



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

# CTC SENTINEL

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## About the CTC Sentinel

The Combating Terrorism Center is an independent educational and research institution based in the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy, West Point. The CTC Sentinel harnesses the Center's global network of scholars and practitioners to understand and confront contemporary threats posed by terrorism and other forms of political violence.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not of the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

# The Danger of Prison Radicalization in the West

By James Brandon



SINCE SAYYID QUTB wrote *Milestones Along the Road* in an Egyptian prison almost 50 years ago, prisons have become widely recognized as important incubators of jihadist thought.<sup>1</sup> In Muslim-majority countries, a number of prominent jihadists were radicalized, at least in part, in prison, including Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi. Islamist extremists in the Arab world have repeatedly used prisons to recruit new followers, reinforce the commitment of existing extremists and to network and exchange ideas with like-minded individuals.

There is increasing evidence that prisons in the West are now starting to play a similar role—particularly in the United Kingdom, which has seen more “homegrown” terrorist plots (and

consequently more terrorist convictions) than any other Western country. Extremists whose paths toward terrorism began in European or U.S. prisons include numerous high-profile terrorists. In the United Kingdom, they include Richard Reid, the 2001 “shoe-bomber,” and Muktar Ibrahim, the leader of the July 21, 2005 London bomb plot.<sup>2</sup> In France, Safe Bourada, an Algerian originally convicted in 1998 for his involvement in the 1995 Paris metro bombings, was convicted again in 2008 for planning further terrorist attacks in France.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Richard Reid converted to Islam while in prison in the mid-1990s. Upon his release, he began attending a Salafist mosque where he became increasingly interested in radical ideas and involved in extremist circles. Muktar Ibrahim adopted extreme Islamism while in prison for gang-related violence in the mid-1990s. Upon his release, he began attending Abu Hamza's Finsbury Park Mosque where he was further radicalized.

<sup>3</sup> Safe Bourada's re-arrest occurred in 2005 two years after he was released after serving half of his original 10-year sentence. See Pierre-Antoine Souchard, “Nine Convicted in

<sup>1</sup> *Milestones Along the Road* is best described as Sayyid Qutb's manifesto for revolutionary Islamism. It is a major source of jihadist literature today.

Among those convicted with him were other former convicts who he had met in prison. In Spain, Mohamed Achraf (also known as Abderrahmane Tahiri), who was convicted in 2007 of being a member of a terrorist organization, recruited others while imprisoned for credit card fraud in Salamanca prison. Additionally, key leaders in the 2004 Madrid bombing network had themselves been radicalized in Moroccan prisons.<sup>4</sup> In the United States, where domestic radicalization has generally lagged behind Europe, there is now growing evidence of prison radicalization. In 2009, for instance, Kevin James, who founded the Jami`at al-Islam al-Sahih terrorist group while in a California prison, was convicted after admitting planning attacks on Jewish and Israeli targets in Los Angeles.<sup>5</sup>

While few of these individuals adopted extreme Islamist beliefs solely as the result of their time in prison, their prison experiences significantly accelerated their radicalization through isolating them from mainstream society while also exposing them to ideologies to which they ultimately proved highly vulnerable. It is important, therefore, to understand how radicalization in prison occurs. This article is largely based on accounts, letters and testimonies smuggled out of British prisons by suspected and convicted extremists, supported by official government reports and surveys.<sup>6</sup>

#### Proactive Recruitment

New convicts, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, typically arrive in prison feeling insecure, uncertain and afraid. In the United Kingdom, some imprisoned Islamists have adopted a proactive strategy to capitalize on this uncertainty by offering food, friendship and spiritual support to new arrivals in prison. For instance, one former prisoner in London's Belmarsh prison, the United Kingdom's main prison for convicted and suspected terrorists, has

written that the day he arrived in prison he was approached by some terrorist detainees:

some brothers approached me and said that they had been expecting me. At first I was a bit apprehensive as to whether I should trust them or not...But afterwards I felt comfortable. One of the brothers, *masha'Allah*, he packed some fruit and a chocolate in a bag and handed it to me before I went back to my cell.<sup>7</sup>

In the same prison, Omar Khyam, convicted of planning terrorist attacks in the United Kingdom, described how Rachid Ramda, a French Muslim who was imprisoned while fighting extradition to France (where he was later convicted of organizing the 1995 Paris metro bombings), proactively approached and befriended other inmates:

The first thing that struck me most about Rachid was the way he greeted me and the new Muslim arrivals, three hugs and a huge smile. He made me feel as if I had known him for years, such a warm personality and character, making everyone feel wanted and important, as if you are his best friend.<sup>8</sup>

Prison radicalization is more likely to begin through such personal relationships rather than through a ranting, wild-eyed extremist "brainwashing" an unwilling audience. As stated by a Muslim inmate in California's Folsom prison who is head of the jail's Islamic Studies Program, a rehabilitation program based on mainstream Sunni Islam: "The potential for radicalization must be understood on a one-to-one basis."<sup>9</sup> In many cases, however, prisons are highly reluctant to separate extremists from ordinary prisoners—even though all evidence from the Middle East suggests that this is an essential first step toward containing radicalization. In France, for instance, official secularism prevents

such religious-based segregation. British reluctance, meanwhile, stems from the United Kingdom's disastrous experience with interning Irish Republican Army (IRA) members in the 1970s (detained IRA men swiftly turned a number of prisons into centers of radicalization and propaganda).

Such humble beginnings can provide a potent platform for Islamists to exert increasing influence over other prisoners. Amar Makhulif, an Algerian also known as "Abu Doha" who is wanted in the United States for plotting to bomb Los Angeles International

**"Prisons are places where disaffected, often violent individuals are concentrated to be punished by the state. Such individuals are naturally receptive to an ideology that glorifies anti-social and anti-state violence and that appears to offer clear, albeit intolerant, solutions to complex problems of identity and belonging."**

Airport (who presently lives in London having defeated attempts to extradite him), has also written of how Ramda offered him advice while detained in Belmarsh: "When I need courage or I feel sad and everything in my life seems as though it has been turned upside down, I think of Rachid and reflect upon his advice. Rachid is a symbol of love, a brother in time of need."<sup>10</sup> It is easy to see how such advice and moral support from extremists can easily turn into a deeper relationship—particularly when charismatic, articulate extremists come into contact with ordinary Muslim prisoners or new converts who have a limited knowledge of Islam and who are often poorly educated.

Paris Terror Trial," Associated Press, October 24, 2008.

4 "Joyas robadas en España financiaron asesinatos de Al Qaeda en Argelia," *El Pais*, July 19, 2009.

5 U.S. Department of Justice, press release, March 9, 2009.

6 Material on British prisons in this article comes from the author's recent report: James Brandon, *Unlocking Al-Qaeda: Islamist Extremism in British Prisons* (London: Quilliam Foundation, 2009).

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Mark S. Hamm, *Terrorist Recruitment in American Correctional Institutions* (Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice, 2007).

10 Brandon.

### Quest for Leadership

Islamists, including convicted terrorists, frequently seek to become leaders of Muslims in prison—just as they do in wider society. In the United Kingdom, convicted terrorists such as Abu Hamza al-Masri<sup>11</sup> and Abdullah el-Faisal<sup>12</sup> both overtly sought to become representatives of Muslim prisoners. To accomplish this, they led demonstrations and hunger strikes against prison food or against perceived mistreatment by prison staff. El-Faisal later said that “if you’re a cleric you have to set an example for other Muslim prisoners to follow, you’re not supposed to crack up under pressure.”<sup>13</sup> Similar strategies have been followed in U.S. prisons, notably by the Jami`at al-Islam al-Sahih group, which organized “collective resistance” against prison authorities in Folsom prison.

In other instances, extremist influence is more subtle. In the United States, John Walker Lindh, the “American Taliban” captured in Afghanistan in 2001, impressed other prisoners by living an ostensibly pious and “humble” life in prison, having reportedly “made a study of proper Islamic etiquette.”<sup>14</sup> Exuding confidence, serenity and certainty often plays an important role in impressing other, less religiously observant Muslim prisoners. Extremists, however, also frequently benefit from aggressive macho prison cultures that typically respect violence and moral strength; this gives them an advantage over other Muslims, whether staff or other prisoners, who seek to preach more moderate, tolerant messages.

Where Islamists fail to become the leaders of other Muslim prisoners, either through defending their “rights” or through setting a moral example, there is another option: violence. Perhaps the most notable use of violence by extremist prisoners happened in Jordan where in the 1990s Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, the prominent jihadist ideologue, worked with his protégé, Abu

Mus`ab al-Zarqawi, to run a campaign of intimidation and violence within Suwaya prison. Their control over inmates and guards at the prison progressively enabled them to recruit petty criminals and transform them into jihadists.<sup>15</sup>

Similar violence also occurs in prisons in the West, although at a lower level and most often directed against white non-Muslim gangs and individuals. For instance, in the United Kingdom, a number of convicted terrorists held in Frankland prison during 2007-2008 led other Muslim convicts in a tit-for-tat battle against white gangs and individuals, leading to a number of serious attacks involving boiling oil being thrown over rival prisoners,

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stabblings and a riot during which Muslim inmates sought to damage and destroy prison facilities.<sup>16</sup> In other instances, more generic “Muslim” gangs based on a loose sense of ethno-religious solidarity (rather than specifically Islamist ones led by convicted terrorists) have been involved in serious violence—often in response to perceived mistreatment by prison staff.

In November 2009 in Belgium, for example, Muslim gangs in Andenne prison responded to perceived insults against Islam by rioting—while violence between Muslims and non-Muslims has also been reported in Italian prisons.<sup>17</sup>

In Australia, prison authorities even had to break-up and disperse a violent Islamist gang that had developed around a convicted murderer in the country’s highest security prison.<sup>18</sup> Such problems are arguably more severe in France, where an estimated 70% of prisoners are Muslim, and where a lack of Muslim chaplains in French prisons means that extremists are often not effectively challenged.<sup>19</sup> A confidential report by the French prison service warned in 2008 that more than 400 Islamist prisoners were displaying “worrying behavior,” which included enforcing prayers on other Muslims or displaying pictures of Usama bin Ladin in their cells.<sup>20</sup>

### Extremist Preaching

Once Islamists have established their authority over other Muslim prisoners, they begin to spread their ideology. This most frequently occurs through small-scale prayer circles that might involve a combination of traditional teaching (such as memorizing the Qur’an) and ideological radicalization. Extremists typically place a high priority on such preaching; they see it not only as a religious duty, but also as a way to spite non-Muslim prison authorities. Abu Hamza al-Masri, for example, has reportedly given sermons between his cell and others’ in the United Kingdom’s Belmarsh prison using the pipes that connect separate prison cells. Similarly, in 2007 Islamist radicals in Spain were later found to have sent letters between different prisons, including ones discussing martyrdom, Islamic theology and the importance of violent jihad.<sup>21</sup>

In some British prisons, jihadists report near-continuous discussions with other prisoners. Prominent jihadist ideologue Abu Qatada, for instance, has written that

we remained with the brothers in [Belmarsh] prison for three years and regretfully, I did not complete

tober 4, 2005.

18 Michael Perry, “Australia Breaks up Muslim Prison Gang,” Reuters, April 23, 2007.

19 Molly Moore, “In France, Prisons Filled With Muslims,” *Washington Post*, April 29, 2008.

20 “400 islamistes font du prosélytisme en prison,” *Le Figaro*, September 23, 2008.

21 Sebastian Rotella, “From Behind Bars, Waging a Verbal Jihad,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 24, 2007.

11 Abu Hamza al-Masri is an Egyptian Islamist activist known for his preaching against non-Muslims. He remains incarcerated in the United Kingdom.

12 Abdullah el-Faisal is a Jamaican Muslim preacher who was imprisoned in the United Kingdom in 2003 for urging his audience to violence. In 2007, he was deported back to Jamaica.

13 Brandon.

14 Tom Junod, “Innocent,” *Esquire*, July 1, 2006.

15 Nibras Kazimi, “A Virulent Ideology in Mutation: Zarqawi Upstages Maqdisi,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 2 (2005).

16 “Terrorists Moved to New Jail After Death Threats,” *Daily Telegraph*, March 20, 2008.

17 “Dégâts matériels limités à la prison d’Andenne,” *7-Sur-7*, November 18, 2009; Tracy Wilkinson, “In an Italian Prison, The Call to Islam,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oc-

very much [writing] in it, because the prison was communal with the [Muslim] brothers and discussions with them were deep.<sup>22</sup>

Babar Ahmed, detained in the United Kingdom while appealing extradition to the United States on charges of running pro-jihadist websites, has meanwhile described prison as a “university of Islamic knowledge” after mixing with convicted extremists such as Abu Qatada.<sup>23</sup> Radicalization is sometimes facilitated by mistakes from prison authorities. For example, Ahmed has written of reading Sayyid Qutb’s *Milestones* while in prison, a book that is manifestly unsuitable for terrorist suspects. In the United States, meanwhile, it has been alleged that books by Abu al-A`la Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb are commonly found in prison libraries, along with more violent Saudi translations of the Qur’an.<sup>24</sup> In 2007, the United States recognized this problem and took steps to address it through the controversial Standardized Chapel Library Project, although few other Western countries have so far followed suit.<sup>25</sup> Books promoting either jihadist or hard-line Salafist/Wahhabist ideologies clearly help to buttress any radical ideologies propagated in prison by extremist inmates.

#### Outlook

Prison radicalization does not mean that terrorist plots are being routinely hatched in prison (although this has occasionally happened). More often, however, it leads to inmates adopting Islamist ideologies that may ultimately lead to terrorism after their release. Unfortunately, there is no easy solution to prison radicalization. Prisons are places where disaffected, often violent individuals are concentrated to be punished by the state. Such individuals are naturally receptive to an ideology that glorifies anti-social and anti-state violence and that appears to offer clear,

albeit intolerant, solutions to complex problems of identity and belonging. In a Western context, extremist recruitment is also made easier because many Muslim prisoners (and, indeed, non-Muslims who convert) have little or no knowledge of Islam and can easily be persuaded that adopting rigid Islamist beliefs will help them turn away from

**“Extremist recruitment is also made easier because many Muslim prisoners have little or no knowledge of Islam and can easily be persuaded that adopting rigid Islamist beliefs will help them turn away from crime, drugs and alcohol to make a ‘new start.’”**

crime, drugs and alcohol to make a “new start.” In addition, imprisoned extremists are often highly motivated by charismatic individuals who regard radicalizing others as a religious duty and as a means to fight back against the West, in effect to continue their jihad from within prison. At the same time, however, this problem should be kept in perspective; many of those who adopt radical ideologies in prison, whether out of conviction or for more pragmatic reasons, often discard their extremist beliefs on their return to mainstream society.

There is little evidence that Western governments are taking the decisive steps needed to combat prison radicalization domestically—even though some attempts have been made by Western forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, while resource-poor countries in the Middle East and elsewhere have created sophisticated deradicalization programs, in order to first isolate and then “de-program” imprisoned extremists, such centers have no parallels in the West. Indeed,

<sup>26</sup> In Iraq, for example, General Douglas M. Stone created a deradicalization program based on the Saudi and Singaporean models. See “Detainee Chief Sees Koran as Key Ally,” *Financial Times*, July 16, 2007.

in some cases attempted government interventions in the West have arguably made problems worse. In 2005, for example, the UK Prison Service created a special segregation unit in Britain’s Long Lartin prison in which it placed Abu Qatada, the jihadist ideologue, Khalid al-Fawwaz, Bin Ladin’s representative in the West in the mid-1990s, Adel Abdel Bary, a senior Egyptian Islamic Jihad member, and assorted Libyan and Algerian terrorist suspects. This policy, an attempt to isolate extremists from the mainstream prison population, instead created a probably unparalleled concentration of senior jihadists from different organizations. Abu Qatada, for one, seized the opportunity by seeking to construct a hybrid super-jihadist ideology, writing the book *Limatha Intasarna* (Why We Were Victorious) to analyze the successes and failures of various jihadist organizations. The book, which has the potential to reinvigorate jihadist movements worldwide, appears to have been smuggled out of prison and is now possibly being prepared for publication. Such are the complexities of prison radicalization: solving one problem often only creates a new one.

Such incidents also make it increasingly clear why Western governments, which presently either shy away from admitting the extent of prison radicalization or which hope to tackle it through minor interventions such as appointing more Muslim chaplains, instead need to develop comprehensive and durable programs for deradicalizing extremist inmates. As Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt and Libya have learned during the last 40 years, prison radicalization cannot be adequately dealt with through ordinary prison management techniques. A new, tailor-made approach is needed. Failure to take such steps not only risks allowing prisons to become hubs of radicalization, but also squanders the priceless opportunity to deradicalize leading extremists so that they can be used to deconstruct jihadist ideology.

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<sup>22</sup> Brandon.

<sup>23</sup> Babar Ahmed, “Three Years in Captivity,” [www.cage-prisoners.com](http://www.cage-prisoners.com), August 17, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Steven Emerson, “Radicals in Our Prisons,” *New York Post*, May 24, 2009; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, “Prison Jihad - How Radical Islamic Charities Exploit Their Access to the Prison System,” *Weekly Standard*, December 10, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Laurie Goodstein, “Critics Right and Left Protest Book Removals,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2007.