Event Report

Fighting jihadist radicalisation in prisons
What more needs to be done?

Policy Dialogue – 16 January 2018

Summary

Prisons across Europe and beyond have become hotbeds for jihadist radicalisation and recruitment of terrorists. While the challenge of radicalisation in prisons is not new, it constitutes a growing threat in the context of jihadist terrorism. It requires dealing with a wide range of offenders, from highly motivated terrorists convicted of extremely serious offences, to inmates who are vulnerable or susceptible to extremist ideology. Prison officers are frequently too overwhelmed to deal with the problem, lacking the skills and training, while de-radicalisation programmes have had mixed results. At this Policy Dialogue, organised in partnership with the European Foundation for Democracy (EFD), a group of experts discussed current policies, best practices and the major challenges faced by governments across Europe in curbing radicalisation in prisons.

Full Report

Ian Acheson, Programme Director, Sampson Hall Ltd, former prison governor and head of the 2016 UK government review into Islamic extremism in prisons, had been working in prisons for ten years before he was asked by UK Justice Secretary Michael Gove in 2015 to lead an independent review of Islamist extremism in the UK prison system. With this review, the UK government wanted to identify the level of the threat and assess the capability of public services to cope with the problem.

The review started from the hypothesis that Islamist extremism in prisons was a serious and complex problem that needed to be addressed as soon as possible. The hypothesis also included four possible worst-case scenarios of how this would manifest itself: 1) members of prison staff are taken hostage and/or murdered, footage of which is then used as propaganda; 2) a terrorist attack is planned from within the prison or by someone who was radicalised inside the prison; 3) a terrorist attack on the prison itself to force the release of terrorist offenders, leading to mass casualties; 4) the spread of Islamist extremism compromises the rehabilitation of other prisoners. This is already happening to some degree, with Muslim gangs dominated by charismatic figures vying for power and controlling prison units, leading to a *de facto* religious segregation of prisons. This is a direct threat to the main objective of the incarceration system – the rehabilitation of offenders as functioning members of society.

He added the evidence suggests that Islamist radicalisation in prisons is a real and growing problem, and not just in the high security facilities. Enablers and accomplices of terrorist plots are put into lesser secured prisons, where there are not enough resources to closely monitor them. The staff in these prisons is not equipped to deal with a threat of this scale, while the prison management services do not understand the severity of the problem. Guards are hesitant to intervene out of fear they will be accused of being racist. Information is scattered and incomplete. This leads to whole sections of prisons being effectively ungoverned.

Acheson also lamented the lack of proper control on the selection and deployment of prison imams/chaplains, many of whom are either unable or unwilling to cooperate with prison management to stop the spread of extremism. The current strategy for highly dangerous and extremist prisoners is not sufficient and relies too much on previous experiences with IRA terrorism, which was much smaller in scale.

Communication to members

Part of the activities under the *Europe in the World* programme. In partnership with the European Foundation for Democracy.

Based on their review, Acheson and his team formulated a set of recommendations for prisons, such as additional training of staff, a better control of extremist literature, a more coordinated approach, and an increase of prisons' tactical response capacities, so that they can respond more effectively to violent incidents, and finally, the most controversial recommendation, the introduction of separate regimes for highly subversive extremists. He acknowledged this could be very risky and challenging, but after much deliberation, the committee decided this was the lesser evil. By separating these charismatic figures from their audience the chain of command is broken, given the authorities an opportunity to intervene in both spheres – the preacher and the followers. Those who will remain ideologically impervious can serve out the remainder of their sentence in complete isolation. However, he warned that an approach that focuses solely on the security aspect is not enough. It is important to have a humanized regime, with close, normalised relations between prisoners and staff. There always has to be a chance to return to the general population in return for their cooperation and engagement (and following a thorough analysis of risk reduction): the prospect of hope is indispensable.

Besides dealing with extremists in custody, we also have to consider the supply, stated Acheson. He said that we, as a society, have to ask ourselves very uncomfortable questions about why these young men, often born and raised in the West, turn to the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) and other terrorist groups. But besides analysing what drives them to become foreign fighters, we also have to take a look at what stops other people from getting involved: what are the protective factors in these cases?

Finally, he said that the communication between extremists outside and inside the prison is a source of much concern for the government and security forces. So far, there is no strategy or technology that can properly monitor, manage or even jam this kind of mobile communications in prisons. Videos of preachers giving lectures inside prison, for instance, can be widely shared on social media.

Then the audience heard from **Luc Van der Taelen, Police Commissioner, Belgium Federal Police Project Manager, Community Policing and the Prevention of Radicalisation (CoPPRa)**, who has a background as a neighbourhood police officer in the municipality of Molenbeek. After having spent some time in the Middle East, he joined the federal police in Belgium, where he leads a training programme in the central city unit for police officers and civil servants. He also regularly works with prison staff.

Belgian authorities did not have much experience with Islamist extremism before the attack at the Jewish Museum in Brussels in 2014, he noted. After Charlie Hebdo, the 13 November attacks of 2015 in Paris, and the attacks at Zaventem and the Maelbeek metro station in Brussels on 22 March 2016, the Belgian government issued a series of measures to address radicalisation and terrorist conspiracies, in line with the EU's CVE strategy and its four pillars: prevent, protect, pursue and respond.

He further explained his unit organises awareness trainings for prison staff, and police and intelligence officers. Besides the four pillars, intelligence gathering, a sustained dialogue with and integration in target communities (including prisons) and respect for human rights are the main threads throughout the training.

CoPPRa also deals with returning fighters, and their wives and children. They have put in place a hotspot procedure, liaising with police on the ground to make a first assessment and create a profile of the returnee, who is then later prosecuted and imprisoned.

Regarding the relationship with prisons, he said that, since the attacks in Paris and Brussels, local taskforces and platforms have been set up wherein police, the army and intelligence services come together to exchange information and discuss radicalised individuals. Prisons are not part of these local task forces, but Van der Taelen's unit is the connection. He commended his colleagues, saying that they were doing 'a great job'. This connection to the prisons is vital because security services need to know who is visiting the prisons.

He then stated that, in his experience from the last six years, if people are not trained, they don't know what to look for. So far, his unit has trained 25,000 people, including prison personnel. He stressed again that the foundation of this training is respect for diversity and equality and human rights. Participants are trained not to contribute to existing polarisation, which means avoiding discrimination and racial profiling. Unfortunately, during the trainings, he has seen a move to the right in the Belgian police force in the past few years.

Another important element in his training course is the changing process of radicalisation, and the evolving relation between ideology, group dynamics and charismatic leaders. Whereas it used to take years of intensive training to become a terrorist, individuals can now be radicalised from behind their computer screen, in a matter of weeks. The training also teaches the participants about the basics of religion and Islam, and informs them on what partners are available to help tackle the problem. Once trained participants see radicalisation much faster, which is reflected in the improved quality of their reporting on the phenomenon afterwards.

Next on the agenda is the financing of terrorism, which is starting to be addressed by European governments. Europol and Interpol have ongoing assessments, but the network of financing streams is spread all over the world, making it very difficult to pinpoint the money's origin and to determine who is funding who.

Selim Cherkaoui, **CVE Prison Programme Manager, L'Autre Lieu**, was born and raised in Brussels, and now works in Belgian prisons as a CVE manager. Based on his many talks with extremists and terrorists in Brussels prisons, he thinks the main challenge is bridging the gap between these radicals and the 'normal' world. He added that so far, 'we are not doing a good job'.

The first issue is that the prison system puts all perpetrators on the same level, all labelling them terrorists. Cherkaoui explained that, in order to help these prisoners de-radicalise – or 'be pacified' as he preferred – they have to be turned away from hateful thoughts. He added that terrorists are at the top of the prison hierarchy nowadays. This means that even people who aren't involved in terrorism or extremist activities are attracted to these individuals, for safety reasons or to climb the hierarchy. He therefore called for a more accurate assessment of all the different 'radical' profiles in prison, ranging from very dangerous and persuasive individuals, to accomplices. And more importantly, we as a society have to keep the door open for some of them so that they can leave the label 'terrorist' behind.

Being radical in itself is not illegal, he continued. It becomes problematic when this radicalism results in the use of violence. So the second step should be to help these prisoners to understand their own responsibility and resilience. They are right in saying there is a societal stigma against them, but there needs to be a 'disconnect' between this stigma and them turning themselves into victims.

He told the audience that most of the people who he works with are lost, and looking for a second chance. The third problem is the lack of rehabilitation perspectives. Usually a programme starts in prison and ends as soon as the individual leaves, but Cherkaoui argued that such programmes should continue outside of prison. Governments should invest more in these kind of programmes, but most of the time the exact opposite happens. Many prison guards are also very confrontational, and cannot separate the individual in front of them from the wider terrorist problem.

Paul then asked if he knew any positive stories of rehabilitation. Cherkaoui replied there were too few, and that in order to have more of these kind of stories, society, governments and prison staff should focus on connection, not confrontation, and provide narratives that are complex, and not so binary. Security is very important, but we have to hold on to our humanity.

Discussion

The first round of questions touched upon the percentage of the Muslim populations in prisons in Belgium and the UK and the reasons behind radicalisation in prisons. **Acheson** said prisons are ideal incubators. There's a steady stream of vulnerable, often violent young men coming in, many with personality disorders or mental illnesses, and feeling aggrieved and alienated. However, he said there are also pragmatic reasons for inmates to turn to radical Islam, such as safety or the perception that the food regime of terrorists is better.

Regarding the presence of Muslims in the general prison population, Acheson said that in the UK, there's an overrepresentation. The Muslim population accounts for 6% of the general population, but 12% of the prison population. Van der Taelen added that he thought there was an overrepresentation of people from Moroccan decent in the Belgian prison system as well, but he had no exact numbers. **Cherkaoui** specified that a differentiation needs to be made between nationality and religion, and between religion and extremism. Not all Muslims are in prison for terrorism, and not all Arabs

are Muslims. All speakers agreed this question was related to the reasons behind radicalisation. Societies in Europe have failed to identify and protect vulnerable youngsters and their families, who often have to face widespread discrimination.

One audience member asked whether **Cherkaoui** preferred a one-on-one approach when talking to radicalised individuals, or group sessions. He answered that, in the beginning he talked to prisoners individually, and they were sent to him by the prison staff, but then he understood the initiative should come from the prisoners themselves. To win time, he now works in groups, but you need to be very strong. He also called on the government(s) of Brussels and Belgium to invest more in CVE measures in prisons. His NGO has to get by on a shoestring budget.

The next round focused on possible lessons from countering violent extremism in the Western Balkans, and how to differentiate between those who are just religious and those that are radicalised. **Van der Taelen** replied that expertise from his unit is shared with experts in the Balkans on a monthly basis. Workshops are organised under an umbrella of a Western Balkans counter extremism project, and he added that their CVE measures have proved to be small-scale but impactful.

On the difference between the devout and the radicalised, **Acheson** noted that the UK prison system breaks it down in three categories: those that are just devout, but are not inciting violence, or inclined to become violent; those that are radicalising and subversive, who continue to try and convert others to extremist views; and finally, those that follow 'prislam' – people who convert for more practical reasons. He added that faith can be a very positive thing for prisoners: it gives them structure, purpose, redemption and a desire to improve themselves. In the UK prison system, prisoners are entitled to worship, and although Islamist extremism is serious problems, the right to worship will continue to be guaranteed.