

**RAAFIA RAEES KHAN**

Email: raafia.raees@gmail.com

FERIHA PERACHA

Email: ferihaperacha@gmail.com

“Bonding and attachment are instrumental to a person’s identity and their ability to overcome vulnerabilities and challenges.”

Deradicalizing, Rehabilitating, and Reintegrating Violent Extremists

Summary

- Despite the volume of research into violent extremism since 9/11, governments worldwide are still trying to understand what drives it and how programs can best mitigate its causes.
- A case study undertaken by Pakistan’s Sabaoon Center for Rehabilitation and the Monitoring Centre (which supports reintegrated youth from Sabaoon) is representative of effective rehabilitation and reintegration programming and hence a useful model for similar efforts elsewhere.
- Sabaoon supports former violent extremists in rebuilding their identities, helping them replace the meaning and purpose these individuals sought when joining violent extremist groups with more socially appropriate and acceptable goals, which then allows for “self-resurrection” and rehabilitation.
- Effective deradicalization programming focuses on psychosocial support, familial involvement, pro-social activities, reestablishing ties with local communities, and interacting with and monitoring reintegrated individuals by both community and law enforcement.

Addressing Radicalization and Recidivism

Over the years since 9/11, transnational violent extremist movements have become a global phenomenon. Governments worldwide are trying to understand what drives violent extremism and how the growing number of related programs can best prevent proliferation. Despite the increasing body of research on these issues (to understand the causes and to develop programs to mitigate them), questions remain about why individuals join such groups and why recidivism remains common among those who have undergone deradicalization and reintegration programs. This Peace Brief discusses lessons learned from a Pakistani case study that focuses on psychosocial support and monitoring to answer some of these questions.

When a person joins a violent extremist organization (VEO), he or she is stripped of their previous identity and given a new persona to serve the group’s agenda, which Social Welfare, Academics and Training for Pakistan (SWAaT) refers to as “metaphoric murder.” Recruits are often assigned aliases and duties aimed at a collective goal that brings them a new sense of meaning and a sense of belonging. A person’s traits and personality are shaped entirely against a backdrop of militancy.

SWAaT, a nonprofit organization established in 2011, develops and implements programs aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism in the northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. The group works to rehabilitate adolescent males recruited into militancy by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan in the Swat region in Pakistan from 2009 through 2017. SWAaT manages the Sabaoon Center, which was established by the Pakistan Army in September 2009 after operations in the area and later transferred to civilian management. (*Sabaoon* is a Pashto word for the first ray of light at dawn.) Sabaoon's deradicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration program has worked with two hundred former extremists to date, 192 of whom have been successfully reintegrated into mainstream society.

The Sabaoon model aims to provide a safe environment for individuals to discuss their perceptions of group ideology, their relationships with commanders and comrades, and how these experiences affected them. By the end of the process, the meaning and purpose individuals sought in joining the VEO are replaced by a more cohesive personality with newfound socially appropriate and acceptable goals, which then allows for "self-resurrection."

Psychosocial Support

Research in developmental psychology has found that bonding and attachment are instrumental to a person's identity and their ability to overcome vulnerabilities and challenges. The most basic form often emerges from the family unit, and neglect or rejection there can result in developmental and interpersonal problems. For instance, the absence of fathers can make young male individuals more susceptible to alternative authority figures and role models, such as militant recruiters or commanders. Similarly, children from large families may be more inclined to seek a sense of belonging in a group. Whether through backlash from family members who disapproved of their decision or resentment toward family members who volunteered them to join without their consent (some 24 percent), a sense of rejection has a negative effect on a person's sense of worth and self-concept, making them more vulnerable and reliant on VEOs or similar groups or gangs.

Sabaoon works to heal emotional and psychological wounds and introduce a secure space for psychosocial intervention. Many youth inducted into the center have not only acted violently but also witnessed violent acts. This intervention therefore tries—within the process of self-resurrection—to restore a healthy mindset and personality profile by assessing the individual in all his complexity, including personality, social, and contextual factors (community organization versus disorganization, in-group versus out-group dynamics); familial factors (familial dysfunction, involvement in militancy); and protective factors (supervision from and bonding with family).

Pro-Social Activities and Community Ties

The Sabaoon facility encourages inductees to acquire skills to help them better adjust to society. Programs focus on teaching critical thinking skills, recognizing and valuing a diversity of opinions, and identifying values to justify their decisions as part of intellectual discourse. These skills provide direction, a sense of meaning and purpose, and help the individual find opportunities to sustain themselves without resorting to criminal activity. Research has found that pro-social involvement is especially effective as a reintegration method, given that those who have sought out "voluntary, sustained, and ongoing helpfulness" over a sustained period prove less likely to reoffend. Pro-social activities and skills help instill a "higher purpose" that individuals often sought by joining a violent extremist group in the first place. For individuals previously motivated by misguided religious or extremist ideology, the Sabaoon program encourages skill development based in religious principles, such as empathy, social and moral responsibility, and practical religious concepts, such

as *haqooq ul ibad* (duty toward mankind), to further reinforce a higher purpose for these individuals. The program also emphasizes the Quran's premise of Rab ul Alameen (God of the universe) rather than Rab ul Muslimeen (God of the Muslims).

Pro-social activities also help in building bridges between individuals and communities that disapprove of the individual's previous involvement with a VEO. Some activities focus on local charity and acts of altruism (such as making donations for local youth, cleaning streets, washing the mosque, providing tuition and basic literacy classes to the youth, and helping the elderly and women carry groceries). Individuals are also encouraged to use their skills to enhance their neighbors' livelihoods, such as by repairing a friend's motorcycle, facilitating transportation of the sick to hospitals, and participating in wedding celebrations and funeral processions. Sabaoon collaborates with community elders to facilitate these interactions and help the community understand the individual's experience within a violent extremist group, their progress in the reintegration program, and how individuals plan to achieve their future goals through community works. There have been zero reports of recidivism among those who engaged in pro-social activities after reintegrating into society.

Interaction and Monitoring from Multiple Sources

Sabaoon worked with numerous sources, including family members and close relatives, community members and elders, and members of the same peer group to verify details provided by individuals inducted at the program. These sources made up a network that helped monitor an individual's progress after leaving the Sabaoon facility.

Establishing a trust-based relationship between the individual and law enforcement agencies is also critical to addressing potential conflicts within families and the community once the reintegrated individual returns. SWAaT works to build this trust by having inductees, when they first arrive at Sabaoon, write a so-called confession statement that helps them both come to terms with their time in militancy and affirm a willingness to change. Details within these statements are also passed on to law enforcement anonymously when reintegrated individuals are able to provide information of militant presence in their communities. This confessional statement is repeated intermittently (and is supported by psychosocial intervention to guide this process further) until the case manager is satisfied with the cohesiveness of the statement itself and the details therein.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Ensuring psychosocial support and monitoring for individuals after reintegration is critical to preventing recidivism and rereadicalization. Given the success of programs that do this, similar programs should aim primarily to understand the context of the target population; tailor such programs to the psychosocial, cultural, religious, and economic needs of the individuals; and assess the progress of the programs intermittently to assess additional needs, successes, and risks to targeted individuals and communities to shape the program effectively.

This process is often lengthy and requires constant review of what has contributed to reintegration successes as well as of the unique needs of inductees at the beginning of each phase of the program. For example, Sabaoon offered two vocational training opportunities in either electrical work or refrigeration–air conditioning repair. However, when few opportunities to use that training were found, market-based surveys were conducted in the community to identify skills more relevant to local needs that would afford those rehabilitating a sustainable income, a key component to their reintegration.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Peace Brief discusses lessons learned from rehabilitation and reintegration programming in Pakistan, focusing on the importance of continued psychosocial support and post-reintegration monitoring for former detainees. Supported by the Asia Center at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the Brief is part of ongoing USIP efforts to develop and implement programs that support objectives related to countering violent extremism. Feriha Peracha is chief executive officer of Social Welfare, Academics and Training for Pakistan (SWAaT) and Raafia Raees Khan is vice CEO.



UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE

2301 Constitution Ave., NW
Washington, D.C. 20037

www.usip.org

eISBN: 978-1-60127-690-2

USIP provides the analysis, training, and tools that prevent and end conflicts, promotes stability, and professionalizes the field of peacebuilding.

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

For media inquiries, contact the office of Public Affairs and Communications, 202.429.4725.

Based on the experiences of the Sabaoon model, this Peace Brief offers the following broad recommendations for other deradicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration programs:

Focus on providing psychosocial services. A program needs to provide a “safe space” for individuals to validate and express their motivations for joining a violent extremist group. Understanding these motivations is crucial for deradicalization programs, because VEOs often recruit those who are most marginalized, excluded, or otherwise at a disadvantage in society. Ensuring basic dignity, safety, and humane treatment is critical to building a basic sense of trust and rapport with those entering the deradicalization process.

Within these safe spaces, psychosocial support serves (or should serve) as counseling sessions to help individuals realize their wrongdoing through confession and acceptance. The sessions could and should be used to help individuals develop basic skills, such as stress and anger management, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, conflict resolution and decision-making skills, and social empathy by engaging them in hypothetical and actual dilemmas. Psychosocial services as a sympathetic and supportive unit can provide individuals with the tools to establish feasible goal direction and guidance for the potential challenges they will face once they reintegrate into their community.

Promote skill building before reintegration. Throughout the rehabilitation process, focus should be on creating an individualized plan that promotes building skills for inductees to help individuals sustain themselves as they reintegrate into the community. Other skills such as basic literacy, including the written and spoken national language as well as English, as well as basic mathematics, history, and cultural-social studies should also be compulsory. In some instances, corrective religious instruction, including moderate religious understanding through verification of Quranic text and discussion on critical aspects of jihad, should be encouraged, as should instruction on citizenship values that emphasize tolerance. The program needs to provide individuals with the tools to verify information for themselves and help inform their personal opinions and perspectives. Opportunities for continuing educational pursuits and skills acquisition should also be available.

Guarantee monitoring after reintegration. Programs should also establish connections with guarantors in the individual’s community, such as neighbors, peer groups, or employers, who can help keep the individual on track after reintegration. Especially in the case of minors, adolescents should be released under supervision and care of a guardian, or any individual who—to minimize the risk of recidivism—can provide social, emotional, and physical support and encourage the individual’s progress toward new goals. Relationships with probationary and law enforcement agencies should also be established to verify individual’s activities after they leave the facility.

In most cases, families should also be emphasized throughout rehabilitation and reintegration. Familial involvement in the process has consistently proven a determinant factor in a person’s overall progress. Individuals whose families visited frequently tended to adapt more quickly to their reintegrated alternative lifestyles (typically within one to three years) than those with limited familial support. Families were encouraged to participate in discussions throughout the process, including those about the individual’s activities as part of the extremist group, corrective religious instruction sessions, and discussions on potential issues for the individual’s reintegration in the short and long term. Family participation not only made it easier for family members to understand and verify how the individual had changed through the rehabilitation process but also helped them reinforce, in an outside setting afterward, the lessons learned in the program.