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The Call for Component Analyses of the Saudi Arabian Risk Reduction Initiative: An Examination of Religious Re-education's Role in the Deradicalization and Disengagement Process

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Abstract

Is it possible to dissolve the violent religious ideology behind the majority of terrorist behavior and keep the 'person' intact? This proposal suggests a potential method to assess the impact of religious re-education on reducing future instances of terrorist behavior. The paper addresses current terms, problems and limits surrounding deradicalization. It also appraises empirical evidence behind current deradicalization programs. It attempts to analyze one component of the Saudi Arabian Deradicalization program (religious re-education) through a behavior analytic framework. It builds on previous research to suggest that social reinforcement through moderate Muslim clerics may reduce the frequency of terrorist behavior. This proposal hopes to successfully argue the necessity of putting each component of the Saudi Arabian Deradicalization program under similar scrutiny.

Keywords: Imam, Reinforcement, Indirect Assessment, Baseline, Contingency Management, Terrorist Behavior, Deradicalization, Takfiri, Maslak, Saudi Arabian Risk Reduction Initiative (RRI)

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Introduction

Omar Mateen pledged allegiance to ISIS before the tragic mass shooting in Orlando on June 11th, 2016. This connection is rather murky, and can include motives unrelated to the terrorist group. However, in the face of events like these, reducing the Muslim faith to one universally violent religion is not the answer. Perhaps it is more helpful to realize that radicalization is a process, a 'leveling up,' or in behavior analytic terms, a series of successive approximations that sometimes, but not always, culminates in violence against an innocent citizenry. If researchers can understand the environmental contingencies that create terrorists, then they can collaborate with moderate Muslim clerics to modify those contingencies and bring former extremists back down to a level where they no longer engage in violence.

Deradicalization is defined as "the social and psychological process whereby an individual's commitment to, and involvement in, violent radicalisation is reduced to the extent that they are no longer at risk of involvement and engagement in violent activity" (Horgan, 2009, p.153). If deradicalization is the goal of efforts to minimize terrorism, it is important to distinguish deradicalization from disengagement. The former tends to be rooted in cognitive schemas and the latter is more closely associated with engagement in terrorist behavior. For the purposes of this proposal, *terrorist behavior* is defined as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience" (Horgan, 2010). Mullins (2010) suggests that these terms are not truly inseparable from one another, and point instead to a more complex mosaic of cognition and behavior (p. 5). This mosaic suggests that changing the cognition of individuals through religious re-education is one potential pathway to disengagement. Because a reduction in *terrorist behavior* is the ultimate goal, the present study will critique the Saudi Arabian Risk Reduction Initiative (RRI) through the concepts of behavior analysis as well and attempt to fill the gaps in current approaches.

Fundamentalism

As a response to modernity, a large portion of fundamentalist groups express a desire to return to a glorified version of the past, or a time where their social values were believed to be more strongly upheld. The Fundamentalism Project identified five commonalities inherent

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in many fundamentalist movements: (1) Reinforced gender norms, e.g. women as nurturers and men as providers; (2) A rigidity in thinking and an insular community that maintain such rigid thinking among its members; (3) A complete absence of pluralism, e.g. "the rules" universally apply; (4) Clear ingroups and outgroups that receive either support or ostracism; (5) Nostalgia for a past that may never have existed in the way the fundamentalists envision it to have (Fundamentalism Project, 1985-1992). Other researchers identified sixteen recurrent themes present in 10 disparate militant extremist groups (cf. Saucier et al., 2009). Their findings overlap with fundamentalist commonalities in regards to "perceptions modernity as a threat" among Sayyid Qutb's followers (Saucier et al., 2009, p. 260).

Maslaks and Takfiri in Relation to Fundamentalism

A desire to return to an idyllic version of the past often drives the concept of *takfir,* or apostasy. This apostasy is what Islamic terrorists use to justify violence that specifically targets other Muslims who are believed to "not share their puritanical worldview" (Azlan, 2005, xvi). Because violence is strongly linked to this form of binary thinking, elimination of *takfiri* beliefs is one of the main goals of the Saudi Arabian Deradicalization Model (Boucek, 2009, pp. 4 & 11; Williams & Lindsey, 2014, p.143), which will be discussed later in the proposal.

Social categorization, long a central focus of social identity theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987), plays a critical role in fundamentalism, as it describes the process of "seeing one's self as similar to some group of people and different from others" (e.g., Turner et al., 1987) . Social categorization is a cognitive tool that allows people to position themselves within larger society (Turner et al., 1987). This leads to the following question: What cognitive tools can be used to get terrorists to define their place in society outside of the terrorist organizations they belong to? What tools can eliminate the idea that the group they belong to consists of only "true believers" and sees the rest of the Muslim worlds as disposable? (Azlan, 2005, xvi).

A *maslak* is defined as "a particular school of Islam" that members identify with (Fair, 2007). The image below details the numerous sects within Islam as well as their evolution to their current states. For the purposes of this proposal, the upper left quadrant, (which contains

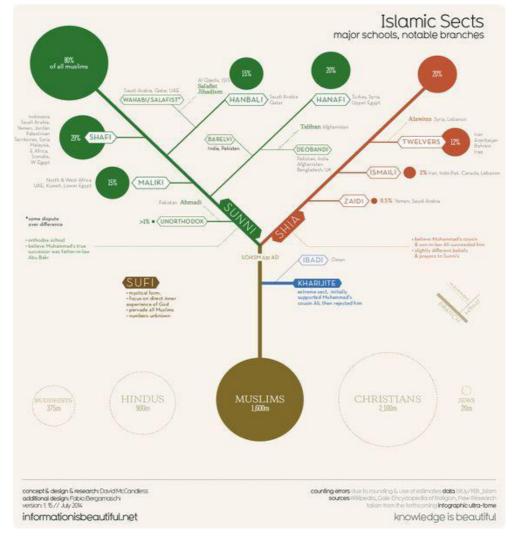Wahhabism, Salafism and derivations of both that include *Takfiri* principles) will be the main focus.

Figure 1 Copyright McCandless 2013

Thinking Structurally about Religion and Radicalization

The allure of religion is that it gives people the sense that they have control in an uncontrollable environment (Hogg, 2013). Perhaps this is why the violent elements that frequently embed themselves within a religious framework are hard to shake. Research supports that extremist recruiters often exploit this need for security for nefarious purposes,

creating pawns out of individuals whose desire to belong makes them more susceptible to radicalization (Boucek, 2008).

Stekelenburg (2014) equates the radicalization process to an individual ascending up different floors of a building, with the top rungs reserved for only the individuals actively committing violence. Extending this analogy, each *maslak* represents a different 'ladder' that participants can either ascend or descend on. In keeping with Stekelenburg's analogy, the author sees the goal of the extremist recruiter is to not have recruits "look down," but, rather to convince them that the only way forward is up. And, by this virtue, commitment to more and more violence is expected. At the height of radicalization, it is assumed that recruits would rather 'kick the ladder down' than encourage a new members' descension. Research speaks to the internet's potential as an accelerant to this radicalization process, creating insular collective identities and disseminating propaganda through various channels at an alarming rate (Von Behr et al., qtd. in Horgan, 2014, p. 124). Researchers in counterterrorism must view their goals structurally as well. They must search for methods to bring individuals down to a level where violence is no longer an option. In the context of this proposal, each *maslak* will be equally represented to better match participants with more moderate versions of their guiding ideology. Instead of the family being the main mechanism for change, as in other programs (Koehler, 2015) as a participant is given a 'pathway back down,' their family can play a complementary role on the 'lower rungs,' waiting to assist.

The Saudi Arabian Program

Now that the major terms and phenomenon have been discussed, it is time to describe the components of the Saudi Arabian Risk Reduction Initiative (RRI). The program is composed of four committees: The religious subcommittee, the psychological social committee, the security committee, and the media committee (Boucek, 2009, p. 11). The committees are all under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is under the direction of Prince Muhammad bin Nayef (Boucek, 2008, p. 4). Each committee has its own involvement in the following six components of the RRI. The first component involves people within a participant's existing social framework, that is, "ingroup members" who encourage the participant to reject the violent ideology they have attached to. The second tenant involves

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removing the concepts of apostasy or takfiri by encouraging pluralism (Boucek, 2008, p. 4). The third component is religious re-education, which is the main focus of this proposal. By not being explicitly affiliated with the Saudi government, imams are given more credibility (Boucek, 2009, p. 6). The fourth component includes the involvement of former extremists to further dissuade participants. The RRI's fifth component is proactive financial and occupational assistance. This element is believed to help participants transition back more seamlessly into society (Boucek, 2009, p. 5). The willingness to absorb its citizens back into society is a novel approach and differs from deradicalization of paramilitary members of the IRA. Former IRA members speak to isolation and stigma they felt when their country seemed eager to exclude them rather than accept them back into society (Ferguson, et al., 2015). The sixth component involves post program surveillance to measure recidivism rates. The dependent variable, (terrorist behavior) is hard to measure beyond overt acts. Experts claim that a participant's association with known extremists cannot be explicitly labeled as recidivism (Boucek, 2009). Other researchers call for longer aftercare measurements to more accurately measure recidivism rates (Horgan & Atelier, 2012; Williams & Lindsey, 2014). The Saudi government has an additional public awareness campaign that attempts to promote two main ideas. The first is that participants have been misled into to believing a deviation of Islam over the actual faith (Boucek, 2008, p. 4). The second is helping former extremists "[identify] pro-social ways of expressing the acknowledged and legitimate grievances held by the individual terrorist" (Horgan & Atelier, 2012). An interesting element of this campaign is the willingness of the ministry of interior to not only be taken to court by individuals, but to purposely lose cases against said individuals. This strategy promotes the following, "[It] possible to win against the alleged most powerful ministry in the country" (Boucek, 2008).

The Saudi government claims their deradicalization program has an 80-90% success rate (Boucek, 2008; Capstack, 2015; Horgan & Braddock, 2010; Gunaratna, Jerard & Rubin, 2011). However, no specific component has been examined individually within the program. While popularly cited, the program is not supported by empirical evidence (Feddes & Gallucci, 2015). The hypothesized mechanisms for change are assumed to be a combination of social integration, religious re-education, government financial assistance, and post-program surveillance (Boucek, 2008; Williams & Lindsey, 2014). Saudi Arabia is one of the

few countries capable of including these post surveillance policies, which make it a unique case study.

Problems with Religious Re-education: Internal Processes

Religion, in its most basic form, is a melding of fluid ideas into a codified system. When a person becomes fully radicalized, it is likely that their ideas have become impermeable to logic, compassion or empathy. This rigid thinking system, which is common in all fundamentalist religions, makes dehumanization possible, which in turn, can make suicide bombings and other terrorist attacks against civilian populations more likely. So how can psychologists, moderate religious clerics and applied behavioral analysts work together to intervene before a person becomes fully radicalized; before their ideas crystallize and they step into the world of binary thinking, of good and evil and of enemy and supporter? Researchers suggest that this binary thinking is a self defense mechanism against increasing levels of uncertainty (Hogg, Kruglanski, & van den Bos, 2013). The ethical question in the process of deradicalization and disengagement (D & D) programs becomes the following: how can compassion, logic and empathy be increased without eroding an individual's self-concept or exacerbating their feelings of uncertainty? Daniel Koehler, who developed the new German Risk Reduction Initiative with foreign fighters has also encountered this challenge (Koehler, 2015). While the German RRI to address this challenge is rooted in family counseling, the present study hopes to address this challenge through utilizing moderate Muslim clerics who engage in religious re-education within deradicalization programs. By working within the participant's worldview, these clerics may coax radicalized members towards the more rational, less violent tenets of their faith, without undermining the more functional elements that religion serves the individual. This approach is rooted in behavioral modeling, which the National Defense Research Institute supports as a crucial element of the deradicalization process (Davis, Cragin, & Noricks, 2009).

Misconceptions

If further research is to be successful, researchers must also do away with the misconception that ISIS recruits and other extremist member are predominantly impoverished, marginalized, uneducated, or mentally ill. Amar Amarasingam, a post-doctoral fellow states that "education" and "privilege" do not protect against the charms of idyllic life that ISIS proposes. Recruits, she notes, "see Western life and morality as bankrupt, and sometimes that becomes clearer the more educated you become" (CMAJ, 2016, p.1). In the same article, Lorne Dawson the co-director of the Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society describes terrorist motivations as a "storm of factors", which can include a "quest for significance" or personal experience with "discrimination (2016, p.1).

A final misconception worth dispelling involves the demographics of some of ISIS's leaders. The group includes many Baathists (military members of Saddam's former regime), who US officials removed from their military posts during the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Bennis qtd. in Nevins, 2015). America, then, in terms of geopolitical strategy, represents the height of machismo; wholly unwilling to admit their contribution to the creation of ISIS and yet equally unwilling to accept that this group 1) cannot be contained and 2) now requires a global response. Hopefully, an interdisciplinary, multi-modal approach can become a part of this response.

Issues Surrounding Deradicalization Research

There is limited research on deradicalization programs. Lum and colleagues comment on this scarcity and call for more evidence based methods, claiming an 'almost complete absence of evaluation research on counter-terrorism interventions" (Lum as cited in Feddes & Gallucci, 2015). This is echoed by Feddes and Gallucci who state "to date no systematic overview exists that outlines what methods and techniques have actually been used to assess interventions and evaluate impact of counter-radicalisation interventions" (2015, p.4).

So the first step in of this research was to first admit a lack of understanding of the depth and complexity of the de-radicalization process, specifically when it comes to determining how successful religious re-education is in reducing terrorist behavior. Along with this is lack of empirically based support for both 'hard' and 'soft' de-radicalization

programs.

Research Question

The central question posed here is: Does Religious re-education have an effect on reducing the frequency of terrorist behavior? Our independent variable (religious re-education) will be utilized in an experimental group to determine its effect on the dependent variable (terrorist behavior).

Statistical Analysis

Feddes and Gallucci (2015), examined preventative measures and deradicalization programs from 1990 to July 2014. These measures included 55 manuscripts and 135 participant samples. Out of their participant samples, only 16 (12%) met the requirements for primary quantitative data (p. 3). The empirical evidence in their study consisted of the following assessment methods. In addition to coding evidence as anecdotal, empirical or theoretical, the researchers of the review labeled the data as anecdotal, empirical or theoretical (2015, p. 11), the research was coded by the specified measurements (1) Experimental; (2) Quasi Experimental (3) Longitudinal with follow up; (4) Longitudinal without follow up; (5) cross sectional; (6) cross historical (7) case study, and (8) meta-analysis. Feddes and Gallucci note the data's shortcomings by noting the prevalence of 'mostly anecdotal' samples (Feddes & Gallucci, 2014, p. 17).

The most frequently cited model, the RRI, was found to have little empirical support. This does suggest that researchers have 'come up empty,' but points to the fact that realm of counterterrorism is fairly new and the amount of research and empirically supported methods to assess the program's success are limited. For this reason, the author needed to expand this paper's focus and incorporate more empirically based methods from other fields. Even though the program could not be used as originally intended, the RRI's six tenants, as outlined by previous research (Boucek, 2008; Williams and Lindsey, 2014), still provided valuable insights into the disengagement process.

Contingency management in real world settings

Project BRITE (Behavioral Reinforcement to Increase Treatment Engagement) offers an "empirical test of contingency management in a real world correctional setting" (2011). The sample population in this experiment consisted of 48 males and 24 females who participated in an "intensive outpatient program" for over a period of 12 weeks. While BRITE focused on prisoners with drug addiction, the lessons of contingency management can be applied to programs like the RRI, which parallels a prison-based treatment environment. A potential common factor, noted by the BRITE researchers are the low levels of engagement that are commonly seen among incarcerated individuals (Burdon, De Lore, & Prendergast, 2011). This approach builds on previous research that claims punitive measures, or punishments would be ineffective if applied to D & D programs (Mullins, 2010,). Additionally, the field of behavior analysis tends to place more value on rewards over punishments. The main difference involves measuring the terrorist behavior post program to see if the interventions had an effect. This post treatment surveillance is assumed to be lifelong (Williams & Lindsey, 2012).

Method and Materials

Participants and the Ethics of Control Groups

The participants will include current members who are already involved in the RRI Program. Each participant's history of extremist sympathies (without overt terrorist behavior) make them a viable candidate. An additional benefit of already detained participants is that they are easier to monitor. It would be strategically improbable to obtain a decent sample size by other means. Researchers note that offenders in the RRI program who have already committed violence and are serving longer sentences (without the possibility of earlier release) are already separated from minor offenders within the program (Boucek, 2009). Their history of religiously motivated violence makes them ineligible for the study. These features can help establish a baseline for terrorist behavior. Individuals who meet inclusionary criteria are thought to be a larger majority of the target population than violent offenders.

Interventions with this majority may provide insight into ways to eventually reach the smaller demographic while negating the risks associated with having a control group.

The risks of having a control group with the proposed participants who meet the inclusionary criteria are the possibility of increased recidivism rates post treatment and/or a resilience to future treatment (Williams & Lindsey, 2014). Williams and Lindsey note these risks by citing the recidivism rates of former Guantanamo Bay detainees under similar conditions (2014).

Staffing Costs

According to Brian Palmer, the average annual salary of an Imam (Muslim Religious Cleric) in America is $30,000 (2012, par 2). The median salary of a Behavior Analyst is listed at $53,845 (payscale inc., 2016). In a six-month program this amount would be $26,922 per each behavior analyst. For three behavior analysts, the costs would amount to $80,766. Using this same equation, the average six-month salary of an Imam would be $15,000. This would amount to $30,000 for two imams. Based on descriptions of different sects within the Muslim Faith, more Imams may be needed, so this figure may increase. The behavior analysts would observe both the control and experimental groups, while the Imams would engage with only the experimental group, which would consist of 15 participants. To summarize, this study includes 30 total participants (15 in the control group and 15 in the experimental group), with 2 imams and three behavioral analysts to guide them in their intervention strategies over a period of six months.

Access to the entire RRI program budget is currently unavailable. However, using statistics from both Palmer and *payscale inc.*, we have determined the total staffing cost of the proposed program to be $111,000 to implement. The Saudi Arabian Program is known to be one of the best funded programs available (Boucek, 2008 p.23) Based on these statistics, tapping into the already existing funding sources for research expenses will be a comparatively small expenditure.

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Method

Baseline assessment Tools

A research team will conduct a functional assessment of participants. Staff would observe the experimental group to determine which reinforcers would prove most effective. In addition to covert observation, indirect methods will be introduced to establish a comprehensive baseline.

Hybrid Questionnaire

On March 10, 2016, CNN released ISIS's questionnaire for potential recruits. This leaked document contains a 23-point list to establish levels of obedience as well as skills assessments and blood types (Botelho, Karimi, & Basil, 2016, web). This questionnaire, with a few modifications, can serve as a valuable assessment tool for the present study. From these questionnaires, researchers may be able to infer the likelihood of a participant to engage in terrorist behavior. It can also help researchers identify the current sympathies of the participants. This assessment tool parallels the violence extremist risk assessment (VERA), which contains the five following risk categories outlined by Beardsley: (1) Motivation and ideology, which distinguish other criminal acts from terrorist acts; (2) Contextual items that may increase the likelihood for an individual to engage with extremist groups; (3) Individual learning history that may or may not expose an individual to violence; (4) 'protective items' that point to changes in an environment, that may reduce the likelihood of terrorist behavior; (5) Demographic items outlined described as being male, below the age of 30 and unmarried (Hudson,1999; Taylor, 1988; Bakker, 2006 qtd in Beardsley, 2013, p.2). The author believes that the combination of in-group assessments through ISIS's questionnaire and the out-group assessment by counterterrorism experts can provide a more comprehensive method in establishing a baseline for terrorist motivations and behavior.

The ethics of control groups

Participant observations would be conducted before and during treatment (with no return to baseline), following an AB framework. Additional observations would occur during

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the post surveillance phase of the program. This supports Mullins 'process' oriented approaches to counterterrorism, which include trial and error process (2010, p.7). The original proposal considered an in between groups design. However, despite the potential benefits of such a design, the recidivism risks are too high to support a control or waitlist group. For these ethical reasons, the use of control groups was excluded from this proposal.

Treatment Phase

Specific reinforcers will be assessed after the observation period. Once the individual reinforcers have been determined and individual baselines have been established (through a hybrid ISIS questionnaire Items and VERA), the experimental phase will begin. Participants will receive religious re-education. Their attendance will be positively reinforced by tokens. These tokens will grant access to reinforcers that individuals have indicated they will be more responsive to. These individual reinforcers can involve extra time out of their cell, family time, cell accommodations, or food preferences. The tokens would be contingent on full attendance and would be presented immediately after the end of the sessions. In this way (and in a similar fashion to the BRITE Program), positive reinforcement, as opposed to punishment, has the opportunity to be utilized in a real world setting. Time for early release may be one of the strongest reinforcers for the majority of participants. The author has concluded that both religious re-education and individual reinforcers are necessary to affect behavior change.

It is suggested that more conclusive results will require a longitudinal study post treatment. Researchers call for adding longitudinal measures to test this and other theories of deradicalization (Cole, Alison, Cole, & Alison, 2012, pp. 2-3).

The Implications of Transparency

If the current Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs made the following changes, countries might see an influx of empirical evidence regarding deradicalization. The first change would involve the Saudi Arabian Kingdom embracing more transparency. This transparency would grant other researchers open access to the recidivism rates (i.e. level of re-engagement in terrorist behavior) following treatment. Even though Saudi Arabia is

technically an ally of the United States, this level of transparency is unlikely. The second change would involve a stronger shift towards implementing contingency management schedules (where positive reinforcement is utilized for the alternative behavior of participation in religious re-education programs), along with other elements of the program).

Conclusions

This proposal attempts to put terrorist behavior into context and suggests a potential model for reducing it. The author hopes to work in a collaborative setting to develop and implement a more sophisticated research model. This would involve a component analysis with several different groups, all subjected to different aspects of the RRI in an attempt to determine the necessary and sufficient conditions for reducing terrorist behavior (assuming there are any). For example, is a willingness of a society to absorb its former extremists a bigger factor in reducing instances of terrorist behavior? Are religious reeducation, CBT and social assistance all necessary to reduce terrorist behavior? Is disengagement more closely related to mending broken familial ties and social reinforcement of alternative behavior (Koehler, 2015)? Or do people simply 'age out' of extremist beliefs, as former Irish paramilitary members have attested to (Ferguson, et al, 2013, p.204)? Until more empirically supported methods are developed, researchers can only speculate on the hypothesized mechanisms of change in decreasing future instances of terrorist behavior. The author hopes that future methods will include a more integrative approach to deradicalization strategies. By developing more empirically supported treatment, deradicalization programs can evolve beyond something easily discarded as an ineffectual fad in counter terrorism strategy. Researchers working collaboratively and in interdisciplinary settings must continue their attempts at understanding the necessary and sufficient conditions for deradicalization. If these conditions are eventually established, it is the hope of this researcher that a universal, highly adaptable model of D & D treatments can emerge.

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