

Centre on Radicalisation and Terrorism – Eradicating Prison Extremism: Understanding Islamist Hierarchies in Prisons

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Introduction

In January 2021, the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, Jonathan Hall QC, launched a new review into “terrorism in the prison estate in England and Wales”.¹ It was a timely announcement, prompted by the disturbingly high number of recent fatal Islamist attacks perpetrated by terrorists with traceable links back to the UK prison system, alongside a series of violent attacks committed against prison officers inside UK jails by Jihadist inmates.

While the overarching aim of Hall’s upcoming review is to uncover how

“terrorism is detected, policed, disrupted and prosecuted” within the prison estate, he specified a particular interest too in the “status and influence of convicted terrorist prisoners within the prison estate”,² and whether or not they have any connection to prison gangs.

Hall’s investigation into the status and influence of terrorist prisoners is much needed. In truth, the justice system has little hope of eradicating terrorism until it fully understands how terrorism is nurtured and nourished by

¹ Hall, J., ‘Terrorism in Prisons’, *Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation*, 2020, available

at: [201120 Draft to Home Office \(independent.gov.uk\)](https://www.independent.gov.uk), last visited: 1 February 2021.
² *Ibid.*

extremist actors and the networks they are able to build in prisons.

Over the last decade, UK Counter Terrorism (CTP) and the Security Services have worked tirelessly to eradicate terrorism from British streets. This has led to a sharp increase in the successful prosecution and incarceration of a large number Convicted Terrorism Act (TACT) offenders,³ ranging from individuals sharing extremist propaganda online to those actively plotting attacks. However, such success has come at a cost. To put it bluntly, we have become victims of our own success, having not adequately prepared our prisons for the mass influx of TACT offenders they now house. As a result, many of our high-security prisons now provide fertile ground for radicalisation as a means of furthering violent extremism.

To allow terrorist networks to continue to dominate, with terrorists preaching and pushing their extremist agendas onto others across our prison estate, further enables the already critical epidemic of extremism spiralling out of control within our penal system. It also greatly undermines the tireless work which is jointly undertaken by the Security Services and CTP to remove these terrorists from our streets.

To counter terrorism effectively, we must not only make our communities safe, but our prisons too. This begins with tackling extremism at its roots. Importantly, we must understand exactly where extremism festers within our prisons and, specifically, the sources it comes from so as to break the chain of influence and radicalisation.

Tackling extremism begins with expanding institutional knowledge - particularly of those tasked with what can feel like the almost impossible task of keeping law and order within high-security prisons. Put simply, it is less about looking at *how* to tackle extremism, but *whom* to tackle.

Drawing on both research fieldwork and the author's own professional experience working within counter-terrorism in prisons, this briefing will focus on the sources of radicalisation across the high-security prison estate. It will identify the most dangerous terrorist offenders and explain why they often hold such an elevated status. It will look at the hierarchical networks built by terrorism-related prisoners, and the loyal, dedicated following they amass. It will map the trail of extremism descending down through Islamist hierarchies, highlighting the different roles played by prisoners. Throughout, it will discuss the impact Islamist hierarchies

³ Offence applied to those sentenced for offences within the Terrorism Act (TACT) 2000.

have on prisoners, staff and their wider threats to British national security.

The briefing will argue that the dispersal of highly influential terrorist offenders across the prison estate is dangerous for our penal system. It is important that they are removed from general circulation and their radicalisation tactics halted. Broad box-ticking de-radicalisation programs will not suit every terrorism offender, nor are they currently working. Only by truly understanding the dynamics and the individual roles played within Islamist hierarchies, can

we be swift at detecting and dismantling them, through the removal of key players.

The hierarchical positions occupied within extremist networks give us glaring clues as to the multitude of differing threats each prisoner poses. Some are ideologically committed to Islamism; others are simply violent. Only by tailoring interventions to their individual threats can prisons more effectively stamp out the sources of extremism which so often contribute to terrorism.

Attacks and Prisons

In recent years, there have been a number of fatal terrorism attacks at the hands of former prisoners.

Most recently, in June 2020, three men were killed in a park in Reading by Khairi Saadallah⁴ who had recently been released from prison. Saadallah, who had spent a significant amount of time in the company of radical inmate Omar Brooks (Abu Izzadeen)⁵ at HMP Bullingdon, displayed serious mental health issues. Despite his known

vulnerabilities, Saadallah was able to interact frequently with the outspoken Brooks. This interaction could conceivably have contributed to Saadallah's attack-planning aspirations following his release from custody.

Six months prior, in February 2020, Sudesh Amman injured three people in a knife attack in Streatham, London.⁶ Despite intelligence suggesting that Amman had gained access to videos depicting terrorism inside prison, and general concerns

⁴ Gardham, D., 'Khairi Saadallah: Terrorist who murdered three in 'brutal' Reading attack gets whole life sentence', *Sky News*, 11 January 2021, available at: <https://news.sky.com/story/khairi-saadallah-terrorist-who-murdered-three-in-brutal-reading-attack-gets-whole-life-sentence-12184977>, last visited: 21 January 2021.

⁵ Brooks, an outspoken Islamist fanatic, had been arrested and imprisoned on terror charges in 2016.

He had significant links to radical Islamist group Al-Ghurabaa and British-based Islamist extremist group Al-Muhajiroun.

⁶ De Simone, D., 'Sudesh Amman: Who was the Streatham attacker?' *BBC News*, 3 February 2020, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-51351885>, last visited: 21 January 2021.

that he may have been a risk to the wider public, Amman was automatically released from HMP Belmarsh just days before his attack (after serving half of his sentence in custody).

In November 2019, Usman Khan killed two people in a knife attack at Fishmongers Hall at London Bridge.⁷ Khan, who had been jailed for preparing terrorist acts in 2012, had been involved in the Home Office's 'Desistance and Disengagement Programme' in prison. A model pupil of the program, Khan was able to maintain his extremist mind-set under the guise of compliance and cooperation, while mixing amongst the general population in prison, and then out on licence.

Acts of violence have been increasing within the prison system too, where jihadist prisoners have been able to meet, plot and perpetrate violent attacks against Prison Officers, who often symbolise the nearest figures of law and enforcement and most immediate target for anti-authority forms of violence.

In January 2021, three convicted terrorists were charged with assaulting a Prison Officer at HMP Belmarsh. Hashem Abedi (younger brother of Manchester Arena bomber Salman Abedi) and Ahmed Hassan, the Parsons Green bomber, had

attacked the prison officer along with one other TACT offender as they all returned from the exercise yard.

Prior to that attack, in January 2020, at HMP Whitemoor, TACT offender Brusthom Ziamani and his associate, Baz Hockton, stabbed Prison Officer Neil Trundle (almost murdering him). Both men, who had become close associates within the high-security prison, wore fake suicide belts during their attack. Reports suggest Ziamani had befriended and radicalised Hockton in the build-up to the attack on Trundle.

These attacks, both within and outside of our prisons, represent the current glaring failure of our prison system to adequately clamp down on extremist activity within our penal institutions. It exposes both how difficult it is to judge - and how practitioners continually fail to predict - which prisoners pose the greatest threat and risk to both staff and citizens.

Islamist Hierarchies - an organised path to extremism

Groups and 'gangs' have always been commonplace in prisons. Indeed, throughout history, "prisons have served as recruitment centres and headquarters for ideological

⁷ De Simone, D., 'London Bridge: Who was the attacker?', *BBC News*, 5 December 2019, available

at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-50611788>, last visited: 11 January 2021.

extremists across the globe”.⁸ But here it is important to note two caveats: First, ‘Islamist hierarchies’ are not a common occurrence across the entire prison estate. This phenomenon is mostly confined to high-security prisons, which make up just over 5% of the entire prison estate and house the most dangerous inmates across the country.

Second, it is important to differentiate between groups of Muslim prisoners who bond and associate through a shared, peaceful interpretation of their faith, and those who act under the guise of religion to exercise control, push extremist agendas and encourage acts of violence.⁹

In 2019, a Ministry of Justice study exploring Muslim groups and gang activity in high-security prisons found that the structure and spiritual guidance of religion did have a positive impact on Muslim prisoners - both those who were born into the faith, and the recently converted (commonly known as ‘reverts’ within the system). Religion offered

“meaning, hope and dignity”¹⁰ and helped guide many prisoners ‘towards rehabilitation’. Prisoners spoke of converting to Islam because it offered structure and a way to turn their lives around.¹¹

While the vast majority of Muslim prisoners use their faith as a structural and moral compass, a small but dangerous minority use it as justification for violent, anti-establishment behaviour. In attempting to deal with this dangerous minority, many countries have grappled with how best to house their TACT offenders. The UK has mostly stuck to the dispersal method: whereby the vast majority of terrorism offenders are free to integrate and mix among the general prison population.

In 2017, three Separation Centres (SC) were built in the UK.¹² Coined as ‘jails within jails’, SCs were built with the intention of housing the most dangerous of TACT offenders within the 28 purpose-built cells. According to the 2017 Separation Centre Referral Manual:

⁸ Passey, K., “No-one messes with the Muslims in here” – Prison radicalisation in the UK”, *Medium.com*, 1 June 2019, available at: <https://medium.com/@katie.passey/no-one-messes-with-the-muslims-in-here-prison-radicalisation-in-the-uk-b276844cc8fa>, last visited: 12 February 2021.

⁹ Webster, R., ‘Are There Muslim Gangs in Prison?’, 5 July 2019, *Russell Webster (blog)*, available at: <https://www.russellwebster.com/miah/>, last visited: 9 February 2021.

¹⁰ Hibell, R., ‘CONVERSION TO ISLAM IN PRISON AND ITS AFTERMATH’, *Islamic Foundation Org*, October 2018, available at: [Islamic foundation.org.uk/UserUpload/filemanager/source/Research%20&%20Reports/Conversion%20to%20Islam%20in%20Prison%20and%20its%20Aftermath%20-%20Report.pdf](https://www.islamicfoundation.org.uk/UserUpload/filemanager/source/Research%20&%20Reports/Conversion%20to%20Islam%20in%20Prison%20and%20its%20Aftermath%20-%20Report.pdf), last visited: 2 February 2021.

¹¹ Powis, B., Dixon, L and Jessica Woodhams, ‘Exploring the Nature of Muslim Groups and Related Gang Activity in Three High Security Prisons’, *Ministry of Justice Analytical Series* (2019), available at: <https://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/testimony/410.pdf>, last visited: 2 February 2021.

¹² Powis, B., Wilkinson, K, Bloomfield, S, and Kiran Randhawa-Horne ‘Separating Extremist Prisoners: A process study of separation centres in England and Wales from a staff perspective’. *Prison and Probation Analytical Services* (2019) available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/818624/separating-extremist-prisoners.pdf, last visited: 9 February 2021.

A prisoner may be referred to the SC system as per Prison Rule 46A if placement in a Separation Centre is sought to appropriately manage an individual and any one or more of the following are evident:

- in the interests of national security;
- to prevent the commission, preparation or instigation of an act of terrorism, a terrorism offence, or an offence with a terrorist connection, whether in prison or otherwise;
- to prevent the dissemination of views or beliefs that might encourage or induce others to commit any such act or offence, whether in prison or otherwise, or to protect or safeguard others from such views or beliefs; or
- to prevent any political, religious, racial or other views or beliefs being used to undermine good order and discipline in a prison.¹³

Unfortunately, few terrorism offenders were referred, and even fewer deemed appropriate for separation. On reading the official MOJ referral process for SCs, it can be deduced this is likely a result of the

lengthy decision-making process and masses of paperwork involved in making an initial referral.¹⁴ SCs were left mostly unused, unstaffed, and dangerously unpopulated. Just two years later, two of the three SCs were closed. At the time of writing (February 2021), just five TACT offenders reside in one SC.

This institutional failure to remove dangerous TACT offenders from the general prison population has resulted in the emergence of Islamist-hierarchical gangs across many of our high-security prison estates. It is a problem shared with many of our European neighbours. Over the years, these Islamist hierarchies have facilitated the increased radicalisation of both TACT and Non-TACT offenders through methods of manipulation, control, and intimidation.

The Islamist hierarchies found across high-security prison estates are complex and, though different in numbers and group activity, mostly mirror each other in formation and the positions held by individuals. Positions range from leaders, radicalisers, enforcers and conformists (LREC). While most criminal gangs also mirror this hierarchical structure, the presence of ideology among the ranks makes 'Islamist gangs' both

¹³ 'SEPARATION CENTRE REFERRAL MANUAL' *HMP Prison and Probation Service* (2017), available at: <https://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/offenders/p>

sipso/psi-2017/psi-05-2017-separation-centre-referral-manual.pdf, last visited: January 2021.
¹⁴ *Ibid.*

exceptionally dangerous and that bit more difficult to tackle.

The individual roles played provide an insight into the reasons why prisoners are drawn into the network, how prisons can disrupt and dismantle them and, importantly, how - through meaningful, considered interventions - individuals can be encouraged to move away from extremism.

The Leader - the 'self-styled Emir'

In an article with *The Telegraph*, Jonathan Hall QC claimed that he found it 'astonishing' that terrorist offenders, despite their horrific crimes, "automatically achieve a sort of status', within the prison system.¹⁵ Astounding as this may be to those on the outside of prisons, those who have worked in these prisons find such an account familiar.

Terrorist offenders often achieve an elevated status, and intelligence suggests there are two main reasons why. First, they obtain status through fear. Terrorist offenders incarcerated for terrorism attacks and/or plots can intimidate the general prison population. They are 'doers' rather than 'talkers'. This intimidation

alongside their violent background, paired with the often-manipulative personalities they exhibit, can quickly overwhelm others into compliance.

Second, their personalities can be somewhat charming. The worst terrorist offenders who quickly become leaders on their wings are intelligent and, importantly, non-aggressive in their behaviours, despite their often violent index offences. Their reason for being in prison is not simply down to deprivation, deviancy and/or bad luck, but because of a self-proclaimed higher purpose. Leaders are ideological devotees¹⁶ and unwavering in their radical interpretations of Islam. There is courage in their conviction. This can - and does - attract admiration among prisoners, both Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Such charismatic figures, or self-styled 'emirs', are able to attract loyal followings from those prisoners who not only share their propensity for violence, but also lack figures of authority. Prisoners often see them "as moral and spiritual guides"¹⁷ whom they want to impress. To be recognised by the leader gives self-

¹⁵ 'Terror watchdog to probe fears of growing radicalisation in prisons'. *The Telegraph*, 25 January 2021, available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/01/25/terror-watchdog-probe-fears-growing-radicalisation-prisons/>, last visited: 19 January 2021.

¹⁶ Simcox, R., 'Radical Islamists Are Still a Threat Behind Bars'. *Foreign Policy*, 15 January 2020, available at:

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/15/radical-islamists-are-still-a-threat-behind-bars/>, last visited: 9 February 2021.

¹⁷ Brandon, J., 'Unlocking Al-Qaeda. Islamist Extremism in British Prisons' 15 November 2009, *Quilliam Foundation*, available at: <http://www.quilliaminternational.com/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/unlocking-al-qaeda.pdf>, p87, last visited: 28 January 2021.

esteem to susceptible prisoners who otherwise lack it.

Almost always born into the Muslim faith, leaders are generally well-read around the Qur'an and anti-establishment in their rhetoric. Their central argument is that "non-Muslim individuals and government are innately hostile to Muslims and their religion".¹⁸ They pose as defenders of the faith and the downtrodden. Espousing such rhetoric can quickly delegitimise prison staff's authority, enabling self-styled emirs to place themselves in positions of respect and authority. Sticking rigidly within the confinements of *Sharia* Law, they decree beatings and punishments, but are quiet in the executions of their demands.

Though uncommon to see in formed Islamist hierarchies, on occasion there can be more than one leadership figure. However, more often than not, one leader suffices. Leaders feature significantly less in intelligence due to their quiet encouragement of violence. Quite often, their influence on - and position within - the Islamist hierarchies can, at first, be unclear.

Radicalisers and Recruiters - the 'Talent Spotters'

Whereas the personality types, roles and behaviours of a leader are mostly rigid, those directly below the leader can play both the radicalising and enforcer roles on a prison wing. These roles can be interchangeable, depending on the individuals concerned. But as a general rule, and for the purpose of this briefing, we will focus next on the radicalisers/recruiters who often share a close relationship with leadership figures and will often be first in line to seize power should the leader be removed and/or re-located.

Like leaders, those tasked with radicalising and recruiting new members, both Muslim and non-Muslim alike, are often ideologically unwavering in their radical interpretation of Islam. However, unlike leadership figures, they do not necessarily have to be TACT offenders or been born into the faith. Quite often recruiters are radicalised converts whose primary role is to identify isolated new prisoners to the wing or those deemed vulnerable to radicalisation, and supply them with support, friendship and protection. They see "radicalising others as a religious duty"¹⁹ and a way to help prisoners deemed to be on the wrong

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Brandon, J., 'The Danger of Prison Radicalization in the West' *CTC Sentinel* (2009), available at:

<https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/CTCSentinel-Vol2Iss12-art1.pdf>, p3, last visited: 8 February 2021.

path. Often, what begins as little more than establishing a relationship with prisoners that show vulnerabilities towards radicalisation, leads to the conversion, acceptance and integration of prisoners seeking material benefits, protection and a structure to their daily life.

Recruiters must have a basic understanding of the religious doctrine in order to utilise jihadist narratives to legitimise the common grievances espoused among prisoners, as well as a means to turn them away from bad habits (such as taking drugs or consuming alcohol). Their preaching works best on inmates who have little or no knowledge of the teaching of Islam, yet hold grievances towards a system which can often appear stacked against them.

Both Muslims and non-Muslims are targeted by radicalisers. And whereas Muslim-born prisoners and/or those with a better understanding of their faith are often keen to distance themselves from radicalising influences, conversions among new recruits are commonplace. Conversions can be gently facilitated or forcibly pressured - the end product is generally the same. The common journey of prisoners' radicalisation often starts with the recruiter via the personal relationships they purposely strike up with those they deem targetable.

The Enforcer - the 'Acolyte Disciplinarian'

Enforcers generally have a propensity for violence. They exert their aggression through the execution of *Sharia* Law punishments against prisoners deemed to be breaking the rules, as decreed by the leader of the Islamist hierarchy.

Like recruiters/radicalisers, individuals who deal with the enforcement of rules and punishments can move between roles. However, their tendency to utilise violence and intimidation to command strict, widespread adherence to rules, means they are consequently less likely to be a figure of friendship and support for prisoners - especially those inmates who are outside of the 'group'. For those considered inside the group, enforcers keep them in order. They bully prisoners within the group who are seen to be flouting the rules, and can be particularly violent towards prisoners outside of it.

Enforcers are regularly converts who subscribe to a violent, extreme form of Islam in line with that adhered to by those at the top of the hierarchy. They see membership as an opportunity to fit in, while also being able to shun official figures of authority and violently intimidate other prisoners under the guise of dedicated faith.

Enforcers are often not as ideologically astute as recruiters and

leadership figures, but often grasp the basics of extreme doctrine in order to justify their demands of the prison population. Without direction from leaders or their adherence to extreme Islam, enforcers would simply be violent offenders, regularly involved in secular criminality and generally disruptive behaviour on the wings.

The Conformist – the ‘Radicalised and/or Quietly Compliant’

Commonly the largest subsection of the Islamist network is ‘the conformist’. Conformists, otherwise known as ‘followers’, come in two basic categories: those who support extremist narratives and, simply, those who do not. Whichever category conformists fall into, the end result is mostly the same: mass, quiet compliance.

Conformists can find themselves imprisoned for a number of reasons. Complex in their make-up, conformists’ index offences can often be violent in nature yet they display no violent tendencies while in prison. Likewise, they can become violent while in prison in order to survive. While their position sits at the bottom of the Islamist hierarchy, their roles are certainly not fixed. In time, some

radicalised conformists can – and do – rise up the ranks to enforce rules.

The vast majority of conformists avoid directing attention to themselves. For the few not ideologically aligned with the group, nor at risk of radicalisation, conformity obviates the possibility of chaos and violence at the hands of the Islamists. Those who are openly uncompliant are often ostracised and are at a heightened risk of violence. On balance, quiet compliance becomes preferable, and a sure-fire way to avoid the punishments decreed by leaders and executed by enforcers.

For those who do become radicalised, a 2009 study of Islamist radicalisation in jails found that radicalisation occurs “partly because of the very nature of prison life, which includes feelings of loneliness, uncertainty and unhappiness”.²⁰ Such hopelessness can make prisoners more open and receptive to new ideologies which provide them with a degree of focus and rootedness. Jails are places of punishment, where prisoners are stripped of their identity and their social networks for a period of time. In an echo chamber of extremism, such prisoners are thus more likely to be “receptive to an ideology that appears to offer clear, albeit intolerant,

²⁰ Brandon, J., ‘Unlocking Al-Qaeda. Islamist Extremism in British Prisons’, 15 November 2009, *Quilliam Foundation*, p87.

solutions to complex problems of identity and belonging”.²¹

Prisons can be unstable and dangerous environments, which can render prisoners more open and receptive to new ideologies which give them certainty, safety and focus. Enforcers and recruiters can also offer structure, discipline, and empathy towards a prisoner’s situation. This can be true too for non-Muslim ‘conformists’. The commonly-shared desires for discipline, empathy and security among prisoners means those who bow to Islamist control often “benefit from the protection of Muslim gangs and to gain access to extremists’ highly supportive friendship networks”.²²

The Case for Separation and Tailored Interventions

The various roles individuals have assumed in Islamist hierarchies, and the dangerous impact they have on the general prison population over the last decade, means it is now imperative to break the chain of radicalisation. The UK’s current method of dispersal has done little to discourage jihadism. Years of inaction have undoubtedly led to an increase in radicalisation, which has unfortunately contributed to deaths of British

citizens as a result of lax procedures surrounding prison releases.

In France, terrorism offenders are immediately housed in isolation and evaluated upon their introduction into prisons. Instant confinement and overt displays of distrust from authorities is unlikely to provide terrorism offenders with a promising start to their prison experience. Instead, terrorism offenders in the UK should be given the opportunity to integrate, and be dispersed across the prison estate. They should only be separated where reasonable thresholds for separation, relating to a significant extremist threat, are met.

Referrals to SCs for such offenders would benefit from being based more on the instinct of staff who have an understanding of their hierarchical roles and associated threats and less upon laborious paperwork and assessments. For example, where corroborated intelligence suggests that an individual is enforcing *Sharia* Law on a prison wing through violence and intimidation, that person must be separated and placed into an SC – with their involvement in violence robustly tackled in the first instance. Additionally, where there is evidence to suggest an extremist ideology exists, even when that person is removed from the Islamist hierarchy,

²¹ Brandon, J., ‘The Danger of Prison Radicalization in the West’ *CTC Sentinel* (2009), p3.

²² Brandon, J., ‘Unlocking Al-Qaeda. Islamist Extremism in British Prisons’, 15 November 2009, *Quilliam Foundation*, p87.

their ideology must also be challenged.

For leadership figures, who are rarely violent but extreme in their rhetoric, ideology should be tackled first by staff trained solely in de-radicalisation, so as to effectively de-construct their distorted ideologies and de-legitimise their authority. Radicalisers too are often ideologically steadfast. If assessed to be a risk to other inmates, they must be removed and their interventions tailored to tackle their problematic ideology.

Separation must be flexible in terms of usage. It must not only be impactful for terrorism offenders, or extremist inmates, but also for those left behind on the wings where Islamist hierarchies have previously dominated and have departed. For conformists, who play by the rules, but show little active interest in violence or radical ideologies, safeguarding and support must be put in place, to fill the void left by the Islamist actors who previously controlled their daily lives.

Conformists are the most variable of prisoners within the Islamist network. Their rehabilitative treatment should reflect this. Such supportive interventions can halt their transition from frustrated prisoner to Islamist. And this must be done quickly. Once vulnerable prisoners have adopted hard-line ideologies in prison, their radicalisation and subsequent even

harder-line ideology becomes significantly tougher to reverse.

Conclusion

There is a credible argument for the need to identify and separate the most dangerous TACT offenders and dismantle their Islamist hierarchies, so as to protect the general prison population from radicalisation. In short, efforts at fighting terrorism and stamping out the sources of extremism must not simply stop at the front gates of jail.

Tailored Interventions:

In a 2019 study of Muslim groups and gangs in prison, Muslim groups were assessed to be “a heterogeneous grouping of individuals with different characteristics, behaviours and reasons for belonging”.²³ The specific roles and behaviours demonstrated by (TACT and non-TACT) prisoners within the Islamist hierarchy give us stark clues into the threat and risk that each prisoner poses. Interventions should be tailored to reduce these risks and tackle the various reasons prisoners become embroiled in the throes of in-prison extremism.

Unfortunately, the UK has learned the hard way that broad, box-ticking de-radicalisation initiatives are unlikely to be both reliable and/or effective on all types of radicalised prisoners. They also encourage false compliance,

meaning such schemes are vulnerable to forms of extremist deception and manipulation. Instead, interventions must be flexible, and bespoke to each prisoner, in relation to the threat they pose and the nature of the intelligence surrounding their personal circumstances.

SC Flexibility:

Timelines for separation must also be flexible. Prisoners should not be placed in SCs for fixed periods of time, but should instead be monitored to gauge improvements in their behaviours or shifts in their ideological convictions. Such flexibility allows for pragmatism. As former prison governor and now director of the Prison Reform Trust, Peter Dawson, claims the special units could be effective if they were used as a short-term measure with a focus on rehabilitating segregated inmates “to change the way they behave and think”.²⁴ Being able to monitor radicalised offenders and their re-integration back into the general prison population would be more effective in gauging their genuine beliefs and behaviours following SC interventions.

²³ Powis, B., Dixon, L and Jessica Woodhams, ‘Exploring the Nature of Muslim Groups and Related Gang Activity in Three High Security Prisons’, *Ministry of Justice Analytical Series* (2019), p17.

²⁴ ‘Extremists to be put in special prison units’, *BBC News*, 22 August 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-37151089>, last visited: 21 February 2021.

A Wider Scope:

It is important that counter-extremism efforts do not solely concentrate on TACT offenders alone. An inmate's risk is not "merely determined by the severity of what they were convicted for", but by the "prison life they experience".²⁵ In other words, an assumed 'low profile' doesn't mean that person is harmless, just like a "detainee convicted of serious offences may not necessarily be more dangerous".²⁶ Radicalisation can mould offenders who otherwise would have had no interest in terrorism before they had been incarcerated. Interventions against these types of offenders, who are all too commonly overlooked, must reflect this potential and most dangerous risk.

Of course, both time flexibility and individualised, tailored interventions would be expensive. But the benefits of spending now outweigh the grave risks associated with continued inaction. Proactive measures are the key to tackling the problem of radicalisation in the prison system. An investment in a baseline institutional understanding of the source and structure of extremism hierarchies in prisons is ultimately an investment in counter-terrorism.

Manageable Numbers:

It is not yet too late, despite the rising numbers of TACT offenders and increasing reports of extremism within prisons. Over 10 years ago, when the Quilliam Foundation investigated extremist prisoners, there were approximately 100 Islamist prisoners incarcerated on terrorism offences. Now, the figure stands at over double that.

Today our prisons have more TACT offenders, more radicalised inmates, and a more structured form of Islamist hierarchies within high-security prison estates. As a result, there are a larger number of prisoners - who otherwise would show a genuine propensity for rehabilitation - being incorporated into Islamist-hierarchical networks at a quicker and larger rate.

There are approximately 220 terrorism offenders incarcerated across the UK prison estate. This number makes up just 0.3% of the UK's total prison population. This figure is small, so counter-extremism interventionists can and must be flexible, with programs and materials bespoke to each prisoner. Prisons must tackle the multitude of risks they face among all prisoners caught up in extremism with a plethora of materials and interventions, with assistance being provided by well-experienced

²⁵Neumann, P., Basra, R., Prisons and Terrorism: 'Extremist Offender Management in 10 European Countries', ICSR, Available at: <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ICSR-Report-Prisons->

[and-Terrorism-Extremist-Offender-Management-in-10-European-Countries_V2.pdf](#), p 25, last visited: 29 January 2021

²⁶ *Ibid.*

subject-matter experts. Failure to act now will lead to the continued increase in prison radicalisation and an eventually unmanageable number of extremist offenders to deal with in the future.²⁷

It is still possible to stem the rising tide. But we must act quicker.

²⁷ 'Prison population figures: 2020', *UK Government, Ministry of Justice, HM Prison Service, and Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (2020)*, available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-population-figures-2020>, last visited 24 January 2021.