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**Combating Extremism
and Terrorism**

Prisoner Radicalisation in the United States

Mark Hamm is Professor of Criminology at Indiana State University, USA.

Although prisoner radicalisation is currently a matter of grave concern, it is actually a very old issue that can be traced to the early development of prison as a government institution to control transgressors. Sometime between the years 30 and 36 AD, Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee, ordered the imprisonment of the itinerant preacher John the Baptist at the fortress of Machaerus, a walled complex located on a desolate hilltop near the Dead Sea in what is now Jordan. The Gospels state that Herod reacted to John's public denunciation of Herod's marriage to the wife of his own brother, Philip, in violation of Old Testament law. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus offered a more political account, writing that Herod had John arrested to preempt a popular uprising among his followers. Yet the authors of Matthew and Luke were in agreement about an episode that took place while John was confined in his dungeon at Machaerus: namely, that John met with two of his disciples and asked them to carry a message to his cousin, Jesus of Nazareth, asking 'Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?'¹ They were John's last recorded words before he was beheaded by one of Herod's sons.²

Fast-forward through 21 centuries and prisoners are still radicalizing through kinship networks, clandestine communication systems, chiliastic religious beliefs, and most importantly, charismatic leadership—what Max Weber described as 'a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary people and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman or at least exceptional powers or qualities.'³ ('Among them that are born of women,' said Jesus of his companion, 'there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist.'⁴) Yet the technology and scale of the matter have undergone profound changes.

In Israel today, imprisoned members of Hamas direct militant actions on the Palestinian streets using smuggled mobile phones and *ashgarim*—crimped notes written on thin transparent paper tightly rolled into 'bindles'. In American prisons, the notes are known as 'kites' and they too are used by terrorist inmates, along with cellphones, as a surreptitious means of communicating with criminal networks of the free world.

Meanwhile, Islam has swept across Western prisons bringing with it both unprecedented security challenges and exceptional possibilities for progressive reform. The growth of Islam in prison is taking place against the backdrop of a global economic meltdown; a rise in religious extremism and ethnic conflict; changes in prisoners' class and race compositions; a declining interest in Christianity among prisoners; new developments in youth subcultures; and shifting power dynamics of long-term confinement—all situated within the framework of post-9/11 fear. Radicalisation has become an issue of such intense sociopolitical complexity that it is poorly understood even by those who run our prisons. This is especially so for the world's leading jailer, the United States of America.

Challenges Facing the United States

Every Western nation is struggling in its own way to work out the institutional methods and conceptual frameworks for controlling the threat of radicalisation brought on by the widespread incarceration of those of Muslim heritage. America faces three major challenges.

Guantanamo Bay

Currently, 171 suspected terrorists are being detained without trial at Guantanamo, including five al-Qaeda operatives charged in connection with the 9/11 attacks. Guantanamo is America's greatest challenge, because instead of rehabilitating terrorists, Guantanamo is creating them. Several cases bear this

1. Matthew 11:3.

2. Montefiore, S (2011), *Jerusalem: The Biography*. New York: Knopf.

3. Weber, M (1947), *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Trans. Henderson, A and T Parsons. New York: Free Press, 390.

4. Matthew 11:11.

out and two are worth recounting to illustrate a significant point about radicalisation: In both instances the detainees were released from Guantanamo after the government failed to uncover any evidence of potential terrorism. That is, they were not terrorists when they entered prison but became terrorists upon release.

The first case involves the Afghan Abdullah Mehsud. As a teenager, Mehsud lost a leg when he stepped on a land mine left over from the anti-Soviet war and was fitted with a prosthesis. He was later forced into Taliban conscription, but due to his missing leg, was held out of combat and assigned a desk job. Mehsud was taken into U.S. custody during the early years of the war on terrorism and detained as an enemy combatant at Guantanamo.

Similar to the treatment of al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri at the hands of the Egyptians following the assassination of Anwar Sadat in the early 1980s, the U.S. military subjected Guantanamo prisoners to what has been obliquely termed 'torture-based techniques' as part of an 'enhanced interrogation' protocol intended to gather intelligence on future attacks against America. According to media accounts of victim statements and official documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, these techniques involved pervasive beatings; solitary confinement in over air-conditioned cells where inmates were stripped naked and exposed to loud rock and hip-hop music, strobe lighting and sustained noise from recordings of crying babies and American television commercials; prolonged sleep deprivation and various forms of personal humiliation—from forcing inmates to soil themselves to the use of attack dogs and sexual abuse.⁵ A 2003 report by the International Red Cross indicates that the techniques also included deliberate desecrations of the Koran, 'excessive isolation' of detainees, and the absence of a policy for the release of those who did not belong in prison. The report cited 'a worrying deterioration in the psychological

health of a large number of the detainees because of uncertainty about their fate.'⁶

Upon his release in 2004, Adullah Mehsud was repatriated to Afghanistan where he rejoined his Taliban unit. Mehsud's final Guantanamo assessment stated that he 'did not pose a future threat.' To the contrary: Mehsud had been radicalized by Guantanamo. Having never committed an act of terrorism before, he set about making jihadist videos and organized a Taliban division to fight U.S. troops. Mehsud then planned and carried out a bold attack on Pakistan's interior minister, killing 31 people. Then he oversaw the kidnapping of two Chinese engineers affiliated with coalition forces. And finally, in 2007, Mehsud blew himself up in a suicide attack against the Pakistani Army. His martyrdom was hailed in an audio message by Osama bin Laden.⁷

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The second case concerns a Saudi carpet salesman named Said Ali al-Shihri, also taken into U.S. custody in Afghanistan following 9/11. Intelligence officials would later interview members of Shihri's family in Saudi Arabia. They would attribute his extremism to the five years he spent incarcerated at Guantanamo.⁸ In 2007, Shihri was released to the Saudis and placed in a government-sponsored de-radicalisation program, but escaped a short time later. Shihri traveled to Yemen, bin Laden's ancestral home, where he became a

commander of al-Qaeda's Yemen branch (soon to become al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula). Shihri's first act of terrorism came in September, 2008, when he participated in the car-bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Yemen's capital, Sana, killing 16. Later that year he killed six Christian missionaries in Yemen. Then, in 2009, Shihri played a pivotal role in Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab's attempted suicide bombing of a U.S. jetliner bound for Detroit on Christmas Day—the most significant terrorist attempt since 9/11.⁹

A year later, and nearly two years after he pledged to close the facility, President Obama called Guantanamo 'the number one recruitment tool' used

5. Mayer, J (2009), *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals*. New York: Anchor Books; Worthington, A (2007), *The Guantanamo Files: The Stories of the 774 Detainees in America's Illegal Prison*. London: Pluto Press.
6. Hersh, S (2005), *Chain of Command: The Road From 9/11 to Abu Ghraib*. New York: Harper, 14.
7. Shane, S and B Weiser (2011), 'Judging Detainees' Risk, Often With Flawed Evidence. *New York Times*, April 25.
8. Ross, B, Rhee, J and R El-Buri (2009), 'al-Qaeda Leader Behind Northwest Flight 253 Was Released by U.S.' ABC News, Dec. 28.
9. DeYoung, K and M Fletcher (2010), 'Attempt to Bomb Airliner Could Have Been Prevented, Obama says.' *Washington Post*, Jan. 6.
10. The White House (2010), News Conference by the President, Dec. 22.

by jihadists, because 'it's become a symbol.'¹⁰ Not only is Guantanamo a symbol for many Muslims of American hypocrisy, confirming the contempt they believe the United States holds for them, but it is also for the intelligence community a symbol of the existential threat posed by prisoner radicalisation. In 2003, a CIA official familiar with interrogation techniques at Guantanamo told journalist Seymour Hersh: 'If we captured some people who weren't terrorists when we got them, they are now.'¹¹ Seven years later, Obama's National Intelligence Director warned the President that Guantanamo may be producing terrorists rather than reforming them.¹² Nevertheless, the camp remains open. And throughout the world, Guantanamo has become a symbol of what many see as America's dangerous drift away from the ideals that made it a moral beacon in the post-World War II era, thereby attracting even more recruits into radical Islamic networks by making the terrorist's cause appear a just response to an unjust enemy.

'Guantanamo North'

A total of 362 federal prisoners were serving sentences on terrorism-related charges in the continental United States at the close of 2011. Most were involved in international terrorism (269 inmates) with another 93 inmates locked up for domestic terrorism.¹³ Among the international terrorists in the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) were about two dozen al-Qaeda operatives, including those involved in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the 1998 East African embassy bombings, the 1999 millennial plot to bomb the Los Angeles International Airport, and the 2000 bombing of the USS *Cole*.

The challenge posed by these prisoners first surfaced several years after 9/11 when three federal inmates incarcerated at the BOP's Administrative Maximum security facility (ADMAX or Supermax) in Florence, Colorado, for the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, wrote over 90 letters to Islamic militants outside the prison between 2002 and 2004. Fourteen

of these letters were sent to Spanish prisoners with connections to the terrorist cell responsible for the Madrid train bombings. The government's after-action report condemned the BOP, charging that it had failed to monitor terrorists' communications, including mail, phone calls, visits with family and friends, and cellblock conversations, resulting in 'little or no proactive' intelligence on the activities of terrorist inmates in custody.¹⁴ Thus was born the total segregation model.

Between 2006 and 2008 the Justice Department transferred all but the most highly-secured terrorist inmates (e.g., Unabomber Theodore Kaczynski, shoe-bomber Richard Reid, Zacharias Moussaoui, the 20th hijacker of 9/11) to two newly established maximum-security Communication Management Units (CMUs) within the federal system—one in the former death row at the U.S. Penitentiary in Terre Haute, Indiana, and the other at the U.S. Penitentiary at Marion, Illinois. Information on these prisoners and their conditions of confinement is primarily due to the investigative reporting of journalists.¹⁵ According to these sources, prisoners are under 24-hour surveillance in the CMUs. Guards and cameras record their every move and hidden microphones pick up every word they speak. Such information—along with data gleaned from

the monitoring of phone calls, mail and visits—is routinely gathered by prison intelligence officers who share their findings with counterterrorism experts in Washington.

The CMUs prohibit group prayer beyond the authorized hour-long services on Fridays and restrict inmate visitation to lawyers and immediate family members. Visits from journalists, human rights experts and volunteers are off limits. As are researchers, who are denied access to the CMUs; hence there is no primary criminological research on the incarceration of terrorists in the United States. Inmates are required to hold all conversations in English. Most of them are Arab Muslims, yet the units also hold some African

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11. Hersh (2005) see note 6, 3.

12. Homeland Security News Wire (2010), 'Gitmo Repeat Offender Rate Rises Sharply.' Dec. 9.

13. Shane, S (2011) 'Beyond Guantanamo, a Web of Prisons for Terrorist Inmates.' *New York Times*, Dec. 11.

14. U.S. Department of Justice (2006), The Federal Bureau of Prisons' Monitoring of Mail for High-Risk Inmates. Washington, D.C.: Office of the Inspector General, 49.

15. Johnson, C and M Williams (2011) 'Guantanamo North': Inside Secretive U.S. Prisons. NPR News, March 3; Shane (2011), see note 13.

American Muslims charged with radicalizing other inmates. Also locked up in the CMUs are inmates who have threatened prison officials or ordered murders using cellphones.

In addition to virtually banning the prisoners' contact with the outside world, the objective of the CMUs is to segregate terrorist inmates from the general populations to prevent them from both converting other convicts to radical Islam and plotting terrorist acts behind bars. By fully segregating terrorists, the BOP argues that it can better concentrate its resources on language translation, content analysis of letters and phone calls, and intelligence sharing. Despite repeated media requests, authorities have refused to release a full list of the CMU inmates, although reporters have compiled a partial list. Among them are three felons who have previously waged terrorist attacks while confined to maximum-security prisons.

Nothing is known of the prisoners' psychological status, the criteria by which they have been chosen for incarceration in the CMUs, or their conflicts with guards and other inmates. Nor is anything known about their rehabilitation, their preparation for community reentry, or their recidivism. Yet many of the CMU prisoners will one day finish their sentences and return to society (some 300 terrorist-related prisoners have completed their sentences and been set free since 2001). Civil rights attorneys have filed lawsuits contending that CMU inmates are denied the right to review the evidence that sent them there, or to challenge that evidence. Some evidence indicates that by creating Muslim-dominated control units, the BOP has inadvertently fostered solidarity and defiance among the CMU prisoners, thereby increasing levels of radicalisation. Adding to these risks, the BOP has failed to institute de-radicalisation programs which are common in other countries. Because of the legal complaints, combined with the atmosphere of secrecy surrounding the disproportionate placement of Muslim prisoners in the CMUs, Terre Haute and

Marion have become internationally known as 'Guantanamo North.'

Mass Incarceration

The rise of Islam in American prisons cannot be separated from the nation's experiment with mass incarceration. With 2.3 million inmates now in custody, U.S. prisons are experiencing an overcrowding problem of historic proportions. A range of negative consequences occur when prisons are filled beyond capacity. First to suffer are rehabilitation programs, leading to rampant idleness. Chronic idleness and confinement in spaces that are occupied by too many people increases the number of social interactions inmates have that involve

uncertainty and problems in mental reasoning. Add to this the increased risk of victimization and predatory violence accompanying overcrowding, and prisoners experience heightened stress levels that aggravate interpersonal instability in an already dangerous world where errors in judgment can be fatal.¹⁶ Exacerbating this challenge is the emergence of a new generation of gangs, bringing with them a primitive racial

tribalism to prison life—one in which blacks, whites, and Mexicans form their own standing armies, each inflated by a bizarre spiritualism that often accompanies secret-society crime networks. Evolving from these conditions, more than a dozen prison converts to Islam have been indicted for waging terrorist plots against the United States since 9/11.¹⁷

A leading theory of prisoner radicalisation holds that disorderly, overcrowded and under-staffed institutions breed a desire in convicts to defy authorities. This creates a condition where 'identities of resistance' are viewed favorably within inmate subcultures.¹⁸ Some scholars argue that Islam, or the 'religion of the oppressed,' is fast becoming prisoners' preferred ideology of resistance, playing the role that once belonged to Marxism.

This breakdown theory is consistent with my own research, which found a pattern of radicalisation among Islamic gang members in California's

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16. Haney, C (2006) 'The Wages of Prison Overcrowding: Harmful Psychological Consequences and Dysfunctional Corrective Reactions.' *Washington University Journal of Law and Policy*, 22: 265-93.

17. Hamm, M (forthcoming) *The Spectacular Few: Prisoner Radicalisation and Terrorism in the Post-9/11 Era*. New York: New York University Press.

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

overcrowded maximum-security prisons.¹⁹ As one Shiite prisoner told me in 2007, 'People are recruiting on the yard every day. It's scandalous. Everybody's glorifying Osama bin Laden.'²⁰ Along with Muslim prisoners, I interviewed inmates affiliated with white supremacy gangs. In both instances, radicalisation was based on a prison gang model whereby inmates are radicalized through a process of one-on-one proselytizing by charismatic leaders.

Yet I also learned that radicalisation is a double-edged sword. That is, a counter-radicalisation movement is evolving from the same harsh conditions that spawn prison extremism. This movement is exemplified by self-help groups which are often led by charismatic inmates serving life sentences. Lifers

typically have little interest in gangbanging, recruiting supporters through intimidation, or pitting believers of different faith groups against one another. Their efforts are consistent with research conducted in the Middle East and Singapore showing that successful de-radicalisation programs are often designed and carried out by inmates themselves.²¹ But more importantly, prisoner de-radicalisation is evocative of a wider movement now taking place in the Muslim world—revealed in the more egalitarian features of the Arab Spring—which is increasingly rejecting various forms of extremism, including the ideology of al-Qaeda.²² For that reason alone, these de-radicalisation programs should be replicated far and wide.



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19. Hamm, M (2009) 'Prison Islam in the Age of Sacred Terror.' *British Journal of Criminology*, 49: 667-85.

20. Ibid, 674.

21. Neumann (2010), see note 17.

22. Wright, R (2011) *Rock the Casbah: Rage and Rebellion Across the Islamic World*. New York: Simon & Schuster.