

From “The Psychology of Counter-Terrorism” (Edited by Andrew Silke on 2011)

The isolated environment of prison settings, where the inmates are living very close proximity, engendered powerful social pressures to conform to the group. The commitment of prisoners to the cause tended to increase considerably in such circumstances and indeed many innocent inmates – those who were innocent of involvement in terrorism prior to their arrest and imprisonment – became politicised and radicalised while incarcerated and had become committed supporters by the time of their eventual release.

A few countries have gradually come to recognise that the disadvantages of concentrating so many political prisoners together outweighs the advantages. Spain is the most notable example of this. Up until 1986, ETA prisoners had been concentrated in only a few prisons. After 1986 however, the Spanish authorities started to distribute prisoners more widely throughout the Spanish prison system. The dispersal strategy brought about several quick benefits. The number of prisoners who resigned from ETA increased considerably. There was no noticeable increase in recruitment or radicalisation among other prisoners who were now exposed to ETA prisoners for the first time. Overall, the organisation lost members rather than gained them. Further, the level of terrorism-related training and skills development the prisoners experienced while in prison declined considerably. Over a period of time, this eventually translated into a drop in the number and effectiveness of ETA operations on the outside.

In most other cases however, states have tended to proceed with the concentration approach despite the many disadvantages. In Turkey, the state used dormitory-type prisons, which essentially became schools for the PKK. As happened with other groups, the PKK was also able to use the prisons to recruit co-opt non-political prisoners with whom they came into contact. The high levels of abuse and torture in Turkish prisons did not undermine the commitment of PKK prisoners but instead was associated with an increase in prisoners’ commitment to the group and the cause and an increase in their hatred for the government and the authorities. An indication of the importance of the social support prisoners gave to each other can be seen in the dramatic increase in suicide rates among prisoners when Turkey moved prisoners from dormitory arrangements to individual cells.