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Mind Over Martyr

How to Deradicalize Islamist Extremists

Jessica Stern

IS IT possible to deradicalize terrorists and their potential recruits? Saudi Arabia, a pioneer in rehabilitation efforts, claims that it is. Since 2004, more than 4,000 militants have gone through Saudi Arabia's programs, and the graduates have been reintegrated into mainstream society much more successfully than ordinary criminals. Governments elsewhere in the Middle East and throughout Europe and Southeast Asia have launched similar programs for neo-Nazis, far-right militants, narcoterrorists, and Islamist terrorists, encouraging them to abandon their radical ideology or renounce their violent means or both.

The U.S. government would do well to better understand the successes and failures of such efforts, especially those that target Islamist terrorists. This is important, first, because, as General David Petraeus, the head of U.S. Central Command, has noted, the United States "cannot kill [its] way to victory" in the struggle against al Qaeda and related groups. Although military action, especially covert military action, is an essential part of the strategy against the Islamist terrorist movement, the United States' main goal should be to stop the movement from growing. Terrorists do not fight on traditional battlefields; they fight among civilians, which increases the risks of collateral damage. Indeed, Islamist terrorists provoke the governments they oppose into responding in ways that seem to prove that these governments want to humiliate or harm Muslims. Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib, and

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“extraordinary rendition” have become for Muslim youth symbols of the United States’ belligerence and hypocrisy.

Second, the effectiveness of deradicalization programs aimed at detained terrorists have direct and immediate effects on U.S. national security. This is especially true regarding the detainees at the detention center in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Because it is difficult to gather evidence that is usable in court, some truly bad actors, along with

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some not so bad ones who have been held unfairly, will inevitably be released. Effective deradicalization programs could help make such individuals less dangerous. Abdallah al-Ajmi, who was repatriated to Kuwait in 2005 on the order of a U.S. judge and was acquitted of terrorism charges by a Kuwaiti court, subsequently carried out a suicide bombing on Iraqi security forces in Mosul that killed 13 Iraqis. Had he received the kind of reintegration assistance and follow-up (including surveillance) now available in Saudi Arabia after his release, he might not have traveled to Iraq.

Third, the success, or failure, of terrorism-prevention programs outside the United States is important to Americans. For one thing, people who carry European passports can enter the United States relatively easily, and so the presence of terrorists in Europe can threaten U.S. national security. For another, terrorism-prevention programs presently under way in, for example, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, could be models for at-risk groups in the United States, such as the Somali community in Minnesota, from which some young men have been recruited to fight alongside al Shabab, the radical Islamist organization that controls southern Somalia and claims to be aligned with al Qaeda. These men do not seem to be plotting attacks in the West, but it is important to think now about how to integrate Somalis into American society more fully in order to reduce the chances that they will carry out attacks in the United States.

The fight against al Qaeda and related groups is not over: Saudi Arabia’s deputy interior minister was nearly killed by a terrorist posing as a repentant militant in August 2009; in September, U.S. government officials interrupted a plot in New York and Denver that they believed was the most significant since 9/11; and in October, the French police

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arrested a nuclear physicist employed at the CERN accelerator, near Geneva, who reportedly had suggested French targets to members of the Algerian terrorist group al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. But in the long term, the most important factor in limiting terrorism will be success at curtailing recruitment to and retention in extremist movements.

Now is the moment to try. Counterterrorism efforts have significantly eroded al Qaeda's strength in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia since the "war on terror" began in 2001. U.S. Predator strikes in Pakistan have killed top al Qaeda leaders, disrupting essential communications between the group's core and its affiliates and new recruits. Testifying before the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs last September, Michael Leiter, director of the National Counterterrorism Center, said that such activities were "potentially disrupting plots that are under way" and "leaving leadership vacuums that are increasingly difficult to fill."

Even though anti-American sentiment remains strong, especially in Pakistan, al Qaeda's popularity is waning. Polls continue to show that many people in Muslim-majority states doubt that the true aim of U.S. counterterrorism efforts is self-protection. A 2007 study by the Program on International Policy Attitudes of public opinion in Egypt, Indonesia, Morocco, and Pakistan, for instance, found that majorities in each of the four countries believed that Washington's primary goal was to dominate the Middle East and weaken and divide the Islamic world. According to another PIPA poll, conducted last spring, anti-American sentiment remained high in Pakistan, where over 80 percent of respondents viewed the Predator strikes as unjustified. Crucially, the report also noted "a sea change" in popular attitudes toward al Qaeda and other religious militants: over 80 percent of the Pakistanis polled said they thought these groups were national security threats—representing more than a 40-percentage-point rise since 2007. Al Qaeda's reputation as the brave vanguard against Western oppression has been tarnished by the tens of thousands of Muslim civilians killed in Afghanistan, Algeria, Iraq, and elsewhere since the "war on terror" began. Several Islamist leaders who once supported al Qaeda, including Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, the organization's ideological godfather, have publicly turned against it, as have many ordinary Muslims. If the deradicalization of Islamist extremists is ever going to work, now is probably the time to try.

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DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT IDEOLOGY

I FIRST GOT involved in deradicalization efforts in 2005, soon after the murder of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh by an Islamist militant. The city of Rotterdam recruited me to help develop a new concept of citizenship that would include Dutch natives as well as immigrants and their children; the city government worried that the idea of jihad had become a fad among not only Muslim youth but also recent converts to Islam. In 2007, a company under contract with Task Force 134, the task force in charge of U.S.-run detention centers in Iraq, asked me to help develop a deradicalization program for the 26,000 Iraqis held at Camp Bucca and Camp Cropper (Camp Bucca has since been closed). Last winter, together with a group of current and former U.S. government officials and analysts, I visited Riyadh's Care Rehabilitation Center, an institution that reintegrates convicted terrorists into Saudi society through religious reeducation, psychological counseling, and assistance finding a job. And in the spring of 2009, I visited a youth center supported by the Muslim Contact Unit, part of the Special Branch of the Metropolitan Police in London, which works with leaders of the Muslim community there, including Islamists, to isolate and counter supporters of terrorist violence.

These experiences made one thing clear: any rehabilitation effort must be based on a clear understanding of what drives people to terrorism in the first place. Terrorist movements often arise in reaction to an injustice, real or imagined, that they feel must be corrected. Yet ideology is rarely the only, or even the most important, factor in an individual's decision to join the cause. The reasons that people become terrorists are as varied as the reasons that others choose their professions: market conditions, social networks, education, individual preferences. Just as the passion for justice and law that drives a lawyer at first may not be what keeps him working at a law firm, a terrorist's motivations for remaining in, or leaving, his "job" change over time. Deradicalization programs need to take account—and advantage—of these variations and shifts in motivations.

Interestingly, terrorists who claim to be driven by religious ideology are often ignorant about Islam. Our hosts in Riyadh told us that the vast majority of the deradicalization program's "beneficiaries," as

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its administrators call participants, had received little formal education and had only a limited understanding of Islam. In the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe, second- and third-generation Muslim youth are rebelling against the kind of “soft” Islam practiced by their parents and promoted in local mosques. They favor what they think is the “purer” Islam, uncorrupted by Western culture, which is touted on some Web sites and by self-appointed imams from the Middle East who are barely educated themselves. For example, the Netherlands-based terrorist cell known as the Hofstad Group designed what one police officer described as a “do-it-yourself” version of Islam based on interpretations of *takfiri* ideology (*takfir* is the practice of accusing other Muslims of apostasy) culled from the Internet and the teachings of a drug dealer turned cleric.

Such true believers are good candidates for the kind of ideological reeducation undertaken by Task Force 134 in Iraq and by the prison-based deradicalization program in Saudi Arabia. A Saudi official told the group of us who visited the Care Rehabilitation Center in Riyadh last winter that the main reason for terrorism was ignorance about the true nature of Islam. Clerics at the center teach that only the legitimate rulers of Islamic states, not individuals such as Osama bin Laden, can declare a holy war. They preach against *takfir* and the selective reading of religious texts to justify violence. One participant in the program told us, “Now I understand that I cannot make decisions by reading a single verse. I have to read the whole chapter.”

PREJUDICE AND PRIDE

IN EUROPE, Muslim youth describe themselves, often accurately, as victims of prejudice in the workplace and in society more generally. Surveys carried out in 2006 by the European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia (now subsumed by the Fundamental Rights Agency), an EU body, showed that minorities and immigrants in the European Union experience greater levels of unemployment, are over-represented in the least desirable jobs, and receive lower wages. After the van Gogh murder, the native Dutch, who are famously proud of their tolerance, grew visibly less so: they started complaining about rising rates of criminality among Dutch Moroccan youth and the rhetoric

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of radical imams who preach that homosexuality is a sickness or a sin. Rightly perceiving that this growing prejudice against Muslims could become a source of social conflict, local governments and nongovernmental organizations put in place various programs to integrate young immigrants into broader Dutch society.

Group dynamics are as important as social grievances. Young people are sometimes attracted to terrorist movements through social connections, music, fashion, or lifestyle and only later come to understand fully the groups' violent ideologies and goals. Al Shabab, spurred by a member who calls himself Abu Mansour al-Amriki, and other groups affiliated with al Qaeda have begun using anti-American hip-hop—"jihad rap"—in their recruitment videos; the British rap group Blakstone and the defunct but still popular American band Soldiers of Allah promote violence against *kafir* (nonbelievers). The first- and second-generation Muslim children I interviewed for a study of the sources of radicalization in the Netherlands seemed to think that talking about jihad was cool, in the same way that listening to gangster rap is in some youth circles. Most of these children will not turn to violence, but once youth join an extremist group, the group itself can become an essential part of their identity, maybe even their only community. And so deradicalization requires finding new sources of social support for them. The Saudi program takes great pains to reintegrate participants into their families and the communities they belonged to before their radicalization by encouraging family visits and getting the community involved in their follow-up after they are released. The program rightly assumes that group dynamics are key to both radicalization and deradicalization.

Then there is economics. For some, jihad is just a job. According to studies by the economist Alan Krueger, now the U.S. Treasury Department's assistant secretary for economic policy, and Alberto Abadie, a professor of public policy at Harvard, there is no direct correlation between low GDP and terrorism. Nonetheless, poor people in countries with high levels of unemployment are more vulnerable to recruitment. Of the 25,000 insurgents and terrorist suspects detained in Iraq as of 2007, nearly all were previously underemployed and 78 percent were unemployed, according to Major General Douglas Stone, the commander of Task Force 134 at the time. Because these insurgents took up the "job" of fighting a military occupation, typically targeting

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soldiers rather than civilians, at least some of them could conceivably be rehabilitated once foreign troops leave Iraq.

According to Christopher Boucek, an expert on Saudi Arabia and Yemen at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Advisory Committee, which helps run the deradicalization program in Saudi Arabia, has reported that most detainees are men in their 20s from large lower- or middle-class families; only three percent come from high-income backgrounds. Boucek says that according to Saudi officials, 25 percent of the detained terrorists who had participated in jihad had prior criminal records, approximately half of them for drug-related offenses; only five percent were prayer leaders or had other formal religious roles. For such individuals, job training and career counseling may be the best deradicalization strategy—or at least a strategy as important as religious reeducation.

ALL IN THE HEAD

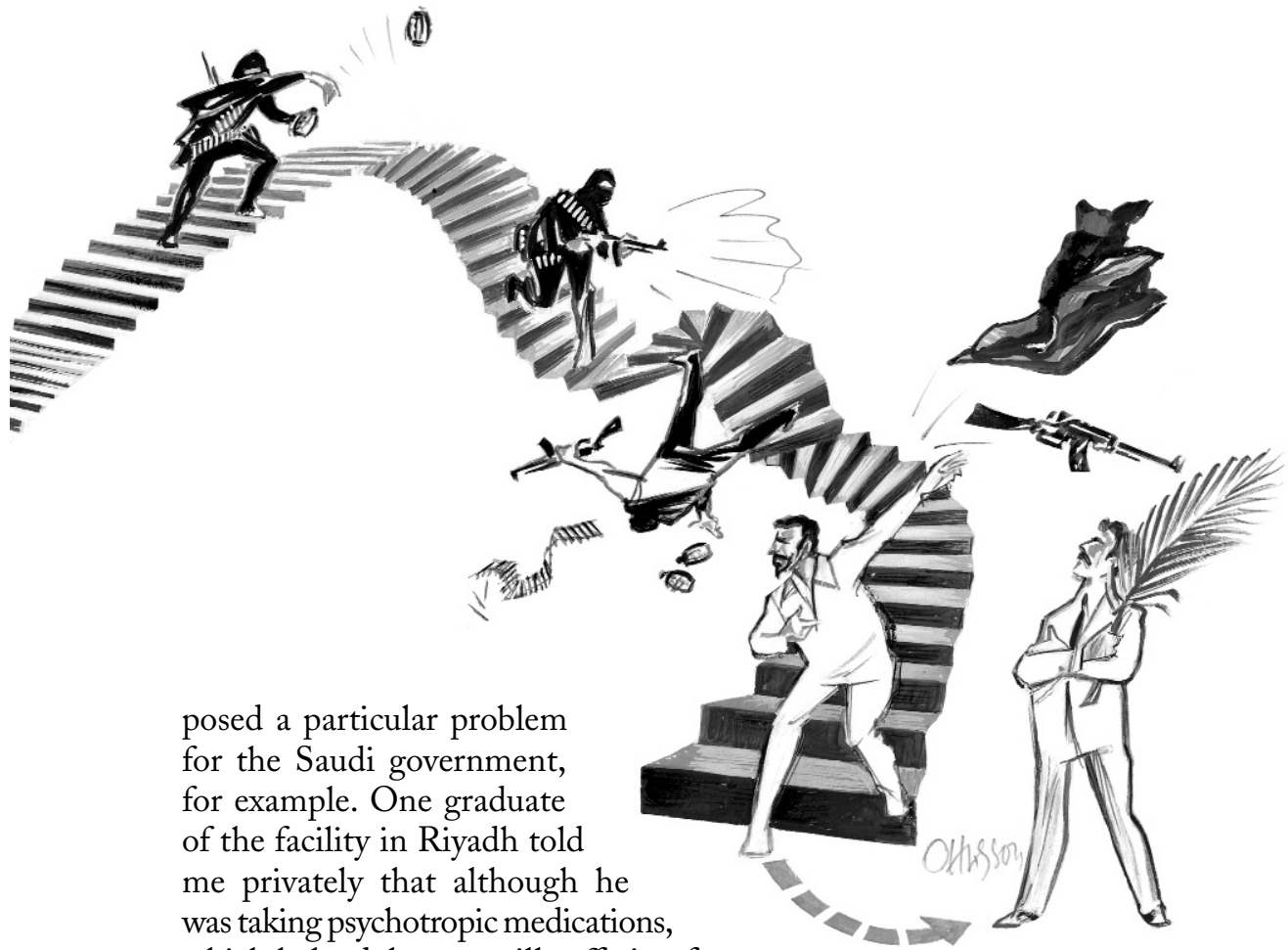
PSYCHOLOGY ALSO matters. One element worth examining in particular is the potential impact of sexual abuse on radicalization. Much has been written about the role of radical madrasahs in creating terrorists in Pakistan and elsewhere, some of it in these pages. Outside of the Pakistani press, however, little note is made of the routine rape of boys at such schools. Also troubling is the rape of boys by warlords, the Afghan National Army, or the police in Afghanistan. Such abuses are commonplace on Thursdays, also known as “man-loving day,” because Friday prayers are considered to absolve sinners of all wrongdoing. David Whetham, a specialist in military ethics at King’s College London, reports that security checkpoints set up by the Afghan police and military have been used by some personnel to troll for attractive young men and boys on Thursday nights. The local population has been forced to accept these episodes as par for the course: they cannot imagine defying the all-powerful Afghan commanders. Could such sexual traumas be a form of humiliation that contributes to contemporary Islamist terrorism?

Similarly, one need not spend many days in Gaza before understanding that fear and humiliation, constants of daily life there, play at least some role in certain Palestinians’ decisions to become martyr-



murderers. If terrorism can be a source of validation, then surely helping adherents come to terms with the humiliation they have experienced could help bring them back into the fold. To that end, the Saudi rehabilitation program includes classes in self-esteem.

Aside from the question of preexisting personal trauma, consider the impact of a terrorist's lifestyle on his psychology. Exposure to violence, especially for those who become fighters, can cause lasting, haunting changes in the body and the mind. Terrorists are "at war," at least from their perspective, and they, too, may be at risk of posttraumatic stress disorder. Moreover, those who have been detained may have been subjected to torture and left with even more serious psychological wounds. The Guantánamo detainees sent back to Saudi Arabia have



posed a particular problem for the Saudi government, for example. One graduate of the facility in Riyadh told me privately that although he was taking psychotropic medications, which helped, he was still suffering from terrible nightmares and feeling hypervigilant.

(He claimed to have been tortured with electrodes in Afghanistan, prior to being moved to Guantánamo.) It will be critically important to incorporate some of what the medical community learns about posttraumatic stress disorder. This is not because terrorists deserve sympathy—they do not—but because understanding their state of mind is necessary to limiting the risk that they will return to violence.

Some individuals join terrorist movements out of conviction but evolve over time into professional killers. Once that happens, the emotional, or material, benefits of belonging can overtake the spiritual benefits of believing. This suggests that some terrorists might develop enduring reasons—perhaps even a compulsion—to pursue violence. Such individuals should be detained preventively and the key thrown away, as some governments do with sexual predators. But in cases in which the law precludes indefinite detention, governments may be

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forced to release suspects. In those instances, officials will have to choose whether to ignore the threat posed by these people or work with other governments to develop tools to reduce the chance that they will resume being terrorists. Regarding lower-level operatives, governments must consider risky tradeoffs. On the one hand, how great is the chance that graduates of deradicalization programs will return to terrorism or other forms of violent crime? On the other hand, are incarcerated terrorists recruiting in prison among the ordinary criminals or the guards, or can preventive detention, or the prison itself, become a symbol of injustice to potential recruits?

REHABILITATION AND RECIDIVISM

AFTER PARTICIPATING in a 1974 survey of 231 case studies of rehabilitation programs for criminals in prisons, the sociologist Robert Martinson wrote that “with few and isolated exceptions, the rehabilitative efforts that have been reported so far have had no appreciable effect on recidivism.” This observation sparked a “nothing works” movement throughout the United States. Academics continued to study the rehabilitation of criminals, however, and there is now a fairly broad consensus that some measures do work. The most successful rehabilitation models focus on the motivations of individual offenders. The ideal approach includes three components: prison-based rehabilitation programs, services to help released prisoners reintegrate into society, and postrelease services. The community’s involvement in the postrelease services, in particular, is essential to reducing recidivism rates.

Terrorists are different from ordinary criminals in many ways, of course, but it is worth noting that according to the Saudi government, its deradicalization program—which relies on prison-based rehabilitation programs, transitional services, and postrelease services—has been extraordinarily successful. The Saudi government has not disclosed the total number of people who have completed its program, but as of 2009, 11 graduates had ended up on the country’s most-wanted terrorist list. Still, according to official statistics, the rate of recidivism is 10–20 percent, far lower than that for ordinary criminals. In order to gain a more complete understanding of what works, and

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what does not, in deradicalization efforts, it will be important for the Saudi government to give outsiders greater access to the program and to statistics regarding it.

That said, some of the Saudi program's main features, and thus its results, may be difficult to replicate elsewhere. The project is extremely expensive; it is constantly being updated, based on input from the staff and participants. It includes psychological counseling, vocational training, art therapy, sports, and religious reeducation. Former Guantánamo detainees who graduate from the program are given housing, a car, money for a wedding—even assistance in finding a wife, if necessary. They receive help with career placement for themselves and their families. There is an extensive postrelease program as well, which involves extensive surveillance. The guiding philosophy behind these efforts, the program's leaders explained, is that jihadists are victims, not villains, and they need tailored assistance—a view probably unacceptable in many countries.

Could aspects of the program nonetheless be replicated elsewhere? The U.S. government has been trying to persuade the Saudi government to assist in reintegrating into mainstream society 97 Yemeni terrorist suspects who remained in Guantánamo as of October 2009. According to Benjamin Wittes of the Brookings Institution, these Yemenis “include many of the worst of the worst.” Repatriating them to Yemen, Wittes adds, is not an attractive option because of the fragility of the Yemeni state and its notoriously leaky jails: ten terrorist suspects escaped in 2003; in 2006, 23 suspects did. And because the Saudi program depends on relatives to police the behavior of the detainees once they are released, Boucek, of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, describes the U.S. proposal to send the Yemenis to the Saudi program as “a catastrophically bad idea,” unless the detainees grew up or have relatives in Saudi Arabia. Boucek favors giving U.S. assistance for a new program in Yemen that would be modeled in part on the one in Saudi Arabia.

The recidivism rate for graduates of the Saudi terrorist-rehabilitation program is far lower than that for ordinary criminals.

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GANGPLANK

BOTH RADICALIZATION and deradicalization typically involve several steps, including changes in values and changes in behavior. The changes in values do not necessarily precede the changes in behavior, John Horgan, director of the International Center for the Study of Terrorism at Pennsylvania State University, has found. Individuals often join extremist groups in the same way that they might join gangs—through social connections, to gain a sense of belonging—and only later do they acquire extremist views. The literature on gangs, for its part, suggests that the most productive time to intervene in this process is before an individual joins the group.

It is based on this understanding that, alongside their deradicalization projects, several governments are devising programs to forestall radicalization altogether. Youth programs developed by the Institute for Multicultural Development (also known as FORUM), in the Netherlands, help adolescents and young adults in the country resist radicalization and recruitment into terrorist groups by encouraging them to “express their possible disappointments and (justified) feelings of exclusion in peaceful and democratic ways and turn their genuine concerns into positive social action.” FORUM focuses on “problem neighborhoods,” namely, ethnic neighborhoods with high levels of unemployment.

The Saudi government also runs a terrorism-prevention program, which monitors religious leaders, schoolteachers, and Web sites. It recently arrested five individuals for promoting militant activities on the Internet and recruiting individuals to travel abroad for what the government called “inappropriate purposes.” Meanwhile, it also supports a nongovernmental organization called the Sakinah Campaign (*sakinah* means “tranquility”), which helps Internet users who have visited extremist sites interact with legitimate Islamic scholars online, with a view to steering them away from radicalism.

Such projects may serve as models or at least as a source of inspiration for similar efforts elsewhere. Washington should study them, even though the United States has so far been relatively immune from the kind of homegrown Islamist terrorism that has afflicted Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom, and other European countries. This may

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be because American Muslims tend to be more fully integrated into American society and tend to be better educated and have higher-paying jobs than the average American. In the last few years, however, a small number of Somali immigrants who had settled as refugees in the United States, especially in Minnesota, have joined al Shabab in Somalia. (One of them is the first known American to become a suicide bomber.) These immigrants have less in common with other American Muslims and more resemble Pakistanis in the United Kingdom and Moroccans in the Netherlands, who face discrimination in school and on the job market. Unlike previous waves of Muslim immigrants to the United States, these Somalis arrived with little knowledge of English or the United States. Partly as a result, they have had difficulty assimilating into American society: according to the most recent census, Somali Americans have the highest unemployment rate among East African diasporas in the United States and the lowest rate of college graduation.

U.S. officials devising social programs for Somali American youth can learn not only from previous anti-gang efforts in the United States but also from the experiences of European governments and their efforts to lure lower-achieving immigrant youth away from gangs and terrorist groups. As part of these efforts, it makes a great deal of sense to back anti-jihadi Muslim activists. But that is also a risky move. Antifundamentalist groups that get official backing risk being perceived not just as opposing violence but also as opposing Islam. The Quilliam Foundation, an anti-extremism think tank in the United Kingdom that was started by two former members of the Islamist organization Hizb ut-Tahrir, has received nearly one million pounds from the British government—and has lost credibility among ordinary Muslims.

But there are hopeful signs: Hanif Qadir, together with his brother and a former member of a local gang, created the Active Change Foundation in 2003, an organization that runs a youth center and a gym in Waltham Forest, a culturally diverse and gang-infested borough of northern London, and is supported by the Metropolitan Police. Qadir told me that he had been recruited by al Qaeda in 2002 and was on his way to Afghanistan expecting to fight when he changed his mind after hearing that volunteers were being used as “cannon fodder.”

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Now, he explained to me, he encourages youth to express their rage about the mistreatment of Muslims in Iraq, Palestine, and elsewhere and channel it into peaceful political action. Having been involved in its gangs or violent extremist groups themselves, he and the other program leaders know the community well. The foundation's ambition, as it puts it, is to "work behind the 'wall of silence'" with people who are marginalized by mainstream British society.

Terrorism continues to pose a significant threat to civilians around the world. If every terrorist could be killed or captured and then kept locked up indefinitely, the world would be a safer place. But there are limitations to this approach. Often, the only evidence implicating captured terrorists is not usable in court, and some terrorists will inevitably be released if they are returned to their countries of origin. The destructive ideology that animates the al Qaeda movement is spreading around the globe, including, in some cases, to small-town America. Homegrown zealots, motivated by al Qaeda's distorted interpretation of Islam, may not yet be capable of carrying out 9/11-style strikes, but they could nonetheless terrorize a nation.

Terrorism spreads, in part, through bad ideas. The most dangerous and seductive bad idea spreading around the globe today is a distorted and destructive interpretation of Islam, which asserts that killing innocents is a way to worship God. Part of the solution must come from within Islam and from Islamic scholars, who can refute this ideology with arguments based on theology and ethics. But bad ideas are only part of the problem. Terrorists prey on vulnerable populations—people who feel humiliated and victimized or who find their identities by joining extremist movements. Governments' arsenals against terrorism must include tools to strengthen the resilience of vulnerable populations. These tools should look more like anti-gang programs and public diplomacy than war. 🌐