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British Prisons and Religious Extremism

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Thank you for this opportunity to join your end-of-project conference.

Introduction

Prisons are a breeding ground for the cross-fertilisation of criminality, religious extremism and violence. We can address this at four levels.

- Potential for extremist recruitment
- Identifying extremists in prison
- Managing extremists in prison
- Managing extremists released from prison

I have worked with skilled criminal justice practitioners from over 100 countries world-wide, many of which embrace Islam. I have experienced nothing but professional and personal courtesies at a level which commands the utmost respect for Islam. It grieves me to see a gentle belief abused and distorted by a minority of violent extremists. But the interests of criminal justice require that we deal with problems as they are presented. In this spirit, let me turn to my themes.

[1] Potential for extremist recruitment

The potential for extremist recruitment in prisons has its origins when extremists are arrested at the time of a terrorist attack, disrupted whilst planning violence or convicted of incitement to violence or allied offences. These offenders go to jail. Within these groups lies the malign seed-corn for further extremism.

In England and Wales, out of a prison population of 82,000, there are 250 people currently in prison for terror-related offences – 0.3 of one per cent or 1 in 300. It is a tiny minority.

But of these prisoners, 82% are self-styled Islamist, 13% far-right with 6% various “other”.

The UK’s total Muslim population exceeds 3 million – around 5% of the general population. But the proportion of prisoners who are Muslim is 15% – three times greater than might be expected on a pro rata basis.

And recent years have seen a surge in Muslim inmates, with one in five (20%) of those serving sentences in Britain's maximum-security jails now said to be following Islam.

We cannot ignore this dimension, or pretend otherwise. It may be absent or less evident in other countries.

[2] Identifying extremists in prison

Identifying the religious extremist in prison is fraught with difficulty. In the case of Muslim prisoners, there are at least six very different categories:

First, there are genuine believers, with precious rights to worship that must be respected and protected.

Second, there are fake believers who use religious privilege as a vehicle for securing material advantage only available to certain faith groups – such as more time out of their cell and better food.

Third, there are prisoners who pragmatically seek the psychological support and physical protection that comes with belonging to an Islamic religious prison subculture.

Fourth, some prisoners are drawn to organised crimes groups (OCGs) built on religious affiliation – often with a focus on violent extortion and drug trafficking, but not jihad.

Fifth, there are inmates who have subverted their religious belief with a jihadist mission – prisoners with convictions for actual violence, plotting violence or incitement to violence. Some of these definitely want to spread jihad; others possibly not.

Sixth, there are vulnerable prisoners who may be susceptible to the influence of already radicalised inmates, either by having their existing genuine faith distorted by extremists, or by conversion to a spurious interpretation of Islam. This is the point at which the threat of radicalisation extends beyond those arrested for terror-related offences.

This is a prisoner profiling minefield. It is difficult to discriminate between these categories with precision. The danger is that genuine believers are seen as extremists and that all Muslims seen as would-be jihadists. This is offensive stereotyping. To make matters more difficult, the boundaries between the good, the bad and the vulnerable are permeable and they change over time. The ebb and flow between these motivations and affiliations is simply not known.

[3] Managing extremists in prison

Moving on to managing the extremist in prison, I think all the countries represented here operate some variation on the dispersal-containment approach – often seen as a linear continuum. Extremist prisoners are either “spread around” the penal estate

(dispersal) or “separated” from the general prison population (containment). Some policies have an element of dispersal and containment, a mixed model.

The dispersal approach hopes to dilute radicalism by overwhelming it with stronger, non-extremist values. It is also the cheapest option. The risk is that it can allow extremism to fester and spread on a wider basis.

The containment approach hermetically seals-off the virus of extremism from vulnerable prisoners. It is a much more expensive option. There are concerns about the possible infringement of prisoners’ human rights and also the way it can lead to those prisoners being identified as “martyrs” to an extremist cause.

But the real key here is not so much a horizontal distinction between dispersal or containment, but a vertical model that sees extremist prisoner management as a pyramid – with three levels and three different penal objectives: prevention, changing behaviour and prophylaxis.

First, at the widest, bottom part of the pyramid, the objective is to safeguard those most at risk of radicalisation through early intervention and support. This requires voluntary engagement. It is the prison equivalent of the UK’s Channel programme widely adopted in the community – literally to channel or funnel potentially violent offenders away from an ideology that fuels violence. Government has invested heavily in training mainstream prison staff for this role. The penal intent here is prevention through low-key but determined educative support within the general prison population.

Second, moving up the pyramid, for those who have already engaged in extremist activity, or known advocates of violence, there is a more focused desistance and disengagement programme (DPP). It encourages non-involvement, sometimes through what are called healthy identity interventions (HIIs) – which offer a reconceptualised world view that show a lifestyle free from extremism. This approach is more proactive. It can apply on a voluntary basis in prison but it can also be imposed as a parole condition. The penal intent here is rehabilitation by means of mentoring and psychological support as well as theological and ideological advice. This has been applied for some years in the community, but is increasingly seen as necessary within the jail system. The penal intent here is training that encourages non-extremist world views.

Third, at the apex of the pyramid, for those identified as posing a threat by promoting the radicalisation of others, there is so-called “specialist case management” for some 700 prisoners. The number is somewhat arbitrary. Within this group, a small minority of those identified as posing the greatest threat to the radicalisation of others – around just 30 prisoners – are warehoused together and held in one of three “separation centres”. The most charismatic extremists are isolated from other prisoners and kept away from the general prison population. They can preach their falsehoods as much as they want but they will only ever be preaching to themselves. The penal intent here is prophylactic – insulating mainstream prisoners from ideologues and preachers of violence. It is not about changing minds or changing behaviour.

This triple-barrelled approach has a compelling logic because it is premised on clearly differentiated penal objectives for different populations, but it has yet to be proved effective.

[4] Managing extremists released from prison

Let me end with a brief note of caution about managing extremists released from prison.

There are now more than 250 extremist prisoners who have completed their sentence. About 50 a year are reaching the end of their prison term. More than 40% of prison terms imposed between 2007 and 2016 will be completed by the end of this year. This number will increase as current prisoners reach the end of their sentence.

On release, extremist offenders are subject to normal parole or – more likely – enhanced parole with restrictive conditions. As the number of released prisoners increases, and the intensity of surveillance and supervision increases, so will the costs. Discharge from prison creates a new offender management problem.

In the next few years, the number of ex-prisoners with extremist affiliations will exceed that of similar prisoners in custody. We need to think beyond the prison walls. Is there a need for another project?

Conclusion

Let me end by drawing some threads together.

The bad news is that we are facing similar threats, violent extremism in the community and its correlates in our jails – where religious extremism can beget yet more violence. And these extremists are being returned to the community. The difficulties will not disappear overnight.

But the good news is that we are struggling together trying to find the right balance between preventive support for vulnerable prisoners (at the bottom of the pyramid), more proactive disengagement programmes for already radicalised prisoners (higher up the pyramid) and containment of the most threatening extremists (at the apex of the pyramid). I call this modest but purposeful progress.

Thank you for your attention and good luck with your ongoing efforts;

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