only 35 individuals have been rearrested for security offenses since their release through the counseling program, equating to a recidivist rate of 1 to 2 percent. Officials admit that other transgressions may have occurred that they are not yet aware of.

It is crucial to note that thus far no one released through the counseling program has been involved in terrorist violence within the kingdom. According to Saudi authorities, while those “with blood on their hands” may participate in the rehabilitation process—and some have—they are prohibited from early release. Saudi officials also stress that not everyone who participates in the program will be released. Release is contingent upon successfully completing the program and satisfactorily demonstrating to the Advisory Committee’s doctors and psychologists that the rehabilitation is genuine. Even completing the program does not ensure release. If time remains on someone’s sentence (for those who have gone through a formal judicial process), that must first be completed before a prisoner can be freed, according to Saudi authorities. Furthermore, if the Ministry of Interior has information that an individual who has finished the program (or a sentence, for that matter) plans to commit further acts of violence, that prisoner will not be released.

Thus far, those who have been released through the counseling program have been relatively minor offenders. On the spectrum of domestic security offenders, they are not among the hard-core, ultra-committed violent *jihadis*. They have largely been support personnel and sympathizers, such as individuals caught with extremist propaganda or those involved in using the Internet to promote extremism. Such people have typically been the easiest for the authorities to interact with. Also participating in the program have been individuals who were looking for a way out. Many of these people found themselves unwittingly involved with terrorists, and when they discovered who they were working with, sought to cooperate with the authorities. These offenders have more often gone through the two-hour study sessions, as opposed to the long study sessions described above.

Although there is reason to believe that some senior militants have participated in the Saudi rehabilitation program, its relative success to date is no doubt boosted by the involvement of the minor offenders, who are more likely to participate than are higher-level, committed extremists. Thus, it remains to be seen how effective this program will be in the long run with regard to security in Saudi Arabia. While the program shows promise, it has yet to face the difficult test of being applied to more committed militants—including those who have carried out violence within the kingdom.

Some of these extremists cannot be rehabilitated and do not wish to be. It is critical to note that even though some will never renounce their beliefs, the fact that the Saudi program nonetheless encourages their participation is very promising.

The counseling program and counter-radicalization strategies in the kingdom highlight several factors that will be essential in any effort to demobilize Islamist militants. The involvement and treatment of an individual’s family and extended social network are central to successful demobilization. Research on the Saudi program has shown that participants develop intense relationships

with the sheikhs and scholars with whom they interact during the dialogues. The majority will leave detention as very religious and observant Muslims. This is to be expected, since many initially become involved with extremists in an attempt to become more religious.

Success of the program also is based in part on the recognition that being radical is not inherently a bad thing. Acting on radical beliefs with violence, however, is, and that is the behavior that needs to be modified. The fact that the vast majority of prisoners who complete the program are not acting on their previously held beliefs can be interpreted as one sign of success, regardless of whether their repentance is ultimately sincere.

In today's dangerous environment, interest in rehabilitation programs is certain to intensify, and more nations will seek to implement programs modeled after Saudi Arabia's. Though started in 2004, the Saudi operation is the most expansive, best funded and longest continuously running counter-radicalization program in existence. When Singapore developed a program to combat extremism, its approach was based in part on the Saudi model. The strategy employed by the U.S. Marine Corps in its Task Force 134 "House of Wisdom" project, which deals with insurgent Iraqi detainees, was devised, in turn, with input from Singaporean officials. In only a few years' time, Saudi Arabia's soft strategy to combat extremism and terrorism has generated some very promising results. It warrants greater evaluation, especially as other nations struggling with extremism look at what is being accomplished in the kingdom for lessons they can apply in their homeland. Throughout the Middle East, Europe, and Asia, similar programs are starting to emerge. That other nations emulate the Saudi program is ultimately based upon the recognition that the defeat of extremism cannot be achieved through hard security measures alone. That, in itself, is a major accomplishment.

Notes

- 1 Adapted from Christopher Boucek, “The Counseling Program: Extremist Rehabilitation in Saudi Arabia,” in *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement*, Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan, eds. (Routledge, September 2008).
- 2 Later reporting has since questioned whether the two women were in fact mentally disabled. Nonetheless, the stories have powerful resonance in condemning suicide bombing.
- 3 It is recognized that these figures do not properly add up. This is in part recognition of the difficulty in obtaining precise data about the program.

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