



## Prisons and the Education of Terrorists

*Ian M. Cuthbertson*

Prison reformers have long been aware that the cellblock is a school for criminals, the shadow campus where the petty offender graduates into organized crime. Yet strangely, the same insight has for the most part eluded jail keepers in countries now targeted by Islamic terrorists. The usefulness of prisons as universities for terrorists, however, has not escaped Islamic radicals. They have become increasingly sophisticated in their operational methods, especially in devising ways of recruiting and training those who spearhead their assaults.

Last spring's devastating train bombings in Madrid, the mishandling of which led to the electoral defeat of the sitting Spanish government, illustrate the phenomenon. A principal conspirator, José Emilio Suárez Trashorras, a Spanish mineworker, was not religious or politically aware when he was jailed in 2001 for a drug offense. Incarcerated in the same prison was Jamal Ahmidan, a young Moroccan living in Spain, also convicted of a petty crime. Once in prison, however, both the nominally Christian Trashorras and the nonobservant Muslim Ahmidan enthusiastically embraced radical Islamic fundamentalist beliefs and were recruited into an al-Qaeda-linked Moroccan terrorist group, Takfir wa al-Hijra.

The imprisoned Ahmidan quickly gained a leadership position in the cellblock, and on emerging from prison both men were absorbed into an extensive and well-organized radical Islamic organization that trafficked heavily in drugs to support its terrorist activities. Later, Ahmidan led the cell that carried out the Madrid bomb-

ings, while Trashorras supplied the explosives and helped plant the 13 backpack bombs that killed 191 people and injured hundreds of others on four Madrid trains crowded with early-morning commuters.

The use of prisons as a means of recruiting new members into terrorist organizations while providing advanced training to existing members is hardly a new phenomenon. For more than 30 years, European countries have been beset by a variety of nationalist and leftist terrorist groups, some of them highly sophisticated organizations with large rosters of combat and support personnel.

Two groups in particular stand out: the Provisional Irish Republican Army, or Provos, which has waged a sustained campaign to achieve a united Ireland, and the Basque Euskad Ta Askatasuna (ETA), which first fought against the Franco government and now battles Spain's democratic government in its quest for Basque autonomy. Both are classic paramilitary terrorist organizations, with integrated command structures and a high degree of group cohesion, characteristics that persist in a prison setting. Leftist revolutionary groups were organized differently. The Red Army Faction in West Germany, Action Directe in France, and the Red Brigades in Italy, which were active from the late 1960s until the early 1980s, eschewed the paramilitary model and relied instead on a looser cellular structure, with collective decisions guided by charismatic leaders.

Targeted governments countered with extensive antiterror legislation and intern-

ment policies for segregating captured terrorists. European parliaments adopted legislation that curtailed a wide range of civil liberties while simultaneously increasing police powers of surveillance and arrest. Intense and longer interrogation procedures were sanctioned against terrorist suspects, sometimes involving outright use of torture and extended detention. Suspects were detained without arrest warrants, held without being tried, and even denied access to counsel. It became part of the standard police repertory to thwart future attacks by building a clearer understanding of a group's ideology, leadership, and capabilities.<sup>1</sup> Prisoners' rights were also sharply curtailed as penal institutions adapted to the new breed of inmate. Mail privileges were suspended and prior restrictions on routine prisoner surveillance were abolished in order to prevent jailed terrorists from waging their campaigns from behind prison walls.<sup>2</sup>

However, different countries coped with the same challenge in different ways. In Great Britain, notably, captured terrorists were isolated from ordinary criminals. This suited jailed terrorists, who commonly viewed themselves as political prisoners, and in the case of the Irish Provos demanded to be treated as prisoners of war. Initially, the British government seemed to accede to this demand; captured terrorists were confined in separate facilities, enabling inmates to preserve their organizational hierarchy in prison. As a result, cellblocks became largely self-governing enclaves for inmates, and no-go areas for prison authorities. The Provo leadership took advantage of this system by turning their enclaves into training camps, where experienced veterans could pass on their expertise in weapons and tactics to their less experienced brethren. This advantage was given a further huge boost by the British policy of holding suspected terrorists without trial. Many politically active Catholic men who had no previous connection to terrorism were swept up and placed in internment camps, where they were ripe

for radicalization. This practice finds its parallel in the current policy of many European countries of detaining illegal immigrants alongside career criminals and terrorist suspects.

While the situation in other European jails never became as extreme as those in British-ruled Northern Ireland, terrorist groups were able to retain a large degree of cohesion within the prison setting, which they discovered to be a favorable environment for training members in new skills and planning future operations. It was only when the authorities decided that terrorists were to be treated according to the criminal acts they committed, rather than according to the ideological beliefs that had inspired them, that the use of prisons as terrorist universities began to be curtailed.

Other major changes in prison policy also played an important role in the divide-and-conquer strategy used against the terrorists. New "maximum security" prisons were established to hold dangerous terrorist inmates, both to increase security and to limit their ability to sow discord among the general prison population.<sup>3</sup> Prison administrators often further segregated prisoners, separating committed terrorists from "conformers," inmates who had renounced their extremist associations.<sup>4</sup> These steps had the salutary effect of freeing wavering members from radical peer pressure and protecting them from murderous reprisals by former comrades.<sup>5</sup>

### *The Current Danger*

These past successful strategies are clearly relevant to the problem posed by Islamic fundamentalists incarcerated in major Western prison systems. Al-Qaeda and its network of associated organizations has taken full advantage of the relatively lax practices in European, and even some American, prisons. The pool of potential recruits is vast. In the United States, at least 3,000 Arab and Muslim men have been detained in the crackdown on illegal immigrants that fol-

lowed the 9/11 attacks.<sup>6</sup> In Europe, while there has been less of a focus on security, the waves of economic refugees from Islamic countries has led to ever higher levels of incarceration for such migrants.

The need to counter Muslim radicalization in prisons is underscored by recent population statistics and incarceration rates.<sup>7</sup> There are around 13 million Muslims living in Europe (about 2.5 percent of the total population); of this number, over 7 million live in Western Europe (about 2 percent of the total population). Initially, Western Europe's Muslim communities were made up of workers drawn largely from former European colonies. These mostly male laborers were later joined by family members arriving from abroad. West Germany was also home to a significant number of Turkish guest workers, whose status was more formally defined. More recently, these established Muslim communities have swelled with the arrival of economic and political refugees from the Balkans, Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, and North Africa. The number of Muslims living in the United Kingdom grew from about 23,000 in 1951 to 2 million in 2000. In 1961, there were about 6,700 Turkish Muslims living in West Germany; the Muslim population of Germany now also stands at about 2 million. Other West European countries, particularly France and the Netherlands, have seen similar increases in their Muslim populations. If current legal and illegal immigration patterns hold, this trend will likely continue.<sup>8</sup>

Foreigners in general and Muslims in particular are overrepresented in Europe's prison populations. In Switzerland, for example, the foreign inmates generally fall into one of three categories: asylum seekers, tourists who have committed crimes, and long-term residents who have not been granted Swiss citizenship. Such foreigners account for nearly 63 percent of the Swiss prison population—about 3,500 of the 5,000 inmates—although they constitute

only 20 percent of the general population. Given Switzerland's geographical proximity to the Balkans, it is not surprising that many of these foreign prisoners are Muslims from Albania, Macedonia, and the former Yugoslav Republic.<sup>9</sup>

This pattern is replicated in other European states. Official statistics show that foreigners account for 28.5 percent, 34 percent, and 28.5 percent of the French, German, and Italian prison populations, respectively, proportions far in excess of the foreign component of the general population. Although precise figures are hard to come by, anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that a large percentage of these foreign prisoners are Muslims. In Britain, one of the few countries that makes a breakdown available, 8 percent of the prison population is Muslim, compared to only 2.5 percent of the general population. In 2002, the last year for which statistics are available, this translated into 5,495 Muslim inmates out of a total prison population of 71,218.<sup>10</sup> The British government has also disclosed that since 9/11 only 97 out of the 562 people arrested for involvement in terrorist activities—a group made up almost entirely of Muslim men—have been charged with offenses under the Terrorism Act passed in 2000, and of these only 14 have been convicted.<sup>11</sup> It is Muslims such as these, men imprisoned then released for lack of evidence or detained on lesser charges, who are ripe for radicalization.

American law enforcement officials have already expressed the fear that their prisons are a “fertile breeding ground” for the spread of radical Islam.<sup>12</sup> In testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee in October 2003, John Pistole, the FBI's executive assistant director of counterterrorism/counterintelligence, called U.S. correctional institutions a “viable venue for radicalization and recruitment” for al-Qaeda.<sup>13</sup> Harley Lappin, the director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, sees the bloated prison population of disgruntled and violent inmates as being

“particularly vulnerable to recruitment by terrorists.”<sup>14</sup> A report prepared by the bureau spotlights the proselytizing of self-selected radical clerics who minister to their captive brethren, espousing a fundamentalist and exclusionary interpretation of Islam that preaches hatred for the West in general, and the United States in particular. The report points out that prison guards rarely preside over Muslim religious services and, even when they do so, lack the ability to understand what is being preached.<sup>15</sup> U.S. prison authorities have begun to combat this perceived threat through intensified monitoring of inmates.<sup>16</sup>

More serious still are the utterly abysmal conditions that detainees suffer in American penal institutions in Cuba, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Official estimates put the total number of security detainees at a conservative 10,500, with at least 500 in Guantánamo, around 2,000 in Afghanistan, and 8,080 in Iraq. These prisoners, nearly all of them Muslim, are trapped in a system where abuse runs rampant. Beyond the videotaped excesses at Abu Ghraib and the harsh regime and legal limbo that prisoners face at Guantánamo, there are well-corroborated reports of prisoners being beaten, stripped naked, and sexually molested. Many detainees face indefinite internment without the hope of a trial. That so many prisoners, both the guilty and the innocent, are denied legal relief serves only to further fan the flames of radicalization.

#### *The European Prison Environment*

European prisons and detention centers seem relatively benign compared to their American counterparts. Unlike in America, where isolation is used to keep potentially dangerous prisoners from interacting with the wider inmate population, in Western Europe, even those convicted of serious crimes, including terrorist offences not involving actual violence, have the same privileges of movement and association within the prison as other prisoners and are not

subject to any but the most routine surveillance. The emphasis is on rehabilitation and vocational training, not punishment. When large groups of Muslims are incarcerated, there is a strong tendency on the part of prison administrators to house such prisoners together. Thus, it is not unusual for a cellblock's population to be overwhelmingly African and Middle Eastern in origin. Furthermore, in prison, religion offers one of the few officially sanctioned sources of friendship and mutual support. The unintended result is that disconnected, impressionable young men and women become a captive audience for those who espouse extremist Islamic dogma. Those imprisoned for petty theft, for selling drugs, or simply for being an illegal alien harbor an animus that makes them ripe for the plucking by Islamic extremists.

Many European prison officials seemingly fail to recognize that the leadership of this already discontented population is often drawn from an intricate, interconnected, and adaptive Islamic fundamentalist terrorist network that is closely affiliated with al-Qaeda. According to Alain Grignard, a senior Belgian police authority on terrorism, the “intermingling of terrorist networks with the criminal milieu is becoming more and more important.... It's in prisons where political operatives recruit specialists whom they need to run their networks—specialists in fraudulent documents, arms trafficking, etc. They use concepts that justify crime, that transform it into redemption.... The prisons of today are producing the terrorists of tomorrow.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, members of these networks actively strive to convert non-Muslims to their cause, while also aggressively seeking recruits among prisoners drawn from the local indigenous Muslim population.

The Spaniard José Emilio Suárez Tratorras, the British “shoe bomber,” Richard Reid, and the American José Padilla, accused of trying to assemble a radiological bomb, were all converted to Islam and

recruited into terror networks while in prison. These events merely confirm what has long been known: the prison environment is an incubator for creating a dedicated and hardened terrorist, offering ideal conditions for both the initial recruitment and radicalization of new members and for the further indoctrination and training of existing cadres.

### *The Nexus of Crime and Terrorism*

All too often, terrorist cadres already in place are not recognized as such by police or prison authorities. The Spanish police had previously identified key members of the terrorist cell that carried out the Madrid bombings as drug dealers while their other identity as terrorist operatives went undiscovered. As a result, Spanish authorities did not realize their criminal activities were in fact generating funds for terrorist operations. “Most of the [extremist] structures that we have dismantled have been financed by crime,” says Pierre de Bousquet de Florian, chief of France’s Directorate of Territorial Security. “What is difficult to prove judicially are the links between crime and terrorism. When you arrest them they are stickup gangs, they are counterfeiters, they are small-time dealers.... It’s difficult to show that money has served or will serve for terrorist activity.”<sup>18</sup>

Even in the rare case where a terrorist connection is suspected, the guilty party is usually imprisoned for straightforward criminal activities. That such activities are an integral part of their role in providing support to radical Islamic networks is seldom, if ever, acknowledged. Terrorist groups, large and small, have long relied heavily on both organized and petty crime for operational funding. The first bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993 and the attempted attack on Los Angeles International Airport in 2000 were funded in large part by credit card fraud operations and petty thievery, including pickpocketing.<sup>19</sup> From the local crime rings that support individual terrorist

cells to the international money laundering that funnels millions yearly into the coffers of groups such as al-Qaeda and Hamas, the symbiotic relationship between the criminal and the terrorist has fallen through the cracks in the division of responsibilities between police officers concerned only with criminal activities and intelligence officials concerned with national security. One Islamic sect, Takfir wa al-Hijra, to which the Madrid bombers belonged, epitomizes the congruence of Islamic terrorism and organized crime. Its name translates to “Excommunication and Exile.” Its members give the appearance of being disconnected from Islam. They hide in plain sight by appearing to have succumbed to such Western vices as alcohol abuse and drug dealing. But inwardly, they remain devout Muslims, their outward behavior camouflage designed to mask a total commitment to waging jihad against the West.<sup>20</sup>

Terrorists jailed for criminal activities thrive in prison. Disciplined and belonging to networks that are internally cohesive, they are free to recruit and train inmates they believe to be suited for work within a terrorist organization, and they are able to draw from a constantly regenerating pool of candidates. Local and immigrant, Muslim, non-Muslim, the bright, the dim, the violent: all are courted, all have a place in the network—provided they prove susceptible to indoctrination and radicalization.

Unidentified and unmonitored by prison authorities, the imprisoned terrorists remain in control of an extensive criminal enterprise, both within the prison and beyond. Trafficking goes on in people, drugs, arms, and forged documents, all to fund the terrorist network, conducted through intermediaries and contraband cell phones. Visitors, including clerics, lawyers, and psychologists can be used to carry messages. So long as there is calm and tranquility within the prison walls, administrators are loathe to interfere with the inmates’ routines. So efficient has the terrorist recruitment process



become, that within a month of incarceration, a new prisoner can be screened, recruited, indoctrinated, and fully absorbed into the Islamic terror network. Short sentences mean that after another month, the same individual can be back on the street, welcomed into a terrorist network on the outside, often severing all ties with his (or her) previous life. It is hard to know exactly how many individuals like Trashorras and Ahmidan are at this very moment entering this chain of recruitment, vetting, and indoctrination under the radar of the Western prison authorities, but there can be no doubt that the process will acquire greater momentum the longer the current construct of prison life remains undisturbed.

Prison authorities must be equipped to disrupt these terrorist networks. Most American and European prison administrators lack the ability even to identify the terrorist networks they harbor. They possess little knowledge of Islamic cultures and languages, and they lack personnel with the skills needed to properly monitor prison populations. Combating radical Islam in prisons requires preventative measures— isolating potential radical leaders, cutting off the flow of incendiary fundamentalist propaganda, screening clerics and lay Islamic prayer leaders (both volunteers and prisoners), and effectively monitoring their sermons to ensure that they are not full of anti-Western or jihadist rhetoric. But this is not enough. A more proactive approach is needed. Since a radical, violent, and exclusionary Islamic ideology is at the root of the terrorist threat, it cannot be allowed to be the only voice that is heard. There is an urgent need for an alternative message, one that stresses Islam as a religion of peace and tolerance.

#### *A Response to the Threat*

It will require considerable financial and human resources as well as unfettered cooperation between governments, prison administrators, and key sectors of civil society—

such as religious institutions, immigrant support groups, and vocational training organizations—to address this issue. American authorities already have considerable experience combating criminal gangs within prisons, and some of the lessons they have learned are readily applicable to the problems presented by terrorist networks within prisons, particularly in Europe, where the number of Muslim immigrants, legal and illegal, is rising rapidly and where increasing numbers of young Muslim men are being swept up into the criminal justice system.

It is clear that many Muslims who are currently incarcerated in European prisons have little knowledge of the culture of the country in which they are imprisoned. They likely do not even speak the local language, having lived, worked, and socialized almost entirely within their immigrant communities. This is a pattern of behavior that is too easily continued within prison walls. However, the sense of security that associating with religious and ethnic confreres gives to a frightened and disoriented inmate plays into the hands of those who are anxious to exploit such dazed foundlings for their own purposes. It is this seemingly benign and protective community of like-minded souls, grouped for mutual support and protection within an alien environment, that first introduces a new prisoner to the most radical and violent interpretations of his religion and sets him up to be recruited into the terrorist network.

If Western governments and societies are to counter the spread of radical fundamentalist Islam in their prison systems, they need to invest significant resources in reaching out to incarcerated foreigners. The foreigners in European prisons are often returning illegal immigrants. Currently, though such a prisoner may spend months or even years in prison, he is almost never engaged by any host culture outreach program.

Outreach programs aimed at such at-risk individuals need to be developed. Such

programs would take into account the background and psychology of the individual prisoner. What might be called an Educational Intervention Action System would aim to expose both disconnected individuals and those already recruited as followers by radical networks to a range of Islamic scripture, interpretation, and thought antithetical to the incendiary views stressed by fundamentalist groups. It goes without saying that given widespread Islamic antipathy toward Western culture, any such initiative must be presented primarily as an educational program intended to give inmates vocational and language skills that will improve their material condition, not as religious teaching. The liberal Islamic message should be a subtle subtext of the skill-development educational materials.

The development of such an educational system will require a systematic investigation of the operational methods employed by terrorist rings in prisons and correctional systems. Investigators should seek answers to the following questions: How do radical Islamic fundamentalist and terrorist groups organize themselves within a prison system, and how do they adjust their tactics to suit a particular prison's infrastructure? How do such networks recruit, motivate, train, and retain new members? How do they provide support to recruits when they are freed from prison? And how do such networks finance their activities, both inside prisons and on the outside?

With the answers to these questions in hand, officials should develop targeted programs applicable to a wide variety of prison systems to counteract, disrupt, and ultimately eliminate radical fundamentalist influence. The proposed Educational Intervention Action System would be based on three programs designed to tackle the most urgent problems that have been identified in a number of prison systems:

- A training and educational program for government officials, prison administra-

tors, prison staff, and civilians involved in prisoner welfare activities on Islamic religious precepts and practices and Islamic culture. Participants would receive instruction on the roots and nature of radical Islamic fundamentalism and its manifestations in Western societies and penal systems, and on the various conflicts in the Middle East. They would be taught how to identify and track the activities of radical fundamentalist Islamic groups and terrorist networks, both within the prison system as a whole and in individual facilities.

- An outreach educational program aimed at providing vocational and language skills to Muslim prisoners. Such a program might use the teachings of liberal Islamic scholars as texts for developing computer skills and in language classes. This might be seen as a first step in socializing Muslim prisoners, helping them to fit into the host society when they are released from prison, and as a means of inoculating individuals against the proselytizing of radical fundamentalist ideologues.

- A more targeted program, led by local Islamic leaders, focused on weaning inmates from radical Islamic teachings through exposure to alternative interpretations of Islamic scripture and thought, coupled with socialization efforts.

#### *Needed: A Systematic Approach*

West European governments, struggling to deal with large numbers of illegal immigrants, operate what is in effect a revolving-door policy for the many Muslim men involved in petty crime who get caught up in the criminal justice system, receive short custodial sentences, and are returned to the street while immigration status and asylum claims are adjudicated. Western governments in general seem unwilling to address head on the reality that their prisons

represent a key link in the chain of Islamic radicalization. Terrorist groups need to move personnel, equipment, and money covertly within and between states. Criminals have long experience in these tasks, and are happy to sell their expertise. Prisons are their meeting ground.<sup>21</sup>

To date, there have been no large-scale attempts to reach out to, rehabilitate, or even track Muslim prisoners leaving Western prisons. Existing efforts tend to be limited to local Muslim outreach programs, inspired by individual mosques and imams. A more systematic approach is urgently needed. Western governments and their prison systems, in cooperation with local Muslim leaders, should begin to see education as an indispensable means of countering the proselytizing of radical Islamists. Such a program would be of long-term benefit to Muslim communities and society in general if it helped governments root out the subterranean networks devoted to hateful and violent ends. ●

## Notes

The author wishes to thank Matthew Sollenberger of Swarthmore College for his assistance in researching this article.

1. Michael von Tangen Page, *Prisons, Peace and Terrorism: Penal Policy in the Reduction of Political Violence in Northern Ireland, Italy and the Spanish Basque Country, 1968–97* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), pp. 41–44.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 55–57, 103–04.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

6. *Sanctioned Bias: Racial Profiling since 9/11* (New York: American Civil Liberties Union, February 2004), p. 5, n. 5.

7. See Omar Taspinar, "Europe's Muslim Street," *Foreign Policy*, March 2003.

8. Frank K. Buijs and Jan Rath, *Muslims in Europe: The State of Research*, essay prepared for the Rus-

sell Sage Foundation, New York, October 2002, pp. 6–8.

9. Crime experts say Switzerland is seen as easy pickings by foreign criminals. Switzerland has the highest percentage (20 percent) of foreign-born residents in Europe and a thriving tourist industry. As a result, foreign criminals find it easy to blend into the background in the large cities. See SwissInfo, September 1, 2002, <http://www.swissinfo.org/sen/swissinfo.html?siteSect=105&sid=1296797>.

10. *Prison Statistics: England and Wales 2002* (London: British Home Office, 2003).

11. Roy Corbridge, "13 Held after Terror Raids," *The Scotsman*, August 4, 2004.

12. "Al-Qaida May Be Recruiting in Prisons: U.S. Officials Worried That Inmates Provide Easy Targets," *Charleston Daily Mail*, November 30, 2002.

13. John S. Pistole, Testimony before Senate Judiciary Committee, October 14, 2003, available at [www.kyl.senate.gov/legis\\_center/subdocs/101403\\_pistole.pdf](http://www.kyl.senate.gov/legis_center/subdocs/101403_pistole.pdf).

14. Mike Ward, "Texas Prisons Hunt Secretly for Terrorists," Cox News Service, November 14, 2003.

15. *A Review of the Bureau of Prisons' Selection of Muslim Religious Service Providers* (Washington, DC: Office of the Inspector General, Department of Justice, April 2004), pp. 20–22.

16. Ward, "Texas Prisons Hunt Secretly for Terrorists."

17. Robert S. Leiken, "Bearers of Global Jihad? Immigration and National Security after 9/11" (Washington, DC: Nixon Center, 2004).

18. Sebastian Rosella, "Jihad's Unlikely Alliance," *Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 2004.

19. John Mintz and Douglas Farah, "Small Scams Probed for Terror Ties; Muslim, Arab Stores Monitored as Part of Post-Sept. 11 Inquiry," *Washington Post*, August 12, 2002.

20. Gene Edward Veith, "Crime as Redemption: A Muslim Sect Turns Vice into a Tool against Western Enemies," *World Magazine on the Web*, June 19, 2004.

21. See Pamela Hess, "Zen and the Art of Counterinsurgency," *Washington Times*, July 29, 2004.