

# De-Radicalization, Rehabilitation and Re-integration of Juvenile Militants in Pakistan: A Case Study of Sabaoon

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**\*Lateef Hakim Zai Khyber<sup>1</sup>, Shahida Aman<sup>2</sup> & Syed Rashid Ali<sup>3</sup>**

## Abstract

In the wake of a protracted militancy in the Malakand region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the post-2007 military operations in the Swat valley culminated in the soft counter-insurgency approach under the De-Radicalization and Emancipation Programs (DREP). In doing so, Sabaoon was established in 2009 as the first de-radicalization initiative in Pakistan and the only program in the world to de-radicalize juvenile militants associated with Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Furthermore, Sabaoon focused on reintegrating the juvenile into their communities as productive and valuable citizens. By drawing on primary and secondary data sources, this paper attempts to highlight the push and pull factors that led the children towards militancy, their rehabilitation methods and techniques used at Sabaoon, and the impacts of the rehabilitation program on reintegration into society. The paper argues that the Sabaoon program aimed to promote religious harmony and tolerance by addressing the ideological and social problems that drove the children towards militancy. The study further argues that most reintegrated children are now running their own small businesses, such as auto-mechanic workshops, carpentry, and electronic appliance repair, while some serve in government and non-government institutions. However, the data also suggests a higher recidivism ratio among these juveniles.

## Keywords

De-radicalization, rehabilitation, reintegration, juvenile/child militants, Swat, Pakistan

## Introduction

The radicalization and Talibanization of Swat in the post-9/11 era was the offshoot of Sufi Muhammad's movement, Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi (TNSM), which originally began in the Malakand division in 1992 for the enforcement of

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<sup>1</sup> \*Corresponding Author: *Lateef Hakim Zai Khyber* is a MPhil Scholar at the Department of Political Science, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Pakistan.

E-mail: [khyberkhan907@gmail.com](mailto:khyberkhan907@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> *Shahida Aman* is a Professor at the Department of Political Science, University of Peshawar, Pakistan.

<sup>3</sup> *Syed Rashid Ali* is an Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Pakistan.

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*Sharia* Law in the region<sup>4</sup>. The movement that started with a small following gained strength in 1994-1995 and more conspicuously in 2001 when Sufi Muhammad recruited and sent around 10,000 fighters to Afghanistan to confront the United States invasion of the country. The Musharraf government, which became an important ally of the United States in the War on Terror (WoT), banned the TNSM in January 2002, arrested Sufi Muhammad and his 30 companions (on April 24, 2002), and sentenced them to jail for seven years on charges of fomenting terrorism and militancy. Sufi Muhammad then brought to the fore his son-in-law Mullah Fazlullah as the new leader of TNSM; he re-organized the TNSM cadres and decided to command the movement in a more militant direction (Abbas, 2006; Fleischner, 2011).

The militancy in Swat under the TNSM ran at a moderate pace till 2007, when the *Lal Masjid* (Red Mosque) operation in Islamabad, which proved to be a watershed; provided newfound wherewithal to the militant cause and acted as a precursor to worsening security situation all over Pakistan (Afridi, 2018). The TNSM along with more than 40 other Taliban groups from the erstwhile FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, formed an alliance in December 2007 under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud, leading to the creation of the infamous Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Fazlullah was made the head of the Swat chapter of TTP (Akbar, 2016; Fleischner, 2011). From 2007-2009, the TTP chapter in Swat tried to take control of the region through fear and violence.

It was in November 2007 that the Pakistan army launched a military operation, *Rah-e-Haq* (the pathway of truth), by sending troops to combat the militancy in Swat. This led to a series of military operations, including *Rah-e-Rast* (the straight path) on April 26, 2009, wherein the military established bases around the region (i.e., Swat) and blocked all routes to ensure targeted and effective operations against the militants (e.g., McKelvey, 2011). More than 1,000 Taliban casualties were reported by June 15, and 106 soldiers lost their lives to bring peace to the region (Abbasi, 2014). In addition, thousands of Taliban were either arrested or made to surrender, including up to 1200 boys who were trained to become suicide bombers.

Due to the overwhelming presence of teenagers in the militancy, the Pakistan army decided to adopt soft measures while engaging experts from different fields, such as religious education, psychology, and sociology, to create a program for rehabilitating these children (Trim, 2011). It was with the help of the government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Hum Pakistani Foundation (HPF) that the army launched the Sabaoon De-Radicalization and Emancipation Program (DREP) to provide these children with a second chance to live a 'normal' life (Basit, 2015a; Rana, 2011). The program was then handed over to HPF and Dr. Muhammad Farooq Khan<sup>5</sup>, a moderate religious scholar and Vice Chancellor of the University of Swat, while the overall management and supervision of the program remained under the control of the Pakistan Army (Basit, 2015a; Johnston et al., 2016). This program is recognized by several scholars, including Dr. John Horgan (cited in Rafi, 2015), as a very unique and the first ever de-radicalization and rehabilitation center of its type in the world (Rafi, 2015). Rana (2011) argues that the rehabilitation model in Swat is

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<sup>4</sup> The valley of Swat is situated in the north of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. It is situated in a geo-strategically important region of the world, where the significant regions of Asia, South Asia, China, and Central Asia meet. Swat is at a distance of approximately 250 km from Islamabad, the capital city of Pakistan (Rome, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Muhammad Farooq was later assassinated by two armed men in his clinic at Mardan on October 2, 2010 (Hoti, 2010).

similar to that of Saudi Arabia in defusing anti-state tendencies and restoring the self-respect of the detainees by eliminating the psychological burden and reintegrating them back into society. He further suggests that Pakistan should learn from the western rehabilitation models to develop strategies to assess security threats posed by militants. The Sabaoon program aimed to address the inductee's ideological and social problems that had driven them to join the Taliban movement and adopted a multi-disciplinary approach involving several components for de-radicalizing and rehabilitating. With regards, this paper explores the de-radicalization and reintegration of young detainees (i.e., juveniles) under the Sabaoon program and the countering of recidivism among them. The two main research questions underlying this research are: (i) What rehabilitation methods and techniques were used at Sabaoon to de-radicalize juvenile militants? (ii) What steps were undertaken to rehabilitate and reintegrate under the program?

### **Understanding (De)Radicalization, Rehabilitation and Re-integration**

Similar to the term 'terrorism', the concept of radicalization is highly contested. Although the literature provides a variety of definitions, many scholars define radicalization as the process of adopting ideas and beliefs that could lead to *acts* of violence and terrorism. Rafique and Ahmed (2013, p. 115) believe that radicalization is "the process of adopting or promoting an extremist belief system for the purpose of facilitating ideologically based violence to advance political, religious, or social change." According to Qazi (2013, p. 2) radicalization is a process that changes individuals from "passiveness or activism to become more revolutionary, militant, or extremist, especially where there is intent towards, or support for, violence." Rabasa (2010, p. 1) also holds a similar view and understands radicalization as a process of developing extremist belief systems, including the "willingness to use, support, or facilitate violence, as a method to affect societal change." Other scholars, such as Horgan and Braddock (2010), differentiate between 'radicalization' and 'violent radicalization'. According to them, radicalization includes the 'social and psychological process,' whereby individuals commit to extremist religious or political ideology, which may not necessarily lead to violence. Violent radicalization occurs when this social and psychological process makes individuals engage with a violent non-state movement. Therefore, radicalization can be understood as a process whereby an individual may undergo fundamental changes in his *belief* systems and *ideas* for pursuing the goals of social, political, or religious change in society. The mentioned fundamental changes may also depend on the context and circumstances that lead them to use violence.

De-radicalization is primarily understood as a socio-psychological process undertaken to de-motivate an individual's commitment to and involvement in violent radical activities so that their risks of engagement in violence dissipate (Horgan & Braddock, 2010). According to Rabasa (2010) and Khan (2015), it is the process in which extremists renounce their worldviews, forswear violence to effect social change, and recognize that political, social, and economic change or transformation occurs in a pluralistic environment and that the use of violence is not acceptable. Qazi (2013) argues that de-radicalization refers to programs that aim at reintegrating radicalized individuals into society by seeking a complete shift in their mindset and attitudes. For this research, we understand de-radicalization as a process that transforms an individual's radical ideas to make him/her more politically normalized and simultaneously reduce his/her involvement in violent activities.

Rehabilitation is a practice that seeks to transform or normalize a criminal into a socially defined ‘normal’ citizen through different actions which may include psychological counseling, interpersonal assistance (i.e., education and family intervention), and structural assistance (i.e., employment and economic opportunities) (e.g., Anderson & Gröning, 2016). Abbasi (2014) and Khan (2018) contend that rehabilitation refers to policies that intend to reform criminals instead of punishing or isolating them from the community. Hence, this research also conceives ‘rehabilitation’ as a process involving necessary education and training to transform (violent) extremists and reintegrate them into society as useful citizens.

The United Nations defines ‘reintegration’ as a process “by which ex-combatants acquire civilian status and gain sustainable employment and income” (as cited in Pašagić, 2019, p. 118). Reintegration can therefore be seen as a process that helps the transition of an individual outside of prison while maintaining a crime-free lifestyle (Davis et al., 2013). Anders Nilsson (2005, p. 27) suggests reintegration as a “societal process aiming at the economic, political, and social assimilation of ex-combatants and their families into civil society” (as cited in Khan, 2018, p. 78). Thus, we understand reintegration as a process through which an individual is transitioned into society after release from internment as a law-abiding, goal-directed, and productive person.

The literature on de-radicalization and rehabilitation of militants and extremists explores the efforts of various countries around the world, including Canada, the United States, United Kingdom, Nigeria, Somalia, Kenya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Singapore, Philippines, and Indonesia (e.g., Ahmad, 2016; Ali, 2015; Bertelsen, 2015; Clubb & Tapley, 2018; El-Said, 2017; Khalil et al., 2019; Neumann, 2010; Striegher, 2013; Suarda, 2016). However, it is important to understand the contextual dynamics and factors that influence the approach and methodology of de-radicalization. In the context of broad policy approaches to countering radicalization, Neumann (2013) explores two approaches to be ideal, i.e. Anglo-Saxon and European approaches. While the Anglo-Saxon approach deals with behavioural radicalization, the European one focuses on both cognitive and behavioural radicalization; nevertheless, much focus remains on cognitive aspects. The Anglo-Saxon approach contends that police should oversee counter-radicalization methods (and related initiatives). Whereas the European approach resists counter-radicalization to be possessed by Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs). The approach believes that countering radicalization is a continuous political and civil effort, which needs to involve both government and civil society resources. Neumann, therefore, argues that the European approach is more effective in eliminating the ideological and structural breeding grounds out of which violent radicalization emerges.

This paper argues that the de-radicalization approach of Sabaoon resonates with the aforementioned European methodology. For instance (as mentioned earlier), in devising the Sabaoon program, the Pakistan army involved civil society and engaged experts from different fields. Furthermore, the main objective behind Sabaoon was to provide juvenile militants with a ‘second chance’ to live a normal. With regards, the subjects were equipped with the necessary education and vocational skills or training (Basit, 2015a; Khan, 2010; Qazi, 2011; Rana, 2011).

## **Methodology**

To elucidate the case of Sabaoon, a case study approach was adopted. A qualitative methodology was employed for data collection and analysis. Both primary and secondary data sources were used to present the case of Sabaoon comprehensively. In total, eight semi-structured interviews were collected (as a source of primary data) from the former staff members of Sabaoon: one beneficiary of the program, four former teachers at Saboon, two psychologists, and a former staff member of the center who served with Dr. Muhammad Farooq Khan in initiating and developing the program. The interviews primarily explored the following related themes:

- Reasons and factors that led the juvenile to join the TTP violent movement
- Methods and approaches used in the Sabaoon program,
- Different modules of the rehabilitation program
- The process of induction and categorization of detainees in different groups
- The time span of the program and the life inside the facility
- Effectiveness of the rehabilitation program

The main reasons behind the section of Sabaoon as DREP was four-folded: (i) Sabaoon emerged as a unique rehabilitation center that focused exclusively on juvenile militants and functions as a boarding school, (ii) It attempted to rehabilitate and reintegrate the juvenile militants who were trained to become suicide bombers, (iii) In contrast to many other de-radicalization and rehabilitation centers in Pakistan, under the control of Pakistan army (such as Mishal, Sparlay, Heila, and Rastoon), Sabaoon emerged as the rare case which was administered by civilian authorities.

The data collected from the interviews were processed by thematic analysis. The emergent themes were clustered around the literature concerning de-radicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration. Considering the sensitive nature of this research, formal permission was secured from the relevant security authorities. With regards, a formal approval and authority letter was provided to the researchers by the Department of Political Science, the University of Peshawar, outlining the purposes behind the research and requesting cooperation. Moreover, the interviews with the staff members of the Sabaoon were subjected to several ethical considerations. The respondents were thoroughly briefed about the nature, aims, and objectives of the research before the interviews. Consent forms were presented to every respondent, and confidentiality aspect was ensured. To conceal the identities of the respondents, pseudonyms were assigned. In addition, several secondary sources were consulted (such as journal articles, newspapers, documentaries, and reports) to capture the existing landscape of DERP in the context of Pakistan (in particular erstwhile FATA and PATA).

This research also had several limitations. By the time the research began, the Sabaoon DREP had been closed (i.e., August 2019), and a Monitoring Cell (MC) was set up at Mingora to monitor the activities of the beneficiaries. The closure of the centre limited the researcher's access and capacity to directly observe the de-radicalization and rehabilitation activities at the Sabaoon center. MC Sabaoon administration was restricted from sharing any program data with outsiders. The security authorities also limited access to the beneficiaries of the Sabaoon programme; hence, it was very challenging to contact the respondents who have been associated with Sabaoon in different capacities. For instance, during the fieldwork, the researcher contacted thirteen former staff members of Sabaoon, but only six agreed to participate in the interviews. Nevertheless, this research highly

acknowledges the General Head Quarters (GHQ) of the Pakistan army for facilitating this important research. In particular, the military supported securing a visit to Sabaoon-II, an offshoot of Sabaoon DREP Swat.

### **Becoming a Child Militant: The Push and Pull Factors**

After their induction, the children at Sabaoon were made to undergo psychological assessments. The objective of the assessment was to understand the level of emotional, psychological, ideological, and intellectual condition and orientation. Additional information such as personal details, family background and issues, and social preferences of the children was also acquired through three different techniques: (i) 'Objective', (ii) 'Subjective', (iii) and 'Projective'. The techniques helped to evaluate and identify the reasons and causes for children joining the Taliban movement. During the interviews, it came to light that the push and pull factors for radicalization varied for different individuals. It was observed that several socio-economic and psychological factors were at play (see also Azam and Fatima, 2017). The push factors included poverty, deprivation, low education levels, socio-political marginalization, corruption, lawlessness, bad governance, and political pressures ('Rahman', personal communication, October 18, 2020; see also Afridi, 2018; Khan, 2015; Peracha et al., 2016). While pull factors, on the other hand, included group factors (such as roles), monetary incentives (salaries, shares of goods, and others), a sense of acceptance, a feeling of self-importance, an increase in the sense of power and authority, and belief in the spiritual cause of fighting for some otherworldly attainments ('Imad', personal communication, October 20, 2020)

In addition, Peracha et al. (2016) and Azam & Fatima (2017), in their studies on the Sabaoon and Mishal, respectively, have identified several common features that influenced the children to join the militant setup, such as low socio-economic status/high poverty; large family size; absence of a biological father or a fatherly figure (mostly working abroad); middle child (of large families); strict and/or negligent behavior of parents and teachers; lack of supervision on activities; lack of formal or informal education; lack of religious understanding or selective religious understanding; school drop-outs; head injury/possibility of soft neuropathology; truancy/absence from home (because of morbid trends); and history of physical or sexual abuse as a child. They also identified different common personality traits among the children, such as lack of logical reasoning/critical thinking, emotional instability (anxiety disorder, depression, aggressive impulses, and insecurity), inferiority complex, revenge-seeking, and authority-seeking behavior.

Although Azam and Fatima (2017) claim that religious indoctrination was not the primary motivating factor in the case of radicalization in Swat, several respondents revealed that many families donated a child to the Taliban to fight for the 'noble' cause ('Imad', personal communication, October 20, 2020). This was ascertained by another former staff member of the Sabaoon ('Rahman', personal communication, October 18, 2020), who added that majority of the children joined the Taliban either on their own or were approached by the Taliban. During the interviews, it was also found that most detainees were school dropouts or left schools to join the Taliban, while few had attended *Madrassas*. This clearly shows that the children were ideologically inspired by the Taliban doctrine due to exposure to their teachings through peer and family connections or had been raised in conservative, traditional setups, which regard religious indoctrination as an essential element of upbringing. Another important aspect is their families' relatively poor socio-economic background, which compelled them to release one of their children for service to the

militant group. This afforded them protection in uncertain situations and ensured small wherewithal in the form of some financial compensation. Afridi (2018) also observed that the marginalized local population in Swat was highly attracted to the Taliban due to their acute social problems, as more than 50 percent of all rural households have no access to arable land. He further pointed out that the lower strata of the society, including underprivileged tenants and poor laborers, joined the Taliban movement as foot soldiers. It is not to be ignored that nearly 60 percent of the 'would-be' suicide bombers detained by the Pakistan military belonged to destitute families (Afridi, 2018).

### **Sabaoon DREP**

The Sabaoon programme was initiated to address both the ideological and social problems that had driven the children towards militancy and to reintegrate them into society as valuable and productive citizens (Khan, 2010; Qazi, 2011). The programme's objectives included (Azam & Fatima, 2017; Peracha et al., 2016):

- To provide a positive environment conducive to the rehabilitation of children.
- To remove the psychological burden on the children affected by ideological exploitation and coercion.
- To facilitate their ability to differentiate and integrate information primarily related to values, morals and ethical dilemmas.
- To provide corrective religious education and communicate the moderate ideology of Islam.
- To provide goal-oriented mainstream education and vocational skills.
- To reduce the possibility of exploitation and radicalization of immediate family members of groups.
- To achieve long-term peace and stability in the Swat valley through targeted de-radicalization.
- To ensure a positive protective environment for the reintegration of the children, their families, and a supportive community and society.

The children were initially inducted for a period of 18 months; however, the time a child spent in the Sabaoon depended upon the individual case and specific conditions. Therefore, often their stay exceeded 18 months. Regarding the induction criterion, two crucial aspects are important to be highlighted here. First, children under the age of 17 were hosted at Sabaoon. Secondly, the induction was purely based on willingness to undergo de-radicalization training or voluntarily turned in by their families (Afridi, 2018). The decision for induction was then taken by the Mental Health Team (MHT) in collaboration with the psychologists and Program Director. The process included an initial interview with the child, psychometric assessment, family narrative, community visit, risk evaluation, initial academic assessment, and medical examination (Peracha et al., 2016).

During the initial phase of the program, around 34 percent of the inducted children in Sabaoon included detainees who were voluntarily turned in by their families. Thirty-nine percent comprised those who had been apprehended by the security forces, whereas around 25 percent of the detainees were the ones who had surrendered before the start of the program to security forces (Parveen, 2010). The total induction into Sabaoon was around 226, engaged in seven different batches from 2009-2015 (Afridi, 2018). Most of the detainees were from Malakand Division; however, 17 were from other parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

During the preliminary stages, the psychologists performed an initial assessment and screening and assigned 'risk levels' to each detainee. Thus, a detainee who (as radicalized) did mostly menial tasks such as cleaning, cooking, fetching water, and serving the Taliban movement for a short time would be considered as 'low-risk'. The ones involved in logistical help, such as transport and providing access to food and water, were considered 'medium-risk'. Furthermore, those trained in weapons and combat, executed attacks, guarded Taliban checkpoints, or worked as spies were considered 'high-risk'. Another categorization was meant for the ones who had joined the Taliban voluntarily, trained as suicide bombers, and firmly believed in the ideology of the Taliban. Such categorization was termed as 'very high-risk'. From the initial group of the Sabaoon that comprised 97 child soldiers, 40 were categorized as 'low-risk', 45 as 'medium-risk', and 12 as 'high-risk' (Parveen, 2010; Basit, 2015b; Qazi, 2013).

Hettiarachchi (2010) believes rehabilitation (as a process) is about changing 'hearts and minds' through engaging the beneficiary in several transformative activities. She further argues that practical livelihood concerns need to be addressed through the involvement of education, vocation, social rehabilitation, and extra-curricular activities. At the same time, the ideological aspect can be countered through counseling, creative therapies, group work, role models, and community and family programs.

To address the individual needs of the detainees, the Sabaoon program also adopted a multi-disciplinary approach that involved several components. The rehabilitation curriculum was divided into four modules: (i) psycho-social support, (ii) education module including formal and corrective religious education, (iii) vocational training, (iv) and a social module to discuss social issues with the detainees and hold sessions with the families of the detainees. Therefore, the detainees were intensely engaged in several activities. Besides the formal schooling and psychological sessions, the children were also involved in sports and indoor games, watching TV, a Quran class in the evening, and studying hours before bed. Extra-curricular and recreational activities were also conducted, such as drama competitions, debates, lectures, audiovisual aids, cultural events, art, and study tours to Islamabad and other places ('Ghafar', personal communication, October 26, 2020).

However, those violating the discipline were given different punishments, such as a ban on playing games or watching TV for a specific period of time. The punishment depended upon the magnitude of violation and behavior of the detainee. The most severe punishment was not to allow the detainee to meet his family members on Sunday ('Imad', personal communication, October 20, 2020). Since it is rather difficult to challenge the mindset and behavior of an extremist because of its foundation in religious legitimacy, the methods used at Sabaoon were formulated with the long-term goal of enabling the children to entertain more balanced, moderate, and tolerant views (Basit, 2015a). The children were trained to regain a sense of self-worth, respect, and value in *life*. For this purpose (i.e., inculcating a sense of responsibility), a remarkable experiment was used by tasking every detainee with the care of a rose bush or tree. The task was supposedly meant to create a sense of responsibility and self-worth in the detainees. Posters of national heroes and places in Pakistan had also been put up to remind them of their history and culture to develop an affiliation to their country and its identity markers (Leghari, 2013).

The rehabilitation of the children at Sabaoon also involved psycho-social support mechanisms. The support mechanism aimed to de-indoctrinate extremist ideologies and offered psychological counseling to the detainees ('Murad', personal



communication, October 24, 2020). In doing so, MHT, comprised of psychologists, religious scholars, and social workers, regularly conducted counseling sessions (both at the individual and group level) with the detainees for their psycho-social support ('Ghafar', personal communication, October 26, 2020). The MHT also provided treatment to those who had injuries, nightmares, or trauma and suffered from various psychological, emotional, and physical disorders due to any physical or sexual abuse by the Taliban. These discussion sessions involved concerns about the detainee's personal life, social and ideological issues, behavior modification, and family counseling (Parveen, 2010; Qazi, 2013; see also Dallasnews Administrator, 2011; McCarthy, 2016).

The Sabaoon program used concepts from social psychology to heal the children's emotional and psychological wounds. The primary motivation was to develop a secure space for the psycho-social intervention of those detainees who had not only acted violently but witnessed violent acts. This intervention tried to restore a healthy mindset and to make them effective persons in life by assessing the detainees in all their complexities ('Ghafar', personal communication, October 26, 2020). This included: personality, social and contextual factors (such as community organization versus disorganization and *in-group* versus *out-group* dynamics); familial factors (such as familial dysfunction and involvement in militancy); and protective factors (such as supervision from and bonding with their families) (Jenson & Klein, 2012; Khan & Peracha, 2017). During the process, the detainees were provided with a comfortable, friendly and open environment for engagements during the repeated sessions. The detainees were further exposed to understanding the difference between *right* and *wrong* and to accept what they had committed (Alvi, 2014; Qureshi, 2011).

### ***The Educational Module at Sabaoon***

The educational module at Sabaoon was developed to counter the extremist ideological narrative and promote religious pluralism and tolerance. In doing so, Dr. Muhammad Farooq Khan, a moderate religious scholar, formulated a pioneering curriculum. He used to visit Sabaoon regularly, and every Friday, he lectured the detainees on the basic teachings of Islam and the concept of *Jihad*<sup>6</sup> and *Qital*<sup>7</sup>. This was attempted to develop a moderate outlook on their beliefs and actions ('Rahman', personal communication, October 18, 2020). As stressed by Dr. Muhammad Farooq Khan (2010), the children at Sabaoon were persuaded to *Jihad* and trained to become suicide bombers in the name of Islam. They had only heard the Taliban's version of Islam and had never experienced counter-narrative. According to the respondent, the children were 'brainwashed' by the Taliban and were led to believe that Pakistan is an unIslamic country. It was further revealed that the detained children were under the impression that the democracy and the judicial system of Pakistan are against the spirit of Islam and that the national leadership are functioning under the influence of the United States; hence, they shall be treated as *Kafirs* (non-believers) ('Faizan', personal communication, October 18, 2020). They were also made to believe that any pious person or group could declare *Jihad* and can use force for the eradication of vice from society. Such religious indoctrination demanded that the Sabaoon hires religious scholars to give sermons on different and/or interpretation of religion Islam.

<sup>6</sup> The Arabic term *jihad* literally means a "struggle" or "striving." This term appears in the Quran in different contexts and can include various forms of violent and nonviolent struggles (The Conversation, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> The word *Qital* is referred to as 'armed struggle' or combative version of *Jihad*. The word in Arabic means 'fighting' and has been mentioned in Quran multiple times (Individual land, n.d.)

Several respondents highly acknowledged Dr. Khan's role and efforts, which reintroduced and re-presented the religion Islam as promoting peace and tolerance. His intense engagements with Sabaoon enabled the detainees to understand *Jihad's* true philosophical (yet divine) meanings in contrast to what extremists propagated. Since noticeable detainees were trained as suicide bombers by the Taliban, a particular focus of the discussions was to explain why suicide is forbidden in Islam and how such acts violate the Holy Quran and *Sunnah* (see also Qureshi, 2011; Khan, 2010). During an interview session with a former staff member of Sabaoon, it was mentioned that the detained children were educated about human values, sympathy, and love for humanity ('Murad', personal communication, October 24, 2020). The children were also taught critical aspects of the Pakistani constitution, the *Shariah Law* and, more importantly, the difference between *Jihad* and *Qital* (i.e., in what circumstances *Jihad* is binding and who could declare *Jihad* and *Qital*). Quran classes were also conducted regularly in the evening, which included *Nazira*, *Hifz*, and translation of the Holy Quran ('Imad', personal communication, October 20, 2020).

In addition to the above teaching module, the school walls were also covered with posters containing verses from the Holy Quran and *Hadith* that denounced the killing of humans and violence. The objective was to remind the detainees that the brutal and oppressive acts of the Taliban were unIslamic (Leghari, 2013; Qazi, 2013). These religious teachings were, however, combined with formal education up to higher secondary education and bachelor's level. For this purpose, the Provincial Education Commission's system and curricula were followed at Sabaoon. Additionally, the exams were affiliated with the Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education (BISE) Malakand and the University of Malakand, respectively. The aim was to promote critical thinking and enable the detainees to pursue and continue higher education after successful rehabilitation ('Asad', personal communication, October 13, 2020; 'Imad', personal communication, October 20, 2020; 'Faizan', personal communication, October 18, 2020).

### ***Vocational Training for Rehabilitation***

The Sabaoon program also offered vocational training in different fields, such as computer skills, basic electrician skills, appliance repair, refrigeration, tailoring, carpentry, and masonry. The training staff for the electrician course was hired from Gandhara College Chakdara, and for the rest of the courses, a training team was outsourced from Rawalpindi. All the technical modules were affiliated with the Khyber Institute of Technical Education (Parveen, 2010). The logic behind this module was to incorporate different vocational skills to help the children create livelihoods after their reintegration. They were equipped with vocational skills to support themselves and their families. The vocational module was developed with the assumption that re-engagement in violent extremism can be prevented if the detainees have an actual job and a place to engage on a regular basis (Basit, 2015a).

### ***The Social Module at Sabaoon***

The 'Social module' involved counseling sessions with the detainees and their families. It included a family visit every Sunday and participation in different events inside Sabaoon ('Asad', personal communication, October 13, 2020). During the visit, the psychologists also discussed the various social issues of detainees with their family members (see also Afridi, 2018; Qazi, 2013; Qureshi, 2011). Furthermore, the respondents highlighted the need for engagement with the family members of the

detainees. Such an interaction enabled Sabaoon to understand the dynamics of their family systems and assess the level of family support for the detainees during the rehabilitation process. The involvement of the family and community sessions prepared the detainees to return to their families and communities. During this period, the detainees were assessed whether they were ready to return to their communities. Regular meetings with the detainees' families helped get support from the families and reduced recidivism risks (e.g., Basit, 2015b; Gill et al., 2020).

### ***Social Reintegration as a Final Step***

After the successful de-radicalization and rehabilitation of the detainees, the final step was reintegrating them back into their respective communities. In this process, the detainees were prepared to return to their communities through participation in different community-level activities, including religious and cultural festivals. According to Parveen (2010), deserving detainees were to be shortlisted for reintegration based on their performance in education and vocational skills, psycho-social assessment, specialists' observation, community survey, and familial level of engagement with former militants. In this vein, the 'low-risk' and psychologically stable detainees were reintegrated earlier ('Asad', personal communication, October 13, 2020; 'Imad', personal communication, October 20, 2020). The criteria for reintegration, as highlighted by Parveen (2010), included the following variables:

- Psychological adjustment in the context of no association of other family members with terrorists, militants, or the presence of militants in the community
- Vocational skills and the facilitation of loans for starting a small business
- Availability of schools and education.

Besides the above criteria for reintegration, Sabaoon had also set some conditions for the detainees and their families. The family had to agree that the detainee would report to the local LEA every week, and after the completion of six months, the reporting will be required monthly. The detainee will either go to school, a vocational skill training center, or start a small enterprise after being 'released'. Lastly, the detainee will not join any militant organization at any cost. In case of violation, punitive actions will be taken against the family/guarantor (Parveen, 2010).

### ***Post-Reintegration Monitoring***

The monitoring and follow-up of reintegrated individuals are essential for any rehabilitation program that may include a parole-like system, conducting ongoing risk assessments, holding supportive sessions to prevent recidivism, and carrying out pre-emptive work based on the risk profile (Hettiarachchi, 2010). During the interviews, respondents mentioned that Sabaoon set up a similar parole-like monitoring system for observing the progress of the children during the reintegration phase. For this purpose, a team of psychologists, termed as 'Monitoring Cell' (MC), was established at Circuit House Mingora to assess the activities of the reintegrated children and to counter any risk of recidivism ('Imad', personal communication, October 20, 2020; 'Rahman', personal communication, October 18, 2020). The monitoring process, which includes visits to villages and works with numerous sources, including family and community members and elders of the area, lasted for a minimum of two years (Basit, 2015b; Khan & Peracha, 2017; Qazi, 2013).

The post-reintegration program is important in many ways. First, it helps to assess the behavioural and attitudinal changes of the rehabilitated individuals when they interact natural environment. Here it is essential to understand that *within*

Sabaoon the individuals were monitored in a highly controlled environment. Secondly, it is crucial to monitor whether the beneficiaries can become financially independent or not. Likewise, it is also imperative to assess the effectiveness of psychological intervention in an uncontrolled environment. Lastly, there is a continuous need to identify the challenges the beneficiaries face in the 'real' world (Azam & Fatima, 2017). The regular monitoring of the reintegrated children has verified that they remain engaged in various constructive activities, including pursuing higher education or staying employed (Qazi, 2013). Regarding Sabaoon, several respondents confirmed that most rehabilitated children continued their education while securing admissions at Islamia College Peshawar and the University of Malakand. Similarly, many beneficiaries are currently self-employed and running their own shops (mechanics, electricians, or appliance repairing) ('Faizan', personal communication, October 18, 2020; 'Imad', personal communication, October 20, 2020).

### **Concluding Remarks**

Sabaoon adopted the multi-disciplinary and systematic approach to de-radicalize and rehabilitate juvenile militants in Swat. The DERP addressed both the ideological and structural problems (as push and pull factors) that led the individuals to join the Taliban movement. The paper elucidated that Sabaoon not only focused on de-radicalization and rehabilitation but also ensured effective reintegration of juvenile militants into their communities. In doing so, the initiative provided the beneficiaries with the necessary education and vocational skills to ensure socio-economic stability during the post-release period. Similarly, the children were exposed to counter-narrative to violent extremism and terrorism, fundamentally based on the teaching of Islam. With regards, particular attention was paid to recognizing religious pluralism and a sense of tolerance.

The effectiveness of any de-radicalization and rehabilitation program can be assessed through the number of beneficiaries reintegrated into society and the recidivism rate among them. The most important element of the Sabaoon was a post-reintegration monitoring system that continuously assessed the activities of the reintegrated children. More importantly, this research confirms that the recidivism rate was observed to be low amongst the 226 rehabilitated and reintegrated children. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that there is no independent assessment or evaluation of the Sabaoon program to support such claims empirically. For instance, the fieldwork discovered that around 10-15 reintegrated children were re-institutionalized at Sabaoon on the advice of the monitoring team and security officials. It was also reported that few released individuals were found to be at 'risk' or recidivists. As experienced by the authors, one of the main reasons behind the absence of any meaningful analysis of Sabaoon is the lack of access to the data. It is equally challenging to approach the reintegrated individuals and their families as they have been strictly advised not to share their life-history and/or experiences.

Nonetheless, the presented case of Sabaoon points to the importance of soft measures such as DREPs to effectively counter the menace of violent extremism and terrorism. It is equally important to consider contextual dynamics and factors (such as social system, culture, norms, and traditions) to ensure the effectiveness of DREPs. The data suggests that particular attention should be paid to providing youth employment opportunities. We argue that economic engagement produces a sense of productive-self; hence, generating a positive self-verification during the reintegration phase. Lastly, it is imperative to address the structural determinants — e.g., poverty,

deprivation, lack of education, socio-political marginalization, ill-governance — of violent extremism and terrorism at a broader societal level.

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