



# Saudi Deradicalization Faces the Future

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Saudi Arabia is in the throes of a monumental transition. This shift, set in motion by Vision 2030,” the signature initiative of *de facto* ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, has expanded since the Vision’s formal launch in 2016 to touch upon virtually every aspect of life within the Kingdom. It entails dramatic shifts in the national economy as the country reorients away from its traditional dependence on oil revenue. It is also visible at the societal level, with extensive reforms enabling greater economic opportunities for women, a loosening of restrictions on social interactions between the sexes, and a more relaxed attitude toward popular culture. Nowhere, however, is change more pronounced – and more potentially significant – than in the realm of religious affairs. By addressing religious extremism, this shift has become important to Saudi counterterrorism measures.

## A ‘Course Correction’

Western observers have long worried over the profound, and profoundly negative, effects of the Kingdom’s decades-long efforts to promote the austere Wahhabi creed that serves as the ideological foundation of the modern Saudi state beyond its borders. This drive was made possible by massive, long-term infusions of Saudi capital; it has been estimated that, between 1975 and 1987, the Saudis spent some \$4 billion annually on “overseas development aid” in assorted foreign countries, including the printing of religious literature, the establishment of mosques and cultural centers, and other related activities. These investments, in turn, contributed greatly to the rise of conservative, exclusionary, and extreme interpretations of the Islamic faith among Sunni Muslims worldwide over the past half century.

Today, by contrast, the Saudi government appears to be making a major effort to strike a more moderate religious tone globally. This is visible in the Kingdom’s attempts at dialogue, with Saudi religious officials taking pains to engage other Muslim governments and movements that they had previously ignored or denigrated. It can also be seen in Saudi religious authorities’ official interfaith outreach, such as the recent delegation of *imams* headed by Muslim World League Secretary General Muhammad al-Issa that traveled to Auschwitz to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi death camp by Allied forces at the end of World War II.

These overtures, however, do not constitute an outright repudiation of Wahhabism on part of the House of Saud. Indeed, in his now-famous April 2018 interview with Jeffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic*, the crown prince refused to even acknowledge the existence of this creed, let alone its role as a driver of the Kingdom’s foreign policy in decades past. Similarly, Saudi academics and officials are uniformly defensive when discussing the country’s role in the promotion of extreme Islam abroad, describing the Kingdom’s well-documented exportation of Wahhabism over the past several decades as a “misunderstanding” or a conspiracy theory cooked up by the country’s enemies, like Iran.

Given these circumstances, the Saudi government’s recent turn on religion falls short of a fundamental change of heart or ideological reorientation. It is, rather, best understood as what scholars have termed a “course correction” – one designed, above all, to show the world a kinder, more inclusive side of the regime. Yet, whatever its limitations, this shift is nonetheless exerting a pronounced influence on the country’s domestic counterterrorism efforts.

## Saudi Arabia’s Deradicalization System

The Kingdom has grappled with the need to forge an effective strategy against Islamist extremism ever since a coordinated May 2003 terrorist assault on residential compounds in Riyadh demonstrated conclusively that the Kingdom’s broad weaponization of political Islam could have deleterious domestic effects. In the subsequent years, Saudi Arabia built a comprehensive program aimed at deradicalizing individuals who had embraced the most extreme interpretations of Wahhabi Islam.

At the center of this effort, commonly known as the *Munasaha* program, lies the Mohammed Bin Nayef Counseling and Care Center. Formally launched in 2006 by the Saudi Ministry of the Interior, the program has grown into a network of seven centers, with the main facility in Riyadh, another in Jeddah, and five more attached to various prisons around the country. (Additional facilities will be erected as the need arises, because the Saudi government has preemptively guaranteed the program any resources it requires.)

The center’s showcase Riyadh facility can accommodate a maximum of 160 residents – dubbed “beneficiaries” by center specialists – at a time. These subjects are Islamist extremists who have completed their sentences at one of the country’s five dedicated prisons for religious extremism and are subsequently sent to the center to prepare for reintegration into Saudi society. Participation in the program is mandatory and a condition of release for all prisoners convicted of religious crimes. Stays at the center average three months, with a maximum tenure of one year.

The center's work proceeds along three broad tracks. The first is counseling, with the center commencing outreach to radicalized inmates in order to begin discussing its work and "correct" ideas about religion with them. Once those individuals are released and come to the center, that work continues through an array of "curative" services, from psychological counseling to religious re-education, that are designed to help the individuals "reconcile" themselves with the fact that their worldview and religious interpretation is incorrect.

The second phase of the center's work revolves around "care and rehabilitation." Subjects are offered a range of religious, psychological, and social programs designed to help them work through their violent impulses and radical ideation. Perhaps the most well-known – and controversial – of these initiatives is the center's "art therapy" program, which allows residents to channel their frustrations via activities such as painting, woodworking, and drawing. While Western experts have often scoffed at the initiative, their criticism tends to ignore the fact that art therapy isn't a standalone program but instead just one part of a much more comprehensive package of rehabilitation activities.

The third phase of the center's work is designed for what is known as "aftercare," and follows subjects after they graduate from the program. This long-term tracking includes facilitating vocational internships to help with eventual job placement, interfacing with family members to ensure the graduate is being monitored in the home, and tracking the behavior of former patients for as long as a decade to ensure that they do not exhibit recidivism and return to radical practices.

### **A Successful Effort?**

The center and its work have received significant attention in the West over the past decade, as more observers and specialists became aware of its work. For its part, the Saudi government has been eager to promote the center as a symbol of its commitment to counterterrorism – and as a key success story in its own ongoing "war on terror."

But is it? Saudi officials cite overwhelmingly positive results from the work of the center, which they say has processed some 4,400 individuals to date. Center specialists point to a success rate of 88% among 138 former al Qaeda militants previously detained in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba – a figure that they say is broadly consistent with the overall results of the center's programs in reintegrating former militants into Saudi society.

Yet these glowing figures mask a more complicated calculus. Subjects who are deemed "irreconcilable" or who continue to display radical tendencies after their maximum allotted time at the center do not "graduate" and re-enter society and are therefore not officially logged as failures. Rather, center officials revealed, these individuals are remanded back into the custody of the country's judiciary system, which once again takes charge of their incarceration. The statistics for this latter cohort are not publicly available, but the overall dynamic suggests that the success rate of the program is more modest the Saudi government advertises – perhaps significantly so.

### **Shifting Sands**

The single biggest hurdle to the center's work, however, could lie in the Kingdom's changing strategic culture.

As part of the country's current socio-cultural transition, there has been a notable change in what Saudi policymakers term the "interpretation" of religion – as it applies to daily life and to the country's engagement with the region. In practical terms, this shift has been bewildering for some Saudis, who have seen religious tenets previously deemed acceptable now officially frowned upon. This holds doubly true for Saudi nationals who harbor religious views that are extreme even by Saudi standards. This, psychologists at the center admit, is a not-insignificant issue in the larger effort to rehabilitate and reintegrate former militants. As they put it, however, it is in and of itself an "important test" of the psychological resiliency of those individuals, and of their suitability for re-entry into a rapidly changing Saudi society.

That dynamic offers a revealing glimpse into the variable nature of Saudi religious thought today, which is undergoing a metamorphosis that – even if not fully explained by the country's authorities – is nonetheless profoundly altering the parameters of acceptable religious interpretation among the country's population. But it is also much more. By its nature, the House of Saud's success in convincing the most extreme elements of society to moderate their ideological positions will serve as an important barometer of future domestic stability in a rapidly changing Kingdom.

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