

# **Agora briefing :** *Managing extremists in the UK's prisons*

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## Executive summary

Prisons play a significant role in the radicalisation of vulnerable individuals. Terrorists have used prisons as incubators to mobilise outside support and radicalise other prisoners in order to recreate operational command structures. Prisons can also play a positive role in tackling radicalisation and terrorism in society as a whole, however. This briefing offers an analysis of the ways in which prisons can aid the fight against terrorism by helping governments and policy-makers spot new ideas and avoid costly and counterproductive mistakes.

## Introduction

In recent years, many nations around the world have been subjected to the spectrum of violent extremism, including right-wing violence, left-wing violence, and other religious and ideological related violence. Although one of the greatest threats identified by authorities is that of Islamic State-inspired violent extremism, all extremists in the prison setting need unique approaches.

Addressing the issue of the radicalisation and the role of prisons in countering violent extremism has become a high priority for policy-makers in Europe and beyond. It has been shown that the UK Government's counterterrorism strategy (CONTEST) has devoted growing attention to understanding the dynamics of the risk behind prisoner radicalisation, by focusing on more technical challenges, such as risk assessment, prison management, and rehabilitation and reintegration approaches[1].

This briefing focuses on the considerations that a prison service should have concerning the management of extremist offenders by examining the role of both prison and staff in the incarceration and post-incarceration experience.

## Considerations for tackling extremism in prisons

It is important to understand that tackling extremism in prison means dealing with a wide range of offenders, from terrorists convicted of serious offences to prisoners who have committed lesser crimes but are nonetheless vulnerable to extremist ideologies. Consequently, a holistic approach is required. At least four areas must be analysed in order to gain a better understanding of how the prison system can deal with radicalisation. These are:

- Allocation strategies
- The role of prisons and staff in the incarceration and post-incarceration periods
- Effective prevention
- Multi-organisation cooperation

### Allocation Strategies

When it comes to the management of prison systems and allocation strategies (which determine the categorisation of prisoners based on personal background, criminal history, significant contacts, ideology, and the level of

threat to national security) a question arises as to whether extremist offenders can be dispersed into the mainstream inmate populations or whether they should be concentrated within dedicated specialist units[2].

Such states as the USA and the Netherlands have adopted concentration policies, whereas others have opted for dispersal policies. Spain has employed a mixed policy, dispersing inmates from the Basque Nationalist group, the ETA (Basque Homeland and Liberty), but concentrating Jihadi terrorists[3].

The UK has generally dispersed violent extremist offenders among the small number of high-security prisons. Nevertheless, the Acheson review in 2016 concluded that Islamist extremism was a growing problem within prisons, convincing the UK to create separation centres in an attempt to crack down on Islamist radicalisation within the prison[4]. In 2017, the Government announced the creation of three separation centres in Durham, York, and Milton Keynes, holding 28 of the most serious offenders, including Anjem Choudary and Michael Adebolajo.

What works in one country may not work in others, depending on a range of contextual factors, such as the prison environment and available resources and staff. On the one hand, integrating radicalised inmates amongst other prisoners can increase the risk of recruitment and dispersion of violent extremist ideologies. On the other hand, holding them separately in concentrated units can damage their physical and psychological well-being, preventing rehabilitation[5]. Undoubtedly, these factors should be considered by a prison service in relation to the management of extremist offenders.

It is widely accepted that those convicted of terrorist-related offences often radicalise and recruit other prisoners. The Government's anti-terror Prevent Strategy argues that, in such cases, the isolation policy can directly disrupt the recruiting and influencing of others in the mainstream population[6]. Nonetheless, it appears that placing radicalised prisoners together may strengthen social bonds and reinforce views about the unfair and biased treatment of particular religious and ethnic groups. As a result, in both cases, this could serve as a source of stigma and undermines rehabilitation efforts. The disperse policy also has both advantages and disadvantages when it comes to the treatment of offenders. Dispersing those criminals provides the possibility that radicalised individuals can be influenced by other inmates and abandon their views through interaction with the mainstream ideologies, however this policy poses a significant risk for the reason that radicalised offenders can be influenced by criminal gangs, maintaining the nexus between terrorism and organised crime[7].

Considering both the high number of prisoners related to terrorism or extremism and the lack of staff trained to understand the threat of extremism, a blended method is necessary for managing high-risk terrorists and preventing widespread radicalisation. The USA, for example, has developed effective

regimes for incarcerating extremists through the blended method by combining isolation (where extremists are separated from the prison population and placed in single cells), co-location (where extremists are placed in specialised extremist units or wings), and dispersal (spreading extremist offender throughout prison, based on threat levels)[8].

### **The role of prison and staff in incarceration and post-incarceration**

Training and educating staff is necessary for developing proper prison management and avoiding mistreatment. This entails recruiting specialist staff (such as social workers, mental health professionals, religious officials), encouraging inter-disciplinary work, and determining appropriate responses toward radicalisation[9].

As ideology is a significant driver of violent extremism, prisons should enlist imams and Islamic scholars to discuss Islamic theology to convince those offenders that their interpretation of Islam is dangerous[10]. With the growing number of extremists, chaplains are increasingly active in prisons, providing pastoral support to identify signs of radicalisation and a moral framework which can help inmates change perceptions[11]. Nevertheless, considering the extent of prison radicalisation, appointing more chaplains is a minor intervention and cannot solve the issue on its own. Instead, more comprehensive and durable programmes by combining deradicalisation and disengagement can serve as a valuable approach in dealing with extremism[12].

Characteristically, there are several deradicalisation programmes in the UK – including the *Health Identity Intervention*, the *Desistence and Disengagement Programme*, and *The Channel* – which together can provide a comprehensive response to violent extremism[13][14]. In particular, the *Healthy Identity Intervention* was one of the first behavioural offender programmes which seeks to address the motivation to offend and the beliefs that enable them to offend. This programme can play a pivotal role in understanding the reason behind extreme right-wing violence, which cannot be addressed through the use of chaplains and imams [15]. Similarly, the “prevent” policy of the CONTEST counter-terrorism strategy – Prevent, Pursue, Protect, and Prepare – uses mentoring, psychological support, and ideological advice in order to disengage offenders from terrorism. Finally, the Channel programme which is available within communities can provide support to people identified as vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism, by involving a partnership between the local authority, the police, education, and others[16].

### **Effective prevention**

Another issue of importance in designing effective prevention programmes for radicalised offenders is in the post-release space. After release,

prisoners must disengage from their affiliated extremist groups and social networks and reintegrate into society[17]. Prisons are a microcosm of society and need to become an environment for change, education, and tolerance, as they can have an impact on the radicalisation process.

There is evidence that engaging family members is a crucial element of the offender's reintegration when released from prison[18]. The threat posed by radicalised individuals remains high as they may continue to reconnect to networks and engage in violent extremist acts, thus enabling offenders to maintain close communication with their family and social circle can bridge the transition from prison to release and avoid becoming drawn back in by extremist groups[19]. Rebuilding and navigating social life while branded with the 'terrorist' label is one of the toughest challenges that requires consideration by the prison system. Similarly, family members deal with the challenges of incarceration and reintegration of their extremist son or daughter and the provision of economic and social opportunities are great family assistance[20].

Regardless of which measures prisons choose to employ, a type of intervention programme that exists in one prison system may not be applicable and permissible to another. Consequently, considering the time available in prisons to implement rehabilitation and disengagement programmes, close cooperation between prison and probation is a logical requirement in dealing with radicalised offenders.

### **Multi-organisation cooperation**

Effective cooperation between prisons, the probation service, police, intelligence agencies, and the judiciary is vital in minimising the chances of reoffending and maximising prisoner reintegration into society by becoming eligible citizens[21]. In most cases extremist prisoners will be released and returned to the community, making support in the post-incarceration period a key consideration. Although this issue has attracted growing attention, solid evidence on the effectiveness of these programmes remains scarce (though several studies have emphasised the dynamics behind prisoner radicalisation, such as overcrowding, gangs, and charismatic leadership).

There is also a lack of evaluative studies exploring why, even inside the same prison, some people radicalise while others do not[22]. More work is also needed into juvenile violent extremist offenders and the way they should be treated differently from adult inmates. Those studies that do exist can provide useful insights into different approaches, but they have been descriptive and very limited when proving the impact of the programmes empirically. Social phenomena such as radicalisation, rehabilitation, and reintegration are equally hard to measure and require further research too. Such studies will only be possible if there is good engagement between prisons and those working in or

with them on the one hand and researchers from universities, think tanks, and similar organisations on the other.

## Conclusion

As rising numbers of offenders are being held in prison for terrorism-related offences, we must respond appropriately to their risks and needs and allocate available resources for safe release into society. To contain radicalisation, prisons should respect prisoners' human rights and work with them and invest in more specialist interventions to mitigate risks.

When it comes to allocation strategies, the UK must balance the prevention of dispersion of extremist ideologies and the rehabilitation of extremist offenders by approaching a blended method. The training of existing prison staff, but also the recruitment of specialist staff such as social workers and religious officials will play a vital role in dealing with radicalisation in prison. The prison system must emphasise post-release programmes to disengage prisoners from the affiliated extremist groups through multi-organisational cooperation between the probation service, police, judiciary, and intelligence agencies.

By investing and promoting high-quality day-to-day interactions between staff and prisoners, we can minimise the risk of violent extremism. Prisons represent a segment of society, and a prison-staff relationship is vital for delivering counter-radicalisation approaches.

## About the author

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