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Radicalization or Rehabilitation

Understanding the challenge of extremist and radicalized prisoners

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Summary

The radicalization of young Muslims has become an issue of high priority to public policy-makers in the UK, Europe and beyond. The deadly attacks in Madrid in 2004 and on the London transport network in July 2005 highlighted the threat posed by small groups of violent, radicalized individuals. Consequently, focus is currently turning to questions about the challenge of radicalization – its precursors, processes, nodes (or physical environments) and operational characteristics, and the potential for de-radicalizing such individuals. Among the nodes for radicalization, three physical venues are thought to be of concern: radicalized mosques, educational establishments (notably universities) and prisons. In particular, radicalization and extremist activity in prisons has increasingly been highlighted as of being of concern in recent official statements surrounding the issue (for example, see House of Commons 2006, 2007a).

This study therefore seeks to explore the issue of radicalization and extremist activity in the prison environment. Using a combination of prison theory, historical examples and contemporary open source material, this report seeks to identify lessons from previous instances of dealing with extremist prisoners. It is hoped that these lessons may provide insights about the challenges posed by the increasing number of violent imprisoned jihadists.

There appear to be considerable overlaps between the historical precedents for dealing with prisoners in earlier conflicts, such as that in Northern Ireland, and the subject of this study. A substantial proportion of the lessons already identified from the management of extremist prisoners are therefore likely to remain valid. However, there are some aspects of the contemporary situation that appear to require greater examination and understanding. A notable difference between the examples of Irish Republican and Basque groups and contemporary violent jihadists concerns their respective attitudes to the recruitment of new members in prison. The nationalist groups deliberately avoided such recruitment, while imprisoned violent jihadists appear to regard recruitment in their prisons as a prime objective. This report draws a number of conclusions about what is and (arguably, more importantly) what is not known about the nature and extent of the problem. It highlights a number of areas that appear to require additional research and exploration.

It is difficult to assess the extent of the problem
Due to the lack of open sources and reluctance on the part of the authorities to discuss these issues, it is not currently possible to draw any definitive conclusions about the extent of violent jihadist radicalization and recruitment in European prisons. While there is some evidence that problem exists, without greater access to security and prison authorities and,

perhaps, to the prisons themselves, it will remain impossible to quantify its extent. However, it seems reasonable to conclude that, as the number of violent jihadist prisoners grows, so too will the potential for future challenges in managing them.

Radicalization of prisoners is neither new nor unique

The examples examined in this study show that the potential for imprisoned individuals to adopt new and, in some cases, extremist or radicalized beliefs, is not a new phenomenon, nor is it exclusive to contemporary violent jihadists. A number of organizations have demonstrated how the prison system is used as a source of new recruits and as a base of power. By examining these and other precedents we may gain a greater understanding of how the radicalization process operates in the prison environment.

Imprisonment may enhance vulnerability to radicalization

Imprisonment may increase a prisoner's susceptibility to adopting new and radicalized ideas or beliefs. This is referred to as a "cognitive opening". There are striking similarities between what are believed to be the psychological experiences that make young Muslims susceptible to radicalization and the psychological impact of imprisonment on individuals in general. These experiences include: undergoing a crisis of self-understanding that challenges or even destroys your conception of the self, experiencing acute feelings of rejection by your native or adopted society and seeking to cope by adopting a new self-identity or self-belief, which may be achieved by adopting a new belief structure (religious or otherwise) and being assimilated into a new, inclusive and frequently protective, group identity. Thus, placing young Muslims (who may already be vulnerable to radicalizing influences) in a prison environment, with all its accompanying psychological and physical dangers may well compound their vulnerability to radicalization. However, it must also be recognized that adopting new and radicalized beliefs may be only one potential pathway for prisoners. Some may seek solace in religion, which may be literalist in its interpretation, but does not necessarily indicate that the prisoner has become a potentially violent extremist. The apparent tendency of some prisoners to convert or revert to religious beliefs highlights the importance of preventing extremists from spreading their ideology via religious services or places of worship in prison. This reinforces the importance of initiatives such as that taken by the UK Prison Service to provide specialist training to prison imams.

Radicalization is one element in a spectrum of potential extremist activity

Radicalized and extremist prisoners may engage in a wide range of activities in prison. Some of these activities may be normal within prison walls, while others may be the result of active resistance. Such activities may simply involve forming into groups of like-minded individuals for self-protection or support, but others may be less benign, such as staging protests and hunger strikes or violent resistance in the form of riots and escapes. Prison and security authorities may have anticipate the possibility that, as the number of violent jihadist prisoners grows, a more cohesive organization may evolve in prisons that will seek to disrupt or subvert the custodial regime.

Greater understanding of the nature of the problem is required

One aspect of extremist prisoner organizations, such as the prison elements of Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) or the *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA), that made them easier

to identify, understand and counter was their hierarchical or paramilitary structures. Identifying who was in control and discerning what the roles of the different prisoners were was easy for the prison authorities. This is not the case with violent jihadist prisoners who, far from revealing their organizational allegiances and activities, may seek to remain covert. The clandestine nature of their operation makes it harder to distinguish which prisoners are extremists in the general prisoner population. Cultural differences between the prisoners and those who guard them make this perception harder still. Religiosity is an increasingly unreliable indicator of extremist or radicalized behaviour and it may be counter-productive to assume that it is. Further research may useful for developing a better understanding of what indicators, if any, may point to influential extremist or radicalizing activity in prisons.

There are options for containing extremist prisoners

One of the problems faced by those seeking to manage extremist prisoners is deciding where and how to contain them. The two primary options are to concentrate them in one or a few prisons or to disperse them throughout the prison system. Both options have advantages and disadvantages. From a resource perspective concentration is beneficial, as the necessary high security resources (perhaps including intelligence-gathering capabilities, using specialized personnel such as linguists, staff training and so on) are needed in only a few locations. However, concentration can also have problematic consequences. In the Maze Prison in Northern Ireland, for example, opposing paramilitary factions of prisoners effectively took control of their prison wings, segregating themselves from the other side and other ordinary prisoners. The paramilitary prisoners could then more readily engage in a range of subversive and violent activities. Those engaged in violent jihad in the UK are typically not part of an organized, hierarchical group; instead they are made up of small, loosely affiliated cells and teams. However, it is possible that if such individuals are concentrated, their loose networks may consolidate into a more solid and organized form.

Dispersing extremist prisoners helps to prevents the formation of groups with strong organizations and ties in a single prison and reduces the opportunities for their leaders to maintain tight discipline and control over other prisoners. Dispersal also is likely to help security by preventing small groups of extremist prisoners from plotting organized escape attempts and from planning attacks or activities in or beyond the prison. Conversely, dispersal may provide violent jihadist prisoners with access to a new pool of potential recruits.

De-radicalization of extremist prisoners may be possible

In a number of countries, perhaps following the recognition by the authorities of the potential consequences of large numbers of violent, radicalized individuals being concentrated in prisons for many years, programmes for the de-radicalization of prisoners have been developed. The efforts of Singapore, Saudi Arabia and Yemen have received considerable attention but is difficult to assess the level of success achieved by these programmes. The authorities in Singapore have released at least three former *Jemaah Islamyia* members as a result of their rehabilitation efforts. It is reported that since 2004 some 2,000 prisoners have participated in the Saudi Arabian programme, of whom roughly 700 have been released. In the case of Yemen some 364 suspected militants were released before the programme's effectiveness was called into question.

The prisoners targeted have several opportunities to abuse such programmes. The Yemeni example appears to demonstrate this, as it resulted in releasing prisoners who returned to their extremist ways. It would be difficult for Western, non-Muslim governments to create such programmes without the active support of leading religious authorities. In Singapore the cooperation between the secular authority and local religious leaders appears to have helped their rehabilitation programme to succeed. However, these schemes mentioned above, and others, have been in operation for relatively short periods of time and therefore it is too early judge their overall effectiveness. Thus, further research and evaluation may lead to greater understanding of these efforts and the effectiveness of different methods.

Preventative and resettlement initiatives require greater attention
Imprisonment provides many of the social and psychological conditions for subsequent criminalization and potentially for radicalization and future extremist activity. Prisoners experience the denigration of the self, detachment from supportive social relationships, exposure to harsh authority and day-to-day violence, and the affiliation with their peers offers them an alternative, counter-cultural community of thought. The period post-imprisonment thus poses further challenges for those seeking to counter radicalization. One way of mitigating these challenges is to implement pre-release programmes that help to prepare the prisoner to reintegrate back into the community and find work. This has been found to have positive effects on offenders generally. However, there are likely to be theological and political facets to prison programmes, which incorporate discussion groups and links that continue when the prisoner is released into the community. This is specifically to be avoided in countering Islamist radicalization.

Currently there is active and urgent debate and discussion about understanding how young Muslims becoming offenders and reducing the likelihood of their doing so. The issues are described at times in terms of counter-terrorism and at other times as concerning social cohesion. This inconsistent use of language indicates a lack of conceptual clarity. While counter-terrorism measures undoubtedly have a role to play in enhancing security, understanding the experiences and disaffection of Muslim youth should be a separate matter. Pursuing social cohesion means focusing on the diversity of communities, including the whole range of religious, socio-economic and cultural groups, rather than targeting one specific group. Targeting points of tension instead of individual groups and seeking potential points of agreement and consensus about desirable ways of living peacefully together, may be more constructive than exhorting the moderate Muslim community to condemn "Muslim terrorists" publicly. In pursuit of cohesion, inter-faith dialogue has increasingly been considered a way forward to solicit the interest and support of religious and cultural leaders in community dialogue. These leaders are key to galvanizing more popular support that could help promote in their community a sense of engagement, investment and belonging, a shared sense of purpose and positive and supportive relationships. The implication is that individuals are thereby less likely to experience crises of the self or to search for experiences that make them vulnerable to those who may offer them alternative ideologies and practices and alternative courses of action, including violence.