



## Understanding Deradicalization Programs in Pakistan: Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Munir Ahmad<sup>1</sup>, Syed Hammad Nabi<sup>2</sup>, Yumna Shakeel<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

Over the last fifteen years, Pakistan has become a hub for radical Islamist militant groups. Despite the rising militancy and increased terrorist attacks, however, the country has yet to implement a comprehensive deradicalization strategy. Lack of access to mainstream education, poverty, and weak legal and political institutions are major contributors to a growing league of young jihadi recruits. Most of the deradicalization programs are led by the military, are concentrated in the Swat valley, and has little connection to scattered efforts by police and civil administration elsewhere in the country. Although the Pakistani army and civil society institutions have taken steps to counter violent militant ideologies, the government has yet to step up to the plate. Most of the deradicalization programs, in Pakistan and elsewhere, focus on the importance of economic incentives and alternative livelihoods. Ideological counter-messaging and efforts to prevent recruits from reconnecting with militant networks are also elements of successful programs.

**Keywords:** Deradicalization, Pakistan, Ideological counter-messaging

### 1. Introduction

Pakistan is a hub for local and transnational Islamist militant groups. Since the mid-2000s, Pakistan's terrorism has killed thousands of civilians, including politicians and activists. The December 2014 school attack in Peshawar, which killed 145 people, including 132 students, appears to have been a turning point for the Pakistani military and civilian government, strengthening their resolve to combat terrorism and antistate actors. In response to the Peshawar attack, Pakistan launched a 20-point NAP in January 2015 (Rumi, 2015).

Special courts under military officers were created to speed up trials and avoid the pitfalls of the Pakistani justice system (overburdened courts, slow processing times, and weak chains of evidence). The death penalty has been reinstated for no terrorism cases. The NAP calls for bans on armed militant groups and hates speech restrictions to limit terrorist access to local media. It also calls for strengthening the National Counter Terrorism Authority, registering and regulating madrassas, and registering Afghan refugees, among other steps. Pakistan needs a more nuanced approach to deal with a growing culture of militancy and terrorism that cannot be eliminated by force alone (Kaphle, 2014).

A deradicalization program can reintegrate would-be terrorists and disengage them from conflict rather than using military courts and capital punishment. Such efforts are key to Pakistan's counterterrorism plans. Ideological, economic, social, and psychological factors drive radicalization and militancy; each must be countered. Poverty, deprivation, and political pressures push boys toward militancy, and Pakistan's idle youth make ideal recruits. Many militants view jihad as an occupation, according to Shazadi Beg and Laila Bokhari. Those who can start businesses or find jobs are less likely to return to militancy. Worldly and psychosocial benefits together radicalize young people for suicide bombing missions, including the immense honor bestowed on an individual on the eve of his departure and the reverence and financial support the family receives. Militant recruits are taught that martyrdom and jihad are great honors. This encourages an extremist, maximalist worldview that rejects other political actors' legitimacy and isolates militants from other communities (Beg, & Bokhari, 2008).

### 2. Current Deradicalization Efforts

Deradicalization is a process in which people abandon extremist worldviews, forsake violence, and accept political pluralism. Pakistan seems to lack a comprehensive strategy and provides little information on current efforts. Current initiatives are random, operate under different frameworks, and have different results. Different approaches are understandable given the various contexts and grievances, but no central reference exists. Pakistan has six deradicalization programs: Sabaoon, Mishal, Sparley, Rastoon, Python, and Heila. The first three aims to educate detainees through formal education, corrective religious education, vocational training, counseling and therapy, and a social issues discussion module that includes family sessions. Militants are separated by indoctrination level and age, between 18 and 45 (Qazi, 2013).

According to Pakistani officials, the 2009 three-pronged initiative "reformed" more than 2,500 Taliban fighters. These statistics can't be verified without independent evaluation. Numerous civil society organizations conduct on-site deradicalization projects, such as interfaith dialogues and madrassas, to counter violent religious schools. Pakistan Army Project Mishal in Swat focuses on adult detainees; Project Sparley includes detainees' families. Pakistani authorities offer limited job-search assistance. Reintegrating former terrorists and radicalized individuals into civil society is the goal. Other programs are underfunded, especially in Punjab. Many are run by the police and have succeeded when they can keep prisoners under surveillance. Some programs, like those in

<sup>1</sup> Department of Pakistan Studies, Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan, Pakistan, Email: [munirsandhu79@gmail.com](mailto:munirsandhu79@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Department of Pakistan Studies, Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan, Pakistan

<sup>3</sup> Department of Pakistan Studies, Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan, Pakistan

Swat, teach detainees vocational skills and provide therapy to promote psychological disengagement (Schram, 2014).

Deradicalization programs worldwide focus on identifying and detaining terrorists. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, and Egypt began their programs after 9/11, but they gained momentum when terrorists targeted them. All programs use imprisonment to eliminate the option of joining violent groups; resources, rehabilitation models, and post-release surveillance vary. Only Saudi Arabia has separated militants from regular criminals to stop prison radicalism. Singapore, Saudi Arabia, the UK, Ireland, and Malaysia keep an eye on released prisoners through police surveillance and family cooperation. Resources and commitment have determined these initiatives success. Rehabilitation in Swat valley has been successful thanks to the Pakistani army presence and surveillance. Pakistani police have also attempted post release surveillance, but their efforts have been sporadic and lackluster. Pakistani, Saudi, British, Malaysian, Singaporean, Yemeni, and Saudi initiatives emphasize religious dialogue to counter radical ideologies. Reeducation has not been without problems in many countries. Malaysia government has used clerics to dissuade militants from violence, but it's unclear whether independent Islamic scholars with more credibility with militants have been sought (Rana, 2011).

Some militants may never accept religious clerics' authority or credibility because they are state officials. Individual-specific programs exist in Pakistan, Britain, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Egyptian program focuses on terrorist groups, not individuals. The Irish initiative accepts group signatures but targets individual militants. Disengage militants and the general population without violating sacred beliefs. Moderate religious scholars can dispel misconceptions that Islam condones violence and terrorism (Burke, 2013). If deradicalization is to succeed in Pakistan, the national narrative must change from an exclusionary one that considers Sunni Muslims its prime citizens to one based on pluralism, secularism, tolerance, and the right to make religious, political, and social decisions without fear of state and social persecution. Everyone must be protected equally by the rule of law. Pakistan has focused on low-risk militants—foot soldiers or low-level facilitators—so far. Unlike in Indonesia, little has been done to rehabilitate high-risk or high-ranking militants. Top-tier leadership will impact members' more than Pakistani authorities, who are seen as the enemy. Indonesia uses reformed terrorists to influence militants and terror suspects; Saudi Arabia separates low-risk and hard-core militants to reduce cross-influence. The Pakistani prison system doesn't segregate prisoners, allowing criminals to be radicalized. Pakistani prisons have lax security, allowing criminals and militants to operate from jails and call collaborators (Abuza, 2008).

Pakistan should start by deradicalizing the country. Islamabad should follow Saudi Arabia deradicalization strategy and target the entire political and social landscape. The political landscape that spawns militancy in the rest of the country is much more complex and nuanced than in Swat, so it requires a narrative that can combat international and regional jihadists. Tolerance and pluralism must be incorporated into the national narrative and policymaking tools (Rana, 2011).

Deradicalization programme were formed internationally to reduce the danger of re-engagement in violent extremism. How countries and programme achieve, this goal varies. One programme may emphasize ideology more than another, but assessing the risk of re-engagement in terrorism is largely about understanding individual-level risk factors present (or absent) in the person being assessed—figuring out why a particular person may be at risk of re-engagement and what can be done to mitigate that risk for them. It is debated whether such programme function. They are rarely evaluated. Measuring and evaluating deradicalization programme is crucial to their long-term success. Deradicalization initiatives aren't a magic solution to a complex, fluid problem. No programme can guarantee success for everyone who engages in violent extremism. They're still promising. Deradicalization treatments can be useful for some and, if evaluated carefully, may be more beneficial than thought. Despite abundant programming, a lack of evaluation work fosters mistrust and hampers our belief in these programmers' future (Gaudette et al., 2022).

### **3. Relevance to Policy and Practice**

Deradicalization programme, if well-designed, can prevent violent extremism relapse. Such initiatives may attract those who want to leave violent extremism but see no way out. Former extremists can dissuade future generations of militants by deglamorizing and delegitimizing involvement. Deradicalization programs are not just about thinning the ranks of violent extremist groups but equally about promoting reintegration and reconciliation in communities affected by conflict (Bosley, 2020). These programs can foster legitimacy and inclusion in such communities. It signals to those communities that states need not exclusively rely on repressive means in countering or preventing future violent extremism and those communities have a voice in efforts to resolve conflict by addressing longer-term issues. The earliest deradicalization programme originated in correctional settings in Saudi Arabia, Yemen and elsewhere to control and rehabilitate violent extremist detainees that might one day be released (Horgan, & Altier, 2012).

The government agencies sponsoring such projects saw numerous benefits, including learning more about the movement, cultivating voices critical of the movement and its propaganda, and strengthening the government legitimacy at home and abroad. Rehabilitation and reintegration can minimize the cost of imprisoning former

militants. In 2021, there will be dozens of deradicalization programme worldwide. The total number is difficult to estimate. Several fledgling efforts exist in the shadows until they either expand in size or feel sufficiently confident to advertise their existence. Others are widely known: Saudi Arabia's programme is well-resourced and in existence for over a decade, for instance. As usual Context matters—Saudi Arabia's low recidivism may be due to strict security. Severe penalties for those who appear in court for violence. France 2016 programme was shut down after five months for breaking agreements because it was deemed to be poorly designed and placed too much emphasis on ideology without ascertaining whether it mattered for individual participants in the program (Bosley, 2020).

Other programs are small, existing thanks to the efforts of a few determined people with minimal resources. All deradicalization initiatives share the same fundamental objective: to lower the danger of re-engagement in terrorism. Their methods vary. Almost all programs use multiple intervention types, including counseling and therapies, ideological debates, family support, restorative justice (e.g., meeting with victims), and vocational training. The interventions provide the participant with the building blocks to shape and nurture a new identity. Early criticisms of deradicalization efforts centered on a lack of transparency. Several programs are still called soft. Programs bear the social and political risk with even one recidivism case. Though violent extremism is rare, one successful attack by a rehabilitated could have political ramifications. Yet, deradicalization initiatives' effectiveness is criticized. Whether they do what they say they do is unclear. Many programs claim success but offer little to no information on how they achieved their goals, how they measure success, or who participates. Some programs are criticized for having online-only participants (Souris, & Singh, 2018). Most of these initiatives have not been assessed. Those who have relied on "expert impressions and flawed recidivism rates." Effective programs must have valid and reliable screening processes to assess whether a participant's intentions are genuine. Once a participant graduated from a program and has been released from prison, post-release monitoring must begin. Albeit a highly resource-intensive process, it is critical to monitor progress and manages risk—not only the risk of recidivism but reprisals from former comrades and security forces (Moore, 2017).

#### **4. Recommendations**

##### **4.1. Transform and Translate Research into Practice**

Disengagement inside and across groups and ideologies is better understood than before. A decade of high-quality research on disengagement offers usable knowledge and evidence-based solutions, but not in concert with deradicalization efforts. Deradicalization initiatives must have access to this research to be effective. Policymakers can support research-practitioner collaborations for mutual benefit. Researchers can learn about practitioners' real-world concerns, while practitioners can learn about developing science. Such contact will promote research-to-practice translation, where applicable and suitable, adding to program sustainability (Glazzard, 2022).

Few deradicalization programs have been evaluated yet. Common excuses include that it's too tough and time-consuming or that the program must mature first. These are incorrect statements that typically represent evaluation fears. Entails Evaluation can appear scary to a new program, but it's necessary to promote transparency, accountability, and public trust. Future programming should include monitoring, measurement, and evaluation for transparent efficacy analysis. Program evaluation is difficult. All evaluations must reflect the time and location of implementation, as anyone who has worked in such contexts can attest. These tremendous tasks must not impede evaluation implementation.

Many programs do not evaluate because they lack goals. Programs are hesitant to set timely goals since they're unsure if they can meet them. Recidivism rates alone can't assess success. Recidivism to violent extremism is minimal regardless of deradicalization.

Deradicalization initiatives must demonstrate their worth beyond reducing recidivism. It is important to think critically and imaginatively about success and how deradicalization initiatives assist in establishing peace in conflict-affected communities. Success is gradual and variable. A 12-month-old program's progress may differ from a 10-year-old program's. In the former, more immediate and short-term goals (such as running for a year or generating initial funds or resources) count more than reducing recidivism for participants who haven't yet participated in the program. Programs raise expectations. Evaluation will show this. What may be relevant in the first year of a program (e.g., establishing local stakeholders' trust, producing early resources) may change in year two (e.g., growing stakeholders' buy-in) or year three (e.g., increasing former militants' voluntary engagement). Year 4 (e.g., working with scientists and practitioners to include change theories), etc.

Too many people demand too much from deradicalization initiatives. Deradicalization is a process, not a product. Deradicalization programs help. As programs mature, so will their realism. Yearly growth Meaningful evaluation attempts can course-correct if prevailing conditions alter. They can't solve or ensure violent extremism. Nobody likes them. Even willing participants won't see results. No deradicalization program is effective. Programs should highlight both triumphs and failures. This is crucial for discovering what works and why and guaranteeing program transparency, credibility, and success.

## 5. Conclusions

Deradicalization is an innovative way to combat violent extremism. Their existence signifies rehabilitation and reintegration. Effectiveness depends on resources, evidence, evaluation, and community roots. Scientific research can help deradicalization programs. Evaluating these programs is crucial for their future. Programs must be encouraged to incorporate evaluation from the start and recognize its significance. Programs must recognize that evaluation ensures their practical implementation.

## References

- Abuza, Z. (2008). The rehabilitation of Jemaah Islamiyah detainees in South East Asia: A preliminary assessment<sup>1</sup>. In *Leaving terrorism behind* (pp. 193-211). Routledge.
- Beg, S., & Bokhari, L. (2008). Pakistan: In search of a disengagement strategy. In *Leaving Terrorism Behind* (pp. 242-260). Routledge.
- Bosley, C. (2020). *Violent Extremist Disengagement and Reconciliation*. Unites States Institute of Peace.
- Burke, J. (2013). Fighting terrorism: Do'deradicalisation'camps really work. *The Guardian*, 9.
- Gaudette, T., Scrivens, R., & Venkatesh, V. (2022). The role of the internet in facilitating violent extremism: Insights from former right-wing extremists. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 34(7), 1339-1356.
- Glazzard, A. (2022). Violent Extremist Disengagement and Reintegration: A Framework for Planning, Design and Evaluation of Programmatic Interventions. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1-20.
- Horgan, J., & Altier, M. B. (2012). The future of terrorist de-radicalization programs. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 83-90.
- Kaphle, A. (2014). Pakistan announces a national plan to fight terrorism, says terrorists' days are numbered. *The Washington Post*.
- Moore, J. (2017). How Pakistan Deradicalizes Taliban Fighters. *United States Institute of Peace*, 11.
- Qazi, S. H. (2013). A War Without Bombs: civil society initiatives against radicalization in Pakistan. *Policy Brief*, 60.
- Rana, M. A. (2011). Swat de-radicalization model: prospects for rehabilitating militants. *Conflict and Peace Studies*, 4(2), 1-6.
- Rana, M. A. (2011). Swat de-radicalization model: prospects for rehabilitating militants. *Conflict and Peace Studies*, 4(2), 1-6.
- Rumi, R. (2015). *Charting Pakistan's internal security policy*. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace.
- Schram, J. (2014). Pakistani Boot Camps Want to 'Reprogram'ISIS Terrorists. *New York Post*, November, 16.
- Souris, E., & Singh, S. (2018). Want to deradicalize terrorists? Treat them like everyone else. *Foreign Policy*, 23.