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Abstract

Syed Nazakat is a special correspondent for the news magazine, The Week, in Delhi. He has reported on politics, defence, security, terrorism and human rights issues in 17 countries. Nazakat has won numerous national journalism awards for his investigative stories on India's secret torture chambers, India's rendition programme in Nepal, arms trafficking in Bangladesh and an insider report on the Al-Qaeda rehabilitation camp in Saudi Arabia.

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Q&A with a journalist on the frontline

Syed Nazakat is special correspondent for news magazine *The Week* in Delhi. He has reported on politics, defence, security, terrorism and human rights issues in 17 countries. Nazakat has won numerous national journalism awards for his investigative stories on India's secret torture chambers, India's rendition program in Nepal, arms trafficking in Bangladesh and an insider report on the Al-Qaeda rehabilitation camp in Saudi Arabia. One of his award-winning stories, "Like Cattle, from Kabul", reveals how Afghanistan has been a source and transit point for the trafficking of women and children for prostitution. "Like Cattle, from Kabul" is one of the most under-reported stories in the region and is on Nazakat's blog¹ and *The Week's* website.²

His recent investigative package "Reborn in Riyadh"³ won him the Christiane Amanpour Award for investigative journalism. There are lessons in this story about the rehabilitation of terrorists and criminals generally, but especially those who spent time in the USA detention facility at Guantanamo Bay. "Reborn in Riyadh" shows that even the worst of the worst can be turned around and reintegrated into society. The judges of the award noted in commending Nazakat's stories:

Making use of unusual access in a closed society, this account sheds light on a little known program to turn terrorists away from violence. This insightful story traces the blending of culture, religion, and real world issues of terrorism in an effort to bring jihadists into peaceful society. Theology and politics meet in this rehabilitation program, which the Saudi government says has rehabilitated more than 3500 Al Qaeda operatives. - Lou Boccardi, President/CEO, Associated Press, Retired; ICFJ Board Member.

Syed Nazakat's piece on the rehabilitation of former radicals in Saudi Arabia stood out for tackling an issue of worldwide importance from a fresh and interesting angle, and doing so in a country which few of his readers might have expected to address militant Islamism through approaches like art therapy. - Kristine Pommert broadcast trainer, former BBC journalist

The notion that hardened criminals can in fact be reintegrated is well documented in criminology. However advocates of torture and extremely harsh and long-term punishment, like the methods at Guantanamo Bay, would deny that reintegration is possible. I caught up with Nazakat to discuss the issues in "Reborn in Riyadh" and the professional and personal obstacles he encountered while reporting from the frontline.

David Blackall: Criminologist John Braithwaite has written a great deal about crime, shame and reintegration and he has a book title precisely under that name.⁴ The process is as ancient as crime itself and certainly intact indigenous communities still deploy that process lovingly in communities where elders provide a forum, a rehabilitation ceremony. I interpret "Reborn in Riyadh" in this way; it is a story about rehabilitation ceremonies.

Deleted: ¶

¹ <http://syednazakat.wordpress.com/>

² <http://week.manoramaonline.com/cgi-bin/MMOnline.dll/portal/ep/theWeekContent.do?programId=1073755753&contentId=13404555&tabId=13>

³ <http://syednazakat.wordpress.com/2011/10/22/reborn-in-riyadh/>

⁴ Braithwaite, John (1989) *Crime, Shame and Reintegration*, Cambridge University Press, UK.

In Braithwaite's later work, "Neoliberalism or regulatory capitalism" (Occasional Paper 5, October 2005) he states:

Guantanamo Bay, the profiling and detention of citizens generally, the burgeoning punitive-police apparatus of the crime control, has revealed the Bush Administration and the American judicial branch to be anything but liberal in its limitation of state power over individuals.

However for the Saudi government, as told in "Reborn in Riyadh", the process is virtually the opposite to the police state and feudal techniques of the USA. While rehabilitation is often considered a type of punishment for criminal offenders, its objectives are therapeutic rather than being only punitive and naturally, the recidivism rates attest to this. How is this occurring?

Syed Nazakat: The Saudi program is also about rehabilitation ceremonies. The concept of repentance in Islam, and I think in other religions too, is very strong and the Saudi Kingdom has used the concept to reform former militants. The religious scholars have successfully used the religious text of Islam, the Quran, and traditional Islamic schools of jurisprudence to turn native jihadists into peaceful citizens. The innovative idea of using the services of religious scholars and clergymen in the rehabilitation of terrorists is seen by many as a direct and most powerful argument against terrorism. I think my story highlights several important issues, ranging from the importance of religion, culture and the role of religious leaders, particularly in the Muslim world, in dealing with contemporary issues. The story also underlines the battle for the soul of Islam.

DB: I can't help noting the irony in your observation that "the innovative idea of using the services of religious scholars and clergymen in the rehabilitation of terrorists is seen by many as a direct and most powerful argument against terrorism". I agree with your point, but this is exactly what the US and Saudi-financed madrasahs were doing in Pakistan, which educated many of the Taliban as boys in Wahabism, a particularly austere and rigid form of Islam that has its origins in Saudi Arabia. I think people of the West need to be reminded that US and Saudi wealth contributed to the growth of these schools or madrasahs during the Afghan jihad against the Soviets. In the later years many Pakistani fathers would chase their sons into Afghanistan to bring them back, to rescue them lovingly from the hold of hate and propaganda during that war (1979-1989).

These were the new kind of madrasahs that emerged in the Pakistan-Afghanistan region and were not so much concerned about scholarship but focused on making war on infidels. The enemy then was the Soviet Union; today it's the West, centered on the UK and the US. Today the state that is left with the most concentrated remnants of this hate is the US itself with Guantanamo Bay, where there is the profiling, torture and detention of many innocent citizens from around the world. There is also the burgeoning of a brutal punitive-police apparatus, which is justified by the emergency in the War on Terrorism.

How did the change for the Saudi government occur Syed? Who do you think was the instigator for the positive swing? Was it entirely Prince Mohammed bin Naif bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud, deputy minister of the interior and architect of the rehabilitation experiment? Or was it more of a societal swing, a cultural realization that the Americans were getting it so wrong and ironically, the US may have helped in the Saudi realization - simply because of the extreme and dysfunctional cruelty of Guantanamo Bay?

SN: I agree that at the heart of the whole rehabilitation program is a big paradox. On the one hand the US and the Saudi Kingdom once funded Afghan warlords and encouraged them to fight against Russia. Today, on the other hand, they are fighting them and calling them terrorists. Though the Taliban were funded by the CIA and the Saudi Kingdom (See *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* by Steve Coll), their concept of Sharia and Islamic state was driven by the Deobandi school of thought. Deobandi is a revivalist movement in Sunni Islam and the movement was inspired by an Islamic scholar in India. The Taliban Mullahs never believed in Wahabism, a school of thought practiced in Saudi Arabia whose animating principle is a direct relationship between believers and God. It was inspired by an eighteenth century theologian, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab.

We've to also appreciate the complexities in the Islamic text. Islam, unlike other religions, is very much political in nature. And jihad is an integral part of the faith and religious text. In 1980s as their country was invaded by the Russians, the clergymen in Afghanistan issued fatwa for jihad. In the tribal regions of Pakistan similar calls were issued. The Arabs joined only after then Grand Mufti of Jeddah issued a fatwa calling upon Arabs to fight alongside their Afghan brethren against Russia. It was only after that call a number of Arabs traveled either to Pakistan or directly to Afghanistan. Saudi Arab officials would tell you stories of how top CIA officials including its station chief met the Saudi clergymen and encouraged them to issue a fatwa for jihad against Russia. So that is the background. It, in many ways, was a secret war, a part of the Cold War.

DB: What changed the Saudi's stance against Al-Qaeda?

SN: During my visit to Riyadh I indeed asked this question to a number of Saudis including top officials at the powerful interior ministry. According to them there were two things, which changed the Saudi attitude towards the Al-Qaeda and terrorism. First, what alarmed them were Osama bin Laden's provocative speeches against the Royal family. That followed a series of random terrorist attacks in the Kingdom. Then the 9/11 event happened. That was the turning point. Nobody in Saudi Arabia believed their countrymen could do such barbaric things. They knew the stakes were beyond exaggeration because Saudi Arabia is not simply another traditional Arab country coping with change. As keeper of the Muslim holy cities, it serves as the custodian of faith and the spiritual home of 1.3 billion Muslims worldwide.

So post 9/11 a lot of rethinking happened in the Kingdom about how to deal with radicalism and Al-Qaeda. The Saudi monarchy, a major ally of the US, decided to combat radicalism at different levels. The Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, also known as the mutawaeen, the powerful Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interior ministry played a key part in framing a new strategy to fight radicalism. A decision was taken to pardon all those who are willing to surrender and leave the path of violence. They went by the Quranic concept of mercy and imagination to halt violent minds rather than punish them. After all, mercy is a paramount in the religious text. The rehab program, as the story goes, formally started with an individual called Abdul Rahman Al-Ghamdi, a hardcore al Qaeda operative.

DB: About your methodology in producing the story "Reborn in Riyadh". It is clear to me that your access to many sources and subjects is attributable to your skills as an investigative journalist, but it also goes with your background and insights as a seasoned journalist publishing stories after researching in as many as 17 countries, and as a Muslim:

as one who understands culture, has a sensitivity to the subjects you seek out and interview. This assures trust from your sources. You have insights that inform your research in Riyadh and the two Muslim holy cities - Mecca and Medina, and these skills are crucial I would imagine for the interviews with former Al-Qaeda members and Guantanamo Bay detainees. I feel that the work you do is going to be more difficult for Western journalists who don't have the values, knowledge and skills that you possess. Is this a fair observation?

SN: You have asked a prudent question. The field logistics, like conducting research, interviews, seeking access to people and different voices is a very important part of our work. We may dislike people, their conduct and their views but once we are on the job we have to always keep reminding ourselves that as journalists our primary job is to hear other voices. Often when journalists report from other places their understanding of the situation is driven by preconceived notions like in the case of Saudi Arabia – people often see the kingdom just an ocean of sand, oil and a country of Bedouins and Royal Sheiks. So it really takes much effort to leave the preconceived notions and make yourself available to situation without prejudging it.

So throughout my reporting assignment I remain vigilant about stereotypes. It was a rare experience to observe things and understand how the kingdom and its people are dealing with the daily challenges of life and the bigger questions like the role of their faith in their lives. In the Kingdom there could have been no bigger sensitive topic than Al-Qaeda. But that topic was a central theme of my quest in the kingdom – to know how the country is conducting an extraordinary experiment to bring back young Arabs who had once embraced Bin Laden and were part of his jihad in Afghanistan and Iraq.

DB: Walk me through the process of producing the stories for “Reborn the Riyadh”?

SN: It started much before my visit to Saudi Arabia. It began with me pitching the story to my editor; then researching and identifying the right people for it. There was a long chase to seek appointments with the powerful interior and religious ministries in the Kingdom. But then every email and phone call opened a new window for us. The real window of opportunity was a permission to meet the former Al-Qaeda recruits at the rehab camp in Riyadh. What helped us to win the confidence was that we were very open about the story. We explained to the people in Riyadh and Jeddah why we were attempting the story and why it was important to have their views on the subject. So in a series of meetings with the rehab program officials, government officials, religious scholars and former Al-Qaeda recruits, we managed to capture an incredible picture of blending of life, culture, religion, and real-world issues. Saudi officials insisted that the generous financial package to Al-Qaeda recruits was not about bribing the jihadists but to help them restart their lives. I heard echoes of that conversation everywhere I went in the kingdom, traveling through different provinces. The echoes spoke of a peculiarly Saudi patriarchal society where a son makes a mistake and the father forgives him.

In reflection, the bottom line is that every story is worth putting in your best effort. You never know how a simple idea can turn into a great story. Human beings are driven by the instinct to speak and share. The question is whether we as journalists are ready to listen and record their stories for your readers. As journalists we just should not settle for stereotypes.

DB: Interesting story. Your writing style holds interest and the human rights context drives it along. Going again to your journalism method and initial pitch of the story: do you think you may have received easy access because the Saudis wanted to showcase their best

practice rehabilitation of terrorists?

SN: About access to the rehab camp, at the time of pitching for the story idea I also thought that it would be easy to seek access to the rehab camp and detainees. After all, the Kingdom was widely praised for such an innovative and successful program. But I found the Saudi authorities least interested to showcase their work or even talk about it. The decision was to keep the whole rehab program low profile and away from the spotlight. Interestingly, many at the interior ministry didn't know the exact location of the camp. Officials, at the interior ministry, told me that the prisoners and their families had opposed any media coverage to the facility. Some prisoners were particularly opposed to be photographed by journalists. They did not want their stories to publish because of security reasons. When we first approached the Saudi foreign office about the permission to the facility we were simply turned away. Neither the interior nor the religious affairs ministry was of any help. It really consumed our energy and all our contacts to seek access. It was really a rare permission and it worked just because of some good contacts.

DB: As you write: "... there seems a universal will across the country, to do this right, from the King to the interior ministry and assisted by the ministries of education and religious affairs, and by universities". But in 2009 King Abdullah had proposed implanting detainees with a chip containing personal information so authorities could track them using Bluetooth technology. Andrew Hough wrote in *The Guardian* [29 Nov 2010] that the King made a private suggestion to John Brennan, the White House counter-terrorism adviser who stated: "... keeping track of detainees was an extremely important issue" and Brennan promised to review the suggestion with "appropriate officials" when he returned to the United States. In a State Department cable there was a record of the meeting, which was later published by Wikileaks and subsequently posted on *The Guardian's* website. This was the beginning, I suppose, of the Saudis negotiating the return of their citizens to then undergo the Thumamah rehabilitation program. So at the beginning, when you were researching "Reborn in Riyadh", do you think the Saudis were active in implementing the best solution to reintegrate their citizens, or were they still searching around for the best solution?

SN: During my field research I didn't hear about the Bluetooth technology. But yes the prisoners remain under a kind of observation once they successfully complete the six-month rehab course and return to their families. I did ask the interior ministry officials about how they track these guys once they leave the camp. Their answer was that they get a guarantee from the family elders (that is a big thing in the Arab culture) about the detainees and that the detainees also have to report in between to the authorities to make sure that they are around. But I do understand that the Saudi intelligence agencies must be keeping track on them.

DB: Your testimony says it all: "Saudi Arabia has successfully rehabilitated more than 3,500 al Qaeda men, of whom 493 were suspected al Qaeda operatives who were arrested in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Around 10 per cent of Saudi detainees have refused to participate in the program. "Some are still consumed by hatred and corrupt ideology," said Dr Abdulrahman Al-Hadlaq, director-general, ideological security directorate (see interview). "It will take us some more time to win them over."

As the last question for you Syed; would you kindly provide an assessment of the Western media coverage of stories like this in the region, comment if you think suitable, on how they miss the point on stories like those you do? As part of this response: could you say

how and where they could do better, stating in your opinion what stories in the region are under-reported or un-reported?

SN: We in the media are often guilty of ignoring facts. At times we determine very selectively what readers should and should not know about a particular issue or a situation. In particular, the Western media's coverage of Islam has more or less been driven by speculation on the realities of Islamic life, so much so that many critics have accused the western media of acute professional bias. Edward Said, in his landmark book, *Covering Islam: How the Media and Experts Determine How We See The Rest Of The World*, has accused the Western Media of presenting half-truths and portraying Islam as a monolithic entity, synonymous with terrorism and religious hysteria. Much of the coverage of religion, as he pointed out, is focused on events and controversies related to Islam.

Reporting about race, ethnicity, and religion needs a good investment of time and understanding. Part of difficulty is that the stories related to religion involve questions about religious text, morality and social philosophy as well as practical problems of language. And then there is a widespread practice in newsrooms that our duty as journalists is limited to obtaining information, verifying it and making it known. The function is not to consider what ought to be done with information. Our fundamental dilemma as a journalist is also that we have to gather and produce news on a daily basis. Therefore, often the news rush and breaking news culture undermines editorial reflection, which is essential to independent and in-depth reporting.

At times key historical and social background of story is ignored, or worse, omitted. The stories are rarely put in proper context, which eventually hampers the communication of information essential for understanding and change. The ground rules of factual, fair and balanced reporting are often ignored, either because of the prejudices, stereotypes or utter ignorance. The issue is not limited to religion and ethnicity stories. The media frequently also miss other stories too. The coverage of poverty, health services issues, education and human rights are few of the areas that remain underreported across the world media, despite the fact that these are the real issues in every society. The major underreported stories in the region are also the political stories, which have been systematically ignored by the world press: say for example the political unrest in Nepal. The real reporting crisis is that there is apparent inability of the mainstream media to connect the dots and tell the stories of political and social abuse and exploitation.

In order to have a better sense of events it is important journalists do more spot and first-hand reports; use testimonials as powerful narrative tools, conduct interviews and adhere to the normative set of journalism values.

David Blackall is Senior Lecturer in Journalism at the University of Wollongong. He makes documentaries and occasionally films current affairs stories for the ABC. His latest documentary, *Lost Innocents of Kashmir*, recently screened in the 2013 11th IN THE PALACE International Short Film Festival, in the picturesque seaside town of Balchik, Bulgaria. *Lost Innocents of Kashmir* had its World Premier at 2011 Raindance Film Festival in London and the 2011 North American Premier in Rencontres internationales du documentaire de Montréal (RIDM). The film also screened in 2012 in Genoa in association with Naseem Shafaie's poetry and earlier that year it screened in the 2012 Kashmir in Poetry Festival in Genova, Italy, in the Palazzo Ducale.

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