

Speech by Prof Thomas Renard
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Challenges of Radicalisation in Prison
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Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Radicalisation in prison is not a new phenomenon. Unsurprisingly, prisons have always been filled with radicals, considered as such for their actions or ideas. Why, then, are we having this conversation only now? One of the key reasons for this is conceptual: “radicalisation” is a relatively new concept in the counter-terrorism discourse. It appeared only in the early 2000s. Another reason has to do with the post-9/11 counter-terrorism agenda. An extended criminal justice approach, which continues expanding to this day as a result of the Syrian crisis, has brought ever more terrorists and extremists behind bars. Some of these inmates became influential recruiters in prison. Moreover, groups like al-Qaeda or ISIS have developed strategies and narratives to encourage recruitment in prison.

In this context, it is paramount to have a discussion on radicalisation in prison, notably to identify good practices. However, it is equally paramount to start this conversation on solid, objective foundations. In the media discourse and in the popular perception, prisons are often described as “breeding ground for terrorism” or “universities for jihad”. The reality, however, is slightly less dramatic. Let me stress this.

First, while the number of terrorist convicts and radicalised inmates has increased significantly in many countries, the relative size of this group should be kept in mind: In Europe, the share of convicted terrorists and so-called “radicalised” inmates compared to the entire prison population is everywhere below 2,5%. It is 0,4% in Spain, 0,8% in the UK and Italy, 1,3% in Denmark and Sweden, and 2,3% in Belgium and France. In short, radicalisation is a marginal phenomenon, in prison just like in our societies.

Second, these figures may have reached their peak. Indeed, the general trend for terrorism and radicalisation seems to be downward, certainly in Europe where several countries have lowered their threat levels. Preachers and recruiters are still present in the streets and in prison, but their discourse seems less appealing today. They are less likely to find an audience in the post-caliphate era than a few years ago. As a result, the number of inmates considered “at risk of radicalisation” will likely decrease.

Third, prisons are just one vector of radicalisation among many others, and generally far less relevant than more traditional vectors, such as kinship or friendship bonds. Furthermore, radicalisation in prison does not automatically

lead to terrorism. Contrary to the common perception, radicalisation to violent extremism in prison is [spectacular but] very rare.

Finally, one of the main concerns about radicalisation in prison is the risk of violent re-engagement upon release. It should be acknowledged here that the academic literature is divided on the risk of recidivism among terrorist offenders. This is one of several areas where we would really need more data and research.

In Belgium, an encouraging study of the national fusion centre (Coordination Unit for the Threat Analysis) has concluded that 75% of the returning foreign fighters from Syria have disengaged at least partially – a rate that goes up to 90% for women. This is possibly linked to the fading appeal of the jihadi ideology in the post-caliphate era. However, it should be emphasized that long-term disengagement is not guaranteed unless we tackle effectively the conducive environment to radicalisation.

This is all encouraging. Radicalisation in prison is not out of control. At the same time, let us not conclude that it isn't a serious challenge either. This is the very nature of terrorism: a statistically marginal phenomenon with potentially severe implications.

For too long, prisons have been considered as the end-point of the criminal justice approach, with little interest for what happens in prison or afterwards. Over the past few years, however, countries confronted with radicalisation in prison have developed specific detention regimes, risk assessment tools,

intelligence gathering processes as well as tailored rehabilitation and reinsertion programmes. These developments are overall to be welcome.

Yet, the variation of approaches from one country to another makes it impossible to identify a single best-practice. In fact, a global one-size-fits-all model would be illusory, even counter-productive given the local roots and dynamic of radicalisation processes, and the national particularities of counter-terrorism regimes. This should not, however, prevent critical evaluations, at the national and international levels. Time has come for such evaluations. Furthermore, more research is also needed to guide evidence-based policies.

From my observations, three key elements seem particularly crucial to an effective policy-making against radicalisation in prison.

First, there is a clear need to balance a security approach with a social one. The former includes notably monitoring and security measures, while the latter includes tailored counselling on rehabilitation and reintegration – and the word “tailored” matter here tremendously, notably with considerations for a gendered approach. It is only the combination of these approaches that can both contain the risks of radicalisation and mitigate individual vulnerabilities.

Second, there is a need to think the incarceration period and its aftermath as a continuum. The post-penitentiary transition is a phase of high vulnerability for every released offender. A discontinuity of socio-preventive measures, or a lack of proper security responses may be particularly detrimental in the context of radicalisation. Security and social approaches need to span over this transition phase in a coherent manner, even if it falls under distinct institutions.

Finally, in the context of a comprehensive and multi-agency approach, good information-sharing is paramount. In every country, there is a certain number of services in charge of security and social policies, in prison and outside prison. A coherent and consistent approach to radicalisation requires an efficient flow of relevant information between these multiple services, in line with human rights standards. In this regard, Belgium's approach articulated around specialised prison [staff] units, fusions centres and a common dynamic database is particularly interesting.

I thank you all for your attention.

Thomas Renard is a Senior Research Fellow at the Egmont Institute, a Brussels-based think tank. He has published extensively on policies to counter terrorism and radicalisation in Europe, with a focus on (returning) foreign fighters.