Reform or Radicalisation?

Is prison a training ground for extremists? RAND Europe explores radicalisation and recruitment in European prisons

BACKGROUND

Following deadly attacks in Madrid and London, and other failed or averted terrorist plots, radicalisation of young Muslims has become a priority issue for policy makers. Prisons, mosques and educational bodies have emerged as potential radicalisation hotspots. With prison highlighted as a particular concern, RAND decided to self-fund research on the potential for extremist groups to use prisons to gain new recruits.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The study set out to identify insights on the challenges posed by growing numbers of violent imprisoned jihadists. We combined prison theory, historical examples and contemporary open source material.

NOT A NEW PHENOMENON

Many extremist groups have used prison as a way to advance their cause. We identified a spectrum of radicalising activities:

1. ORGANISED GROUPS

Ideologically-motivated groups seek to inform and organise prisoners to further their aims:

- **Self-segregation from other prisoners.** Creating group codes of behaviour and separate structures for education and worship. Modern jihadist prisoners are urged to join with other 'brothers' to create their own Islamist program.
- **Hierarchical command structures.** Both ETA and the Provisional IRA set up military-style ranks and discipline. Jihadists typically form small informal cells, though charismatic leaders may emerge.
- **Indoctrination and recruitment.** Muslim groups actively seek to recruit others to their cause, from Malcolm X in the 1960s to organised propaganda by modern jihadists in UK, Spanish and Iraqi jails.

2. NON-VIOLENT RESISTANCE

Groups escalate activity to overt acts of resistance, such as:

- **Using the law as a vehicle.** The Black Muslims litigated for recognition as a religious group, while the IRA sought prisoner of war status and claimed human rights violations. Modern jihadists are advised to allege mistreatment at every opportunity.
- **Using prisoners' bodies as weapons.** The suffragettes pioneered the hunger strike as a political tool, a technique adopted by detainees at Guantanamo Bay. However, the IRA's notorious "dirty protests" strategy is shunned by modern jihadists, possibly for religious reasons.

3. VIOLENT RESISTANCE

Violence is used collectively to further the group agenda, for example:

- **Attack.** The IRA and ETA authorised violent attacks on prison staff and inmates. The UK Prison Officers' Association reports increasingly confrontational attitudes by jihadist prisoners towards staff.
- **Escape.** The Provisional IRA engineered several escapes, including a mass break-out of 38 prisoners from The Maze. Jihadists have led armed assaults on prisons in Afghanistan and Iraq, exploiting their successes for propaganda.
- **Planning future attack.** Violent jihadists have used time in prison to plan attacks, including the Spanish 'Martyrs for Morocco, the Los Angeles 'Authentic Assembly of Islam' and *Jemmah Islamyia* in Indonesia.

IMPRISONMENT INCREASES VULNERABILITY

Placed in a hostile environment and cut off from family and support networks, new inmates often experience acute fear, isolation and identity crisis. Some turn to new groups or belief systems to help them cope; religion has long played a role in prison life.

Evidence shows that some young European Muslims already feel disconnected from Western society. This increases their vulnerability to radical Islamist ideas offering a coherent group identity and legitimising purpose – the 'Ummah'.

PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE

Countries experimenting with programs to de-radicalise prisoners include Singapore, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. It is still too early to determine success, but there is potential for abuse by target prisoners.

It may be more productive to focus on social cohesion to understand why young Muslims are over-represented in the prison population and reduce their receptivity to radical ideas. Inter-faith dialogue involving religious and community leaders may be a way forward.

IMPACT

- **Learn from history and criminology.** There are lessons from the past and prison studies which may be applied to the contemporary situation.
- **Understand jihadist mindset.** Imprisonment has played a key role in the development of violent jihadist ideology and strategy, which needs to be understood to be countered.
- **Shift focus to prevention.** Countering prison radicalisation requires an understanding of the influences that make imprisonment more likely, how these may be amplified in the prison context, and the social investments needed to reintegrate otherwise disaffected groups.

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