



# The role of art therapy in counterterrorism: The Saudi experience



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online 21 April 2015

### Keywords:

Art  
Therapy  
Counter-terrorism  
Rehabilitation  
Saudi  
Jihadists

## ABSTRACT

Art therapy, as a means of self-expression and healing, is used in a variety of clinical and rehabilitation settings. Here, it is tested with a population judged to be involved in terrorism-related activities. This paper presents an extensive review of the art therapy program at Mohammed Bin Nayef Center for Counseling and Care, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The objective of this study is to showcase the use of art therapy in the care and rehabilitation of ex-jihadists, with suggestions for best practices. This paper is the first description in the literature of the efforts of the Saudi government to explore the use of art therapy in counterterrorism. Art therapy outcomes on a population incarcerated for terrorist activities are presented alongside treatment and reconstruction of extreme ideology through art production. We conclude that a successful art therapy program is required within the overall approach to counterterrorism. Further, a strong understanding of the cultural backgrounds of the subjects, along with recommendations for relying upon specific artistic components of the therapeutic process are clearly indicated. According to government sources, together with the other programs offered to ex-jihadists, the art therapy program discussed here, which has been in operation since 2007, has achieved an 86.17% success rate, with (as of January 2015) a 13.83% recidivism rate. This is a strong indication that art therapy is an efficacious approach in counterterrorism.

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## Introduction

Since 2003, Saudi Arabia has been heavily engaged in counterterrorism. The Saudi Interior Ministry has been tasked with the responsibility of “cleaning house” with respect to terrorist activities and influences, and is largely succeeding (Ansary, 2008; Boucek, 2007, 2011). The Saudi government fights terrorism using two basic approaches—the *hard approach* and the *soft approach*. Under the hard approach, militants are brought in by force, and tried and sentenced according to Islamic judicial practice. The soft approach is used with select individuals found guilty of participating in terrorist activities or of going to Iraq or other conflict zones and who returned, completed their sentences, and were deemed promising candidates to be released back into society. The aim of the soft approach is to help such individuals reintegrate into society. Through the soft approach, the program is “undermining extremist views and disrupting the activities of those who promote violent extremism” (Ansary, 2008, p. 118). Through dialog, intellectual interaction, self-expression, psychosocial reconstruction, social

awareness, and heavy religious re-education, the soft approach is able to correct subjects’ corrupted ideologies (Boucek, 2008).

Art therapy plays an important role in the soft approach, as it inherently focuses on self-expression (Durham, 2008). A variety of materials and techniques are used to facilitate the use of art in the rehabilitation of detainees, most of whom immediately welcome the idea of non-verbal communication through art; this involves communication with the self, the past, the present, and the future. Sometimes, this communication is with others, including other inmates, professors, and the authorities. Through art, the subject individuals find refuge from past experiences and hardships. At other times, these students find in art a way of expressing anger and hardship through a safe medium that does not harm themselves or others; such expression is, on the contrary, found to be therapeutic.

The art therapy program is part of the Mohammed Bin Nayef Center for Counseling and Care (MBNCCC) in Riyadh. The program began six months after MBNCCC was founded in 2007 by the author and a former student of the author in art education, on invitation from His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed Bin Nayef, Minister of Interior of Saudi Arabia (who at the time was Undersecretary of the Interior Ministry for Homeland Security), who found in his own work that art can offer balance in the lives of detainees, can help them express their feelings and thoughts, and can help

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address important unconscious issues that might not otherwise find redress. The Prince's idea for art therapy as an additional program at MBNCCC has already done far more than simply create balance; it has helped detainees come to terms with their problems and facilitated their safe reintegration into society.

As of January 2015, 2918 students have graduated from MBNCCC after successfully completing rehabilitation through the many programs offered there, including art therapy. The art therapy program is an important component of MBNCCC's activities and it is well received by the beneficiaries. Art therapy is designed to work alongside all of MBNCCC's other programs to arrive at an outcome of safe social reintegration of the beneficiaries into Saudi society.

This study investigates the use of art therapy in rehabilitation of ex-terrorists, a new study population in this field. The author, who is the senior art therapist at the program, reports his experiences and experimentation in laying out the essential components of such a program, in the expectation that this knowledge will prove valuable to colleagues in both the fields of art therapy and counterterrorism.

### Research question

This study addresses one fundamental research question:

What role can art therapy play in reintegration of ex-terrorists into society?

### Methodology

This study follows the exploratory research design outlined in Stebbins (2001) to investigate the use of art therapy with ex-jihadists. "Exploratory studies are quite valuable in social science research. They're essential whenever a researcher is breaking new ground, and they are almost always yield new insights into a topic for research. Exploratory studies are also a source of grounded theory" (Babbie, 2015, p. 91). The research team went in with little knowledge about the detainees, but with great apprehension that such a population would not accept the idea of artistic self-expression. Artistic self-expression seemed incompatible with how we and others perceived the subjects as the highest order of criminal, whose stated purpose in life is to destroy civilization and the world. The exploratory research methodology gives us the opportunity to, for the first time, explore the research setting, the backgrounds of the targeted population, their willingness to artistically interact, and their willingness to change. In addition, the methodology allows us to learn directly from the subjects in terms of how to approach them, and it allows us to learn from our colleagues both within and outside the research setting. We were able to introduce our adopted evaluation tools and adjust them to be more applicable to such a new research population. Approaches were tested and retested. Art therapy treatment activities and procedures were introduced, evaluated, and confirmed. In the end, this methodology has given us the ability to make sound recommendations with respect to this setting, and these may be beneficial for other art therapy settings. The methodology allowed us to reexamine our theories and to arrive at a more specific understanding of the therapeutic value of the artistic process and product, and it may bring us closer to a better understanding of the nature of art therapy.

### Setting

Mohammed Bin Nayef Center for Counseling and Care (MBNCCC).

### Objectives

- To provide safe means of self-expression through visual art
- To provide means of internal insight that may aid in the individual's awareness of conscious and unconscious motives underlying behaviors
- To help in the reconstruction of misconceptions, aberrant thoughts, and misguided beliefs through both the creative process and production of art
- To help reintegrate individuals with their families and social groups

### Target population

The target population for this program of art therapy and care is all students enrolled at MBNCCC. All candidates have the privilege of attending the program without compulsion, and they may withdraw from it at any time of their own choosing. Thus far, we have encountered only a few students who were reluctant at first; but they later joined and eventually completed the course.

The participants are 2918 male Saudis between the ages of 18 and 40. There are no women enrolled in the MBNCCC art therapy program. There have never been non-Saudis enrolled or housed at MBNCCC. Although the subjects of this study are detainees at MBNCCC, for the purposes of rehabilitation, they are referred to as *beneficiaries* or *students*, as their enrollment and participation in the art therapy program is entirely voluntary and without compulsion of any kind, as stated above.

Currently, there are two populations treated at MBNCCC. The main population comprises 2798 Saudi detainees arrested locally, and released after serving sentences for fighting in Iraq and other hotspots around the world, aiding and abetting terrorist attacks by renting cars or apartments, spreading aberrant ideology, etc. Their sentences vary from eight years to a few months in prison. The second population comprises 120 Saudi returnees from Guantanamo Bay who were captured in Afghanistan in 2002 and held at Guantanamo until repatriation. The latest returnee had arrived as late as November 2014 (Beech, 2014), and is currently under rehabilitation. This population is treated the same as the main population at MBNCCC, but because of their experiences at Guantanamo and in war settings, and their resulting attitudes, their participation in the art therapy program is limited.

### Institution

In the period 2007–2014, MBNCCC was located in the Atthumammah district of Riyadh, a half-hour drive from Riyadh's downtown. This is considered a resort area, where Riyadh families retreat on weekends to unwind and let their children play in the many play parks. MBNCCC is not part of a prison, nor is it even located near one. MBNCCC began with one rented resort (Istiraha) in 2007, and grew over the last 8 years to occupy 12 former resorts. The art therapy team joined MBNCCC when it was six months old and was still called the Care Center. Each resort complex was equipped with all necessary facilities, such as living quarters, a small mosque, a fully equipped kitchen, a classroom, and a grass courtyard where detainees are left to contemplation, playing soccer or volleyball, receiving unstructured classes, and sometimes creating outdoor art and receiving art therapy sessions. Each resort also houses an art studio for art production and art therapy activities. In mid-2014, the beneficiaries were moved to a different location, in Riyadh, which is owned by the Interior Ministry. The Interior Ministry built two special resorts, one in Riyadh and the other in Jeddah, with similar architectural designs and more sophisticated additions, such as a state of the art fitness center, an Olympic

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