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Deprogramming Jihadists

By KATHERINE ZOEPF

The sunset prayer had just ended, and Sheik Ahmad al-Jilani was already calling his class to order. When the latecomers slipped into the front row, Jilani nodded at them briskly. “Young men,” he began, “who can tell me why we do jihad?”

The members of the class were still new and a bit shy. Jilani clasped his hands and smiled encouragingly. Before him, sitting in school desks, were a dozen young Saudi men who had served time in prison for belonging to militant Islamic groups. Now they were inmates in a new rehabilitation center, part of a Saudi government initiative that seeks to deprogram Islamic extremists.

Jilani has been teaching his class, which is called Understandings of Jihad, since the center was established early last year. A stout man who makes constant, self-deprecating references to his weight, the sheik is an avuncular figure, popular with his students. On this chilly evening he had on a woolly, brocade-trimmed bisht, the cloak that Saudi men wear on formal occasions or in cool weather, which gave him a slightly imposing air. But behind his thick glasses, his eyes shone warmly as he surveyed the classroom.

Finally, someone answered: “We do jihad to fight our enemies.”

“To defeat God’s enemies?” another suggested.

“To help weak Muslims,” a third offered.

“Good, good,” Jilani said. “All good answers. Is there someone else? What about you, Ali?” Ali, in the second row, looked away, then faltered: “To . . . answer . . . calls for jihad?”

Jilani frowned slightly and wrote Ali’s answer up on the white board behind him. He read it out to the class before turning back to Ali. “All right, Ali,” the sheik said. “Why do we answer calls for jihad? Is it because all Muslim leaders want to make God’s word highest? Do we kill if these leaders tell us to kill?”

Ali looked confused, but whispered, “Yes.”

“No — wrong!” Jilani cried as Ali blushed. “Of course we want to make God’s word highest, but not every Muslim leader has this as his goal. There are right jihads and wrong jihads, and we must examine the situation for ourselves. For example, if a person wants to go to hajj now, is it right?”

The class chuckled obligingly at Jilani’s little joke. The month for performing hajj, the holy pilgrimage to Mecca that observant Muslims hope to complete at least once in their lives, had

ended five weeks earlier, and the suggestion was as preposterous as throwing a Fourth of July barbecue in November.

“Well, just as there is a proper time for hajj, there is also a proper time for jihad,” Jilani explained.

Jilani’s students, who range in age from 18 to 36, are part of a generation brought up on heroic tales of Saudi fighters who left home to fight alongside the mujahedeen in Afghanistan during the 1980s and who helped to force the Soviets to withdraw from the country. The Saudi state was essentially built on the concept of jihad, which King Abdul Aziz al-Saud used to knit disparate tribal groups into a single nation. The word means “struggle” and in Islamic law usually refers to armed conflict with non-Muslims in defense of the global Islamic community. Saudi schools teach a version of world history that emphasizes repeated battles between Muslims and nonbelieving enemies. Whether to Afghanistan in the 1980s or present-day Iraq, [Saudi Arabia](#) has exported more jihadist volunteers than any other country; 15 of the 19 hijackers on Sept. 11 were Saudis.

But jihad can go too far. The Saudi government has condemned the Sept. 11 attacks and arrests jihadists who attempt to enter Iraq. Some Saudi veterans of overseas jihads have adopted one form of the doctrine of takfir, in which a Muslim is judged by another Muslim to be an unbeliever. Because traditional Islamic law calls for the execution of apostates, some have used takfir to justify attacks on the Saudi state. In recent years, these attacks have raised fears that the chaos in some of the world’s conflict zones is being brought home to Saudi Arabia by radicalized jihadists. The Saudi government thus finds itself in the awkward position of needing to defend the principle of jihad to its citizens while discouraging them from actually taking up arms. One step it has taken is simply to talk to those who have proved to be most vulnerable to the temptations of jihad, the captured militants themselves. As Jilani put it to me, “The kingdom of Saudi Arabia has the confidence to fight thoughts with thoughts.”

Jilani and his colleagues are not just fighting a war of ideas. Though the Saudi government tends to explain its rehabilitation program in purely Islamic terms, as an effort to correct theological misunderstandings, the new program also addresses the psychological needs and emotional weaknesses that have led many young men to jihad in the first place. It tries to give frustrated and disaffected young men the trappings of stability — a job, a car, possibly a wife. Though international human rights groups continue to sound the alarm about Saudi Arabia’s habit of detaining suspects without charging them and of punishing certain crimes with floggings and amputations, these young men seem to have become the subjects of a continuing experiment in counterterrorism as a kind of social work.

If the Saudi rehabilitation program succeeds, it could reduce the ranks of dangerous extremists and have a far-reaching impact: domestic and regional stability and, though it’s not a stated goal, increased safety for potential targets in the West. Program administrators claim that the Saudi initiative could also provide a model for other Muslim countries struggling with Islamic militancy. They say that Saudi Arabia — home to Islam’s two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina — has an unmatched moral authority among the world’s Muslims and is uniquely placed to find the intellectual and spiritual vulnerabilities of organizations like [Al Qaeda](#) and to fight Islamic extremism on its own terms.

Though the exact nature of the role that religious belief plays in the recruitment of jihadists is the subject of much debate among scholars of terrorism, a growing number contend that ideology is far less important than family and group dynamics, psychological and emotional needs. “We’re finding that they don’t generally join for religious reasons,” [John Horgan](#) told me. A political psychologist who directs the International Center for the Study of Terrorism at [Penn State](#), Horgan has interviewed dozens of former terrorists. “Terrorist movements seem to provide a sense of adventure, excitement, vision, purpose, camaraderie,” he went on, “and involvement with them has an allure that can be difficult to resist. But the ideology is usually something you acquire once you’re involved.”

Other scholars emphatically disagree, stressing the significance of political belief and grievance. But if the Saudi program is succeeding, it may be because it treats jihadists not as religious fanatics or enemies of the state but as alienated young men in need of rehabilitation.

In 2004, the Saudi Interior Ministry started the Munasaha, or Advisory Committee, program, to reform prison inmates convicted of involvement in Islamic extremism. Abdulrahman al-Hadlaq, the program administrator, says that a committee of senior Saudi clerics interviews inmates about their beliefs before placing them in appropriate classes. Enrollment in the Munasaha program is not voluntary, and [Human Rights Watch](#) reports that some participants have been in detention for months or even years without trial or access to lawyers. But graduates of the program say the treatment is far from harsh.

In January 2007, the Interior Ministry began renting small vacation compounds in the Riyadh suburb of al-Thumama. Half-a-dozen adjoining compounds now house the Care Center, a post-prison continuation of the Munasaha program offering more intensive rehabilitation activities. Each compound holds up to about 20 men, who study, eat and sleep together for the duration of the program.

On arrival, each prisoner is given a suitcase filled with gifts: clothes, a digital watch, school supplies and toiletries. Inmates are encouraged to ask for their favorite foods (Twix and Snickers candy bars are frequent requests). Volleyball nets, PlayStation games and Ping-Pong and foosball tables are all provided. The atmosphere at the center — which I visited several times earlier this year — is almost eerily cozy and congenial, with mattresses and rugs spread on stubby patches of lawn for inmates to lounge upon. With few exceptions, the men wear their beards untrimmed and their thobes, the long garments that most Saudi men wear, cut above their ankles in the style favored by those who wish to demonstrate strict devotion to Islam. The men are pleasant but many seem a bit puffy and lethargic; one 19-year-old inmate, Faisal al-Subaii, explained that they are encouraged to spend most of their daytime hours in either rest or prayer.

In Saudi Arabia, psychological disorders are often understood as the results of a person finding himself somehow outside the traditional circle of family and community. Most of the counseling that the inmates receive is focused on helping them to develop more healthful family relationships. “We use Western psychiatric techniques together with Islamic techniques,” T. M. Otayan, the center’s staff psychologist, says, referring to the intensive religion classes. A number of the inmates have received diagnoses of antisocial personality disorder, he adds, but he claims serious mental

illness among the former jihadists is rare.

Though it might seem out of place in a society whose religion proscribes the representation of animal or human forms, art therapy is practiced. Awad al-Yami, who studied the subject at Penn State, leads the classes, and chalk drawings by former jihadists decorate the walls of his classroom. Although the sketches — mostly ornate Arabic calligraphy and depictions of flowers — do not especially suggest that demons are being wrestled with, art therapy helps inmates to examine the consequences of their actions, Yami says. “I ask them, ‘If you blow up a car, what will happen?’ The paper gives them a safe place to express some destructive emotions.”

Most prisoners complete the program within two months. Upon release, each former jihadist is required to sign a pledge that he has forsaken extremist sympathies; the head of his family must sign as well. Some also receive a car (often a Toyota) and aid from the Interior Ministry in renting a home. Social workers assist former jihadists and their families in making post-release plans for education, employment and, usually, marriage. “Getting married stabilizes a man’s personality,” Hadlaq says. “He thinks more about a long term future and less about himself and his anger.”

Other countries have experimented with efforts to rehabilitate Islamic extremists. In Egypt and Yemen, moderate clerics counsel prisoners accused of militant activity. The Religious Rehabilitation Group in Singapore has been widely praised for reducing the influence of the [Jemaah Islamiyah](#) terrorist organization. But the Saudi approach is unusual and, according to Bernard Haykel, a professor of Near Eastern studies at [Princeton University](#), “is consistent with Saudi history in that you try through nonviolent means to cajole, to bribe, to buy off the opposition.”

Sheik Jilani likes to encourage class discussions by asking the men to share their experiences, and on one of the occasions I visited, he asked a student named Azzam to explain why he spent five months in Iraq. Referring to the infamous Mahmudiyah killings of 2006, Azzam replied that he had seen an article on the Internet about “the little girl named Abeer who was raped and killed by the Americans.”

“I felt so much sympathy for the Muslims,” Azzam continued. “The infidel rape women and kill children. I decided then that I should join the Muslims in Iraq in order to drive the Americans out.”

The desert evening was growing chilly. Jilani removed his bisht and handed it to a shivering student. He turned back to Azzam. “Tell us, Azzam. What did you find in Iraq? Did you feel good when you went there?”

Azzam frowned. “To tell you the truth, I didn’t find what I was expecting,” he said. “In Iraq, even the Muslims fight each other. I was expecting them to be well organized, but they weren’t.”

Jilani nodded. “So did you fight?”

“I didn’t have the chance,” Azzam said, sounding defensive. “For months, we went from safe house to safe house. There wasn’t anything to do — no action, no training. Finally, they asked me to be a suicide bomber. But I know that suicide is forbidden in Islam, so I came back home.”

Many of the former jihadists seemed to feel unappreciated, their sense of injury plain. Jilani and his colleagues encourage the former militants to examine those feelings, even to think of themselves as victims. Yes, they were tricked and manipulated by deviant ideology (a favorite Saudi catchphrase for Islamic extremism), but now they have a chance to turn back.

Of all the concepts addressed in classes at the rehabilitation center, takfir is the one that tends to evoke the most anger among mainstream Saudi Muslims. The idea that there's a slippery slope from jihad to takfir comes up regularly in discussions with Saudi clerics.

"Some of our young people don't listen to the right scholars," Jilani told me. "First they start to think that they have the right to go to jihad at any time. After that, they start to think that we have the right to kill any non-Muslim."

"Then they start to say that our leaders are kuffar, infidels," the sheik continued. "After that they start to say that our scholars, too, are kuffar. Before long, they've declared war against the whole world."

The Saudi government has recently intensified efforts to fight extremism and to turn public sympathy away from terrorist groups. Several prominent clerics have taken public stands against Al Qaeda, and late last year Saudi Mufti Sheik Abd al-Aziz bin Abdallah Al al-Sheik issued a fatwa prohibiting Saudi youth from traveling overseas to wage jihad. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs has initiated a new program called Serenity to fight terrorism online by drawing terrorist recruiters into one-on-one ideological chat-room combat with moderate-minded clerics.

The government maintains that no graduates of the Munasaha program have returned to violence. But the program is still relatively new, and there are unanswered questions. Is the government dealing with captured militants while really failing to address the root causes of extremism? Will released extremists, now counted as successes, eventually return to jihad?

A consulting psychiatrist at the King Faisal hospital in Riyadh says that to truly fight jihadism would mean fundamentally changing how Islam is taught in Saudi schools and mosques in a way that the Saudi government has until now been unwilling to attempt. "The government is never going to say, full stop, that jihad is wrong," he explains. The doctrine is an integral part of Islamic law, and arguing against it would raise the ire of religious scholars and possibly call the Islamic credentials of the Saudi government into question.

And global jihad is still a socially acceptable path for a young Saudi man with few options, the psychiatrist says. "You have a young man who's depressed, frustrated with life, maybe he fails an exam. He can go from being a loser, a failure, to being a jihadi, someone with status."

How and why violent extremists come to leave their organizations are a fairly new focus in academic studies of terrorism. Horgan's findings — that simple fear and disillusionment can play a major role in an individual's decision to disengage from his group — seem to be echoed by a recent RAND Corporation report on the demise of terrorist groups, which found that efforts by police and intelligence agents to create intense internal pressure within terrorist groups are more successful at fighting extremism than military actions.

Consider Abu Sulay man, a stocky 32-year-old who spent more than three years in prison at Guantánamo and says he fought alongside [Osama bin Laden](#) at Tora Bora. Abu Sulay man spoke on the condition that I would use only his old nom de guerre. He completed the Munasaha program but was released shortly before the Care Center was established; he joked that he envies the current batch of former jihadists their “resort vacation.”

“Getting captured and Guantánamo — it was all a good lesson,” Abu Sulay man told me. “I mean, the main idea of jihad is good — no one disagrees with that.”

His first jihad was in 1996, when he traveled to the Philippines to fight with the [Moro Islamic Liberation Front](#). “They had guys from everywhere, all these different countries, working together,” Abu Sulay man said. “The majority are always Saudis.” In 1997, Abu Sulay man went on to Afghanistan. Four years later, after his second trip to the country, he grew disillusioned with bin Laden and planned to leave for the Philippines because “Chechnya said they didn’t need anyone at the moment.” Instead, he was captured.

Today he notes that the Qaeda camps where he worked as a training instructor offered him clear professional advancement. His new life — in a middle-class Jeddah suburb, doing shift work at an electrical company — doesn’t provide the same sense of purpose. Even so, he has little regard for those who have followed in his footsteps.

“Most people just want to carry weapons,” Abu Sulay man said. They do not, as he put it, have especially sophisticated religious arguments. “For me, it was always more about the feeling that I wanted to help the Muslims. But jihad is complicated. If you’re heading to Afghanistan or Iraq, do you really have the facts you need to get involved on the right side?”

“With Al Qaeda, the training was really excellent,” Abu Sulay man went on. “These people they’ve got going to Iraq nowadays, they have no training, so they’re just sent to explode themselves.”

“Now our government is saying: ‘Don’t go to Iraq. It’s not in our interests,’ ” Abu Sulay man continued. “Now I think, At least I did something with my life. I went out and fought for my beliefs, and I found that things were not as I had planned. But at least I fought for my beliefs. God knows my heart.”

The sheiks who were charged with rehabilitating him were startled by his easygoing attitude, Abu Sulay man recalled. Even though Saudi public opinion has largely turned against Al Qaeda, many Saudis remain concerned that American-led efforts to fight terrorism are anti-Muslim and are infuriated by Guantánamo. “They thought that after all this time in Guantánamo I’d have some hate in me,” Abu Sulay man told me. “But I never look back. I said, ‘O.K., now I’ll start a new life.’ ”

Katherine Zoepf, who writes regularly for The Times, is working on a book about young women in the contemporary Arab world.

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