**Terrorist Recruitment and Prison Radicalisation: Assessing the UK Experiment of “Separation Centres”**

**Abstract**

While correctional institutions are supposed to be strong partners in disengagement from violence, prisons have historically played an instrumental role in many radical organisations enabling recruitment of new followers. Recent examples from Europe and the Middle East demonstrate that prisons frequently facilitate the spread of Islamist ideology by providing inmates a platform to forge alliances, exchange experience and recruit potential attackers. Because policies regarding management of terrorism-related offenders can either mitigate or exacerbate the risks of prison radicalisation, it is important to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. This paper examines strategies for dealing with Islamism in prisons worldwide (dispersal, containment and mixed approach) focusing on best practices and assesses the United Kingdom’s experiment of “separation centres” from the point of view of its potential to tackle the spread of Islamism in prisons.

Key words: Islamism, prisons, radicalisation, crime-terror nexus, terrorist recruitment

**1. Introduction: Prisons as “Terror Academies”**

The concern about prisons contributing to radicalisation and the nexus between convictions and terrorism have been mentioned repeatedly by academics and practitioners as one of the most pressing security issues that requires an immediate response (Basra, Neumann and Brunner 2016; Hamm 2013; Silke 2014; Brandon 2009). Prisons have played an instrumental role in the narratives of many radical political organisations in the twentieth century, including Irish Republicans, German Marxists and Egyptian Islamists (Soufan, 2016). Additionally, prison radicalisation poses threats with regard to enhancing the structure and recruitment pools of criminal networks. In the Soviet Union, Gulags enabled development of a unique criminal subculture that generated “thieves in law”, or a special rank of violent, elite criminals who vetted and recruited future cadres for their gangs in high-security jails.[[1]](#footnote-1) Some of the most powerful Brazilian criminal groups, such as the Primeiro Comando da Capital[[2]](#footnote-2) in Sao Paulo and the Comando Vermelho[[3]](#footnote-3) in Rio de Janeiro, originated in prisons (Mulcahy et al, 2013).

The process of prisoner radicalisation can be a ”double-edged sword” (Hamm, 2013, p. 1), capable of triggering both positive and negative results as some prison radicals, including Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi, achieved great heights of public service as leaders of national liberal movements and prominent government officials. However, in the context of Islamism, prisons are known as “universities of terror”, as exemplified by recent examples of the biographies of jihadists. In the Middle East, prisons have proved to be formative in the development of extremism from an organisational and logistical perspective providing a platform for inmate encounters and collaboration. One of the most telling examples is how Camp Bucca, a prison maintained by the United States in Iraq from 2003 until 2009, contributed to networking between two different groups of inmates. The detention of large number of jihadists and ex-Ba’athists[[4]](#footnote-4) during the Iraqi insurgency resulted in opportunities for the two groups to forge alliances and exchange experiences, including combat doctrine. The Ba’athists brought military skills, discipline, excellent training and a network of experienced bureaucrats that other radical organisations lacked (Barrett 2014), and this symbiotic relationship contributed to the first military achievements of ISIS. Although the administration did successfully separate the inmates along sectarian lines to avoid tensions, they failed to separate the extremist Sunni inmates from the moderate Sunnis, and this situation created a breeding ground for extremism.[[5]](#footnote-5)

A significant number of the Islamic State’s senior members passed at some point through either Saddam’s prisons or the US-run Camp Bucca, known as the “Academy” among extremists (Soufan 2016). However, it was not the first time prison would galvanise a jihadist movement. In the 1980s, imprisonment in Mubarak’s Egypt strengthened future terrorist leaders, such as al-Qaeda’s leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, who was arrested following the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981 (Soufan, 2016). Although al-Zawahiri was a committed jihadist before his arrest, his experience in prison made his determination more clear, and he became more convinced of the need to use violence for political change (Ibid). Besides empowering already committed extremists, some prison regimes exacerbate the issue of radicalisation by mixing different categories of inmates. In Lebanon, prisoners are not categorised according to their criminal records, and minor offenders have repeatedly been jailed in the Roumieh prison together with perpetrators who have committed serious crimes, including terrorism (Lebanese Center for Human Rights, n.d.). According to Penal Reform International (2015), lack of classification of prisoners and lack of separation of pre-trial and convicted prisoners are factors that intensify the issue of radicalisation.

While both prison and probation are supposed to be strong partners in de-radicalisation and resettlement, instead of promoting disengagement from violence, these systems frequently facilitate extremism. Considering that the above-mentioned strategies of housing terrorism-related offenders in the Middle East have failed to decrease the risks of prison radicalisation, but rather are exacerbating the issue and providing extremists with a common platform and learning tools, an important question to pose is whether the separation strategy could produce better results in terms of the management of extremists.

In the United Kingdom, following the inquiry into the spread of Islamism in prisons published in 2016, the government announced its plans to crack down on the spread of radical ideology among incarcerated people by creating three “separation centres” that would house the most subversive Islamists. As of January 2018, HMP Frankland near Durham has been created (Hill 2016), and it is the first time the UK government has practised the policy of separating terrorism-related offenders. At the same time, most of the mass media coverage of the new approach has been negative, drawing attention to its human rights criticism and comparing the units to Guantanamo Bay (Parveen 2017). Currently, a more balanced and nuanced evaluation of the containment policy is absent from the public discourse in the United Kingdom. This article aims at filling this gap by examining strategies for dealing with Islamism in prisons worldwide and assessing the UK experiment from the point of view of its potential to tackle the spread of radicalisation in prisons.

**2. Methodology**

This study is based on a comparative criminal justice methodology. There is a rich tradition of scholarship in the area of comparative penology in social sciences and law. Contextualising justice arrangements designed for terrorism-related offenders helps researchers to acquire specific knowledge about how cultural settings and legal traditions shape counter-terrorism responses. Comparative criminal justice also helps to generate insights into the efficacy of various policy initiatives on tackling extremism in prisons. Cavadino and Dignan (2005) argue that, despite a great diversity of cultural, political and legal indicators that exist cross-nationally, it is essential to understand the international dimensions of punishment. Pakes (2015) points out theoretical as well as practical incentives to the comparative study of criminal justice, as globalisation and notable changes in legislation make comparisons more relevant.

The first step of data collection was based on a literature review which examined different penal strategies with regard to housing extremism-related offenders: containment, dispersal and mixed approach. The following countries that face the risks of the spread of Islamism in prisons were reviewed: the United States, Australia, the Netherlands, Spain, Belgium, France, Germany, Russia and Israel. The second step of data collection relied on gathering information about the UK imprisonment of terrorism-related offenders and the new policy of separation centres. This step of data collection, in addition to a review of existing literature, is based on interviews with academics and practitioners, including forensic psychologists and the Joint Extremism Unit at HM Prisons and Probation Service, about management of terrorist-related offenders and current challenges that the prison and probation system is facing.

The main research question of this paper is: under what circumstances will the policy of separation of terrorism-related offenders be effective from the point of view of mitigating prison recruitment and radicalisation threats? Because separating extremists in prisons is a very recent policy in the UK introduced in 2017, no quantitative or qualitative data is available regarding its results. Therefore, this paper examines best practices of managing extremists in prisons in the above mentioned countries with the objective of evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of “separation” and assessing under what circumstances the policy will be successful in the United Kingdom.

**3. Operational Dynamics of Prison Radicalisation: Push and Pull Factors**

Individuals are usually more receptive to religious ideologies at times when their self-identity is questioned, and prisons are environments conducive to searching for a new identity, hope and recognition to fill the void. Because radical preachers capitalise on the vulnerabilities and marginalisation ususally prevalent in prisons, and exploit many socio-economic and racial grievances, inmates are particularly susceptible to the fundamentalist rhetoric in the correctional institutions. While examining the process of spreading extremist ideology in prisons, it is important to consider push, pull and facilitating factors that contribute to radicalisation.

Concerning push factors prison conditions, including infrastructure, policies, procedures and staff-prisoner relationships, can play a significant role in increasing or mitigating the radicalisation risks. Institutionalised penal crises observed in many Western countries results in a situation when prisons suffer from a chronic crisis of legitimacy, being viewed by incarcerated individuals as ineffective in controlling crime, inefficient and inhumane (Cavadino and Dignan, 2005). Shortage of prison resources, poor facilities, overcrowding and lack of access to adequate health care as well as long periods of time in pre-trial detention, can also contribute to a context in which radicalisation flourishes (Penal Reform International, 2015).

Besides harsh prison conditions, overcrowding and deterioration of staff–prisoner relationships, sentences perceived as punitive and unjust contribute to the push factors of radicalisation. New sentencing practices in the UK (e.g. criminalising the “glorification” of terrorism and other non-violent acts) prompted changes in the dynamics of the relationships between prisoners, one of which was a higher threat and fear of violence (Liebling and Arnold 2015). Violence and gang culture in prisons are another push factor. Inmates in high-security prisons in the UK have reported concerns for their safety, and prisoners have been converting to Islam for their own protection against growing gang-related violence (HM Ministry of Justice, 2016).

Concerning pull factors, embracing radical Islamist ideology could be appealing for inmates who seek confidence, esteem, membership and belonging. Moreover, conversion to Islam is known as a protection-seeking strategy and a means of gaining more material benefits, such as better food during Ramadan or more time out of cells during serving time (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons 2010). Embracing Islam in prison demonstrates another way of exerting power by individuals who would like to be regarded as leaders and who tend to show their power in a violent way, justifying it by faith (Liebling and Arnold 2015).

Besides push and pull factors, it is important to take a note of facilitating factors that help recruit individuals. Charismatic radical preachers become facilitating agents that capitalise on both push and pull factors, exerting a controlling influence on both Muslim and non-Muslim populations. There have recently been reports that Michael Adebolajo, one of the Lee Rigby killers who was given a whole-life sentence, may have helped convert inmates to Islam and has been exerting a considerable influence on other prisoners as a “charismatic” person (Simpson 2017). Abdullah el-Faisal, a radical preacher deported from Britain to Jamaica, has also had an important influence on some inmates while being in custody, including a former prisoner who went to Yemen after his release, hoping to participate in a suicide mission (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2012).

**4. Criminals and Terrorist Recruitment**

As evidenced by the recent terrorist attacks and foiled plots discussed below, criminals have successfully become a pool for terrorist recruitment, and people with a criminal record could be an easier target for extremist recruiters because, unlike people who have not been involved in crime before, those with a criminal record do not require the period of conditioning or grooming that would normally be needed to overcome their inhibitions about breaking the law (Lloyd and Dean 2015). Lloyd’s and Dean’s research reveals that the involvement of criminals in the al-Qaeda-influenced extremist organisations appears to be opportunistic and self-serving, and they do not always share the same belief systems or religiosity with other radicalised individuals. Basra et al. (2016), having examined the crime-terror nexus among European foreign fighters, also confirm that the jihadist narrative is well aligned with the personal needs and desires of criminals, and terrorist groups are increasingly relying on the pool of people previously convicted or involved in common criminality.

Before his conversion to radical Islam, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian petty criminal and a future leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, served time in prison for sexual assault and drug possession. Recent examples from Europe also show that there is a strong link between convictions and radicalisation. Abdelbaki Es Satty, a Moroccan imam at the Ripoll mosque in Catalonia who was instrumental in radicalising the Barcelona attackers, had previously served time in jail for drug trafficking. He met several al-Qaeda members during his imprisonment, including Rachid Aglif, who was serving an 18-year sentence for his part in the 2004 Madrid train bombing. This encounter is believed to have been a pivotal moment in the development of Es Satty’s radical ideas (Dunleavey, 2017).

Khalid Masood who drove a car across Westminster Bridge towards Parliament in the United Kingdom in March of 2017 injuring 50 people and killing four, has an extensive criminal record having been convicted three times since he was 18. In 2000, he was imprisoned for two years for a violent knife attack, and converted to Islam and started using a new name in jail (Mendick and Allen, 2017). Masood was later sent back to prison for another six months for possession of an offensive weapon (Ibid).

Anis Amri, a failed asylum seeker who murdered 12 people when he drove a truck into a Christmas market in Berlin, had previously been accused of armed robbery back in his home country of Tunisia. He had a history of dealing drugs in Europe and travelling throughout the EU using multiple identity documents under different aliases after his asylum application was rejected (Europol 2017), and was sentenced to a four-year prison term (but released in 2015) for starting a fire in a refugee centre (Huggler 2018). Indeed, while ideology has a part to play in radicalising and motivating terrorists, the opportunity to engage in criminal violence for its own sake appears to be just as significant a draw (Soufan 2016).

Amedy Coulibaly, a Malian Frenchman who was responsible for the Montrouge shooting that resulted in killing a police officer and a kosher supermarket siege in which he killed four hostages, had been previously convicted at least five times for robbery and drug trafficking since the age of 17. Coming from a family that did not practise a radical version of Islam, he was exposed to the jihadists’ ideology for the first time while serving time in the Fleury-Mérogis jail where he was influenced by top al-Qaeda operative Djamel Beghal, an Algerian Frenchman who had been convicted for a plot to destroy the US embassy in Paris (Callimachi and Yardley 2015). The two managed to communicate and build networks in jail, even despite Beghal’s solitary confinement, by passing messages to each other’s cells and speaking through open windows. Coulibaly and Beghal stayed in touch after their release while the latter was under house arrest in a hotel in Murat. As evidenced by photos, Coulibaly was practising the use of weapons at that time.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Chérif Kouachi, one of the brothers behind the Charlie Hebdo massacre, was arrested in January 2005 when he was about to join the jihad against US troops in Iraq, and it was the prison environment of Fleury-Mérogis that offered him an opportunity to build contacts and meet like-minded individuals. In prison, Kouachi became acquainted with Amedy Coulibaly, who had by then been convicted for armed robberies, and Djamel Beghal. An investigation into their lives shows that Kouachi was also mentored by Beghal, and the two men remained close after being released from prison (Rayner 2015). Gilles Kepel argues that the Fleury-Mérogis prison served as a relay between the “second” and “third” generations of jihadists, or between al-Qaeda’s largely defeated pyramidal organisation and the network-based system (Kepel, p. 157). Moreover, Kouachi was reported in a French television video to have said he was radicalised by the self-taught preacher Farid Benyettou, who was jailed alongside him (Channel 4, 2015).

Radicalisation is a continuous process that involves multiple channels and processes, and while in some cases it is difficult to find a firm evidence that certain individuals did radicalise in jails, it is clear that prison environment provided them with more opportunities for networking and identity seeking. Prisons offer an offender convergence setting (Felson 2006) that facilitates crime structure and continuity and helps set stage for criminal acts. As exemplified by notorious examples such as Camp Bucca in Iraq, prisons represent recurrent settings where criminal cooperation can grow as extremists might use their conviction to find accomplices and acquire information needed for planning another attack. Felson (2006) argues that offender convergence settings allow criminal cooperation to persist even when the particular people vary, and removing or reducing such settings can have a major impact on crime. The idea of separating prisoners and disrupting or limiting their outreach activities has a similar rationale at its core.

**5. Strategies for Dealing with Extremism in Prisons**

In line with the chosen methodology of a comparative criminal justice analysis, this paper relies on examination of strategies for dealing with extremism-related offenders in custody implemented in ten countries that face the danger of the spread of Islamism in prisons. It is important to assess the strengths and weaknesses of these policies before discussing the UK context and the experiment of “separation centres” as evaluation of best practices helps us to better understand the conditions under which this policy will be successful in the United Kingdom. Experts identify three main policies for dealing with violent or non-violent extremists in prisons: containment, dispersal or a mixed approach (Williams 2016). As shown by Figure 1, dispersal is the most common strategy of dealing with terrorism-related offenders, and it is practised in most of the countries worldwide, including Australia, Belgium, France, Germany and Russia. According to this approach, terrorism-related offenders are placed among the mainstream prison population. Although problematic inmates may warrant special treatment, the same regime is applied to both terrorism-related offenders and regular prisoners. As a result, terrorism-related individuals are not subject to stigma and do not benefit from a status of “martyr” that separate units might create. There is also the possibility that radicalised individuals might change their views through interactions with the mainstream prisoner population.

At the same time, this policy poses significant risks of prisoner radicalisation, and the danger that violent extremist offenders will exert influence over others. Moreover, they could also be influenced by criminal gangs, perpetuating the nexus between terrorism and organised crime. As discussed in the introduction, Middle Eastern countries tend to follow the dispersal method, separating prisoners only according to sectarian lines and not according to the crimes committed. The general units also lack staff who are specially trained to understand the threat of violent extremism and are equipped with the knowledge and ability to recognise and address vulnerabilities (Williams 2016).

In comparison to dispersal, containment is amore expensive and less common regime of housing inmates. Those suspected of being able to radicalise others are placed in separate units that benefit from previously trained staff. It is expected that the inmates will be measured against particular criteria to enter the separate units, and are monitored closely. This approach prevents terrorism-related offenders from exerting their influence and potentially recruiting people who are not involved in politically motivated violence. The Netherlands is one of the few states able to successfully house its entire prison population in two high-security prison facilities (Vught and Rotterdam). Spain has a different approach to ETA prisoners and Islamist extremists, applying dispersal to the former and containment to the latter (Dolz Ortega 2017). Israel also practices a full separation approach, making a clear distinction between “criminal” and “security” prisoners (Ganor and Falk 2013). One of the Australian states (New South Wales) has so far implemented this policy in its maximum-security Goulburn prison (Hunt 2017).

The following disadvantages are usually cited as possible outcomes of the containment policy: 1) it could be a source of elevated status for convicted people; 2) the policy could strengthen social bonds between inmates, reinforcing their ideological beliefs; 3) it could influence society’s perceptions about unfair treatment and discrimination in prisons (Williams 2016). In addition, the separation approach treats all terrorism-related offenders as equal in degree and severity of risk, despite a range of offences (e.g. non-violent or violent extremism). [[7]](#footnote-7)

Mixed approach is a combination of both strategies carried out on the basis of a risk assessment. Although this strategy offers more flexibility with regard to the placement of individuals, it does not set out a precise list of criteria for an inmate to be considered for placement in the specialist unit. The United States follows a mixed approach of dealing with terrorism-related offenders, as the most dangerous individuals are held in maximum-security prisons (e.g. Zacarias Moussaoui, Richard Reid, Dzhokar Tsarnaev, and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab are incarcerated in the ADX facility in Colorado), while the rest are spread out across the country (Fairfield and Wallace 2016). The United Kingdom has recently followed this example, introducing the “separation centres” in 2017 for the most dangerous and actively proselytising inmates, and the following section will be dedicated to the examination of the British approach.

Figure 1. Management of Terrorism-Related Offenders Worldwide: Policies

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Country** | **Dominant policy** | **Has separation been introduced?** |
| 1. United States | Mixed | Yes |
| 1. Australia | Dispersal | Yes, New South Wales (Goulburn prison) |
| 1. Belgium | Dispersal | No |
| 1. Netherlands | Separation | Yes |
| 1. Germany | Dispersal | No |
| 1. United Kingdom | Mixed | Yes, HMP Frankland |
| 1. France | Dispersal | Yes, although a new initiative of separate de-radicalisation units was introduced but not fully implemented due to its criticism |
| 1. Spain | Separation | Yes, terrorists are classified according to their motive (separatist vs. Islamist) |
| 1. Russia | Dispersal | No, but this initiative is now being discussed |
| 1. Israel | Separation | Yes, terrorists are considered “security prisoners” |

**6. Radicalisation in Prisons in the UK Context: From IRA to Islamism**

**6.1. IRA: Previous Experience with Separation of Prisoners**

The United Kingdom has a long history of grappling with the particular problem of detaining individuals involved in ethno-political and religious violence and subsequent radicalisation in prison. In the wake of the Easter Rising in 1916, the UK authorities used the wartime Defence of the Realm Regulations to detain 3,500 individuals suspected of involvement in Irish Republicanism, and around 2,000 detainees were transferred to internment camps (Townshend 1999). Many of these individuals had no involvement in the Rising, but in the camps they eventually came under the influence of those who had participated (Ibid).

Unlike in Scottish, Welsh and English prisons, general segregation of paramilitary prisoners from the remainder of the prison population was adopted in the 1970s and 1980s as one of the measures in Northern Ireland. Although segregation was a key demand by paramilitary prisoners at that time, in retrospect this policy is viewed as having been a failure, primarily because separation provided them with a barrier against informants, thereby facilitating disruptions of prison routine and even escape attempts (Murray 2014). Maze Prison, one of the historic incarceration facilities for Irish paramilitaries located on the outskirts of Norther Ireland, is usually cited as an example of segregationist policies that did not work from the point of view of security as the separation provided paramilitary prisoners with the opportunity to take control of certain areas and run them as private enclaves (House of Commons, Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2004)).

Despite this negative experience, the government decided to introduce separation again at HMP Maghaberry in 2003. Following a number of protests mounted by prisoners, the Steele Review commissioned by the government concluded that a degree of separation was required within HMP Maghaberry[[8]](#footnote-8) to protect paramilitaries of opposing factions from each other, and to protect the “ordinary” prisoners from the paramilitaries as a group. As a result, loyalist and republican paramilitaries were transferred into a special regime of a highly controlled prison within prison (Ibid). This decision was largely unwelcome by the prison’s staff who were sceptical about the separation’s potential to result in improved safety for prisoners or staff. It was feared that the paramilitaries would seek to take control of the separated areas as they had previously done at Maze Prison (Ibid). Currently, Maghaberry Prison houses 50 dissident republican prisoners, 31 of whom are aligned to the New IRA, and the remainder are linked to the Continuity IRA (McDonald, 2015). They belong to two factions opposed to the peace process and support the continuation of armed struggle. At the same time, recent changes did not directly improve safety or prisoners’ well-being (National Preventive Mechanism 2015). Moreover, Maghaberry Prison was described as being in a state of crisis and as a facility where safety had deteriorated.

In addition to the threats posed by the IRA, the increase in legislative scope and security responses in the wake of 7/7 led to a significant increase in arrests and conviction rates for terrorist offences. According to Home Office, the number of people arrested for terrorism-related offences in Britain rose by 58% to a record high of 412 in 2017 (Travis 2018). As of the end of 2017, there were 224 prisoners convicted for terrorism-related offences in jails in Britain at the end of 2017 – an increase of 24% comparing to the previous year (Ibid).[[9]](#footnote-9) Current trends suggest that the number of prisoners guilty of offences relating to terrorism and extremism (e.g. returning foreign fighters) is likely to increase, as authorities grapple with how to convict and prosecute returnees from the caliphate. Around 850 British nationals are among the foreign fighters affiliated with ISIS in the Middle East, and almost a half of them have returned and might be facing prosecution (BBC, 2017). Another concern would be individuals who repeatedly place or use extremism-related content online, as the laws on internet regulations might be tightened in the future to include penalties up to 15 years for those who repeatedly view extremist content online (Home Office, 2017).

**6.2. Current Challenges and Achievements of the United Kingdom’s Approach**

More recently, Ian Acheson’s independent review, commissioned by the Secretary of Justice Michael Gove in 2015, found evidence that Islamist extremism was a growing problem within prisons in the UK, and a central, comprehensive and coordinated strategy is required to monitor and counter it (HM Ministry of Justice, 2016). The report concluded that Islamist ideology in prisons could be threatening in various ways, including Muslim gang culture and the consequent violence, charismatic prisoners acting as self-styled “emirs” and exerting a controlling and radicalising influence on Muslim inmates, aggressive encouragement of conversions to Islam, available educational materials promoting Islamist extremism, exploitation of staff’s fear of being labelled racist, and so on (Ibid).

The above-mentioned review recommended giving consideration to containment of known extremists within dedicated specialist units. In an attempt to crack down on Islamist radicalisation behind bars, the government has recently announced its plans to create specialist units within the high-security estate: HMP Frankland near Durham, HMP Full Sutton near York and HMP Woodhill in Milton Keynes (HM Ministry of Justice 2017). The Prison (Amendment) Rules 2017, SI 2017/560, which are linked to the special offences in the legislation, allow for a special separation regime for extremist prisoners (Hill 2018). Three separation centres are expected to hold up to 28 of the most subversive offenders, including Michael Adebolajo and Anjem Choudary, and the main idea is to “allow greater separation and specialised management of extremists who pose the highest risk to other prisoners” (HM Ministry of Justice 2017). Prisoners can be placed in separation centres if they are involved in planning terrorism or are considered to pose a risk to national security. Furthermore, those who are spreading views that might encourage or influence others to commit terrorism crimes, or anyone whose views are being used in a way that undermines good order and security in prisons, may also be placed in one of the centres (Ibid).

Most of the mass media coverage of the UK experiment with regard to tackling radicalisation in prisons was negative and focused on drawing parallels between the UK separation centres and Guantanamo Bay, labelling the centres as “jihadi jails” that restrict individual liberties and produce more grievances (Parveen 2017; Farmer 2017). It was also pointed out that isolation is counter-productive as it could potentially give an elevated status to the most dangerous extremists, as happened in Northern Ireland where republicans and loyalists were housed in different blocks (Parveen 2017). The general perception of the containment policy circulated by the mass media channels and by some politicians is that separation will potentially intensify the problem, creating “jihad universities” (Selby 2017). However, what constitutes the basis for the decision-making behind the process of managing terrorism-related offenders in custody?

Separation is meant to be carried out on the basis of an offender’s intention to subvert the state and foment a terrorist attack either alone or via influencing others. In the United Kingdom, unlike some countries reviewed during the first part of the data collection for this paper, one of the most important goals of the penal system is to reduce the risk of reoffending, and the concern about preventing recidivism rates is at the core of how convicted people’s cases are managed. The conclusions about the dangers posed by extremist offenders are made on the basis of specially developed risk assessments designed by forensic psychologists. ERG 22+ is among the tools enabling prison officers to determine the risk potential of an extremist in custody.

**6.2.3 Risk Assessment and Terrorism-Related Offenders**

ERG (Extremist Risk Guidance) 22+ is a conceptual framework for assessing offenders based on 22 cognitive and behavioural factors theoretically associated with extremism that is carried out post-conviction. It has become embedded in offender management systems since 2011, including informing approaches in the “pre-criminal space” within the Channel programme (Lloyd and Dean 2015). Before this methodology was developed, those convicted under terrorist legislation were considered by NOMS officials to be at higher risk of serious harm by virtue of their offence alone, making it difficult to make judgements about other factors that could contribute to their risk levels (Ibid). Any risk assessment includes the challenging task of negotiating consent and cooperation with offenders but this process is essential on admission as it can be the foundation for important decisions about security risks an individual poses and possible rehabilitation interventions

ERG 22+ takes around 35 hours to complete and consists of three clusters: engagement, intent and capability. The term “engagement” is used to refer to the process by which individuals become involved with an extremist ideology or cause. The term “intent” is used to describe the mindset associated with a readiness to perform or contribute to an extremist offence. The last segment, “capability”, calculates the capacity for carrying out acts of terrorism. The profiles vary among individuals convicted under terrorist legislation, which means that there are people who have a clear intention to offend which can be deduced from their actions, while others are not willing to contribute to acts of violence (Ibid).

The ERG is completed on all extremist offenders by a psychologist or probation officer, ideally with the cooperation of the offender, who provides written consent. Prisoners’ cooperation is sought and the benefits are explained in terms of them not being disadvantaged in relation to other offenders by missing out on assessment and intervention that could assist them to make different decisions about their future which would be reflected in their parole reports. The process of undergoing risk assessment is consensual, and there is evidence that the majority of extremists collaborate with the assessment panel.[[10]](#footnote-10) However, experts from the Joint Extremism Unit at HMPPS have recently expressed a concern that there is a noticeable trend of extremist-related offenders not engaging with the ERG 22+ process.[[11]](#footnote-11) This decision is often influenced by peer groups and reflects a general scepticism about the state making an assessment about them. There is also a perception that a positive risk assessment will not impact on how they will be managed in custody.[[12]](#footnote-12) In the absence of the offender’s cooperation, the ERG is completed from records of the case. These are scrutinised alongside other reports by a sentence management board. Collateral information (e.g. prosecution papers, trial materials, evidence of offending) may be used for making a decision about the risks the offender poses. While some open-source information may be considered as a contributing factor in assessments, experts are wary that this data could be flawed in terms of its validity, and should be used with caution.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Besides a refusal to cooperate with forensic psychologists and probation officers, there is an increasing trend[[14]](#footnote-14) of extremist offenders receiving shorter sentences (12–18 months) for non-violent offences, such as Twitter activity classified as glorification of terrorism under the Terrorism Act 2000.[[15]](#footnote-15) These sentences are considered too short for the completion of ERG 22+, as risk assessment is to be carried out only after an offender has been convicted and sentenced. Moreover, al-Qaeda-inspired ideology in the wake of 7/7 did not attract many young people, and the risk assessment was initially tested on older offenders. Nowadays more ISIS-inspired young people (under 25 years old) enter the prison system,[[16]](#footnote-16) and ERG 22+ needs to be reviewed to reflect these demographic changes.

**7. Conclusion**

In Western Europe and North America, most of the countries house only a handful of terrorism-related offenders. However, even a small number of terrorism-related prisoners in the correctional system can have a powerful effect on other inmates in terms of adopting radical beliefs. Besides its under-reported nature, the difficulty of claims about radicalisation in prisons has to do with the fact that radicalisation is a multi-faceted, continuous process influenced by various channels of communication and social actors. At the same time, prisons that house extremists open new channels of communication and new political perspectives for offenders convicted of non-ideological crimes. Extremists successfully use these channels, capitalising on existing grievances and circumstances. The policy of separation recently introduced in the United Kingdom aims to break this vicious circle by segregating the most dangerous terrorism-related offenders and disrupting the dynamics of violence.

The comparative analysis undertaken in this study demonstrates that although dispersal is the most common way of housing terrorism-related offenders, at least a partial regime of separation has already been implemented by most of the states that face the danger of Islamism. Therefore, this policy should not be dismissed without understanding the goals and objectives of the management of extremism-related offenders. If decreasing the risk of prison radicalisation defines effectiveness, the regime of separation prevents extremist individuals in custody from learning from one another, planning terrorist acts and building networks. While addressing the prevailing criticism of the containment policy in the UK, it is important to understand the differences between ethno-political and religious terrorism, particularly its Islamist context. It is counterproductive to draw parallels between the practice of separation of Islamism-related offenders and IRA paramilitaries as these two groups operate in very different social contexts and are characterised by different goals, motives and recruitment strategies.

Currently, a more balanced and nuanced evaluation of the containment policy is absent from the academic and practitioners’ discourse in the United Kingdom. Although there is a risk that a new intervention will generate additional safety concerns, this paper argues that separating the most dangerous and subversive terrorism-related offenders either in isolation or in small groups has the potential to make a considerable contribution to the prevention of radicalisation in prisons. However, it is crucial to develop a comprehensive policy framework that takes into account the recent dynamics of radicalisation threats.

**Clear policy framework.** The successful management of terrorism-related offenders in prisons requires a policy framework based on the clear understanding of the aims of the implemented policies**.** Defining the aims of the policies is crucial because they will determine how successful the new policies are, including the separation centres. The policy-makers will first need to define whether the ultimate goal of separation is “disengagement” (giving up violent ideology) or “desistance” (cessation of offending), and this will inevitably depend on the individual profiles of the offenders.

**Differentiation within separation units.** Differentiation within separation centres is essential for ensuring the effectiveness of individualised programme treatments. The population of convicted offenders is not homogenous, and there should not be a single, uniform approach. Besides differing by social backgrounds, age, levels of training and contact with terrorist organisations, prisoners differ by the sentences received. There should be a clear demarcation line between individuals who serve indeterminate sentences and those who have a scheduled release date, as these factors will influence the objectives of de-radicalisation programmes applied to them.

**Addressing new trends: gender, age, motivations, and length of custodial sentences.** The increasing trend of shorter sentences creates a challenge for the management of terrorism-related offenders and aggravates the already existing issue of prison radicalisation by creating more grievances linked to the perceived injustice of the criminal justice system. From the point of view of disengagement and potential reintegration, more alternative options should be considered instead of custodial sentences as a means of preventing extremists from spreading Islamism in prisons.

While al-Qaeda-inspired ideology did not attract many young people, there is an increasing trend of young offenders (under 25) to be convicted and prosecuted, which was not fully considered while testing the risk assessment tools used in the United Kingdom. This new trend should be reviewed and addressed. Moreover, the factors included in the current risk assessment did not take into account female participation in Islamist terrorism and were not gender-sensitive. It is important that the risk assessment criteria are updated in order to reflect and adequately tackle current demographics, and that both the gender and the age aspects are factored in.

Finally, while there is an ongoing debate in Britain regarding criminal justice strategies that should be applied to the returning foreign fighters, it is crucial to consider what strategy could be an appropriate response for those returnees who will be prosecuted and will enter the UK correctional institutions, as their wrong placement might exacerbate the risks posed by prison radicalisation.

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1. Zenide, P., ‘Thieves by Law – Vory V Zakone 2010 Document FullHD HD english subtitles’, *Youtube*, 28 June 2011, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1w8zME-uDtw>, last visited: 7 February 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Primeiro Comando da Capital is the largest Brazilian criminal organisation and has a membership of 13,000, of whom 6,000 are in prison. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Comando Vermelho is Brazil’s oldest criminal group, created in a Rio de Janeiro prison in the 1970s as a self-protection group for prisoners. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Immediately following its invasion, the United States dissolved Iraq’s standing army and declared persona non grata any government employee who had been a member of the Ba’ath Party. According to Soufan, this policy pushed Ba’athists into the arms of al-Qaeda in Iraq, especially considering that the two groups already shared a common goal of restoring their Sunni sect to the dominant position. Soufan, A., *Anatomy of Terror. From the Death of Bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State*, pp. 240-241. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Moreover, the guards did not speak Arabic. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Coulibaly also clandestinely made a film denouncing prison conditions, extracts from which were shown on television after his release and about which he was interviewed. Kepel G., *Terror in France: Rise of Jihad in the West* (Princeton University Press, 2016). Djamel Beghal himself had been supplied with a false passport by another UK-based jihadist from Leicester, Bahgdad Meziane, to travel to a training camp in Afghanistan. This is yet another example of the links between organised crime and terrorism. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Although non-violent extremism is not illegal, this refers to the instances of criminalised non-violent extremist behaviour such as glorification of terrorism or disseminating extremist materials. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. HMP Maghaberry (opened in 1986) has historically functioned as an integrated establishment in which prisoners of all persuasions and backgrounds are required to live and work together. Following the closure of HMP Belfast in 1996 and HMP Maze in 2000, HMP Maghaberry was required to absorb and accommodate a number of different prisoner groups, including remand prisoners and those paramilitaries who were not to be released from prison early under the Belfast Agreement. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. However, one has to acknowledge that this number is not entirely indicative of the number of extremist prisoners in custody, as some extremists get convicted for other serious crimes (not related to terrorism). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Author interview, 24 November 2017, London.

    The decision to grant parole or not is that of the Parole Board (independent of HMPPS), which receives assessments from prison staff. All prisoners serving sentences of more than four years are eligible for parole. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Interview with the probation counter-terrorism experts from the Joint Extremism Unit at HMPPS in London, 4 December 2017, London. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. At the same time, it is pointed out by experts interviewed for this project that, although those entering custody were mainly over 25 years old, their radicalisation started earlier, often at university. The author acknowledges this and notes that nowadays individuals entering custody are even younger, and radicalisation starts at school or college. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)