Sudan: De-radicalization and Counter Radicalization in a Radicalizing Environment

Introduction

Sitting at the crucial crossroads of the Arab peninsula, northern Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, Sudan is strategically important. Its stability will have far-reaching consequences not only for the African continent, but also for the United States and Western Europe, as many radical extremists might use Sudan for training, planning and attacking Western targets. The country remains one of the poorest in the Arab world, with a history of volatile narration, including decades of civil war, military coups, religious and ethnic persecutions, and alleged genocide, all of which have claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, displaced millions and torn the country apart economically, politically and ethnically. In the 1990s, Sudan’s name became associated with terrorism, training, supporting and ‘harbouring’ terrorists and terrorist organizations (Waller, 2011). In 2011, Sudan was split into two countries (North and South), both of which remain economically the poorest in their region, unreconciled, unstable, volatile and vulnerable to terrorism, inbound and outbound. Worse, they exist in a region where ‘sub-state terrorism is already endemic in Africa’ (Arya, 2009).

While the country’s name has become synonymous with political instability, terrorism and terrorist organizations, including al-Qaeda (AQ), little attention has been paid to the country’s counter-terrorism efforts which started in the second half of the 1990s and gained momentum after the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). As Waller (2011) noted, ‘Sudan made significant progress in limiting the terrorist presence inside its borders’ after 2005. As far as we know, no researcher has undertaken a study specifically to shed some light on these efforts, which included measures to restore Sudan’s relations with
the international community, de-radicalization procedures, counter terrorism measures and post-release efforts to facilitate reintegration of repented individuals back into their society and families. Nor has anybody attempted to provide meaningful evaluation for these efforts, let alone to draw lessons from counter radicalization and de-radicalization (De-rad) measures undertaken in poor, ethnically and politically divided, strategically important, externally influenced, countries like Sudan.

This chapter fills an important gap in the literature. It analyses Sudan’s counter terrorism measures in detail as they evolved after the expulsion of Osama bin Laden and his colleagues from Sudan in 1996. It is the first study not only to document Sudan’s counter terrorism and De-rad procedures, but also to provide a comprehensive evaluation for the outcome of reforms, the main lessons derived and the main challenges facing them. The chapter proceeds as follows. The next section provides a brief background on Sudan’s historical evolution, including the rise and fall of the first national insurgent movement, the Mahdist Movement, during the last years of the 19th century. Countries are prisoners of their own history, and no country is more ‘a prisoner of [its] history’ than Sudan (Arya, 2009, p. 64). Hence, understanding Sudan’s historical political evolution is important for understanding Sudan’s political, economic and social challenges today. The third section continues with studying Sudan’s historical evolution, but under the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium during 1899–1956, a period which had significant consequences for the country’s later and present development. Sections 4 and 5 shed some light on the post-independence political evolution, including the Islamization of the country in the 1990s, the arrival of the AQ leader, Osama bin Laden (OBL) and his colleagues to Sudan in 1992, and international consequences of these developments. Section 6 provides a detailed description of Sudan’s counter radicalization and De-rad procedures, while Section 7 evaluates the outcome of these efforts. The final section summarizes and concludes.

Background: Sudan before independence and the rise of the Mehdi Rebellion

Mongaybay (2012) is one of very few sources that documents most of the key developments in Sudan’s pre-independence period. Throughout history, Sudan has been divided between two main heritages: the Arab Muslim heritage in the North (Sudan today) and the African, Christian heritage in the South (known as Southern Sudan since 2011). These