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**Perceptions of extremists and deradicalization programs among university students in Kuwait****By: Kyle A. Msall, PhD<sup>1</sup>****Abstract**

The increase of terrorism and terrorist organizations such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham throughout the Middle East over the past three years have led to an exponential increase in individuals living outside of the Middle East becoming radicalized. These individuals range from children to adults, both male and female. The current study focuses on the process of deradicalization. While a number of studies have begun exploring this issue with regards to the actual process, this study focuses on the perceptions of deradicalization from the public. The study is a mixed-method design with the quantitative portion being a questionnaire about what the students' perceptions are toward consequences of convicted individuals in relation to extremists. Much research has been done on citizens' perceptions toward convicted criminals in countries such as the US and the current study seeks to relate those findings, which suggest that there is a highly negative attitude toward convicted criminals, to the attitudes expressed by the university students in Kuwait toward extremists. The qualitative portion of the study involved an open-ended prompt which gave the participants the chance to discuss and describe their thoughts about whether or not a religious extremist could be rehabilitated and deradicalized. The qualitative portion of the study was the primary focus because it is important for program and policy developers associated with deradicalization to understand what the general public perceives regarding the process. The results for the qualitative portion were divided into two main themes: the first being "change is possible" for extremists and the second being "change is not possible" for extremists. However, an interesting find was the third theme that emerged from both of the first two themes, characterized as "all people should be given a second chance." The current study aims to add to the research gap regarding the public's perception of deradicalization in the hopes that future work will be conducted in this area.

**Keywords:** *perceptions toward deradicalization, extremists, radicalism*

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## **Introduction**

The terrorism and humanitarian crisis which dramatically increased in 2014 with the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and the continued presence of Boko Haram in Nigeria and other terrorist organizations around the world have forced governments and citizens to face radicalism in a variety of forms. There have been an especially high number of foreign individuals that have traveled to Syria, Iraq, and other countries with the intent of joining a particular terrorist organization. Many of the individuals that successfully make it to their determined point rarely are able to return to their previous residence. However, there are in fact several individuals who do travel back to their homeland or are stopped by security forces before being able to carry out their plan in joining the extremist group. The essence of both types of individuals, those that make it successfully to their target country and those that are stopped beforehand, are parallel in that both individuals have become radicalized by one method or another and are intent in carrying out their duties. Although there are many researchers and centers focusing on how to prevent this radicalization process from happening in the first place, there are fewer focusing on how to deradicalize those individuals who are already radicalized. This would be different with the two types of individuals listed above because those that come back from their time abroad tend to either reenter the country with the intent of committing an act of violence and/or to help operations within that country or they were faced with the reality upon arrival to the terrorist organization that did not match their preconceived notion of what joining the group would be. In this case, their individual ideology was challenged and they believe that they have made a mistake.

The difference between these two types of individuals is clear, one being still very much radicalized and the other actively questioning their ideology that might have led to radicalization. The individuals stopped by security before being able to travel are also different than the two others just mentioned in that they most likely have not had direct contact or actions with terrorist groups and in most cases would not be legally charged to the same extent as the other two. The issue that this situation highlights is the possibility that several of these individuals could be placed in counseling centers or rehabilitation centers that focus on deradicalization and then re-integration into the public. Deradicalization is a

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relatively new field of research but does have several programs already in place such as Germany with regards to Neo-Nazis and other radicals (Dechesne and De Roon, 2013). There are also facilities with the same focus in countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa, all of which have limited or no long-term data regarding the success rate (Bertram, 2015). The difference between the Western countries' programs and the programs in the Middle East is that those in the Middle East focus on ideological/theological re-education while the programs in the western countries focus on practical and economic assistance and social re-integration (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013). In fact, deradicalization processes and programs as a whole have no real, long-term evidence to base the programs on or support the success that they may have (Horgan and Altier, 2012).

The current study recognizes that there are many different methods of deradicalization being used at the time of writing and together with the increase of global terrorism, the academic data regarding this topic will also increase. However, what has not been studied at the time of the writing is what happens after deradicalization with regards to the individuals. A long-term goal of deradicalization programs is to integrate the individuals back into society but simply doing so without taking into consideration public opinion could be a vital error. Although there have been several studies focusing on the public's perception toward terrorism since the events of September 11, 2001 (Stevens, et al., 2011; Jore, 2007; Lemyre, Turner, Lee, and Krewski, 2006); Goodwin, Willson, and Stanley, 2005) it seems that there is limited research on the topic of the public perception of deradicalization, which is essential to understand in order to properly reintegrate former radicals into the public. The current study seeks to provide a start to this topic of public perception toward deradicalized individuals by asking is there an overall negative perspective toward former radicalized religious extremists and whether demographics such as gender, nationality, and religion have differences in perspectives toward this population. However, before delving into this topic, several definitions and theories must be explored.

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**Terrorism, radicalization, deradicalization**

The term terrorism has several definitions in accordance with the government body defining it. An analysis of the United States' and Russia's definitions indicated several similarities which include the act or threat of violence, influence the decision of a group, intimidation methods, a motive with regards to politics, religion, or economics, and violence that is directed against civilians (Kuznetcov and Kuznetcov, 2013). This is widely used as the definition of terrorism and without question lists many elements of terrorism. Some definitions of modern terrorism include the term "non-state actors" and define terrorism as the initiator or violence not only directed toward civilians as the previous definition implies, but also against material or symbolic representations (Lizardo, 2015).

An example of terrorism against symbolic representations could be seen as recent as ISIS' attempt to destroy cultural symbols throughout Iraq and Syria. During 2014 – 2016, ISIS waged not only a terrorist war on civilians and governments, but also on cultural heritage sites throughout the Middle East. These sites included the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage sites such as Palmyra and other cultural heritage sites including holy sites and temples of the Yezidis, Christians, and Shi'a. This destruction of cultural and religious sites is often displayed on social media by ISIS in order to promote terror and to recruit. Smith, Burke, de Leiu, and Jackson (2015) posited that this type of terrorism is labeled "socially mediated terrorism" which is a new form of terrorism brought on by the rise of social media. They go on to point out that ISIS used religion to justify the destruction of antiquities and to promote their view of Islam (Smith, et al., 2015). Although ISIS is one of the most recent terrorist organizations to deploy social media tactics, there have been other terrorist organizations in the past that have gone to the media to promote their cultural destructions as well. As an example, the Taliban in Afghanistan destroyed the Buddhas of Bamiyan in 2001 because they believed that Islam declared all other religious statues and sites as false idols and publicly took to media to promote their endeavors (Colwell-Chanthaphonh, 2003).

Although there are set definitions of terrorism used universally by governments and organizations, the rise of social media and technology are enabling terrorist groups to use different and unique tactics that have not been used or seen in the past. It suggests that as

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technology improves and becomes more intertwined in everyday life, the definition of terrorism should be altered in order to take on the totality of what is available and utilized by terrorist organizations. The rise of social media and technology is also increasing the recruiting and radicalization process of terrorist organizations.

A definition for radicalization is harder to come by and is not as universal as the definition of terrorism above. According to Ahmed (2016), radicalization is “characterized by the adoption of an explicit ideological system that encourages radicalization and promotes the use of violence by individuals or groups in pursuance of political, ideological, or religious objectives” (p. 234). This definition and the definition of terrorism share similar terms and ideas including the overall theme of using violence for a political, ideological, or religious objective. Other definitions include factors that may lead to radicalization such as the definition posited by Bartlett, Birdwell, & King (2010). These factors were divided into three different levels which were global, state, and social-policy. The authors agreed that there is no concrete definition of radicalization but believe that the radicalization occurs across the aforementioned levels and when individuals are introduced to an overtly ideological message and belief system that encourages movement from moderate, mainstream beliefs toward extreme views (Bartlett, Birdwell, and King, 2010). This differs from the definition proposed by Ahmed (2016) in that there is no reference to violence (i.e. terrorism) associated with radicalism. This is further supported by Al-Badayne’s (2010) statement that the relationship between the two, radicalization and terrorism, is not causal and further noted that radicalization could lead to terrorism, as suggested by several other studies (Al-Badayne, Khelifa, and Alhasan, 2016; Doosje, et al., 2016; McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008). Based on the above definitions, it is quite clear that there is not a concrete, universally accepted definition of the process of radicalization because the term is used in several different contexts such as the security, integration, and foreign-policy contexts which all carry different meanings (Sedgwick, 2010).

However, several models of radicalization have confirmed that social-psychological factors do play significant roles in the process of radicalization (Ahmed, 2016; Doosje, et al., 2016). The psychological components of radicalization are discussed in Hafez and Mullins (2015) and highlight two important features of radicalization: the cognitive and behavioral dimensions. This is parallel to the above statement that radicalization could lead to terrorism

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and also the definition of radicalization which postulated that a main goal of radicalization was to promote violence as an objective. It does not seem likely that an individual would become a behavioral radical (i.e. committing or physically supporting violent acts for a purpose of terrorism) before becoming cognitively radicalized. This coincides with the eight radicalization models compared and discussed by Christmann (2012). All of the models discussed by Christmann (2012) differed in the steps and/or stages of how radicalization occurs but the models did agree that a change within the individual does occur at some point during the radicalization process. There were some missing key points in the models, however, which included a timeline of the process and what exactly initiates an individual to begin the process in the first place. This leads to the important question of deradicalization research: can an individual who is cognitively radicalized be deradicalized before becoming behaviorally radicalized and committing violent acts? This is one of the fundamental questions researchers have within the deradicalization field of study.

Since radicalization does not have a universal definition and there are several different models and theories as to how the process or system of radicalization occurs, it should be no surprise that deradicalization also has no universal definition. This is partly because there is little research on deradicalization as it pertains to religious extremism (as opposed to deradicalization in other contexts such as Neo-Nazism) and with Islamic extremists in particular. The concept of deradicalization also lacks the precision that radicalization has and is often addressed as a disruption of radicalization in lieu of reversing the process of radicalization (Della Porta and LaFree, 2012). It is understandable why security agencies tend to focus on disrupting radicalization in the short term but focusing on actually reversing the radicalization process in long term may improve the individual's chance to stay non-radicalized and help others to do the same.

According to Ashour (2007), deradicalization is similar to that of radicalization in the sense that a change takes place within the individual or group. Ashour (2007) stated that deradicalization is a process within the individual or a group that seeks to reverse its radical ideology and de-legitimize the use of violent acts to achieve the objectives of terrorist groups. Ashour (2007) also conjectured that those individuals or groups who deradicalize also start to accept the social, political, and economic changes within the society. Horgan and Braddock (2010) offer another definition of deradicalization which suggested it is the "social and

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psychological process whereby an individual's commitment to, and involvement in, violent radicalization is reduced to the extent that they are no longer at risk of involvement and engagement in violent activity" (p. 280). This definition integrates the psychological factors that were also discussed in Hafez and Mullins' (2015) definition of radicalization.

The increase in 'home grown terrorism' around Europe and North America has led to several organizations and governments to begin developing and implementing counter violent extremism (CVE) programs. These are programs that rely on the community and the public for support in identifying and reporting individuals that may be of concern. These programs were based on evidence that friends of the individuals contemplating carrying out acts of extreme terrorism could be the best poised to notice these changes (Williams, Horgan, & Evans, 2016; Williams, Horgan, & Evans, 2015). This seems like it would be successful, however, a drawback that both studies revealed was the "reluctant bias" which means the individuals do not report due to the fear that it would damage their relationship with their friend or the fear of actual reporting. Williams et al. (2016) state that because of this bias, when an individual comes forward with information about an individual considering such violence, they should be taken seriously due to the internal struggle the individual had to overcome and the possible consequences. By obtaining these individuals in the possible early stages of radicalization, one can suggest that the process of deradicalization could be implemented successfully.

The rise in foreign fighters from Europe to Syria to join ISIS has also increased the return of these fighters back into their countries of origin in Europe. This has led to several questions as presented by Dechesne and De Roon (2013) which address the challenges of how the returning fighters should be dealt with, what is the nature of the threat, and the best practices of dealing with those radicalized individuals. In their article, the authors believe that deradicalization is more than an ideological debate and should discuss the psychology of the process of radicalization and what can be done to reverse it. Again, the topic of deradicalization is heavily reliant on the unclear definition of radicalization and the process of radicalization. What most studies focusing on deradicalization exclude from their analysis and suggestions is the general public's acceptability and perspective of reintegrating former radicals and the process of deradicalization as a whole. Similar to the CVE programs mentioned above, perhaps a correct path would be to incorporate the community within

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deradicalization programs. In fact, Dalgaard-Nielsen (2013) and Horgan et al., (2016) posited that several case studies have revealed that increased contact with the community outside of the extremist environment is an accelerator of the exit process. This further relates to an idea within criminology which is tertiary desistance. Tertiary desistance is a concept developed and discussed by McNeil and Schinkel (2016) that iterates the importance of a positive community experience for ex-offenders. The authors stated that the more an individual has a sense of belonging to a positive community, the more desistance that individual will have from the negative attitudes and behaviors. This could certainly be linked to the process of deradicalization in a sense that the complete process will also take into account the re-integration of the individual into the community. As aforementioned, if the re-integration efforts stall or the community is not able to comply with the re-integration of a former radical or extremist, the individual may relapse into the radicalized and extremist way of thinking. This study aims to add literature to this gap in academia to bring some insight as to what possible perspectives can be expected.

### **Perspectives toward ex-offenders**

Before discussing the study itself, a brief discussion on the public's perspective toward ex-offenders might draw some insight as to how the public might perceive a former religious radical or extremist. There has been much research on this topic in western countries and it seems there is an overall negative public attitude toward these ex-offenders which prove to be a barrier to successful reentry of the ex-offenders into society (Wakefield and Uggen, 2010). Further, a study conducted about perspectives toward returning offenders found that participants largely agreed that the community support for the offenders was mostly unreliable and often nonexistent (Brooks, Visher, and Nasser, 2006). Although extremists and terrorists are often considered a different type of criminal, and in some instances convicted in military courts instead of civil courts, the research on ex-offenders could show what the perception toward extremists may be. It is important to separate offenders who are religious extremists from other offenders because previous research focused on attitudes towards sex offenders compared to non-sex offenders showed significantly more negative attitudes toward sex offenders (Rade, Desmarais, and Mitchell, 2010). Being that most of the research



conducted on perceptions toward ex-offenders has found that there is a negative attitude toward these individuals and a significant increase of negative attitudes toward sex offenders, it might be that the public's negative perception of extremism and terrorism would result in an increase in negative attitudes toward former extremists as opposed to other ex-offenders. To date, there were not any studies found correlating or comparing attitudes toward former extremists/terrorists with attitudes toward ex-offenders so no concrete evidence can be presented. Again, the goal of the study is to gain an understanding of the perceptions and attitudes toward possible former extremists and deradicalized individuals among the public.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

The participants for this study were undergraduate university students enrolled in the American University of Kuwait located in Salmiya, Kuwait. The initial analysis conducted with the G\*Power software recommended a total of 172 participants in order to obtain an optimal sample size for certain statistical tests. A total of 176 participants responded to the questionnaire. The age of the participants varied and was classified into four groups: 18-20, 21-27, 28-35 and 36 and over with the majority of the participants self-identifying in the 18-20 age group. Further, there were 97 female participants and 79 male participants with 109 participants claiming Kuwaiti as their nationality and 67 claiming other nationality. The overall majority, 157, of the participants claimed Islam as their religion and 19 marked other in the demographic field. All participants were first year students and were proficient in the English language, as it is a requirement for enrollment at the American University of Kuwait.

Table 1

### *Demographics of Participants*

	Gender		Religion		Nationality		Age			
	Male	Female	Islam	Other	Kuwaiti	Other	≤ 20	21-27	28-35	36≥
Participants	79	97	157	19	109	67	136	35	4	1

### *Materials and Data Processing*

A survey was developed by the researcher based on several different studies. The first half of the questionnaire was developed with the help of the ISSP Module 2014 Citizenship II questionnaire by Pammet, et al. (2014). This was used to develop survey questions focusing on good citizenship and perspectives on different freedoms in order to develop an understanding of the participants' perspective. The second portion of the questionnaire was created on the basis of the ISSP questionnaire but went more into the perspectives of "not good" citizens i.e. those who break the law. The questions started by focusing on citizens breaking the law in a general sense and then moving toward violent offenders and then finally to religious extremists. The analysis was conducted on the SPSS software package (23rd Version). All survey questions were arrayed on a five-point Likert scale with 1 being "Strongly Disagree" and 5 being "Strongly Agree." The questionnaire data was input into SPSS and statistical analysis was conducted. The t-test was conducted on a number of different variables within the study such as gender, religion, and nationality with regards to their scores on the survey. In addition to the quantitative portion of the study, an open-ended question was included at the end of the questionnaire in order to capture the participants' thoughts regarding deradicalization and rehabilitation for religious extremists. The qualitative portion is given the most attention in this particular study. This portion, like the questionnaire, was optional for the participants and approximately half of the participants responded to the open-ended question.

### *Procedure*

Undergraduate students at the American University of Kuwait were asked to complete the questionnaire at the end of class time. All surveys were given out midway through the 2016 fall semester. All students were ensured that the questionnaire was anonymous and that their answers would not be linked back to them. The participants were also instructed that completing the questionnaire was completely voluntary and they could stop at any point throughout the survey. All students provided verbal consent and acknowledged that they understood the process and their rights.

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## Results

### *Quantitative Findings*

The results of the 176 surveys were input into SPSS and statistical tests were conducted. The t-test was used on the variables that corresponded to the research questions which included: (1) is there a negative perception to former radicals among university students in Kuwait and (2) do the demographics of gender, religion, and nationality have a difference in perspective toward this population. The two tests conducted on the religion (Islam vs. other) variable as well as the nationality (Kuwaiti vs. non-Kuwaiti) variable showed no significant differences on the survey questions.

This first find is important because it demonstrated that regardless of the participants' religion, the perspectives toward extremists were essentially the same. The group of questions on the survey which focused on reformed extremists and prisoners was the last section and included the variables as listed below in Table 2.

Table 1

### *Questions Focusing on Reformed Prisoners/Extremists*

I would...

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Q19	Feel comfortable living next to a reformed prisoner
Q20	Feel safe living next to a reformed violent offender
Q21	Feel safe living next to a reformed religious extremist
Q22	Feel safe living next to a non-violent religious extremist
Q23	Feel safe living next to a person wanting to join a terrorist organization

As previously mentioned, a Likert-scale was used on the survey and the max score a participant could choose was a 5 for "Strongly Agree" with the max on this section being 25. There was no significant difference in the scores between participants who reported Islam as their religion ( $M = 12.47$ ,  $SD = 3.408$ ) and those participants who marked other as their religion ( $M = 12.21$ ,  $SD = 3.614$ ),  $t(174) = .743$ ,  $p = .755$ . Although results which show no significant difference are usually not focused on in studies, this particular result is important for the field of deradicalization and for western society that sometimes pushes the notion that

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Muslims tend to be more sympathetic to extremists, while this study suggests that is not the case. The t-test conducted for the nationality group also showed no significant difference between the results.

Whereas no scores across the survey showed a significant difference with regards to nationality and religion, the results for the gender showed two significant differences. There were two variables in the same section, as shown in Table 2 above, where the gender of the participants showed a significant difference which included Question 19 and Question 20. For Question 19, the results showed a statistically significant difference between the male participants ( $M = 3.01$ ) and the female participants ( $M = 2.65$ ),  $t(174) = 2.34$ ,  $p = .021$ . For question 20, the results also showed a statistically significant difference between the male participants ( $M = 2.68$ ) and the female participants ( $M = 2.29$ ),  $t(174) = 2.63$ ,  $p = .009$ . The male participants overall scored higher on both questions than did the female participants. What is interesting about this that more females marked that they strongly disagreed with the statements on both Q19 and Q20, with about 50% more marking Strongly Disagree on Q20 than Q19. This is perhaps because of the term “violent” is included in Q20 and not in Q19, signifying that there is a keen difference between what the female participants perceived toward reformed prisoners, which is similar to what has been found in previous research.

There was no significant different between genders in the three following questions which were all focused on religious extremists, as was expected. For Q21, the majority of the participants' marks were evenly spread out from “Strongly Agree” to “Agree” while the vast majority (153) marked either “Strongly Agree” or “Disagree” on Q23. These questions do have very different meanings and while Q21 stressed that the extremist was reformed, participants were still unsure about feeling safe living next to these individuals. On the other hand, the outcome that most participants would not feel comfortable living next to a person wanting to join a terrorist organization is not surprising.

This leads to the question of what exactly is meant by rehabilitation of terrorists and deradicalization. If by comparing the results of previous research, where it was found that the public holds a negative view of former offenders (Wakefield and Uggen, 2010), with the results of the current study, the study suggests that the public holds similar perspectives of reformed radicals/extremists as they do reformed offenders. However, more research in other contexts needs to be conducted to strongly suggest that this is the case. Even when an

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individual goes through programs that are supposed to deradicalize him or her, once out of the system, they will possibly face discrimination and negative emotions and perceptions from the public. This could propel them back into extremism similarly to some former offenders reverting back to committing offences.

### *Qualitative Findings*

An open-ended question was included on the questionnaire for the participants to voluntarily complete. The question was intended to gain some insight on the participants' individual perspectives about whether or not they believed that a religious extremist could be rehabilitated. The results provided an interesting look at the participants' opinions regarding this subject and were analyzed using a thematic analysis as described by Creswell (2013) and Braun and Clarke (2006). The responses were diverse with several key themes being consistent throughout the responses. The themes are represented below and specific responses are included in each theme in order to provide a basis on which these themes were identified. This method of analysis has many advantages including the ability for the results to be more understandable and relatable to the general public. For the current study and the general area of deradicalization, it is pertinent for the public to be able to read and perhaps even relate to the findings in such studies. The most prominent themes which emerged throughout the qualitative analysis included Theme 1: Change is possible, Theme 2: Change is not possible, and Theme 3: People deserve a second chance. The first two themes found in the analysis were expected as the prompt for this portion asked what the participants' thoughts were regarding deradicalization.

The first theme had the largest number of references throughout the participants' feedback. There were many different variations and descriptions within this category with most participants mentioning that religious radicals could be deradicalized or rehabilitated "only if they want to be" and removed from their "toxic environment." Interestingly, the later finding is parallel to the suggestion by Dalgaard-Nielson (2013) and Horgan et al. (2016) that contact with the community outside their extremist (or toxic) environment is an accelerator of the exit process. Both responses within this theme are similar to each other in that they are related to what other rehabilitation processes include. When comparing the participants' feedback to aspects of drug rehabilitation, similarities are noticed because rehabilitation for

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drug abusers include both that the individual must have the desire to change (which is evident in psychology) and they must be removed from their environment which often leads to individuals not being able to quit. However, making the comparison between the deradicalization process of religious radicals and drug rehabilitation should not be taken fully because one is an addiction and the other is an ideology. The environmental stance that the participants brought up could also be argued against due to the numerous individuals in these “toxic environments” who do not turn to radicalism or extremism. Further, if compared to the American prison system in which prisoners are often taken from their environment and put into a prison facility, there are frequently sub-groups within these systems that form and continue the same environmental issues for the prisoners that they faced in their normal environment. Rehabilitation centers that put extremists together could see similar issues and some cases such as organized hunger strikes have actually been documented in terrorist holding facilities such as Guantanamo (Morse, 2016).

The other phrase that was mentioned substantially within Theme 1 was that the extremists could only “change if they wanted” to change. This is deemed true of any rehabilitation program since the sole determinant of the rehabilitation is the individual who is changing. One participant described the change of extremists as a possibility but only with help from qualified people who are able to “bring the balance to them” and help “alleviate the hate in their heart.” Another participant posited that an extremist individual would have to work with a religious leader in order to get a “proper understanding of what their religion means/stands for.” Both statements lean toward the same principle of having qualified individuals lead and work with individuals throughout the process of deradicalization.

However, the statements also bring up an important question regarding the process of deradicalization: who should lead and work with the individuals being deradicalized/rehabilitated? The question is important for two reasons with the first focusing on the goals of the deradicalization programs. The goal of these programs are similar, of course, but to what extent? For example, the deradicalization/rehabilitation programs throughout the Middle East focus on religious leaders and teachings while the programs in the western countries tend to focus on clinical methodologies (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013; Koehler, 2016). Because the field of deradicalization is relatively new and the research within the field does have gaps due to the novelty of the field, apart from the above mentioned works,

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relatively few studies have compared and contrasted the differences between the two types of programs, making this topic excellent for future studies.

The second theme also had a large number of participants' statements within it which stated that rehabilitation/deradicalization was not possible among religious radicals/extremists. One of the most mentioned ideas within this theme referred to the individuals as "brain washed." This was the leading reason given by participants regarding the inability of extremists to be rehabilitated. Being that the majority of the participants identified as followers of Islam, it was interesting to recognize that this was a popular answer among the participants because it signified that many of the participants perceive the radical views of individuals as a phenomenon outside their reality. A similarity between this theme and the first theme discussed above was included during the participants' explanation and description of radicals and extremists being "brain washed." The similar context brought up was the idea of the extremists being in a "toxic environment" with most participants in the second main theme stating that extremists cannot be rehabilitated because of the toxic environment the extremist individuals are encompassed. One participant suggested that even if the individuals were taken out of this environment they had been "surrounded by the toxic environment for so long that the brain washed person would not be possible to change."

Here we have two similarities between two themes; however, the similarity has actually introduced a major difference between the themes. The link between the two themes in this case was the shared thought among the majority of the participants that the extremist individuals were a part of a toxic environment. The difference between the two themes was that the first theme believed that the individual could be rehabilitated if removed from the environment which pressures radical and extremist views on them. In contrast, the second theme believed that even if the individual were to be removed from his/her environment, rehabilitation would not be possible because of the cognitive change that the individual has experienced. It would seem that if the rehabilitation center used for deradicalization had former religious extremists together there would still be a community and environment within the center that all hold similar radical beliefs, possibly allowing for a toxic environment for the individuals within the center. It is different than a prison system where the individuals held together have different beliefs, ideologies, and values even though they may have committed similar crimes.

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The third theme that emerged from the analysis was that people deserve a second chance. This was found throughout the answers of the participants. However, different rationales and contexts were given when participants described this. Just as the first two themes were two opposing views, the third theme itself was essentially split into two views. Participants often reported that people in general deserve a second chance but, as one participant stated, individuals who “killed or help with killing” should not be given another chance. This was similar to most of the participants’ statements who believed that everyone deserved a second chance. In contrast, there were participants who described the second chance as a human right and believed that “effort should be given to help” the individual through the process of deradicalization. This is an interesting split in perspectives and it seems to closely resemble the different perspectives of the public regarding individuals who commit serious crimes. In some western judicial systems, the individuals who commit serious crimes, regardless if it was clearly evident or not, can be given a second chance in the form of rehabilitation and extensive mental health treatment if the individual was found to have major mental health issues that may have led to the crime. A recent example of this situation was carried out in Canada (Larkins, 2017). When a case like this presents itself, there is much debate about whether the individual should be released or imprisoned. In relation to deradicalization, similar debates and difference in opinion/perspectives would also occur among the public. The difference, however, would be that those individuals who go through a deradicalization program would presumably not have committed crimes involving terrorist acts.

For all three themes presented throughout the qualitative findings, there was some doubt about the ability to rehabilitate and deradicalize at least some of the individuals. A special program attached to the deradicalization program could be helpful to bring the community behind the programs and perhaps decrease the negative perceptions toward these individuals. Rade et al. (2016) found that individuals who reported having some kind of contact with ex-offenders actually showed less negative attitudes toward the ex-offenders than individuals who had not had any contact with them. Rade et al. (2016) went on further to mention that there have not been any contact-based programs for the public in order to reduce the negative views toward ex-offenders. A contact-based program for individuals who have gone through the deradicalization process and are ready to be integrated into the community



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may serve both parties equally by lessening the negative notions toward the former radical individuals and to increase community support.

### **Limitations**

The current study has a few limitations with regards to the application of the findings. Being that the participants all lived and studied in Kuwait at the time, the responses on both the quantitative and qualitative portions of the study may be limited to location and should not be generalized to other regions and populations. The participants' answers were all based on their own experiences and because Kuwait has a lower risk of terrorism inside the country compared to its neighbors, the impacts of terrorism and extremism may not be as direct for the participants as it would be in populations in other regions that face the effects of terrorism and extremism often. The participants being university students also presented a limitation for the study which is often the case for studies done with convenience sampling. Because it is not a representation of the general population in Kuwait, the results should not be generalized. Future studies focusing on this topic within Kuwait may want to include a random sampling of the Kuwaiti population which would increase external validity. This would also allow for more diverse participants and could include participants who were in Kuwait during the Iraqi occupation. The latter group mentioned may have different perspectives on the deradicalization process and the reintegration of those individuals. Another limitation of the study is the measurement bias of the participants which is when the participants may answer reluctantly or untruthfully due to socially unacceptable answers. Although Kuwait is relatively progressive within the GCC, there are subjects and topics that are not discussed in public. Some participants may have felt that their answers could be linked to them and therefore altered their answers from their initial thought. To decrease the effect of measurement bias, all questionnaires and answers were anonymous.

## Conclusion

The current study aimed to understand the perspectives of the public toward deradicalization and toward the individuals who would potentially go through a program of this sort. The findings revealed that the attitudes toward radicals and extremists are similar to those attitudes toward convicted criminals and ex-offenders found in previous studies. However, the qualitative portion of the study showed that the participants were divided on whether a religious extremist/radical could and/or should be deradicalized. As mentioned above, the first two themes demonstrated this divide with nearly half the participants believing that religious extremists could be deradicalized and the other half believing opposite. The third theme, however, revealed that regardless of the participants' belief on the first two themes, a majority of the participants believed that the individuals should be given a second chance because everyone should be given another chance, unless those individuals either carried out a violent crime or helped with the crime.

Just as previous studies on ex-offenders have shown, the findings suggest that there is in fact a negative perspective toward former religious extremists. This is important to consider when developing a deradicalization program because a key part of these programs is the re-integration stage. If the public's perception is negative, it could lead to a discriminatory environment being created that might lead the deradicalized individuals into taking refuge with the same individuals and organizations that may have led to their radicalization initially. This would start the radicalization process all over and would essentially lead to what could be called a relapse into extremism. Rade et al.'s (2016) finding that the public's negative perception toward ex-offenders decreased with community contact seems to be a reasonable step forward in the future of deradicalization research. Along with research exploring the process and programs within this field, considerable research should be done within the re-integration of extremists into the public. As proposed by Rade et al. (2016) and applied to the deradicalization field, the types of future research could address the influence of social contact on attitudes toward extremists and consider the type and quality of contact.

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