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British and Lebanese Prisons: Are They Fertile Breeding Ground for Terrorism?

Author Biography

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Abstract

Within an antagonistic atmosphere, radicalism becomes an attractive path for young Muslim inmates who feel disaffected. This is especially the case for those who are easily manipulated emotionally, due to being separated from friends and family. Radicalism makes them feel like they are in the “right” place. This article contrasts the radicalization processes occurring within United Kingdom prisons with those occurring in Lebanese prisons. Prisons are frequently designated as the “hotbeds” of radicalization, violent extremism, and terrorism, but in the United Kingdom, they are seen more as “homegrown” terrorist plots. Focusing solely on security is insufficient to prevent radicalization. Instead, an approach is needed that not only strengthens the legal framework, but is grounded in wisdom and justice, as otherwise further anti-Muslim backlash to terror attacks will only drive more terrorist attacks.

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INTRODUCTION

The current European economic crisis hit particularly hard the Muslim population. For instance, the unemployment rate for young Muslims is extremely high in many parts of Europe. The UK is facing more difficulties than other European countries because it is currently the top destination country for Muslim migrants. For instance, the UK received 43% of all Muslim migrants between mid-2010 and mid-2016. Many of these young Muslim migrants now feel alienated, disenfranchised, and resentful due to perceived frequent discrimination against Muslims in the job market.

Because of perceived unequal opportunities and a lack of social integration, some extremists are spreading their ideology and attempting to recruit new Islamic followers to save Islam from European attacks. Recruiters practice variant ways in radicalizing new followers but they have consistently used mosques, gyms, and university Islamic associations as places to spot potential recruits. Usually, they process aside, away from the view of the community, such as in prisons, and radicalized in a one-on-one or small-group setting.

In such an environment, many prisoners have a strong desire to develop a need for belonging, group identity, protection, and religious guidance. A July 5, 2016 report, submitted to the French National Assembly, suggests, “Everyone knows... prison is one of the soils of radicalization.” Incarceration gives many young Muslims the “opportunity to be exposed to radical discourse and to become involved in radical political or even militant activity.”

Historical Overview

The history of prison Islamic radicalization began in Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Lebanon. Islamist extremists in the Arab world have repeatedly used prisons to recruit new followers and graduate some of the most dangerous people known sometimes to intelligence agencies. For instance, Sayyid Qutb, leader of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s and 1960s, wrote his influential radical book “Milestones” whilst in prison. In addition, Ayman al Zawahiri, the current leader of Al-Qaeda and a former student of Qutb, during his time in prison in the 1980s, became a hardened radical and recognized leader for Islamic militant beliefs, where he taught radical understanding of Islamic theology and Islamic history in various prisons. Likewise, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi spent most of his time under United States detention in the infamous Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and after his release became the leader of the Islamic

State (IS, formerly ISIS/ISIL). In addition, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi during his imprisonment in Jordan, became a powerful leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, and even recruited followers in prison. Due to the control, these and other Islamists have gained over inmates and guards in prisons, petty criminals have been recruited by and transformed into jihadists.

Connection between Religion and Radicalism

As a sociological phenomenon, issues such as belonging, identity, group dynamics, and values are important elements in the radicalization transformation process. The French political scientist Olivier Roy believes that suicide terrorism and organizations such as al-Qaida and ISIS are new in the history of the Muslim world and the rise of fundamentalism doesn't explain it. He points out that terrorism does not arise from the radicalization of Islam, but from the Islamization of radicalism.

In contrast, wars in the Muslim heartland and foreign policy issues are not the only suggested triggers for radicalization. British counter-extremism James Bradon reminds us "detained Irish Republican Army (IRA) men swiftly turned a number of prisons in the United Kingdom into centers of radicalization and propaganda." He views prisons, particularly in the United Kingdom, more as "homegrown" terrorist plots than any other Western country. Robert Mueller III, Director of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) goes so far as to suggest that prisons are fertile grounds for radicalization. He argues prisoners "may be drawn to an extreme form of Islam because it might help justify their violent tendencies."

Criminologist Harvey Kushner believes, Western prisons are one of the main recruitment grounds for Al Qaeda. Not surprisingly, Dame Anne Owers, former Chief Inspector of Prisons in the United Kingdom, suggests that police should spend greater focus on converts to Islam, as supposed to be at far greater risk of radicalization than other Muslims are. Babar Ahmed, detained in the United Kingdom while appealing extradition to the United States on charges of running pro-jihadist websites, has meanwhile described prison as a "university of Islamic knowledge."

Keys Factors for Prison Radicalization

Socio-economic deprivation, including low education attainment, unemployment, and underemployment, are amongst the most common, as well as most contested, explanations for radicalization in general. But, isolation from the outside world, a perceived sense of victimization, the need for belonging, a sense of vulnerability, and prolonged exposure to

radical individuals, are all believed to be contributed factors for prison radicalization. Which means that socio-economic frustration and lack of self-fulfillment, along with bitter experiences of racism, discrimination, and Islamophobia can trigger violent radicalization. This enlightenment might lead to economist Gary Becker's theory that "the greater amount of human capital a person accumulates, the less likely that person is to commit crime."

David Snow and Scott Byrd write that it is fallacious to consider ideology as "tightly coupled, inelastic set of values, beliefs, and ideas." In fact, prisons offer radicalizers an ideal atmosphere for introducing their extreme ideologies and doctrines by playing on certain prisoners concerns and feelings to gain their trust, garner their support, and recruit them into their group. It is more likely to begin through such personal relationships rather than through a ranting, wild-eyed extremist "brainwashing" an unwilling audience.

In the United Kingdom, some imprisoned Islamists have adopted a proactive strategy to capitalize on this uncertainty by offering food, friendship, and spiritual support to new arrivals in prison. Lebanon uses a similar approach where the influential prisoners offer a secure ambiance for new prisoners in order to obtain their trust. They demonstrate a route out of isolation, creating a sense of involvement in a wider project, and presenting a vision of a promised victory. Extremists are making the most of these circumstances by contacting and recruiting non-radicalized prisoners. Hence, according to Olivier Roy,

"prison amplifies many of the factors that fuel contemporary radicalization: the generational dimension; revolt against the system; the formation of a tight-knit group; the search for dignity related to respect for the norm; and the reinterpretation of crime as legitimate political protest."

There have been a number of cases of young men, often imprisoned because of crimes committed in gangs, converting to radical Islam while in prison. Joining Islamist groups gives some of these converts the sense of comradeship and purpose that they had outside prison, contributing to the drowned individuals into radical groups inside prison. Furthermore, it is not always clear whether an individual's radicalization took place in prison or happened before. Take, for example, the case of Richard Reid, the "shoe bomber" who attempted to blow himself on board a transatlantic flight in 2001; he converted to Islam while imprisoned at a Young Offenders Institution in England, but many believe that his

interest in Al Qaeda only started when he became involved with a group of extremists at Brixton Mosque. However, not all people who convert to Islam in prisons are becoming radicalized and not every radicalized is a terrorist.

British Profiles

There is increasing evidence of the process of radicalization inside British prisons. Examples include Michael Coe who went into prison as a gangster and left as Mikael Ibrahim, a convert to Islam acting as a minder for Anjem Choudary. Likewise, Kevin Gardner later recognized as Abbas Shafiq, who turned towards extremism during his stay at a Young Offenders' Institution in England in 2006-07. He became obsessed with the British Army and plotted an attack on a military base from within his cell. As well, Jordan Horner known as Jamaledin, jailed in December 2013 for trying to bring Sharia Law to the streets of east London. He claimed that he was able convert dangerous, hardened criminals during his time in prison. Horner said that he found prisons fertile ground for his extreme understanding of Islam and suggested that prison guards were "powerless" to prevent his activities.

The recent Westminster killer Khalid Masood is suspected to have been radicalized in prison. His actions led Durham Frankland Prison in summer 2017 to begin the creation of a separate block for terrorism related prisoners. The prison authority design this block, referred to as a "jihadi jail," to prevent the radicalization of inmates. Can similar models (a "Guantanamo UK or Abu Ghraib Lebanon") be adapted into the UK and/or Lebanon?

Lebanese Profiles

According to Lebanon 2017 Human Rights report, there were approximately 6,330 prisoners, including 4,097 pre-trial detainees and remanded prisoners, in facilities built to hold 3,500 inmates. Roumieh prison is the largest prison in Lebanon and holds 1050 inmates. Unfortunately, as of 2017 it is extremely overcrowded and operating at about 300% capacity which represents nearly half the prisoners in Lebanon. For instance, the placement of 1100 prisoners with a maximum capacity of 400, extremely overcrowded the separate block of the Islamist extremist. This overcrowding, the poor conditions of the prison and the lack of the judicial system where detainees spent one year on average in pre-trial detention prior to sentencing, were supportive circumstances for Islamic extremists to conduct a mutiny in 2015. This in turn led to disorder and the establishment of alliances between terrorists

and ordinary prisoners. A revolt occurred after the prisoners managed to steal the master key from a guard, kidnapping 12 others, two doctors and holding them ransom demands to negotiate with the government. This caused an intervention from Special Forces in the Internal Security forces (ISF) in Lebanon to remove such uprising of terrorist forces.

These prisoners pose a serious challenge to safety and security in Lebanon. Hence, the Lebanese Interior Minister believes Roumieh prison plays an infamous role in the recruitment of terrorists, confirming, "Roumieh prison is an operations room for ISIS." Shortly in 2015, extremists organized a suicide attack perpetrated in North Lebanon from within the prison. A raid two days later exposed mobile and satellite phones, computers, and even video conferencing capabilities in the Islamist Bloc in Roumieh Prison. A similar case happened later in Britain, where an imprisoned supporter of Al Qaeda used a mobile phone to direct the construction of an extremist website. Prisoners of a segregation unit holding convicted terrorists used a "linked system" of pipework to move the contraband devices (encased in waterproof bags) passed by inmates from one cell to another at HMP Whitemoor in Cambridgeshire.

Why focus on the UK and Lebanon?

This article contrasts marginalization and radicalization in Lebanon with what it is happening in the United Kingdom. Lebanon plays an immense role due to its importance thoroughfare for extremists from Syria and Iraq to Europe. Alistair Burt, British Minister of State for the Middle East and North Africa stated in June 2018:

"Lebanon security is United Kingdom security. I am pleased to be back in Lebanon and see how the UK, as a strong supporter of Lebanon, is delivering its commitment to stand shoulder to shoulder with Lebanon now and into the future."

This statement highlights the importance of this comparative research, because the Lebanese and British authorities are facing a substantial challenge, one that does not respect borders, especially after the start of the Syrian war in 2011.

Furthermore, comparing prison radicalization rates across these two countries has many challenges, especially due to the differences in legal systems, culture, language, environment, and many other factors. For example, Foley argues that the United Kingdom has continued to try terrorism cases through the ordinary courts, but has introduced considerable and controversial powers, such as control orders, which

“allowed the authorities to exercise extensive control over terrorist suspects without bringing them to trial.” In contrast, the Lebanese judicial system follows a trial procedure for terrorism applied by military judges in front of special courts called “military courts,” which have no equivalent in the English legal system.

In 2015, a military court sentenced the radical cleric Omar Bakri Mohammed (who fled Britain in 2005) for three years in Lebanon. His “voice” Anjem Choudary, who was urging support for ISIS, got jailed in 2016 for five-and-a-half years in the United Kingdom. Prisons authorities face serious difficulties managing such prisoners, as currently inside prisons the risk of extremism recruitment is substantial and produces an extremely violent mind-set. Consequently, there is a need to focus on the following question: What is the destiny of such prisoners when they will be released?

A case study from the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF) in 2018, reported a 23 years old male released after three years of imprisonment at Roumieh prison for joining Daesh. On release, his relative asked him to carry out a terrorist attack against the Lebanese army in the north of Lebanon and on a Church, promising to provide him weapons and an explosive belt from Syria via Wadi-Khaled, Lebanon.

SOLUTIONS

Deradicalization

There are many perspectives of deradicalization. For instance, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force Working Group on Radicalization and Extremism describes deradicalization as “programs that are generally directed against individuals who have become radical with the aim of reintegrating them into society or at least dissuading them from violence.” In his seminal 2009 work, *Walking Away from Terrorism* as Horgan defines deradicalization in a different manner:

“The social and psychological process whereby an individual’s commitment to, and involvement in, violent radicalization is reduced to the extent that they are no longer at risk of involvement and engagement in violent activity.”

Hence, prisons are important vectors in the process of radicalization and they mostly leveraged in the fight against it. For instance, Babar Ahmed has written of reading Sayyid Qutb’s Milestones while in prison. This book

is manifestly unsuitable for terrorist suspects might support any radical ideologies propagated in prison by extremist inmates.

Radicalization has no simple cause and effect. The perpetrators come from all areas of society, and it is difficult to predict who may be vulnerable to radicalization. Nevertheless, the following potential strategy, preventing young people from entering the radicalization process in the first place might be efficacious. In an attempt to protect children from the risk of radicalization, the British government in 2015 imposed on all schools a Prevent duty under Section 26 of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015. Though the UK Government has expressed its desire for controversial topics to be debated in classrooms, it is also mandatory for teachers to refer children for “deradicalization” for bringing up their “concern about British policy in the Middle East” as a potential sign of radicalization. There are also, right wing extremist (RWE) disengagement programs run in Germany, France, Netherlands and Sweden. The Lebanese government, however, has not currently implemented any similar strategies.

Professor Bjorgo interviewed former right-wing extremists and found that there are two universal factors involved in disengagement and deradicalization. These are classified as push factors or pull factors. “Push” factors includes doubting and disillusionment from the group’s ideology, becoming uncomfortable with the brutality of the violence involved, loss of status from the group and burnout. “Pull” factors includes age, fatigue, maturity, greater freedom, not well accepted in the wider community, and leaving to establish a personal relationship and/or family.

In May 2015, the Council of Europe launched a three-year action plan to counter violent extremism and radicalization, in particular in schools, prisons, and on the Internet. In this context, the Committee of Ministers adopted guidelines to help member States of the European Union prevent radicalization of prisoners and probationers and rehabilitate individuals who have already been radicalized. For instance, the Channel program in the UK (technically counter-radicalization) known as a deradicalization program despite extremist violence not having taken place. It focusses on the ideology of those referred to it, who moves through a series of interventions by officials. Prison-based deradicalization programs range from informal “chats” between prisoners and imams, to two-week intense “courses” teaching prisoners the basics of Islam, to a years-long integrated program.

For nearly social prevention programs should address progressively the

idea that the risk of radicalization potentially leading to violent actions. For instance, International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) Vice-President Christine Beerli notes, “many States are developing and implementing various domestic plans to address the root causes of this phenomenon.” These states are referring such programs to as preventing or countering violent extremism (P/CVE). On the other hand, it is argued that current deradicalization programs focus largely on ideological factors and are unlikely to be effective in achieving participant’s disengagement. Whether these programs are sufficient to counter radicalization leading to terrorism is presently unknown.

A concentration of radicalized prisoners may result in accusations of racism, prejudice, and profiling, but would also lessen the likelihood of radicalization of other prisoners. Alternatively, spreading inmates with extremist views throughout the prison system may weaken the strength of the individuals, by removing their support networks. However, it may result in the radicalization of other individuals and thus lead to even greater levels of radicalization. The practice of combating radicalization consolidates the perception that fanatical religious ideology causes terrorism and that the holding of radical ideas within a society is the only detrimental attribute. Efforts to keep individuals from engaging in radical violence are much more focused on the prevention of radical ideologies and encouraging the integration of “at-risk communities” (which are primarily taken to be “Muslim communities”).

CONCLUSION

Radicalism inside prison raises the threat of attacks from unknown parties. Most people involved in terrorist attacks appear normal, unremarkable and sometimes intelligence agencies know of these people. Hence, it is important to ask, is our government taking the right precautions to avoid the development of radicalization, especially inside prisons? Likewise, we should all question whether it is ideal to distribute extremists across a number of prisons so that their influence and provision is reduced.

While the political landscape and policies in Europe are diverse, across the continent the patterns of radicalization are familiar. Cases of radicalization in prison are rising and prison environments is linking extremist attacks. The United Nations General Assembly adopted in its sixtieth session a resolution containing the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. The strategy has shortlisted unlimited conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism such as, “prolonged unresolved

conflicts - dehumanization of victims of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations - lack of rule of law and violation of human rights - ethnic, national, and religious discrimination - political exclusion, socio-economic marginalization and lack of good governance.” Finding solutions for the root causes of terrorism, in addition to understanding the common tactics of prison radicalization being employed across the continent, is essential to prevent its spread. Furthermore, in order to limit the magnitude and scope of radicalization in prisons worldwide we need two things. First, more research focusing on the efficacy of preventive methods is needed. Second, the international community needs to implement and respect rules of law.

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A Longer Term? It is the judge decision! 'Inviting support for a proscribed organization' is an offence under the Terrorism Act 2000, which states that the maximum sentence for the offence is 10 years'. He'll be out in two-and-half years and there's no reason to believe prison can reform him or make him see how appalling his recruitment of young Brits had been': Spillett, "It's a mockery."

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