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Special Edition
**Combating Extremism
and Terrorism**

Editorial Comment

*'Let us not look back in anger or forward in fear, but
around in awareness.'*
(James Thurber).

How does one address the offending behaviour of terrorists? This was the question facing us, a small group of psychologists in Headquarters, after the events of 7/7 and the 2006 Terrorist Act brought an influx of terrorist offenders into custody. The political science literature gave us some clues about radicalisation but there were few studies based on face to face contact with terrorists themselves. It was evident that we could not begin to develop interventions without understanding the background to their offending.

We were in the privileged position of having direct access to the 'true positives'; those who had embarked on a terrorist pathway and, mostly, completed it. If anyone was going to clarify the routes into terrorism it would be these offenders in custody. Most agreed to talk with us, though some refused and a small number continue to hold out. We can only speculate that those who are the least likely to engage are those who feel they have the most to lose in abandoning their cause or changing course.

On the basis that such offending was politically motivated and different from criminally motivated behaviour we assumed that a different approach was needed. We sought to define terrorism, but discovered that there were many definitions that variously emphasised engagement with ideology, the use of violence, the involvement of others and/or the motivation for the behaviour. We were aware of the phrase *'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter'* and the importance of not pathologising political violence in the context of terrorism when it was undeniably the common currency of international conflict. We also appreciated the potential hypocrisy that would not be lost on these individuals, of criminalising beliefs within a country that represented itself as tolerant and pluralist. We reasoned that beliefs were only problematic where they concerned the use of violence to achieve political goals, and that political beliefs in themselves were not an appropriate target for change. Eventually we settled on the definition of an extremist offence developed by the Extremist Prisoners' Working Group in 2007:

'Any offence committed in association with a group, cause or ideology that propagates extremist views and actions and justifies the

use of violence and other illegal conduct in pursuit of its objectives'.

This definition is generic to different extremist ideologies and does not specify political motivation. It has served us well as our developing dialogue with terrorists revealed that their motivation was not always straightforwardly political; it was sometimes criminal or otherwise opportunistic, and at root was always personal. In this edition extremist is used as a generic term for all those whose offending is influenced by extremist views: simplistic bi-polar ideologies that split the world into the worthy and the unworthy and project blame for the ills of the world on to the unworthy. The word terrorism is used to refer to acts of violence that are intended to advance an extremist cause. We have found it necessary to separate *engagement* with extremist ideology from *intent* to commit an act of terrorism (and the *capability* to do so). This allows us to make essential discriminations between those who have been convicted of being engaged with ideology (on the assumption that they were on a pathway to terrorism) from those who have crossed the threshold of intent to commit harm and been involved in terrorist plotting.

We established fairly early on that despite the claim, often repeated in the literature, that *'the distinguishing feature of terrorists is their normality'*¹, most of those we spoke to were troubled people. OASys analysis showed that greater numbers of terrorist offenders than criminally motivated offenders were identified with 'emotional wellbeing' needs. These took the form of emotional vulnerability, unhappiness, poor adjustment and disappointment, sometimes manifesting in depression. It was sometimes accompanied by a strong sense of superiority, the experience of being thwarted, misunderstood, denied one's true place in the sun, and a desire to assert oneself, to become a hero in the vanguard of change and take revenge against those responsible for their perceived marginalisation and victimisation.

We also found that a significant number had a background in crime, often violent crime, with a few diagnosed as psychopaths. For these individuals a period of conditioning or grooming to overcome their inhibitions about using violence was not necessary. They had attitudes supportive of violence, divided the world into criminals and 'straight-goers', and were already persuaded that the ends justified the means. Such individuals were willing to commit terrorist

1. Crenshaw, M. (1981) The causes of Terrorism, in *Comparative Politics*, V13, 379-99.

offences without subscribing to ideology or cause. It was enough that it served their criminal interests to do so and conferred the fringe benefits of justifying or laundering their offending, providing an outlet for their violence and boosting their status.

This finding that offenders were vulnerable to extremism, however opportunistic, reinforced the fear of radicalisation in prison widely aired in the media and borne out by the development of some unlikely alliances between organised offenders and terrorist offenders in custody, highlighted by Mark Hamm's analysis in the edition. It has yet to be established whether such opportunistic alliances survive beyond prison, but a close watch is being maintained.

Extending our dialogue to include extreme right wing offenders, animal rights activists and some gang related offenders confirmed that many shared the same 'psychological hooks' of identity and status issues. These generic vulnerabilities rather than ideology therefore became the focus for intervention. More recently the evaluation of a scriptural reasoning programme 'Al Furqan' for Islamist offenders has shown that there are additional benefits for some in tackling the common misinterpretations of the Q'ran that accompany their extremist beliefs.

It became evident that by the time we began our dialogue most had already done a considerable amount of reflecting and re-thinking. Our subsequent understanding of the importance of exclusive associations and ongoing exposure to reductionist rhetoric in maintaining engagement, explains how easily some disengaged when these were disrupted. As Eric Hoffer² commented '*It is startling how much unbelief is necessary to make belief possible*' and constant conditioning and/or grooming is required for it to remain in place. When reality-tested, simplistic explanations for all the ills of the world that project blame on to an out-group with no human worth who are hell bent on your destruction are hard to sustain in the face of conscientious treatment in prisons from professional staff and exposure to fellow prisoners from a range of cultural backgrounds.

Conversely, as also highlighted by Mark Hamm, unprofessional custodial practices such as those used in Guantanamo can reinforce feelings of grievance and vengeance and fuel radicalisation. Richard Pickering describes the more measured response of NOMS to the challenges posed by the incarceration of terrorist related offenders in England and Wales, and Alison Liebling and Christina Straub clarify the challenges of physical and psychological survival in a high security prison from the prisoners' perspective

and explain the potential appeal of 'identities of resistance'³. The power of treating people well may turn out to be our post powerful weapon against the threat of extremism.

Another finding has been that not all Islamist offenders have been directly inspired by AQ ideology. This may be true of those who received operational sanctioning from the AQ leadership, but many have been self-starters motivated by their desire to express dissatisfaction with British and American foreign policy in Afghanistan and Iraq rather than any desire to introduce religious government into the UK. In fact their aims have sometimes been quite vague, '*to ensure the fair treatment of Muslims across the world*', '*to defend the Muslim faith against its attackers*'⁴. When pushed, some have been unable to articulate any political goals; their involvement simply allowed them to express their disaffection from western values, to signal their difference by their distinctive dress and appearance and to experience themselves as a soldier in the army of Allah and in the vanguard of change. For this reason, I prefer the term 'Islamist extremist' instead of AQ influenced.

Desistance from crime being the over-riding goal, disengagement from ideology is not essential, though experience has shown that disengagement is not uncommon in response to intervention. Self evidently many former provisional IRA members in Northern Ireland have given up violence without relinquishing their goal of wanting a united Ireland. Chris Dean describes the background to the interventions developed for addressing extremism. Our experience so far indicates that both disengagement and desistance are realistic goals.

One final observation: Wherever terrorism is discussed there is fear in the room. Prisoners and staff fear being the victim of a terrorist offence in custody; governors fear an act of terrorism in their prison on their watch or after release by an offender who was radicalised in their prison; offender managers fear a repeat offence by an offender on licence; senior officials from police, probation and prison fear they may miss evidence of radicalisation or of terrorist plotting in prison, or under-estimate and mismanage the risk of re-offending in the community; terrorist offenders themselves fear retribution from their own if they abandon the cause. Fear sometimes prevents us from responding proportionately to these challenges. If this edition achieves anything I hope it will serve to demystify terrorist offending and build confidence that both our operational and correctional skills are equal to working effectively with these individuals.

2. Hoffer, E. (1951). *The True Believer: Thoughts on the nature of mass movements* London: Harper Collins.

3. Neumann, P. (2010) *Prisons and Terrorism, Radicalisation and De-Radicalisation in 15 Countries*. International Centre for the Study of Political Violence and Radicalisation (ICPR). King's College, London.

4. Quotes are taken from prisoners.