

Prison radicalisation: The focus should be on rehabilitation and integration not segregation, Muslim chaplains can help with this

*This week the government revealed plans to create separate isolation units for Islamist extremists in high-security prisons. Here, **Imran Awan** argues that to tackle prison radicalisation we must adopt a broader approach that addresses the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders back into society. This will require not just tackling structural issues within prisons but also increasing the role that religion, and in particular Muslim chaplains, can play in this rehabilitation process.*

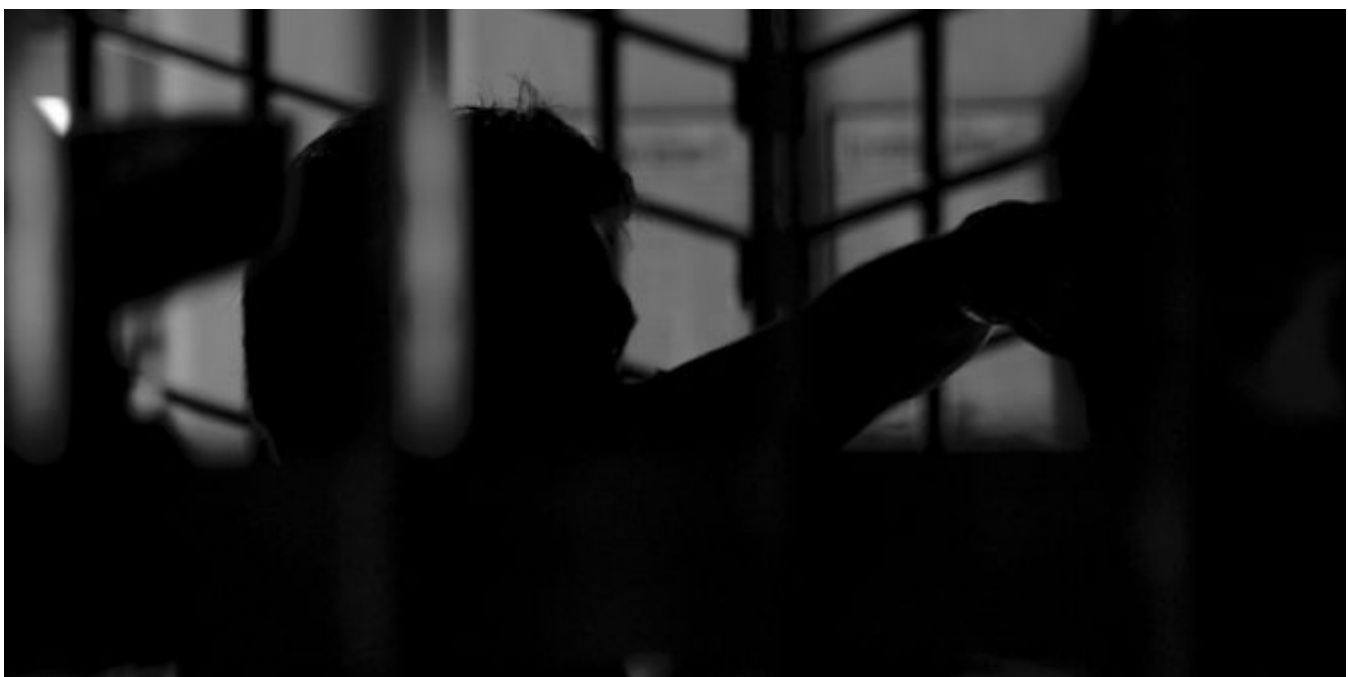


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The UK Government has announced new plans to deal with prisoners deemed to be violent extremists. The **programme** will see new special units that will aim to prevent prisoners being radicalised by creating isolation zones that will promote segregation. The proposals also include the removal of extremist books and literature alongside a stronger vetting system for prison chaplains that aims to create a safer environment within British prisons. Will removing books and keeping prisoners in isolation actually prevent extremism or will this just create a vacuum for dissent that plays into the hands of those preaching hate and intolerance?

Any measures to tackle radicalisation within prisons must start by addressing the issue of over-crowding and under-staffing which leads to a potential risk of prison staff being under-resourced and undertrained in understanding the issues around faith, **radicalisation** and integration. Furthermore, the governments policies that focus on isolation could potentially result in unfairly targeting Muslim prisoners as dangerous jihadists and terrorists which could ignite further grievances once these prisoners are released back into society. Rather than concentrating on whether prisons are 'institutionally timid', an emphasis on how to prevent those in prison coming out and reoffending should be the real focus.

Discrimination, over-crowding and under-staffing



In a report conducted by **HM Prison Service in 2010** that involved interviews with over 164 Muslim prisoners across eight prisons and young offender institutions found that Muslims prisoners overall had a negative perception of UK prisons citing poor safety, diversity and equality issues which seemed to undermine the relationships between prisoners and prison staff. Indeed, this problem was particularly high in relation to high security prisons where a number of Muslims interviewed felt that their security was at risk from other inmates and prison staff.

Prejudice and anti-Muslim hatred Muslim prisoners have received is a central challenge when tackling prisoner radicalisation. The HM Prison Service study noted a number of examples whereby the level of abuse and prejudice Muslim prisoners have faced has become frequent. Whilst prison staff shortages and over-crowding in prisons can act as an incubator for extremist ideas to be formulated it can also lead to an oversimplification with any sort of religious conversation within prisons being described as radicalisation.

Better-equipped prison staff that are able to monitor areas of discrimination and disadvantage and examine the implications for this and the tensions between racial identities within a prison environment is key. In some contexts, there should be a level of assessment for staff based on a person's background and experience, which does require dialogue and a better awareness of Islam. Prison staff must also work in a more proactive manner to promote integration within the prison setting. This can act as a catalyst for innovative approaches towards helping Muslim prisoners feel they are being treated fairly.

Rehabilitation, integration and the role of Muslim chaplains

Rather than a narrow focus solely on radicalisation, the attention should be placed on how we rehabilitate and reintegrate offenders back into society. With regards to Muslim prisoners, their targeting as dangerous jihadists and terrorists could ignite further grievances once these prisoners are released back into mainstream society. Here Prison chaplains have a key role to play in helping the transition from inside a prison to outside. Imams can be used for both a spiritual and welfare purpose providing religious legitimacy to the Muslim prison population. Imams can provide an impetus for collective disengagement from further reoffending and therefore are voices that are needed in this debate. They also will play a key role in helping prisoners on release integrate back into the community and society and provide both religious and pastoral needs to the Muslim population.

In a study conducted by academics at **Cardiff University** based on Muslim chaplaincy in Britain they found that Muslim chaplains suffered greatly within prisons. Their study involved a qualitative methodology whereby they took part in focus groups and interviews with Muslim chaplains. In total, they interviewed 65 Muslim chaplains and found real issues in relation to the reintegration of Muslim offenders back into society. They also found that in many instances Muslim chaplains had felt uncomfortable with the **Prevent Strategy** which had been incorporated in their job description, but hadn't been for other faiths. The vast majority of Muslim chaplains are part of the solution and not the problem. With an increasing Muslim population in prison, the **Cardiff University research** suggests that religion can play a key role in both reintegration and rehabilitation of Muslim prisoners but is often overshadowed by the over-emphasis on Deoband Muslim prison chaplains as not doing enough to promote British values.

Interestingly, the **study in Cardiff** found that Muslim chaplains of a Deoband persuasion actually provided much needed pastoral care. Focusing on religious persuasion as a predictor for radicalisation is dangerous as it fails to understand the complex nature of the pathways to radicalisation. Providing pastoral care and using Imams to help bridge that connection between prisoners and communities is important when confronting issues around safeguarding and vulnerabilities within prison. The fear is that an over-emphasis on the notion that Muslim chaplains of a Deoband persuasion are the problem will lead to a form of silencing that ultimately will mean Muslim prison chaplains are too afraid to work within prison for fear that they will be unfairly targeted as violent extremists.



Another issue around focusing solely on radicalisation is that it may mask other problems Muslim prisoners face. The Cardiff study for example found issues in relation to the reintegration of Muslim offenders back into communities, from finding a job to being ostracised by the local community. There is also evidence to suggest that Muslim women face particular challenges with regards to reintegration. The charity **Muslim Hands** commissioned the Huddersfield Pakistani Community Alliance to carry out a pilot study which would help better understand the experiences of Muslim women at New Hall and Askham Grange prisons. Their findings would appear to suggest that Muslim women suffer from a range of issues during post-prison release. The study found that Muslim women are more likely to suffer from community rejection, cultural and family isolation. Their study is interesting as it also reveals how Muslim women post-release from prison also require additional support in areas where this sense of isolation is magnified. For example in matters dealing with access to children, Islamic divorce and immigration status. Thus reintegration and issues of rehabilitation again pose important questions about the specific support and assistance Muslim women within the criminal justice system require.

Using religion in prisons seems to be the way forward as it offers a real opportunity for disengagement from terrorism and can help prisoners reintegrate into society. Prisons should continue to respect Muslim prisoners' human rights and also work with them to promote religious tolerance and respect. If prisons are used with this in mind then they may achieve what they are aiming for, which is the prevention and disruption of future violent attacks.

About the author



Dr Imran Awan is a Reader in Criminology and Deputy Director of the Centre for Applied Criminology at Birmingham City University. He is an expert in issues related to Muslim communities and has done extensive research in the area of Islamophobia, policing, counter-terrorism and cyber hate. He is also the author of a number of peer-reviewed papers and books in this area. His new book 'Islamophobia in Cyberspace: Hate Crimes go Viral' is published by Ashgate (2016). Follow him on @ImranELSS.

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