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## Arab Prisons: A Place for Dialog and Reform

By Nicole Stracke

Reforming and rehabilitating terrorists could be one of the most effective long-term counter terrorism strategies to have been adopted in a number of Arab states. States plagued by terrorism had to learn the hard way that prisons and detention centers could be breeding grounds for hard-liners and recruitment centers for terrorist groups. This is, however, not a new phenomenon. During the 1970s and 1980s, Egyptian prisons sometimes became centers that turned young Islamists from sympathizers who vaguely understood the ideas of Jihad into hard-liners. The case of Ayman Al-Zawahiri is well-known. He was imprisoned in Egypt for three years and during this time, he transformed from a moderate jihadi and regime opponent into a hardcore militant, who used his time in prison to recruit new members for his organization.

However, for some time now, Arab states have been witnessing a remarkable reversal in the role of prisons: once used as a recruitment center by terrorists groups, they now have become reform centers. The "Revision of Jihad" ball started to roll in May 1997 when deep from within the cells of political prisons in Egypt, the imprisoned leadership of *al-Jama'a al-Islamiya*, one of the largest and most violent extremist Islamic movements in Egypt, declared an initiative to denounce violence and provided a new interpretation of the principles of Jihad wherein the use of violence was considered legitimate only in the case of self-defense. The literature that was later produced by the group's leadership was particularly critical of al-Qaeda ideology and its brutal methods. [1] Ten years later, in November 2007, the imprisoned leadership of the second most important Egyptian Islamist Jihadi movement *al-Jihad al-Islamiya* (whose former leader was al-Zawahiri) has decided to follow suit and adopt the already successful example of reconciliation with the government and society.

At first, the Egyptian security authorities were skeptical and hesitant to support the process, which was initiated by the prisoners themselves. Then, the authorities decided to offer limited support, namely by facilitating the many and long meetings that took place between the leaders of the organization and its members. [2] Recently, with the announcement of the *al-Jihad* leadership initiative, Egyptian authorities have decided to facilitate the process by separating the supporters of the reform or "revision" process from the small group that was objecting to the process simply by relocating about 30 of the 'rejectionist' militant Islamists to other prisons.

The Egyptian experience was unique in the Arab World in comparison to the Saudi and Yemeni experience in the sense that the leadership of the terrorist organization, or some of its leading figures, decided to 'review' the organization's ideology and strategy and then implement 'collective reform.' The 'reform' was designed to be wide-ranging and inclusive, encompassing the great majority of the organization's members.

In the years between the two phases of the "Revision of Jihad" process, which was implemented in Egypt during 1997 and 2007, some Arab governments introduced their

own reform programs inside prisons and detention centers to target individuals who were allegedly involved in terrorist activities.

What is unique about the Arab rehabilitation and reform program is the soft approach to fight terrorism. The security services, after having engaged in dialogues with Islamists, understood that it was better to put a 'carrot' at the end of the 'stick' if they wanted to successfully fight terrorism. In the earlier days, the alleged cruel treatment of Islamist prisoners and the harsh interrogation methods used inside prisons had only radicalized detainees and hardened their views. Detainees started to revolt against prison authorities and organized themselves to resist the authorities' pressure. Some who were sent to prison for suspected illegal activities or minor offences became 'radicalized' and vulnerable to pressure from militant groups, who eventually recruited by these prisoners.

The Saudi government was one of the first in the Arab World to set up professional and comprehensive reform programs in prisons. In mid-2004, Saudi Arabian authorities initiated *al-Munasaha wa al-Islah committee* (Advice and Reform) with the aim of targeting certain individuals who were detained on terrorism-related charges. The 'de-radicalization' and rehabilitation program was started after the wave of terrorist attacks in May and November 2003, and it was only one of a number of counter terrorism tactics adopted as part of the general counter terrorism strategy by the state. To implement and promote the program, the Saudi government established a special committee. The Saudi move was based on the belief that the great majority of young people who had been detained were victims of misguided interpretations of Islam or had succumbed to pressure from the militant groups.

Therefore, the program aimed to gain the trust of prisoners, and enlighten them on the 'true teachings of Islam', which forbid followers to use violence against civilian Muslims or non-Muslims. The program presented alternatives for those who were willing to review their attitude and change. The initial run of the program experienced some difficulties as prisoners distrusted the authorities and disbelieved the promises and intentions of the project managers and consultants from the official religious institutions. Terrorist groups worked hard at trying to discredit the program and publicly warned anybody working with the project. Yet, the program was successful, and Saudi officials confirm that only 3 to 5 percent of the hard-line prisoners from 2004 to 2007 relapsed into their old ways. [3]

Numerous factors contributed to the success of the program. First, the program targets Islamists who have not yet committed a terrorist act but have shown tendencies and willingness to become involved in terrorist activities. It is easier to convince these Islamists their ideas and actions were wrong. Many of the detainees did not have an adequate understanding of the Holy Quran and were surprised by the interpretation provided by the religious scholars visiting them in prison. Moreover, these Islamists had not yet been subjected to extensive brainwashing by terrorist groups, and therefore, it was much easier to convince them that they had chosen the wrong religious path. [4]

The second major contributor to success was the Saudi government's huge financial commitment of over \$30 million for the program from 2004 to 2007. [5] The ongoing program is comprehensive, employing about 80 permanent staff members, including religious scholars and psychologists, and affecting every aspect of the prisoner's life. The program provides social and economic incentives for detainees who decide to cooperate. The Saudi government was prepared to ensure employment, provide houses or even facilitate marriage for the detainees in the belief that responsibility for a family would prevent the detainee from being attracted to the militant cause and going to the Jihadist battlefields in Iraq or Afghanistan. In most cases, this strategy proved to be very successful. The government initiative is not limited to the prisoners' personal well-being alone. Indeed, in some cases, authorities take care of the detainee's family by continuing the payment of his or her salary and providing medical treatment for ill parents to set an example of generosity in order to finally convince the detainee that the government is not their enemy. After being released, the detainees remain in contact with the Saudi authorities and return for a 'follow up examination.'

A third factor is that the Ministry of Interior oversees *al-Munasaha committee* in Saudi Arabia. That is different from the programs in other states of the Arab World where the rehabilitation programs are under the supervision of the Ministry of Religious Affairs or the Ministry of Justice. This is important as only the Interior Ministry has the authority to give security guarantees to detainees promising that if they cooperate; it will not only provide them with benefits, but could also recommend their release from prison if they prove their trustworthiness. Therefore, prisoners are more likely to cooperate if they have a safety guarantee directly from the ministry. Influenced by *al-Munasha committee*, the Saudi government has already released more than 1,000 prisoners. This is likely to encourage other prisoners to cooperate in the hope of securing release.

Finally, even though the soft approach of the program has been a success, it should be mentioned that prisoners are well aware of the consequences they face if they fail to cooperate with the program's objective - namely to abstain from all kinds of terrorism-related activities. Only some prisoners would be able to cope with the prospect of having to spend even more years in prison.

Over the last few years, numerous initiatives have been implemented to win the 'battle of the hearts and minds' in Saudi Arabia including tackling the influence of radicals over the Internet. In 2004, a number of religious scholars set up a web page under the name *Sakeenah*, or '*inner peace*', to fight terrorism on an ideological level, offering open debates and answering questions. Furthermore, in October 2007, the Presidency for Scientific Research and Religious Edicts (*Dar Al-Ift'a*), the Riyadh-based organization comprising prominent Islamic scholars that issues fatwas, set up a website for its religious rulings. The site ([www.alifta.com](http://www.alifta.com)) provides access to the fatwas issued by *Dar Al-Ift'a*, which is affiliated to the Council of Senior Islamic Scholars of Saudi Arabia headed by the Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al-Sheikh. The decision to tackle radical ideology via the Internet was made after it was alleged that some Imams in Saudi Arabia were issuing fatwas and calling on young people to take part in the Jihad. The project

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also aims to tackle the broadening jihadist Internet scene that increasingly targets and recruits ‘wannabe jihadists’ through the worldwide web.

The success of the Saudi reform program contributed to official responses in other countries. In 2003, the government in Yemen established the committee of al-Hawar al-Fikri (the intellectual dialog) headed by an Islamic religious scholar, Judge Humoud al-Hattar. Al-Hattar confirmed in interviews that within a few months of the start of the program, the government agreed to free 92 detainees on the recommendation of the committee. During 2004, the commission succeeded in convincing 246 people of former Arab Afghan Leaders to give up their ‘wrong extremist ideas.’ One of the most popular representatives who participated successfully in the program is Khalid Abd al-Nabi, the leader of the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army.

The Yemeni program had attempted to deal with major issues concerning the question of Jihad and relations between the citizens and the authorities, as well as attitudes towards non-Muslims. Among the main topics on the project's agenda were:

1. The true concept of jihad in Islam.
2. The importance of adherence to the Islamic basic sharia law.
3. The principles of the dialogue in crucial matters in Islam.
4. The importance of understanding the true rules of takfeer (declaring someone as unbeliever).

The Yemeni program drew the interest of the British Foreign Office. Intending to learn from the Yemeni experience, it invited the head of the al-Hawar al-Fikri committee to give briefings concerning the committee’s achievements. The UN has also shown interest in the Saudi experience. Richard Barret, the coordinator of the monitoring team of the 1267 Sanctions Committee, which was formed per a Security Council resolution, contacted Saudi authorities to obtain information on the Kingdom's special anti-terrorism program aimed at protecting people from being influenced by Al-Qaeda ideology.

The achievements of “de-radicalization” and reform programs have also been noticed by the US government, which is now making an effort to implement a similar program in Iraq. Since the beginning of this year, the US has been funding a \$254-million rehabilitation program in Iraq aimed at reforming militant Islamists. The program has been initiated in various US administered prisons and detention centers where many Iraqis are detained or imprisoned for alleged terrorist activities. US official sources claimed in the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper that so far, none of the more than 1,000 detainees who had been through these 'reform programs' had been re-arrested for renewed terrorism-related activities. But the sources remained skeptical about the sustainability of such a high rate of success and also mentioned that about “30 percent of the detainees may be impervious to the efforts” of the rehabilitation program. [6]

The Arab world and the West have acknowledged that terrorism cannot be overcome by force alone, and that the battle for the hearts and minds is even more important to win.

Against this backdrop, it can be expected that the rehabilitation and reform program will remain a vital part of counter-terrorism strategies in the region.

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- [1] “Dr Fadl”, Tarsheed al Jihad fi Misr wa Aa’lam, 2007
- [2] Al Hayat, 7 November 2007
- [3] www.alarabiya.net, 20 June 2007
- [4] Al-Riyadh Daily Newspaper, 9 December 2005
- [5] Al Sharq Al Awsat, 21 April 2007
- [6] Los Angeles Times, 16 November 2007.