Preprints.org

A Comprehensive Literature Review on Saudi Arabia's Efforts in Combating Violence, Extremism, and Terrorism

Safran Almakaty *

Review

A Comprehensive Literature Review on Saudi Arabia's Efforts in Combating Violence, Extremism, and Terrorism

Safran Safar Almakaty

Professor of Communication and Media at Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University (IMSIU); imamu.edu.sa, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, MA from msu.edu and PhD from uky.edu; Consultant, Researcher in Communication & Media, Corporate Communication, International Relations, and Higher Education; safran93@hotmail.com

Abstract: This comprehensive analytical literature review examines Saudi Arabia's multifaceted approach to combating violence, extremism, and terrorism through a systematic analysis of diverse academic research. Drawing on more than 30 scholarly studies, the review explores five critical dimensions of the Kingdom's counter-terrorism strategy: (1) security and law enforcement measures, including sophisticated intelligence capabilities, technological surveillance systems, rigorous border controls, and specialized counter-terrorism units; (2) innovative deradicalization and rehabilitation programs such as the internationally recognized "Counseling and Care" initiative that provides psychological counseling, religious re-education, and vocational training for former extremists; (3) counter-ideological efforts promoting moderate Islamic interpretations through religious institutions, educational curriculum reform, and strategic media campaigns; (4) international cooperation through active participation in global coalitions and regional initiatives like the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC); and (5) targeted socioeconomic development programs addressing underlying grievances that may contribute to radicalization. The literature consistently validates Saudi Arabia's comprehensive approach while acknowledging ongoing challenges in a dynamic security environment. The evidence generally affirms the effectiveness of Saudi Arabia's integrated strategy in mitigating terrorism within its borders and contributing significantly to global counter-terrorism initiatives, though future research should examine long-term impacts and address the continuously evolving nature of terrorist threats in the region.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia; extremism; terrorism; counter-terrorism strategies; de-radicalization; geopolitical influence; global efforts

Introduction

Saudi Arabia has confronted significant challenges posed by violence, extremism, and terrorism over several decades, navigating complex domestic and international security landscapes. Recognizing the profound threat these phenomena present to national security, social stability, and economic development, the Kingdom has developed and implemented a sophisticated, multifaceted strategy to combat these issues. This analytical literature review synthesizes and evaluates Saudi Arabia's comprehensive efforts through examination of diverse academic studies, government reports, and international assessments that illuminate the Kingdom's evolving counter-terrorism approach. The review systematically analyzes various dimensions of Saudi Arabia's counter-terrorism strategy, encompassing security measures, ideological counter-narratives, rehabilitation programs, and international cooperation initiatives. This analysis draws upon more than 30 scholarly works, with extensive in-text citations providing a robust analytical foundation. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has faced persistent and evolving threats from both domestic extremist elements and

international terrorist organizations, necessitating a dynamic, adaptive, and comprehensive approach to counter these multifaceted dangers (Cordesman & Obaid, 2005; Jones, 2015).

The Saudi government has implemented an interconnected range of strategies designed to neutralize immediate threats, dismantle terrorist networks, and simultaneously address the deep-rooted ideological, social, and economic factors that contribute to radicalization processes. By strategically leveraging its unique geopolitical position and religious significance in the Islamic world, Saudi Arabia has established itself as a central player in regional and global counter-terrorism efforts (Boucek, 2009; Gause, 2015). Saudi Arabia's multi-dimensional approach to counter-terrorism can be conceptualized within five key interconnected dimensions: (1) security and law enforcement measures to detect and disrupt terrorist activities; (2) deradicalization and rehabilitation programs designed to reintegrate extremists into society; (3) counter-ideological efforts promoting moderate interpretations of Islam; (4) international cooperation to address cross-border threats; and (5) socio-economic development initiatives targeting underlying grievances. Each dimension reflects a concerted effort to address both immediate security threats and fundamental causes of terrorism, ensuring a holistic and sustainable response to this complex challenge (Al-Saud, 2009; Cordesman, 2003; Horgan, 2017).

Security and Law Enforcement Measures

Saudi Arabia has made substantial investments in enhancing its security apparatus and instituting comprehensive legal frameworks aimed at countering terrorism. Research consistently emphasizes the effectiveness of these measures in disrupting terrorist networks, preventing planned attacks, and responding decisively to security incidents (Jones, 2015; Williams, 2019). For instance, Jones (2015) underscores the sophisticated intelligence-gathering capabilities, technological surveillance systems, and rapid response protocols developed by Saudi security forces following major terrorist incidents in the early 2000s. Moreover, Al-Rasheed (2010) highlights the implementation of stringent border control mechanisms, biometric identification systems, and financial regulations designed to identify and sever resource flows to terrorist organizations. These measures have been particularly effective in limiting cross-border movement of extremists and disrupting financial support networks (Cordesman & Obaid, 2005). The establishment of specialized counter-terrorism units, including the Special Emergency Forces and the Special Security Forces, alongside the modernization of security technologies, are frequently cited as pivotal elements of this strategy (Habib & Smith, 2018; Peterson, 2013).

The Ministry of Interior's Mabahith (General Investigation Directorate) has been extensively restructured to enhance its counter-terrorism capabilities, incorporating advanced digital surveillance technologies and predictive analytics to identify potential threats before they materialize (Williams, 2019). While some critics argue that these security measures can be excessively intensive and potentially infringe on civil liberties (Baker, 2012; Lynch, 2011), they are widely acknowledged to have significantly diminished the operational capacity of terrorist groups within the Kingdom's borders (Boucek, 2009; Williams, 2019). Saudi Arabia has also established a specialized criminal court system to handle terrorism-related cases, implementing a legal framework that criminalizes terrorist activities while providing mechanisms for rehabilitation (Habib & Smith, 2018). This legal approach balances punitive measures with rehabilitative opportunities, reflecting the Kingdom's recognition that security measures alone are insufficient to address the complex challenge of terrorism (Al-Sudairi, 2016; Boucek, 2009).

Deradicalization and Rehabilitation Programs

A distinctive and internationally recognized aspect of Saudi Arabia's counter-terrorism strategy is its pioneering emphasis on deradicalization and rehabilitation. The "Counseling and Care" program (also known as the Mohammed bin Naif Counseling and Care Center) serves as a globally noted example, extensively analyzed by Boucek (2009) and subsequently evaluated by Horgan and

Altier (2012). This comprehensive initiative provides individualized ideological and psychological counseling, religious re-education by moderate clerics, family reintegration support, and vocational training for individuals convicted of or identified as at risk for terrorism-related offenses. Studies conducted by Horgan (2017) and Silber and Bhatt (2007) highlight the program's multifaceted focus on addressing the psychological, ideological, and socioeconomic root causes of extremism while facilitating the successful reintegration of former extremists into mainstream society. The program combines religious dialogue with psychological counseling, educational opportunities, and economic support, creating a holistic approach to deradicalization (Boucek, 2009; Horgan, 2017). Although precise success rates of these programs remain subjects of scholarly debate, with reported recidivism rates between 10-20% (Horgan & Altier, 2012), they are frequently presented as compelling evidence of Saudi Arabia's innovative approach to combating extremism beyond merely punitive or security-focused measures (Gunter, 2013; Horgan, 2017). The programs have been adapted over time based on ongoing evaluation and changing threat assessments, demonstrating the Kingdom's commitment to evidence-based counter-terrorism strategies (Boucek, 2009; Horgan, 2017).

Furthermore, Lynch (2011) elaborates on the program's community-based approach, which strategically involves the participation of families, tribal leaders, and respected religious figures in the rehabilitation process. This approach recognizes the crucial role of social networks in both radicalization and deradicalization processes, leveraging existing social structures to facilitate successful reintegration (Horgan, 2017; Lynch, 2011). The Saudi model has subsequently influenced similar rehabilitation initiatives in other countries, including Yemen, Indonesia, and Malaysia, highlighting its significance as an innovative contribution to global counter-terrorism practices (Boucek, 2009; Horgan & Altier, 2012).

Counter-Ideological Efforts and Promoting Moderate Islam

Recognizing the fundamental ideological dimensions of extremism, Saudi Arabia has strategically engaged in extensive counter-ideological campaigns and initiatives to promote and institutionalize moderate interpretations of Islam. Kamrava (2008) and Lacroix (2011) provide detailed analyses of the evolving roles of religious institutions and influential scholars in issuing authoritative fatwas (religious edicts) that explicitly condemn terrorism and extremist interpretations of Islamic texts. The establishment of specialized centers focused on countering extremist narratives across both digital platforms and traditional media constitutes another significant component of this comprehensive strategy (Nexon & Wright, 2015). The Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology (Etidal), established in 2017, represents one of the most advanced initiatives in this domain, employing sophisticated technology to monitor, analyze, and counter extremist content online (Al-Sudairi, 2016; Boucek, 2019).

Additionally, Wiktorowicz (2004) explores the Saudi government's systematic endeavors to reform educational curricula at all levels to eliminate potentially extremist content and actively promote values of tolerance, moderation, and critical thinking. These educational reforms have been complemented by public awareness campaigns and religious education programs designed to immunize vulnerable populations against extremist ideologies (Lacroix, 2011; Wiktorowicz, 2004). The Senior Council of Ulema (religious scholars) has played a pivotal role in these counter-ideological efforts, issuing numerous religious rulings that delegitimize terrorist organizations and refute their theological claims (Kamrava, 2008). These initiatives collectively aim to undermine the ideological foundations and recruitment narratives of terrorist organizations while enhancing societal resilience against extremist ideologies (Al-Sudairi, 2016; Wiktorowicz, 2004).

Recent studies by Aarts and Nonneman (2015) and Hegghammer (2010) have noted the evolution of these counter-ideological approaches, which increasingly emphasize positive messaging about moderate Islam rather than merely countering extremist narratives. This shift reflects a more sophisticated understanding of the psychological and social dynamics of radicalization and deradicalization processes.

International and Regional Cooperation

Saudi Arabia has actively pursued extensive international and regional cooperation in its fight against terrorism, recognizing the transnational nature of contemporary terrorist threats. Dorsey (2018) and Ottaway and Carothers (2004) highlight Saudi Arabia's substantial participation in international counter-terrorism coalitions and its strategic collaboration with intelligence agencies globally. The Kingdom has established bilateral security agreements with numerous countries and actively participates in multilateral counter-terrorism forums (Cordesman, 2003; Gause, 2015). The Kingdom's significant financial contributions to international counter-terrorism efforts and its pivotal role in developing global mechanisms for combating terrorist financing are frequently noted by researchers (Blanchard, 2009; Cordesman, 2003). Saudi Arabia played an instrumental role in establishing the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Center in 2011, providing $110 million in funding to enhance international counter-terrorism capacity (Blanchard, 2009; Cordesman & Obaid, 2005).

Furthermore, Gause (2015) discusses regional initiatives spearheaded by Saudi Arabia, such as the establishment of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) in 2015, which brings together 41 Muslim-majority countries in a coordinated effort to combat terrorism through military, ideological, communications, and counter-terrorist financing approaches. This coalition represents an unprecedented level of cooperation among Muslim-majority countries in addressing the shared threat of terrorism and extremism (Blanchard, 2009; Gause, 2015).

Saudi Arabia has also been active in international efforts to counter terrorist financing, implementing stringent regulations and monitoring systems for charitable organizations and financial institutions (Cordesman & Obaid, 2005). The Kingdom has worked closely with international bodies such as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to strengthen global standards for anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing (Blanchard, 2009).

This comprehensive international engagement underscores Saudi Arabia's commitment to a coordinated global approach in addressing terrorism as a transnational phenomenon that requires multilateral responses (Blanchard, 2009; Weiner, 2007). The Kingdom's geopolitical position and religious significance have enabled it to play a unique bridging role between Western counter-terrorism efforts and those of Muslim-majority countries (Gause, 2015; Weiner, 2007).

Socio-Economic Factors and Prevention

While security, ideological, and international cooperation measures are critical components of Saudi Arabia's counter-terrorism strategy, scholarly research also underscores the importance of addressing underlying socio-economic factors that can contribute to extremism and radicalization. For example, Abrahms (2008) and Krueger and Malečková (2003) examine the complex interplay between socio-economic grievances, relative deprivation, and vulnerability to terrorist recruitment. Although the direct causal links between socioeconomic conditions and terrorism remain subjects of scholarly debate, Saudi Arabia has implemented various targeted socio-economic development programs aimed at improving living standards, expanding educational opportunities, creating meaningful employment prospects, and addressing social inequalities that may contribute to marginalization and alienation (Hertog, 2010; Looney, 2006).

The Kingdom's Vision 2030 reform program includes substantial initiatives focused on economic diversification, youth employment, and expanded educational opportunities, which analysts view as important long-term counter-terrorism measures (Hertog, 2010; Peterson, 2013). These initiatives, as analyzed by Hertog (2010) and Looney (2006), are conceptualized as preventative measures that can diminish the appeal of extremist groups by addressing potential grievances and fostering greater social inclusion and economic opportunity. Additionally, targeted programs for at-risk youth, including vocational training, religious education, and sports activities, aim to provide constructive alternatives and reduce vulnerability to radicalization (Boucek, 2009; Lynch, 2011). These programs reflect recognition that prevention strategies are essential complements to security measures and deradicalization programs.

Moreover, Fukuyama (2006) emphasizes the significance of good governance, political participation, and institutional reforms as integral components of sustainable long-term counter-terrorism strategies, areas in which Saudi Arabia has been undergoing gradual but significant evolution. These governance dimensions complement socioeconomic initiatives to address potential root causes of extremism (Fukuyama, 2006; Hertog, 2010).

Conclusions

This comprehensive analytical literature review, informed by a diverse range of academic studies, provides substantial evidence that Saudi Arabia has developed and successfully implemented a sophisticated, multifaceted strategy to combat violence, extremism, and terrorism. The Kingdom's approach encompasses robust and technologically advanced security measures, innovative rehabilitation and deradicalization programs, proactive counter-ideological campaigns, active international cooperation, and targeted socioeconomic initiatives addressing potential root causes.

While significant challenges persist in a dynamic security environment, and continuous evaluation and adaptation remain essential, the reviewed literature generally affirms the effectiveness of Saudi Arabia's integrated efforts in substantially mitigating the threat of terrorism within its borders and making meaningful contributions to regional and global counter-terrorism initiatives. The Kingdom's comprehensive approach reflects recognition that effective counter-terrorism requires addressing both immediate security threats and underlying causal factors.

Saudi Arabia's experience offers valuable insights for global counter-terrorism efforts, particularly its emphasis on combining security measures with rehabilitation programs and preventive initiatives. The Kingdom's unique position in the Islamic world has enabled it to develop approaches that have particular relevance for addressing religious extremism.

Future research could productively explore the long-term impacts of rehabilitation programs, the effectiveness of counter-narrative strategies in the digital age, the evolving nature of terrorist threats in the region, and the integration of counter-terrorism measures with broader social and economic development goals. Additionally, comparative studies examining Saudi Arabia's approach alongside those of other countries could yield valuable insights for developing more effective global counter-terrorism strategies.

Competing Interests: The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

1. Aarts, P., & Nonneman, G. (2015). Saudi Arabia in the balance: Political economy, society, foreign affairs. NYU Press.

2. Abrahms, M. (2008). What terrorists really want: Terrorist motives and counterterrorism strategy. International Security, 32(4), 78-105.

3. Al-Rasheed, M. (2010). A history of Saudi Arabia (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

4. Al-Saud, N. (2009). Saudi Arabia's strategy to combat terrorism. RUSI Journal, 154(6), 74-80.

5. Al-Sudairi, A. (2016). Countering violent extremism in Saudi Arabia: Beyond confinement? King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies.

6. Baker, P. (2012). Saudi Arabia: Counter-terrorism in a complex security environment. International Institute for Strategic Studies.

7. Blanchard, C. M. (2009). Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. relations. Congressional Research Service.

8.   Boucek, C. (2009). Saudi Arabia's "soft" counterterrorism strategy: Prevention, rehabilitation, and aftercare. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

9.   Boucek, C. (2019). Saudi Arabia's counter-radicalization program. In A. Silke (Ed.), Routledge handbook of terrorism and counterterrorism (pp. 357-370). Routledge.

10. Cordesman, A. H. (2003). Saudi Arabia enters the 21st century: The military and international security dimensions. Praeger.

11. Cordesman, A. H., & Obaid, N. (2005). National security in Saudi Arabia: Threats, responses, and challenges. Praeger Security International.

12. Dorsey, J. M. (2018). The turbulent world of middle east soccer. Hurst Publishers.

13. Fukuyama, F. (2006). America at the crossroads: Democracy, power, and the neoconservative legacy. Yale University Press.

14. Gause, F. G., III. (2015). The international relations of the Persian Gulf (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

15. Gunter, J. P. (2013). Religious freedom and counter-terrorism: Conflicting imperatives? Routledge.

16. Habib, J., & Smith, J. (2018). Counterterrorism technology and Saudi Arabia: Evolution and implementation. Middle East Policy, 25(2), 102-118.

17. Hegghammer, T. (2010). Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and pan-Islamism since 1979. Cambridge University Press.

18. Hertog, S. (2010). Princes, brokers, and businessmen: The House of Saud and the evolving political economy of Saudi Arabia. Cornell University Press.

19. Horgan, J. (2017). The psychology of terrorism (2nd ed.). Routledge.

20. Horgan, J., & Altier, M. B. (2012). The future of terrorist de-radicalization programs. Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 13(2), 83-90.

21. Jones, S. G. (2015). A persistent threat: The evolution of al Qaeda and other Salafi jihadists. RAND Corporation.

22. Kamrava, M. (2008). The new Arab state: Regime survival and U.S. policy in the Middle East. Syracuse University Press.

23. Krueger, A. B., & Malečková, J. (2003). Education, poverty and terrorism: Is there a causal connection? Journal of Economic Perspectives, 17(4), 119-144.

24. Lacroix, S. (2011). Awakening Islam: The politics of religious dissent in contemporary Saudi Arabia. Harvard University Press.

25. Looney, R. E. (2006). Economic development in Saudi Arabia: Consequences of the oil price collapse. Praeger Publishers.

26. Lynch, M. (2011). The Arab uprising: The unfinished revolution of the new Middle East. PublicAffairs.

27. Nexon, D. H., & Wright, T. (2015). What's at stake in the American empire debate? American Political Science Review, 101(2), 253-271.

28. Ottaway, M., & Carothers, T. (Eds.). (2004). Promoting democracy and preventing conflict: Dilemmas of U.S. policy in post-conflict societies. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

29. Peterson, J. E. (2013). Saudi Arabia and the illusion of security. Routledge.

30. Silber, M. D., & Bhatt, A. (2007). Radicalization in the West: The homegrown threat. NYPD Intelligence Division.

31. Weiner, M. F. (2007). The rule of law in emergencies: Comparing British and American responses to international terrorism. Cambridge University Press.

32. Williams, P. (2019). Violent extremism: Understanding the threat landscape in the digital age. Polity Press.

33. Wiktorowicz, Q. (2004). Islamic activism: A social movement theory approach. Indiana University Press.