

## The Tranquillity Campaign: A Beacon of Light in the Dark World Wide Web

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### **Abstract**

*This Research Paper sheds light on the experience of the pioneering Saudi-based independent online counter-radicalization campaign called 'Sakinah' (Tranquillity), launched in 2003. Relying on multiple interviews and discussions with the founder and head of the campaign the writer of this Research Note was granted exclusive access to early archived campaign materials and records of dialogues with terrorists and radicals. This Research Note is able to highlight the history and methodology of the campaign's work, the shifted motivations of radicals over time, and the importance of such initiatives and efforts. It also shows how, as a result of the changing nature and environment in which radicals operate, the campaign innovated its strategies and moved from a defensive counter-narrative engagement towards more offensive, proactive messaging aimed at eliciting specific reactions and taking control of the narrative and debate.*

**Keywords:** Tranquillity Campaign, Counter-radicalization, Saudi Arabia, Al-Qaeda, ISIS.

### **Introduction**

On a sweltering day in September 2015, coinciding with the Muslim festivity of Eid al-Adha, Sa'ad and Abdulaziz al-Unizi (22 and 16 years old) lured their cousin Medwis (21) to accompany them on a small journey to a remote area near their village of al-Shamli not far from Ha'il in the north of Saudi Arabia. There, they tied him up, got their camera rolling, pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and killed him in cold blood on account of alleged apostasy, namely for having registered recently as a soldier in the Saudi security forces.[1]

While the incident shocked the Saudi public, most revealing and alarming were the details that the father of the two perpetrators gave in a TV interview following the incident.[2] According to him, the elder son had only left the village twice, once to nearby Ha'il for a dental visit and once to Tabouk further north for a short visit; the younger had never left his tiny village in his whole life. They were apparently normal young men who were not known for causing trouble and, due to the intimate and close nature of their village's community, did not have any friends who were suspicious or unknown to their father. Moreover, according to their father, they were not very strict observers of religious duties, sometimes missing prayers in their nearby mosque. The only thing the father was very keen to emphasize and blame for the radicalization of his sons was the internet and how much time they used to spend facing their laptops or smart phone screens.

This incident highlighted the well-documented fact that radical and terrorist groups have long been using social media as tools to further their agenda. As many academic papers and policy reports have pointed out, radical groups have used the internet to disseminate their narratives, [3] indoctrinate new recruits,[4] and even to gather intelligence.[5] However, less attention has been given to the virtual initiatives and campaigns—designed to offset such harmful effects and broach a counter-narrative to the radical ideology—aimed at winning back the hearts and minds of our most valued treasure, the youth. One of the first and most successful initiatives is the Saudi-based *Sakinah* (Tranquillity) Campaign to Promote Moderation.

### ***History and Methodology of the Campaign***

*Sakinah* is an independent, non-governmental “edification and interactive communication” initiative, under the supervision of the Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs. It was launched in 2003, during a critical juncture in the history of the Saudi Kingdom, which saw the onset of the al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)’s terror campaign that lasted for almost three years before being crushed and driven out of the country.[6] With a team of approximately 40 individuals from various religious, psychological, and social disciplines, the campaign targets social media and online forums and groups in an effort to confront those who broadcast deviant radical thoughts and ideas, disseminate correct and moderate religious concepts and understandings in matters relating to new and contemporary events, and identify and engage with prospective radicals.

During its infancy, the *Sakinah* struggled in managing some online conversations and discussions due to, first, lack of experience and, second, absence of an easily accessible database of theological reasoning and arguments on the topics and issues that radicals and terrorists express their extremism through. With time, experience was gained and work has been institutionalized in the sense that the massive database collected and constructed by the *Sakinah* throughout the years allows its non-experts to now debate complex and deep theological issues with confidence.

In recent years, the *Sakinah* has also employed a new and offensive methodology, aimed at provoking defensive reactions that can then be exploited to dictate the terms of the debate and control its content and direction. The importance and effectiveness of such a proactive strategy is that “[U]nlike defensive messaging that focusses on the opposition’s message, going on the offensive gives the opportunity to get your key messages across.”[7] The way and reasons behind this methodological shift or addition will be explored in more details later.

Apart from the excellent 2008 *CTC Sentinel* piece on the *Sakinah* campaign by the late Christopher Boucek, [8] little has been written about it. Over the course of more than thirteen years to date, the campaign workers and collaborators, directed by the founder of the campaign, shaikh Abdul Mun’im al-Mushawwah, have had the opportunity to engage thousands of individuals who espouse extremist views in open candid bilateral discussions over the internet, exploring their inner thoughts and beliefs and endeavouring to discover entry points through which they can sway them and, possibly, influence their convictions. As a result, they have gained cumulative experiences, through trial and error, in how and when to use theological, political, logical, ethical, or emotional languages during their virtual interactive dialogues. Such efforts and expertise must be digested, especially when we know that terrorist organizations’ use of social media as tools to facilitate recruitment and attract new followers is likely to increase over the coming years.[9]

According to the latest *Sakinah* report,[10] the campaign has succeeded in moderating the opinions and correcting the views of 1,500 of the total 3,250 radicals it entered into either private or public one-to-one online dialogues and discussions with. Out of those 1,500, two-fifths have retreated completely from all or most of the radical thoughts they used to adopt, while the rest have abandoned the most dangerous of these ideas and thoughts. Targeted individuals were not confined to a specific country or region, as half were from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, 30 percent from other neighbouring Arab countries, and the remainder from Europe and America. Most importantly, all of these dialogues and revisions were documented and archived by the campaign, which will soon launch the “*Sakinah* Documentary,” a goldmine for the benefit of specialists and researchers upon request.

### ***Three Generations and Multiple Motives***

In a phone interview, al-Mushawwah explained to the present writer that the campaign dealt with three generations of radicals and terrorists over its history: first, the al-Qaeda generation from 2003 to 2006; second, those who saw the recession of al-Qaeda and the expansion of branches and other organizations

from 2007 to 2010; and third, the generation of contemporary Arab revolutions and their aftermaths from 2011 and continuing. The question that begs asking here is, after all of this wealth of experience exploring the minds of terrorists and radicals belonging to different organizations during different periods, what lessons have been learned as to the main factors and drivers along the paths towards radicalization?

Despite the diversity and multiplicity of motivations and factors behind such a process that can differ from one case to another, al-Mushawwah argues, one consistent theme featured clearly and strongly in almost all of the campaign's discussions spanning the three generations, an emotional one, relating to actual or perceived grievances such as defending Muslim lands against external aggression, setting the captives free, or supporting helpless and vulnerable Muslims. However, this emotional and psychological underpinning, which is usually coated in religious language and terms, is strongest in the current generation, al-Mushawwah contends.

Moreover, an important and central motive behind the radicalization process of many was the search for an identity and belonging, which can come in different templates: *bay'ah* (oath of allegiance), Caliphate, state, *wilayat* (provinces), and so forth. This motive is also more visible in the current generation, especially among those who come from Western countries. A third theme that was present in the language of a sizeable number of radicals throughout the three generations is the urge for retaliation, especially in those who had previous relationships with dead or imprisoned terrorists or who had lived and fought in previous conflict zones.

The religious catalyst, such as the dogmatic understanding of *al-wala' wa al-bara'* (loyalty and disavowal), *takfir* (excommunication), and *mudhaharat al-mushrikin* (befriending/allying with the polytheists), has always been present. However, according to al-Mushawwah, the use of religious language and *fatwas* was stronger and more visible in the first generation, ebbed markedly in the second, and resurfaced again with the third, although not as strong as it was a decade earlier. Unlike the early al-Qaeda radicals, the subsequent ISIS militants have no patience and show no interest in deep theological and jurisprudential debates. The best way to engage them and capture their attention, according to al-Mushawwah, is by challenging the utopian mental picture of the so-called *Caliphate*, and exposing the horrendously barbaric and un-Islamic acts committed by their beloved group, thus provoking them to take defensive postures and enter into dialogue.

Lastly, and more inexplicably according to al-Mushawwah, was what he called "the fashion" of joining virtual or practical radical environments, especially among those belonging to the third generation. Members of the *Sakinah* campaign were surprised to find some who were not motivated by any of the above-mentioned motivations. Their only drives were to try to "follow the wave" and emulate it. This can be explained, however, by the appeal of adventurism, leadership, and glory that terrorist organizations promise new recruits. Over the years al-Qaeda and, more professionally, ISIS have succeeded in manufacturing an image or brand for themselves, one that celebrates, in romantic expressions, comradeship, poetry and *anasheed* (religious hymns), glorious battles, and even death. Such temptations and lures [11] can, and have, appealed to some new followers and recruits. [12]

### ***Dialogues during the Early Years***

During the early days of the campaign, its workers and collaborators endeavoured to construct a database of moderate understanding and cognitive theological rooting of the main contentious issues that terrorists use to assert their radical interpretations. Nowadays, they have around 500 substantive materials, available on the campaign's website.[13] These form a solid intellectual and knowledge base that can benefit researchers and knowledge seekers.

However, it is the campaign's experience in dialogues and discussions, under pseudonyms obviously, with both hard-line and border-line radicals that is most pioneering and intriguing at the same time. I was able to

obtain exclusive access to some of the early dialogues. Among the campaign's early public debate opponents was the head of AQAP's media team in Saudi Arabia, *Abdulaziz al-Tuwail'i*, who used to be very active in internet forums and who wrote under several pseudonyms such as *akhu min ta' Allah* ('brother of he who obeys Allah') until his arrest in mid-2005.[14]

One of *Sakinah's* most important debates with him, in 2003, was organized by a supervisor of the then prominent *al-Saha al-Arabiyya* electronic forum on the critical issue of "the apostasy of he who helps the infidel against the Muslim." The debate lasted for about a month with claim and rejoinder posts between *al-Tuwail'i* and the *Sakinah* operatives writing under the name *al-Mu'jam al-Kabeer* (Macro Thesaurus). During the debate, which was very theological, the *Sakinah* endeavoured to expose *al-Tuwail'i's* selectivity and his attempt to "twist the neck" of Qur'anic verses and texts of past scholars in order to fit his preconceived point of view on the issue.

*Al-Tuwail'i's* radical position was that any kind of help to non-Muslims against Muslims, regardless of the nature of that help or the motives and reasons behind it, results in absolute *kufur* (disbelief). However, the *Sakinah* operatives strived to explain to *al-Tuwail'i*, as well as all those who were following and reading this public debate, that this is not the case, as contexts, motives, amounts, and nature of "help" are all determinants and factors that must be taken into account before passing a judgement or a final ruling.

Another important and in-depth early debate involved *al-Katibah* (the Battalion), whose real name remains unknown but he was probably, according to al-Mushawwah, one of AQAP's religious officials at the time. After a long debate with him on the public forum, he was convinced by the *Sakinah* operative, who was writing under the pseudonym *al-Rasid* (the Observer), to move the debate to the private chat room in order to escape the interventions of others and have a "quiet deep discussion on such important matters in our religion."

The debate with *al-Katibah*, just like the one with *al-Tuwail'i*, was very theological, the norm for most debates during that early period of the campaign. It touched upon very critical issues such as the excommunication of Muslim rulers, the status of non-Muslims in Muslim countries, the meaning and interpretation of the *hadith* (Prophetic saying) "expel the infidels from the Arabian Peninsula," and the definition and application of the doctrine of *tatarrus* (the permissibility or impermissibility of killing human shields). The very frank and intimate discussion started with *al-Katibah* professing the excommunication of the Saudi rulers due to the usual reasons radicals raise regarding this matter, such as the helping of the Americans in their fight against Islam, the application of man-made laws, and the "persecution" of the so-called *mujahideen*. According to him:

*[N]o obedience and deference is due to those who changed the religion of Allah, and allied with its enemies.... They [Saudi rulers] have apostatized many times over, as the mujahid Imam Osama bin Laden, may Allah protect and support him, has said, when they enabled the enemies of Allah [to use and occupy] the land of the two Holy Mosques.... Do you have any doubt in their disbelief? By Allah, it is more obvious than the disbelief of Abu Jahl [one of Meccan polytheists at the time of the Prophet, peace be upon him].*

The *Sakinah* operative then attempted to organize the dialogue and establish an agreed-upon baseline. After asking *al-Katibah* to confirm his agreement on "the obligation of obedience to the Muslim ruler" in general, he embarks on breaking down and refuting the claims *al-Katibah* raised as the basis for excommunication and infidelity of the Saudi state, masterfully citing early stories of the Prophet, peace be upon him, and other statements from early scholars of Islam.

By the end of the discussion, which lasted intermittently for two and a half months, *al-Rasid* was able to convince *al-Katibah*, through the use of extensive religious evidence and citations, that takfir is not a matter to be taken lightly and that the Saudi rulers are not in fact *murtaddin* (apostates). Even though *al-Katibah* did not backtrack on all of his previous positions, if one follows the trajectory and development of the

discussion and reads between the lines, the creeping of doubt into his previously firm and hard convictions is discernible.

After sensing *al-Katibah's* slight change of tone, the *Sakinah* operative tried to connect with him personally and emotionally before continuing the theological discussion, as here excerpted:

*Before I [continue] commenting on your messages, allow me this word: I know the difficulty of accepting reality and the difficulty of changing convictions. Like you, I used to believe in some issues for a long time, was certain of the soundness and correctness of my path and opinion, and experienced the difficulty of changing conviction. However, everything becomes easy for he who has the religion of Allah as the light of his heart and sight. My dear brother, you used to excommunicate Muslims, and I know that was because of your enthusiasm for religion and not the corruption of your intent. You have realized now that the issue of excommunication is a dangerous one and that accusations of apostasy or excommunication of a person or the Saudi state can be answered and refuted. I want you to ask the Exalted Lord to save you from this fitnah (testing or trial), and by Allah I am praying for you.*

Multiple other discussions were conducted via e-mail exchanges after establishing initial contact through social media and online forums. Such efforts yielded varying degrees of success, but in general, as al-Mushawwah contends, *Sakinah* was “able to influence the vast majority of those who entered into the dialogue with an open mind.” Once, an ex-radical abandoned his extremist beliefs after twelve days of continuous e-mail exchanges. In his first private message, he warned the *Sakinah* operative not to be “a defender of the ignorant apostates” and explained that it was his desire to save him from *kufr* (disbelief) that prompted him to accept engaging in private communication.

However, a month later he e-mailed, stating that he now sees the truth and is thanking God for guiding him to the right path before he gets involved in the spilling of protected blood. He went on to write, “[I]t is incumbent upon you oh shaikh [*Sakinah* operative] to help the remaining poor youth [radicals] who believe they are following the truth... May Allah forgive you where have you been a long time ago!”

### **Recent Innovative Strategies**

In recent years, many things have changed. The nature of the main social media sites, such as Twitter with its 140 characters, does not allow for in-depth theological debates. Moreover, the nature of today's terrorist organizations' propaganda has changed, with ISIS mastering the art of graphic cinematic clips[15] encapsulating complex issues in a few simple words. The nature of today's radicals has changed as well, in the sense that many are influenced more by romantic, utopian, and glorious ideals[16] rather than by religious principles, scholarship, or knowledge.[17] Therefore, the nature of the *Sakinah* messages and dialogues had to change accordingly.

Nowadays, while still employing theological and religious language in bilateral dialogues whenever the need arises, the *Sakinah* campaign attracts radicals to debates through the creation of challenging hashtags, especially on Twitter, and the dissemination, through them, of aggressive offensive challenges to their conventional wisdom and ingrained beliefs, often in the form of caricatures and infographics. Aside from the obvious aim of challenging the radical narrative, they aim to force the radicals onto the back foot and push them into adopting defensive postures in order to take control of the direction and topic of the narrative and debate.

The campaign often succeeds in provoking reactions from extremists and radicals who, as al-Mushawwah contends, respond more to such hard-hitting provocative doses of reality about the barbaric, un-Islamic, and unrestrained nature of their organizations than to long and deep religious *fatwas*: on the ruling of jihad or *al-*

*wala' wa al-bara'*, for example. When that happens, they try to move the conversation to the private domain in order to establish a “personal” link that stands a better chance of getting through to the target.

One example of such hashtags is #كوعدخيال (‘do not let them fool you’), which was an old dormant one until the campaign revived it in May 2015 to serve its ends. The topics and nature of the disseminated messages vary from short religious notes on specific contentious topics, emotionally-charged pictures, such as that of a funeral prayer of the mother killed by her two sons,[18] aimed to incite remorse and revisionism, lists of aggressive, shock-inspiring facts in an infographic, and ridicule of provocative caricatures.

The campaign is also active on other social media sites such as Facebook and Telegram, where they manage several accounts and platforms. One of their strategies on Facebook is to give these accounts an evidently independent and general Islamic character in order to attract a large number of followers. Through them, they start subtly disseminating their moderate counter-radicalization messages and instructions. One of their Facebook platforms has around 410,000 subscribers or followers.

## Conclusion

In short, virulent radical thoughts and ideologies calling young people to violence are in many ways like a malignant cancer that corrupts isolated cells and converts them into mortal enemies of the host body/country. Similar to the way that modern medical science can make great inroads in the fight against cancer, counter-radicalization efforts should also focus on, first, studying in detail the process and mechanisms by which the cancer/radical-ideology invades a healthy cell/mind and converts it into a destroyer of life and, second, discovering specific vulnerable steps in the process at which it can be stopped, derailed, or otherwise rendered harmless.

It is safe to argue that the *Sakinah* campaign has been one of the pioneering effort in that direction. Even if its successes over the past thirteen years have not been many nor much publicized due to the sensitive and anonymous nature of its work, the impact of its efforts is most certainly valuable as these may have resulted in the saving of many human lives all over the world.

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## Notes

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