

PRE-EMPTING, CONTAINING, AND REVERSING PRISON RADICALIZATION IN CANADA

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Honoured Chair and esteemed members of the Committee, thank you kindly for inviting me to participate in these hearings.

My intention today is to introduce Canadians to the threat of prison radicalization and to help establish a comprehensive strategy to combat it. My comments are based on a report I published in October with the Macdonald-Laurier Institute (MLI), a public policy think tank based in Ottawa.¹ I am a Fellow of the Institute.

The report, which is based on open source materials, offers a comparative illustration of European and American trends in prison radicalization. It does so to both highlight the challenges Canadians might face and to detail some policy solutions.

Today, I would like to emphasize two points.

The first is that counterterrorism does not end with the incarceration of would-be terrorists. What happens behind bars should worry Canadians too. Far from being the last phase of a successful security operation, the incarceration of individuals who orchestrate or facilitate terrorism represents the beginning of a second series of related threats. Of particular concern today is Islamist prison radicalization, whereby members of the general prison population adopt militant ideologies that legitimize political violence. Herein, the worst case scenario is that in jailing one terrorist, we unintentionally produce two more.

The second point is that Canada is in a unique position to learn from the experiences of our friends and allies. We have only just begun jailing our own homegrown radicals. But other countries have been doing so for years, or in some cases decades. It is in their collective successes and failures to counter prison radicalization that Canada finds the policy lessons we need to pre-empt, contain, and reverse the threat here.

Terrorists are not Ordinary Offenders

Unlike most criminals, terrorists enter prison with strong – if not always refined – political and ideological beliefs. Treating terrorists as if they were like “normal” criminals minimizes the importance of that ideological motivation, a motivation that influences their self-perception, goals, and behaviour while imprisoned. So while criminalizing terrorism may, appropriately, tend to deny it any legitimacy, we need to be careful not to ignore the political

¹ Alex Wilner, *From Rehabilitation to Recruitment* (Ottawa: Macdonald-Laurier Institute, 2010), <http://www.macdonaldlaurier.ca/FromRehabilitationToRecruitment/>. See also, Alex Wilner, “Getting Ahead of Prison Radicalization” *The Globe and Mail*, October 18, 2010; and Alex Wilner, “We’re not ready to stop Islamic extremists even after we catch them”, *National Post* (Matt Gurney’s *Dialled in*), October 21, 2010.

and religious motivations that shape a terrorist convict's behaviour in ways that make such prisoners profoundly different from run-of-the-mill offenders.

The problem is that some terrorists don't consider themselves as mere criminals but rather as foot soldiers in a global and cosmic conflict. Instead of idly serving their sentences as other criminals might, they may treat their imprisonment as an opportunity to refine their ideology and strategy, to influence others, and to mobilize support for their cause. Imprisonment certainly restricts their ability to participate in terrorism and it may deter some from again participating in political violence upon their release. But for others, prison may open new doors for spreading their message and methods.

Prison radicalization is a product of that ambition. While exact figures are difficult to pinpoint, some prominent western terrorists were clearly radicalized and recruited, or at least started on the path to radicalization, while in prison. British shoe bomber Richard Reid converted to Islam behind bars and radicalized after his release. Britons Muktar Ibrahim, leader of the failed July 2005 London bombings, and Mohammad al-Figari, re-imprisoned on terrorism offences in 2008, both adopted radical Islam in prison. Moroccan Jamal Ahmidan and Spaniard Emilio Trashorras both radicalized in prison and went on to orchestrate the 2004 Madrid attacks. And a number of terrorist groups, including France's *Ansar al Fath*, Spain's *Martyrs for Morocco*, and the American *Jam'iyat ul-Islam Is-Saheeh* (Assembly of Authentic Islam) were all established in prison and/or using prison contacts.

Here in Canada, consider the case of Ali Dirie, a self-confessed member of the Toronto 18. He was first jailed in 2005 for smuggling guns into Canada. But while serving his sentence he remained an enthusiastic member of the group. Crown prosecutors revealed that he supported the Toronto 18 with "encouragement, advice, and direction," and took an "active role in recruiting other inmates to adopt extreme jihadi beliefs ... and become members of the terrorist group."² In advocating his radical views, Dirie posed as big a threat in prison as he did outside it.

International and Canadian Trends

Since 2008 alone, more Canadians have been indicted on terrorism-related offenses than used to face such charges over decades. Fourteen Canadians have been sentenced, with all but one conviction related to Islamist terrorism. The list includes Momin Khawaja, sentenced to over ten years for facilitating terrorism in the UK, Said Namouh, handed a life sentence last February, and eleven members of the Toronto 18, of which seven admitted their guilt. Three other terrorism-related trials are ongoing, stemming from the arrests made last August in Ontario. All of these individuals are Canadian citizens and few have had contact with or received training from foreign-based organizations.

In comparison to European and American figures, these Canadian statistics are – I am happy to say – rather small. The threat of terrorism from al Qaeda-inspired radicals is enormously higher overseas than it is here. In the US alone, for instance, there have been over 45 cases of domestic radicalization and recruitment to jihadi terrorism since 9/11.³ And while there is a

² CBC, "Toronto 18 Member Deserves 7-year Term, Court Hears", September 23, 2009; Stewart Bell, "No Remorse from Terrorist, Court Told", *National Post*, September 24, 2009; Stewart Bell, "'Toronto 18' Defendant Gets 7 years for Terrorist Plot", *National Post*, October 2, 2009; *Globe and Mail* (Editorial), "It's too Soon to Give Ali Dirie a Second Chance", September 19, 2010.

³ Bran Michael Jenkins *Would-be Warriors* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2010), http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/2010/RAND_OP292.pdf

wide range of figures on incarceration rates, by most accounts the UK, France, Spain, and the US each have between 125 and several hundred Islamist terrorist convicts sitting in their respective prisons.⁴

That Canadians face fewer threats from terrorism should be of some comfort. Not only does it mean that we are generally safer. It also means that we can learn from our allies' experience with prison radicalization to address the problem here pre-emptively.

Radicalization in Prison

Unfortunately, understanding how and why people radicalize isn't easy. The radicalization process is inherently individualized. Different people radicalize for different reasons and in different ways. So while radicalization might usefully be defined as a personal experience through which individuals adopt extreme ideals that justify the use of violence, mapping out that process is complicated.

On the plus side, we know that individuals who participate in terrorism do so because they believe that murder for a cause is feasible and just. We know that radicalization is a psychological, intellectual, and social process. And we know that it entails a mental, emotional, and cognitive transition that motivates an individual to pursue violent behaviour.

What we don't know exactly, is what drives that process. It is usually a combination of factors, like alienation, religious solidarity, acute anger over foreign policy, and resentment to feelings of dishonour, humiliation, prosecution, and xenophobia.

These precursors to radicalization help us identify the process in prison.

First, inmates of all sorts often experience feelings of isolation and insecurity that drives them to seek protection within a prison group. And in some cases, prison gangs not only satisfy an individual's need for safety but also solidify a particular prison identity. In the UK, for example, Islamist prison gangs offer protection while promoting an exclusive ideology "that glorifies violence and intolerance."⁵ Likewise, convicted extremists dedicated to advancing *jihadism* might purposefully take over existing prison gangs to more easily radicalize and recruit others.

Second, religion can also play a role in prison radicalization. I do want to emphasize that increasing religiosity and conversion can also have positive effects. Islam, like other religions, can have a calming effect on a prisoner's behaviour by offering a sense of direction and self-worth that includes lifestyle guidelines that steer a person away from destructive and antisocial behaviour. The risk, however, is that converts and lapsed adherents brought back to their childhood religion may be especially susceptible to hard-line interpretations of their faith. Under some conditions, terrorism convicts may be able to augment the rate of conversions to radical Islam.

Finally, anger towards the prison system can facilitate radicalization. Islamist inmates can amplify real or perceived inmate grievances, especially concerning religious practices and obligations, in order to radicalize others.

⁴ For details and sources, see Wilner, *From Rehabilitation to Recruitment*, pp. 12-15.

⁵ James Brandon, *Unlocking al-Qaeda: Islamist Extremism in British Prisons*, (London: Quilliam, 2009), 35-40.

Addressing Prison Radicalization

In my MLI report “From Rehabilitation to Recruitment”, I offer a long list of policy recommendations for addressing prison radicalization and I urge committee members interested in the details to look it over. I want to conclude my presentation here today by focusing on four overarching recommendations.

First, we need to appreciate better how radicalization occurs in Canada, specifically. How is Canadian radicalization different from British, French or American radicalization, and what domestic factors and characteristics drive the process? Dissecting Canadian radicalization will require establishing a taskforce to study the phenomenon. We might also consider developing an inter-agency “extremism unit” that can monitor domestic trends and rapidly inform policy responses. And like other countries, Canada might also produce a prison guide describing the indicators of prison radicalization to help prison staff in identifying troublesome developments.

Second, we need a balanced strategy that denies incarcerated terrorists access to other inmates without retarding their rehabilitation. Simply isolating radicals from one another or segregating them from the general prison population may not be enough. Segregation may protect other inmates from radical ideologies, but long-term isolation does not facilitate rehabilitation and reform of convicted terrorists. Most terrorist inmates will eventually rejoin society, so we should be careful not to trade short-term security gains for long-term losses. With that said, prisoners who are adamant about promoting radicalism should be isolated and repeatedly displaced and relocated within the prison system to disrupt their social ties with potential recruits. Terrorist inmates who legitimately repent and come to reject violence, on the other hand, should be used to counter radical ideologies. Radicals who turn their backs on old comrades might have a positive influence on other inmates. If so, the best strategy would be to concentrate them with others in order to help inoculate the prison system from radicalism.

Third, rehabilitating terrorists may require special programs. Some inmates will need specially-designed treatment to help them reject violent convictions, re-socialize into society, and avoid a trip back to prison. We should take stock of international rehabilitation programs and identify the best practices of each in building a national program. Because Canada has only a few terrorist convicts, it may be enough to build a small, one-on-one program. We’ll have to identify and train appropriate interlocutors and develop a way to assess an inmate’s progress. We’ll also have to think about post-release rehabilitation and assist ex-convicts to properly reintegrate into society. Rates of recidivism are influenced by an ex-convict’s social environment and their success at reintegration. Ensuring that ex-terrorists in particular stay out of jail may require building partnerships with Muslim communities and NGOs and effectively monitoring their progress.

Finally, we need to recognize that prison imams play an important role in denying radicalism. Muslim inmates, like all Canadians, have a right to access religious leaders. Ensuring there are enough qualified imams to address prisoners’ needs will sideline radical voices. At the same time, we need to exclude radical religious leaders and extremist literature from prison. Islam is a multifaceted religion with a diversity of interpretations. Some espouse violence. There have been unconfirmed reports, for example, that Hiva Alizadeh, one of the men arrested in Ottawa this past August, had spent two years volunteering as a spiritual caregiver at various Winnipeg-based correctional facilities. He is said to have “counselled many

Muslims and aboriginal people who were incarcerated.”⁶ Today, Alizadeh faces three terrorism charges, including possession of explosives with the intent to kill and injure. Though it may be difficult to do, Canada must establish a review system that can vet members of the prison chaplaincy, part-time contractors, and volunteers to certify that none harbour radical sentiments. We also need to scrutinize the literature available in prison and remove texts that support radical views and political violence.

These solutions are easier to describe than to implement. But the emerging threat of homegrown terrorism in Canada may have a new source if we don't take the problem of prison radicalization seriously and act to stop it before it starts.

Thank you. I look forward to our discussion.

⁶ I thank Colin Freeze, from the *Globe and Mail*, for pointing this out. See, Yahya Abdul Rahman, “A Portrait of Hiva Alizadeh”, (November 9, 2010), available at <http://www.cageprisoners.com/our-work/opinion-editorial/item/797-a-portrait-of-hiva-alizadeh> (accessed November 10, 2010). *Cageprisoners* Ltd describes itself as “human rights organization” whose goal is to “raise awareness of the plight of the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and other detainees held as part of the War on Terror.”