

Terrorist de-radicalization shows promise, comprehensive study finds

July 3 2010

Prison-based programs to de-radicalize terrorists show promise, if well-run, says a new joint report from U.S. and British researchers. Their initial findings - the most comprehensive to date, based on programs in 15 nations - were presented at a conference this week.

Prisons and [Terrorism](#): Radicalization and De-radicalization in Countries is a joint report of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), based at the University of Maryland, and the International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR), based at Kings College in London.

The report concludes that individual de-radicalization and disengagement programs, such as those in Saudi-Arabia, Singapore, Indonesia and other nations, "can make a difference." The researchers say their work could have policy implications for prisoners detained at Guantanamo Bay, Afghanistan and Iraq.

"This is a much bigger issue than most people appreciate," said University of Maryland professor Gary LaFree, director of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). "It's a classic problem really. Prisons change behavior for both good and for bad. It's difficult to detain prisoners forever, but when is it safe to let them go?"

The final report will be presented in Washington, D.C. this fall.

"Initial results indicate that the programs can work, though probably not 100 percent of the time," LaFree adds. "Just as with regular criminals, individual and community supports help combat recidivism. But with terrorism and ideology there's an added dimension. In general, it's easier to de-radicalize when a movement is on the decline, when the battle seems lost."

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The report identifies principles and best practices to help governments and policymakers avoid costly and counterproductive mistakes. These include:

- Prison services should be more ambitious in promoting positive influences inside prison, and develop more innovative approaches to facilitate extremists' transition back into mainstream society. The current emphasis on security and containment of terrorists leads to missed opportunities to promote reform.
- Over-crowding and under-staffing amplify the conditions that lend themselves to radicalization of inmates. Badly run prisons make the detection of radicalization difficult, and they also create the physical and ideological space in which extremist recruiters can operate freely.
- Religious conversion is not the same as radicalization. Good counter-radicalization policies - whether in or outside prison - never fail to distinguish between legitimate expression of faith and extremist ideologies. [Prison](#) services should invest more in staff training, and consider sharing specialized resources.

- Individual de-radicalization and disengagement programs - such as those in Saudi-Arabia, Singapore, Indonesia, and other countries - can make a difference. Their positive and outward-looking approach should serve as an inspiration for governments and policymakers everywhere.
- Even in the best circumstances, de-radicalization and disengagement programs complement rather than replace other instruments in the fight against terrorism. They work best when the political momentum is no longer with the terrorists or insurgents.

More information: A copy of the preliminary report is available [online](#).

Provided by University of Maryland

Citation: Terrorist de-radicalization shows promise, comprehensive study finds (2010, July 3) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-07-terrorist-de-radicalization-comprehensive.html>

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