

At luxurious rehab center, a Saudi cure for extremism

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) At the Mohammad bin Naif Counseling and Care Center, some 250 patients have daily access to art therapy, water aerobics classes, ping-pong, Jacuzzis, and gourmet chefs.

In several palm-shaded, private chalets, complete with air-conditioned sitting rooms and private pools, Saudi psychologists, imams, and sociologists help prepare the patients for their reintroduction to the outside world.

For some critics of this rehabilitation program, the level of treatment borders on excessive, given who the patients are: former fighters for jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and the self-described Islamic State.

While many Western and Arab states crack down on the hundreds of young men returning from fighting alongside jihadist groups in Syria, Saudi Arabia welcomes them back with rehabilitation. It promotes its program as a model for other Arab states.

By contrast, prison terms in the United States for membership in terrorist groups can reach life imprisonment. In Jordan, teenagers have been sentenced to five years in prison for merely expressing support for IS on Facebook.

Despite a royal decree late last year that imposed heavy penalties on IS members, Saudi authorities continue to hand down reduced sentences to returning jihadists—some as short as a year—with early releases for inmates vetted for the rehabilitation program. More than 3,700 remain in prison on terror charges and are awaiting rehabilitation.

The program stems from beliefs among Saudi officials that the only true deterrent to extremism is for individuals to have a full life and that jihadist ideology is a distortion of true Islam. In the treatment at the center and the out-patient services that follow, this theory is put into practice.

In a three-month program, crafted and advocated by Mohammad bin Naif, current crown prince and interior minister, Saudi officials transfer former jihadists who have completed their jail sentences at the kingdom's five high-security correctional facilities to the care center on the outskirts of Riyadh.

The program employs a team of clerics, theologians, and Shari'a experts to correct "misconceptions" spread by jihadist ideology and guide patients to the "true path of Islam." Armed with dozens of hadith, or sayings from the Prophet Muhammad, and volumes on Islamic jurisprudence dating back to the eighth century, religious experts spend daily sessions with patients to debunk jihadist groups' various claims.

Center psychologists said that former jihadists come from backgrounds that are both poor and wealthy, religious and secular, from large families and from broken homes.

"There is no typical profile, no common factors we can point to that lead to extremism," said Abdullah al-Garni, clinical psychologist and head of the center's mental health division. "But all have been misled and manipulated."

Services do not end once the former jihadists leave the center: for months and years after, physicians help them complete university degrees, find employment, and even marry.

"Once these young men have a family, have responsibilities, life becomes that much more precious to them," al-Garni said. "They think twice about risking everything."

The center said it has the numbers to back up its approach: 88 percent of the some 3,000 Saudis who have gone through the program have been successfully reintegrated into society, officials said.

However, 310 cases have "relapsed," some of whom rejoined jihadist militias in Syria. Center officials say that factors such as an unsupportive family or peers who support jihadist ideology typically cause the relapse.

"For us it is not a failure for the center but a failure for Saudi society," said Yahyah Abu Mugayadh, deputy director.

By encouraging jihadists to come forward, the officials said they aim to bring the issue of extremism out into the open.

“We need the entire society to work with us to combat and prevent extremism,” said Maj.-Gen. Mansour Turki, spokesman for the Saudi Interior Ministry. “A major part of that is to raise awareness—and let families and citizens know that there is another way.”

As part of its counterterrorism strategy, Saudi officials work with families whose members have gone off to fight with various Islamist militias. Through phone calls and Skyping, families encourage militants to break ranks and make their way to Saudi Arabia’s borders—often without passports and with only the clothes on their backs—to be picked up by Saudi intelligence services.

So far, 650 Saudis have returned from Syria over the past two years—many of whom had become disillusioned with jihadist infighting and the disregard for Islamic principles of warfare. They have flooded the kingdom’s detention centers.

Though there are fears of IS attacks at home, Saudi officials see these numbers as a sign of success. “Rather than risking fighters, we bring them back and correct their extremist ideology,” Turki said. “It is a preemptive campaign to prevent attacks.”

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