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Physical facilitating environments – prisons and madrassas as mechanisms and vehicles of violent radicalisation?[1]

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Introduction

A consistent element of the UK's counterterrorism strategy since 2011 has been the proposal that certain physical spaces represent a significant risk of radicalisation. As argued in the government's Prevent Strategy:

> … radicalisation tends to occur in places where terrorist ideologies, and those that promote them, go uncontested and are not exposed to free, open and balanced debate and challenge. Some of these places are the responsibility of Government, some are Government funded but have considerable autonomy and others are both privately owned and run.[2]

The institutions particularly singled out in this regard have been education and health-care providers, universities, faith groups, charities and prisons. Following from this perception, the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 duly required a range of organisations - including local authorities, schools, universities, prisons and health bodies - to fulfil a duty of care to detect and prevent radicalisation within their settings.

The government position has been supported by several theoretical models of the radicalisation process. For example, an early model by Precht (2007) flagged the importance of "Opportunity Factors" in the radicalisation process, drawing attention to the degree or exposure to extremist ideas in an individual's environment, including

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[2] HM Government (2011). *Prevent Strategy*. London: The Stationary Office.

physical spaces such as mosques and prisons.[3] The exposure theme also appears in subsequent frameworks including, for example, Kruglanski et al.'s (2014) quest for significance model of radicalisation which has a role for physical spaces such as mosques and madrasas as places where individuals can "encounter the terrorism-justifying ideology".[4] This framework stresses that other factors are also critical in the process and that exposure to the ideology alone, while important, is by itself not enough. Other radicalization models note that physical spaces are important in terms of providing an arena where groups of individuals can meet and interact. For example, Helmus (2009) notes the importance of "bottom-up peer groups" in the radicalisation process, highlighting the importance of venues. He identifies religious settings advocating violence and prisons as particularly important in these terms.[5] Neumann and Rogers (2007) referred to such venues as "places of vulnerability" and as "gateways" which can facilitate both exposure to extremist ideology and also create and sustain social connections to people who endorse such ideologies.[6]

Collectively these models have had considerable influence on government policy, but the evidence around the specific role of physical spaces is often ambiguous. Crucially, the evidence supporting such a link is often anecdotal and is usually much more conceptual than empirical.[7] More recent assessments have increasingly questioned the degree to which such physical spaces can be accurately viewed as incubators of radicalisation.

[3] Tomas Precht. "Home grown terrorism and Islamist radicalization in Europe: From conversion to terrorism," Danish Ministry of Defence, December 2007, available at: http://tinyurl.com/y9myfpy (www.justitsministeriet.dk/fileadmin/downloads/ Forskning_og_dokumentation/ Home_grown_terrorism_and_Islamist_radicalisation_in_Europe__an_assessment_of_influencing_factors__2_ .pdf).

[4] Arie Kruglanski, Michele J. Gelfand, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, Anna Sheveland, Malkanthi Hetiarachchi, and Rohan Gunaratna. "The psychology of radicalization and deradicalization: How significance quest impacts violent extremism." *Political Psychology* 35, no. S1 (2014): 69-93.

[5] Todd Helmus. "Why and how some people become terrorists." *Social Science for Counterterrorism* 74, no. 06-C (2009): 71.

[6] Peter Neumann and Brooke Rodgers, "Recruitment and Mobilisation for the Islamist Militant Movement in Europe," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (2007), available at: http://tinyurl.com/buyfaq3 (icsr.info/paper/recruitment-and-mobilisation-forthe-islamist-militant-movement-in-europe).

[7] Sarah Desmarais, Joseph Simons-Rudolph, Christine Shahan Brugh, Eileen Schilling, and Chad Hoggan. "The state of scientific knowledge regarding factors associated with terrorism." *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* 4, no. 4 (2017): 180-209.

Prisons

Prisons are frequently portrayed and widely viewed as 'hotbeds' of radicalisation and an increasing amount of research has focused on understanding the risks and dynamics behind prisoner radicalisation.[8] Speaking in 2016, the then Prime Minister David Cameron warned that in England and Wales there were 1000 prisoners who were radicalised or assessed as potentially vulnerable to radicalisation.[9] In 2017, this figure was revised down to approximately 700 prisoners of whom 180 had been convicted of terrorism-related offences or were on remand for such offences.[10] The remaining 520 prisoners comprise those who were radicalised within prison and those assessed as vulnerable. While exact figures have not been released, it is generally accepted that the vulnerables make up the overwhelming majority of the 520, and those who have actually been radicalised are small in number. To set the wider context, in 2017 the prison system held over 86,000 prisoners, of whom 13,244 were classified as Muslim.[11] Thus, terrorist prisoners, radicalised "ordinary" prisoners and prisoners identified as potentially vulnerable to radicalisation represented 0.8% of the prison population.

The spread of radicalisation among "ordinary" prisoners has been a recurring obsession with authorities, for understandable reasons. High profile (albeit very isolated) cases such as the Spaniard José Emilio Suárez Trashorras and the American José Padilla, stand as a warning about the potential danger posed by such prisoners.[12] More evidence-

[8] Mark Hamm. *The spectacular few: Prisoner radicalization and terrorism in the post-9/11 era*. New York: New York University Press, 2013; Clarke Jones. 'Are prisons really schools for terrorism? Challenging rhetoric on prisoner radicalization.' *Punishment & Society*, 16, (2014): 74-103; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. *Handbook on the Management of Violent Extremist Prisoners and the Prevention of Radicalization to Violence in Prisons.* Vienna: United Nations, 2016; Ryan Williams, *RAN P&P Practitioners' working paper Approaches to violent extremist offenders and countering radicalisation in prisons and probation.* Amsterdam: Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2016. James Brandon. *Unlocking al-Qaeda: Islamist extremism in British prisons*. London: Quilliam Foundation, 2009; Greg Hannah, Lindsay Clutterbuck & Jennifer Rubin. *Radicalization or Rehabilitation: Understanding the challenge of extremist and radicalized prisoners.* Santa Barbara: RAND Corporation, 2008; Bert Useem & Obie Clayton. 'Radicalization of US prisoners.' *Criminology & Public Policy* 8, no. 3 (2009): 561-592.

[9] David Cameron. *Prison reform: Prime Minister's speech*. Policy Exchange, London. 8 February 2016.

[10] https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2017-04-25/debates/3084EAEB-AEB6-47E8-892A-A9825431E2FE/ExtremismInPrisons

[11] Grahame Allen, Lukas Audickas & Chris Watson. *Prisons Statistics, England and Wales. Briefing Paper Number CBP 8161*. House of Commons Library, 6 December 2017

[12] Andrew Silke, ed. *Prisons, terrorism and extremism: Critical issues in management, radicalisation and reform*. Routledge, 2014.

based reviews of prison systems in the west, including those of England and Wales, have found that such radicalisation is relatively rare.[13] As highlighted in a recent United Nations report:

> There is a concern that if left unchecked, prisons may serve as locations in which violent extremism can thrive and where prisoners can be radicalized to violence or where violent extremist prisoners who are co-located can form closer relationships, more cohesive networks and mutual reinforcement of violent extremist beliefs. However, recent research suggests that such risks are overstated and that there is limited evidence for suggesting that significant numbers of prisoners are being radicalized to violence and proceed with committing violent extremist acts upon release.[14]

Theories on prison radicalisation argue that when it does occur, it primarily stems from a combination of institutional, social, and individual factors, such as overcrowding and deprivation, violence and group dynamics, and a desire for protection and belongingness.[15] The role of charismatic leaders is also often emphasised. Mark Hamm, for example, stresses how charismatic leaders select vulnerable inmates and use one-on-one proselytization to recruit groups of followers.[16] Liebling and colleagues describe a similar dynamic in the UK, where charismatic Muslim "key-players" target searching or "lost" inmates and offer themselves as trustworthy guides, propagating Islam as a means to find an identity and meaning in life.[17] In the Liebling context, however, the aim of the recruiters was conversion to Islam, not radicalisation.

One problem, however, with the discussion around the causes of radicalisation within prison is that the evidence base has tended to be anecdotal. Current theories on prison

[13] For a good review see: Mark Hamm. *The spectacular few: Prisoner radicalization and the evolving terrorist threat.* NYU Press, 2013.
[14] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. *Handbook on the Management of Violent Extremist Prisoners and the Prevention of Radicalization to Violence in Prisons*. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2016.
[15] For example, James Brandon. *Unlocking al-Qaeda*; Mark Hamm. *Locking up terrorists*; Elizabeth Mulcahy, Shannon Merrington and Peter James Bell. 'The radicalisation of prison inmates: a review of the literature on recruitment, religion and prisoner vulnerability.' *Journal of Human Security* 9, no. 1 (2013): 4–14.
[16] Mark Hamm. 'Prisoner radicalization: Assessing the threat in US correctional institutions.' *NIJ Journal* 261 (2008): 14-19; Mark Hamm. 'Prison Islam in the age of sacred terror.' *The British Journal of Criminology* 49, no. 5 (2009): 667-685; Mark Hamm. *Locking up terrorists*; Mark Hamm. *The spectacular few*.
[17] Alison Liebling, Helen Arnold and Christina Straub. *Staff-prisoner relationships at HMP Whitemoor.*

radicalisation are almost entirely based on an analysis of a small number of case studies, combined with a theoretical assessment of likely drivers which draws primarily on the wider literature on radicalisation and also frequently on the literature around prison gangs.[18]

Nevertheless, a shortage of actual cases has not stopped frequent claims that radicalisation is a serious problem in UK prisons. Most notable in this regard was the recent Acheson Review into the threat of Islamist extremism to prisons and probation services. Overall, the review concluded that "Islamist Extremism (IE) was a growing problem within prisons"[19] though the statistics to support this conclusion were not released. Acheson reported that

> We believe that there are a small but significant number of people in custody who either have become radicalised themselves in custody or who have been imprisoned for Islamist extremist-related offences … They are not being imprisoned in the high-security estate, where there is a higher level of understanding and surveillance, but in the category B, C and D estates. There is an issue with them.[20]

The main conclusions made by the review were that: (1) staff training needed to be improved particularly outside of the high security prisons, (2) National Offender Management Service (NOMS)[21] senior leadership was too complacent about the threat, and (3) the recruitment, training and supervision of prison imams was poor.

It is perhaps not surprising, that such conclusions were not shared by NOMS which could highlight the very low re-offending rate for former terrorist prisoners, and the extreme rarity of cases of individuals actually radicalised in prison in England and Wales who are subsequently convicted of terrorist offences. In some respects the

[18] Nathan Thompson. 'Root Cause Approach to Prisoner Radicalisation.' *Salus Journal* 4, no. 3 (2016): 18.
[19] Ian Acheson. *Summary of the main findings of the review of Islamist extremism in prisons, probation and youth justice*. London: Ministry of Justice, 2016.
[20] House of Commons Justice Committee. *Oral evidence: Radicalisation in prisons and other prison matters, HC 417* Wednesday 13 July 2016.
[21] NOMS was renamed in 2017 and is now called Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service.

Acheson conclusions were more about the perceived *potential* for radicalisation rather than *actual* radicalisation.

Nevertheless, the Acheson conclusions chimed with public perceptions and ultimately a receptive government introduced one of the key recommendations: the creation of specialist "separation centres" to isolate terrorist prisoners from the rest of the prison population.[22] Three centres were established, each located in a high security prison, and with a combined capacity for up to 28 prisoners.

Researchers quickly raised concerns. For example, drawing on interviews with former British Jihadi prisoners, Tam Hussein highlighted that the ability of terrorist prisoners to radicalise other prisoners in British jails was widely overestimated, and what was significantly underestimated was how exposure to other prisoners actually moderated the views of most extremist prisoners.[23] Overseas research added further concerns. For example, after evaluating the Dutch policy of concentrating terrorist prisoners in specialised 'terrorism wings', Veldhuis found that there was no substantial evidence that concentration was a necessary and helpful response to violent extremism.[24] Moreover, concentration policies can produce undesired side-effects, such as intensification of extremist ideologies and networks. They can also enhance the prisoners' ability to plan and orchestrate activities both within the prison and with elements beyond the prison walls (as the case of Northern Ireland, for example, highlights).[25]

Madrassas

[22] Ministry of Justice. Press release: Dangerous extremists to be separated from mainstream prison population. 21 April 2017. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/dangerous-extremists-to-be-separated-from-mainstream-prison-population

[23] Tam Hussein. *Prison Radicalisation: Dealing with Muslim Inmates with Terror Convictions*. 13 February 2017. http://www.tamhussein.co.uk/2017/02/prison-radicalisation-dealing-muslim-inmates-terror-convictions/

[24] Tinka Veldhuis. *Captivated by fear. An evaluation of terrorism detention policy. PhD dissertation*. Groningen: The University of Groningen, 2015. See also: Tinka Veldhuis. *Prisoner radicalization and terrorism detention policy. Institutionalized fear or evidence-based policy making?* London: Routledge, 2016.

[25] See for example Jacqueline Bates-Gaston. 'Prisons and detention: Reflections on the Northern Ireland Experience.' In A. Silke (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of Terrorism and Counterterrorism*. Oxon: Routledge, 2018.

As with prisons, madrassas have been frequently flagged as potential locations of radicalisation. In a UK context, it has been estimated that there are about 2000 madrassas with about 250,000 Muslim children attending them.[26] According to the Muslim Council of Britain there are three main types of madrassa: (1) madrassas attached to mosques, (2) madrassas run by volunteers who teach Islamic classes in hired-out community centres or school halls, and (3) informal classes run in people's homes. The degree to which there is independent oversight of the activities of these madrassas also varies. For example, the Department of Education has reported that a location would not count as a school if it does not teach classes in subjects such as maths, English or science. Further if children at the site are taught less than 18 hours a week again it would not count as a school. Thus, primarily religiously focused sites do not technically fall under the Department of Education oversight, inspection and guidelines.[27] This has resulted in concerns that exclusively religious "schools" are effectively an unregulated space, with fears raised about the quality of teaching and child welfare standards. Such concerns apply to Jewish and Christian sites, for example, but an additional element with regard to madrassas is anxiety around the potential for radicalisation.

This issue was highlighted in March 2018 with the conviction of Umar Ahmed Haque on a range of terrorism offences including attempts to radicalise children.[28] Haque had worked as a classroom assistant at a school and was also involved in running evening classes in a madrasa connected to a mosque. He exposed students to extremist propaganda and had engaged students in terrorist role-playing. The police believe that he attempted to radicalise at least 110 children, with 35 of these identified as needing long-term support in the aftermath of the case.[29]

The Haque case highlighted that madrassas could be hijacked as spaces by extremists to attempt to radicalise children. At an international level, research has drawn particular

[26] Cherti, M. and Bradley, L. (2011). *Inside madrassas: understanding and engaging with British-Muslim faith supplementary schools*. London: Institute for Public Policy Research.
[27] Noel Titheradge. 'Is there a problem with unregistered schools?' *BBC News*, 27 February 2018. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-43170447
[28] Jamie Grierson. 'Isis follower tried to create jihadist child army in east London.' *The Guardian*, 2 March 2018.
[29] Dominic Casciani. 'How a teacher sought to recruit a terror 'death squad'.' *BBC News*, 2 March 2018. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43172379

attention to the potential role of madrassas in Jihadist extremism. In the case of Pakistan, for example, the madrassa system has been blamed for contributing to radicalisation in the region with some describing the madrassas as 'factories of jihad'.[30] While the jihadist extremists have a strategic religious aim, the religious backgrounds of the people who join the Jihad is not always clear-cut. Sageman (2004), for example, found that only 18 percent of Islamist extremists had an Islamic religious primary or secondary education. In contrast, 82 percent went to secular schools.[31] Overall, Sageman's early finding has been replicated by most subsequent studies on jihadist terrorists in the west which has found that relatively few grew up in particularly religious households and most were not regarded as religious as children. Increasing religiosity was something which occurred later in life.[32]

Even prior to Haque case, media coverage of UK madrassas has generally been negative, flagging issues around child welfare, the quality of education and the risk of radicalisation.[33] Research into madrassas in the UK, however, suggests that fears about radicalisation are typically exaggerated. For example, Cherti and Bradley (2011) conducted the most detailed survey to date on the operation of madrassas in England.[34] This research focused on 179 madrassas and involved interviews with staff, parents and pupils, as well as other stakeholders such as local authority representatives. The researchers found that madrassas played a significant role in developing a sense of identity for young people, but did not find evidence that they were havens for extremism.

Research, in general, suggests that a 'madrassa myth' has developed where madrassas have been singled out in the West as high risk environments for radicalisation. While

[30] Tahir Andrabi, Jishnu Das, Asim Ijaz Khwaja, and Tristan Zajonc. "Religious school enrolment in Pakistan: A look at the data." *Comparative Education Review* 50, no. 3 (2006): 446-477.
[31] Marc Sageman. Understanding Terrorist Networks. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.
[32] See, for example: Andrew Zammit. "Who becomes a jihadist in Australia? A comparative analysis." Understanding Terrorism from an Australian Perspective: Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation and Counter Radicalisation"(Melbourne, Monash University Caulfield Campus, 2010) (2010): 1-21; M. Danish Shakeel and Patrick J. Wolf. *Does Private Islamic Schooling Promote Terrorism? An Analysis of the Educational Background of Successful American Homegrown Terrorists*. EDRE Working Paper 2017-20, 2017.
[33] Myriam Cherti, Alex Glennie, and Laura Bradley. *Madrassas in the British media*. London: Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) (2011).
[34] Cherti, M. and Bradley, L. (2011). Inside madrassas: understanding and engaging with British-Muslim faith supplementary schools. London: Institute for Public Policy Research.

there can sometimes be genuine concerns in terms of general child welfare issues and whether appropriate safeguards are in place, there is not evidence that madrassas are significant radicalising spaces in the West. Actual cases of such radicalisation are isolated, and studies suggest that students at madrassas have similar experiences and characteristics to students who attend Christian Bible study classes, or Jewish children who attend Hebrew school (and that similar concerns regarding standards and welfare apply).[35] Overall, Allan et al., (2015) in an evidence review of the drivers of radicalisation concluded that it was an error to regard madrassas as a significant driver of radicalisation, arguing that "the problem of madrassa-based radicalisation has been significantly overstated."[36]

Conclusions

> 'Initially, policy-makers focused on community settings, such as mosques, as the locations where extremist ideology had to be blocked; later, they turned to prisons and universities; more recently, the focus has been on the circulation of extremist ideology through schools and social media. Even as the settings for policy implementation have changed, the arguments made for such policies have been constant.'[37]

Ultimately radicalisation in both prison settings and madrassas and religious-education settings does occur or is attempted. This review has flagged a number of cases where this has clearly happened or has been seriously attempted. In a UK context, do these cases represent very isolated instances or evidence of a substantive and significant phenomenon? While other countries may have different experiences, the review finds that in the UK the evidence suggests that successful radicalisation is rare in both

[35] Christine Fair. "The enduring madrasa myth." *Current History* 111, no. 744 (2012): 135-140.
[36] Harriet Allan, Andrew Glazzard, Sasha Jesperson, Sneha Reddy-Tumu, and Emily Winterbotham (2015). *Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review*. London: Royal United Services Institute.
[37] Rogelio Alonso, Tore Bjørgo, Donatella Della Porta, Rik Coolsaet, Farhad Khosrokhavar, Rüdiger Lohlker, Magnus Ranstorp, Fernando Reinares, Alex Schmid, Andrew Silke, Michael Taarnby and Gijs De Vries. Radicalisation processes leading to acts of terrorism: *A concise report prepared by the European Commission's Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation. (*2008).

settings. The evidence highlights that other factors play a role in the radicalisation process and that physical setting alone appears to be a poor predictor for radicalisation.

Nevertheless, it is also clear that both types of settings remain widely regarded by the media and within government as prominent centres of radicalisation. This has led to policy being specifically directed to countering and preventing radicalisation in such spaces. There is no indication that this is trend is about to change any time soon and we can continue to expect both prisons and madrassas being described as high risk centres of radicalisation in what is often a simplistic and poorly informed debate.

Essential Sources

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