

Detainee Deradicalization

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A key dimension of psychological science has been its potential to address major societal issues. A troubling problem that has occupied center stage since 2001 concerns the terrorism suspects detained in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba (Gitmo for short). U.S. President Barack Obama has ordered his advisors to find a way to dismantle the facility, and heart wrenching discussions have revolved about the ethical treatment of the detainees, their legal rights, their political status, and the repercussions of their detainment for America's image abroad. However, the key question is whether they will re-integrate peacefully into society or return to violence and pose renewed danger.

Dismantling Gitmo

Hardly anything of a constructive purpose was done with the Gitmo detainees. Consequently, they typically perceived their incarceration as U.S. revenge, not U.S. justice. With little or no incentive to change their ways, many continued^[1] to advocate or commit acts of violence. At least 74 of the 534 released (as of May 2009) have gone back to the fight, according to Pentagon sources. One of those was Abdallah Al Ajmi who, after his release from Guantanamo, appeared in a martyr video and drove a truck bomb into an Army base in Mosul, Iraq, killing 13 Iraqi soldiers.

Though the world's attention has focused on the "enemy combatants" of Gitmo, the detainee problem is vastly larger. There are an estimated 100,000 suspected Islamist terrorists in custody around the world, huge proportions in the Middle East, and Central and South East Asia, but growing numbers also in Western Europe. Capturing the "hearts and minds" of detainees and successfully reintegrating them into society is one of the greatest challenges in the war on terrorism, and many countries have already begun deradicalization programs aimed at this goal. Fundamentally, it is a task of attitude change to which social psychology can make an important contribution.

Mollifying Detainees' "Hearts and Minds"

Deradicalization programs assume that an essential dimension of terrorism is a terrorism-justifying ideology.^[2] At best, the use of force only temporarily cripples the terrorists' capabilities. With the ideology intact, capabilities will be replenished and dangerously reinvented. Hence, the only way to stem the current global wave of terrorism, is to effectively dismantle the terrorists' ideological beliefs.

Al Qaeda has recently been intensifying its ideological onslaught on Muslim minds. In 2001, it issued but a single propagandist video; in 2007, it issued 97 videos (Gunaratna, 2007). These can be terribly effective. A counterterrorism worker at a Singapore center whose task is to analyze the Al Qaeda tapes recounted to one of the authors how she is often convinced by the videos and has to seek an antidote from resident Muslim clerics at the center.

To counter the notion that Islam tolerates terrorism against civilians, rehabilitation programs rely on

Islamic scholars who carry “epistemic authority” for the detainees (Kruglanski, et al., 2005); the scholars engage detainees in a religious dialogue aimed to convince them that the terrorists blasphemously twist Islam’s most cherished values.

Despite their weight and authority, such arguments might fall on deaf ears if not combined with the readiness to listen. The acceptance or rejection of persuasive arguments is subject to powerful motivational influences (Chaiken, Lieberman, & Eagly, 1989; Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, Erb, & Chun, 2007; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In other words, the “minds” need to be prepared by readying the “hearts.” To that end, some programs join the religious dialogues with intensive work with their families and emphasis on building a more normal life. Financial support for children’s education, professional training for wives, and assistance in re-integrating released detainees into society are part of this effort. A key figure in the deadly Abu Sayaf group in Southern Philippines told one of the authors how his extremist commitments waned after he got married, started a family, and got a steady job.

Deradicalization Programs in the Muslim World

Various national rehab programs have been taking advantage of such sentiments while providing intellectual food for thought. Egypt’s deradicalization program, initiated in the 1990s, converted imprisoned leaders of an Islamic group closely linked with Al Qaeda to non-violence. These in turn deradicalized thousands of followers, pacifying this once-violent organization (Ashour, 2008). Yemen’s program employed the “Committee for Dialogue” where Muslim scholars engaged suspected Al-Qaeda members in discussions (Stracke, 2007). This resulted in the release of 364 prisoners.

The Saudi government launched a major deradicalization effort directed at thousands of detainees. Their re-education phase is followed by special examinations testing the detainee’s knowledge of authentic Islamic views. Teams of legal experts, psychologists, and sociologists offer counseling, and the government provides material help to families and released detainees (Boucek, 2007). Singapore has a sophisticated deradicalization program targeting 70 detained members of Jama’ah Islamiyyah (JI), a militant Islamic organization affiliated with Al Qaeda. Forty of the 70 Singaporean detainees have been released, based on an extensive vetting process by psychologists.

Indonesia instituted a deradicalization program following the Bali bombing of 2002. Instead of clerics, the Indonesian program uses former militants as persuasion agents. As one measure of success, the Indonesian program convinced two dozen former members of JI to cooperate with government authorities (Sheridan, 2008). Nascent deradicalization programs are being set up in the Philippines, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Thailand.

The U.S. program in Iraq has been probably the most extensive, involving 26,000 detainees. Modeled after the Saudi program, it includes religious de-radicalization coupled with vocational training; civic education; art programs; family, tribe and community engagement; counseling and medical (physical and mental) treatment; and job placement. Over 18,000 detainees have been released through this program. Nothing comparable is taking place at Gitmo or at the Bagram prison in Afghanistan, where 600 detainees are being held.

Psychological Differences Among the Programs

Extant deradicalization programs have differed on several dimensions that from a social psychological perspective seem relevant to their success, including the perceived *epistemic authority* of the deradicalization clerics (Kruglanski et al, 2005) compared to radical clerics and the *degree of discrepancy* between the advocated deradicalized views and the old radicalized perspectives. Based on a social psychological research (Aronson, Turner & Carlsmith, 1963), we know that a novel argument that shares a basic overlap with an old view is likely to be more persuasive to individuals than a highly discrepant argument. It appears that current deradicalization efforts typically share general premises with the overall extremist world view (e.g., on issues of democracy and the role of women), while differing from it on the issue of violence (Ashour, 2008). The psychological rewards that one could attain through adherence to the deradicalized versus the radicalized belief systems may also play a part. For instance, the prospects of being released from prison and leading a normal life might represent potent rewards, motivating individuals to embrace the deradicalization arguments. In contrast, prospects of rejection and disdain on part of one's comrades and possible retribution may induce a negative motivation, in turn reducing the detainees' open mindedness (Kruglanski, 2004).

Researching Deradicalization

In varying degrees, the different deradicalization programs are showing signs of success, and it is a major scientific challenge to carefully examine their impact and the moderating and mediating factors that affect it. We are commencing such an inquiry (to our knowledge the first of its kind) at Philippine prisons in Manila and the southern islands (Mindanao) in which hundreds of suspected Abu Sayyaf and Raja Sollaiman members are detained. We are also exploring the possibility of carrying out similar work in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Bangladesh, three other conflict zones subject to terrorism and insurgency.

With the help of an interdisciplinary team of psychologists, Muslim clerics, prison officials, and international relations experts, we have developed a longitudinal research design for the study of deradicalization. It is based on a quasi-experiment involving a before-after control group design and includes a battery of questionnaires administered at several points in time over the course of the intervention effort carried out in the treatment group. The control group will consist of detainees held in prisons where no deradicalization is attempted.

Our battery of tests is a multidimensional instrument designed to include both *cognitive* (corresponding to the "minds") and *affective/motivational* (corresponding to the "hearts") components of the process. Sub-scales comprising the cognitive component include attitudes toward numerous Islamic notions, including *Jihad* (struggle), *Takfir* (blasphemy), *Hakimiyyah* (sovereignty of God's rule on earth), and *Shahada* (martyrdom), concepts that have a very different, non-violent, meaning for the vast majority of practicing Muslims than their interpretation by extremists. The cognitive component will also assess condonement of the extremists' *ends*, such as establishment of the Islamic State or revival of the Caliphate. Finally, it will tap possible change in attitudes toward the West that may occur as consequence of the treatment.

Sub-scales comprising the *affective/motivational component* assess the detainees' likes and dislikes toward the deradicalization clerics, their perception of their treatment in prison, their suffering in detention, and the fate of their families; all of these could potentially affect their openness to deradicalization. These motivational subscales will also address the changing perceptions of the *emotional fuel* — the grievances, the humiliation, the loss of personal significance — that has presumably

motivated detainees' embracement of the terrorism-justifying ideologies in the first place (Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, & Orehek, 2009).

Based on techniques devised by social cognition researchers, we will also investigate these cognitive and affective/motivational processes with implicit methods such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT) or affective conditioning procedures. And based on the work of organizational psychologists, we will investigate the detainees' embeddedness and standing in their extremist social structures as possible moderators of deradicalization.

The Rocky Road to Deradicalization Research

To be sure, this work faces many potential obstacles that can thwart its success: Gaining access to the detainees requires cooperation and consent from local governments, detainees themselves may refuse to cooperate, our IRB boards must approve the research plan, and local prison officials may not fully appreciate IRB requirements and the ethics of psychological research. Also, local conditions, such as major uprisings and violence (that we have seen in our own research in Mindanao, Philippines), can thwart the speed with which these programs can be implemented and evaluated. The process is no doubt messy on many levels, but with patience and effective psychological tools and concepts, these programs can and should be evaluated.

A Challenge for Psychological Science

That genuine deradicalization *can* occur has been proven already in several programs. We ourselves have seen erstwhile terrorists now helping in the deradicalization efforts and even assisting in research work on deradicalization. Whether specific deradicalization programs are effective and what makes them so is a different question, but one in a dire need of an answer (Horgan, 2008). The stakes are enormous. Thousands of deradicalized detainees have been released into their communities. Is their conversion authentic? Is it permanent? How resistant it is to recidivism? How can the process be improved? Psychological science is well positioned to offer answers to these questions and assist with formation of a comprehensive detainee policy as part of our struggle against terror.

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^[11] Because of the lack of precise legal process involved in detaining suspected terrorists, some detainees may have in fact been innocent.

^[12] By such ideology, we simply mean a set of beliefs that legitimize and advocate terrorism and violence. At bare essence, these include a sense of grievance and injustice perpetrated against one's group, an identification of a culprit deemed responsible for the injustice, and a method of redressing the grievance via the tool of terror. Such ideology may or may not be anchored in specific appreciation of theological arguments and sophisticated knowledge of the Qur'an, and at times may simply rest on pronouncements of revered leaders and other epistemic authorities.