



THE MACDONALD-LAURIER INSTITUTE



COMMENTARY/COMMENTAIRE

Preventing Prison Radicalization in Canada: More needs to be done

By Alex Wilner and Brian Lee Crowley

In a few short weeks, Canadians should expect to finally close the book on the Toronto 18.

The last member of the terrorist cell behind Canada's most notorious homegrown conspiracy, Shareef Abdelhaleem, is expected to receive his prison sentence in March 2011. Found guilty of terrorism offenses in January 2010, Abdelhaleem faces the prospect of a life sentence. He'll join ten other members of the Toronto 18 and two other convicted homegrown Islamist terrorists, Momin Khawaja and Said Namouh (both serving life sentences) convicted of participating in terrorism.

All of this is good news; locking up terrorists keeps Canadians safe. And yet, Canadians are now waking up to the fact that terrorism offenses do not simply end with the conviction and imprisonment of would-be bombers. It's what happens behind bars that should worry Canadians, too.

In October 2010, the Macdonald-Laurier Institute (MLI) published *From Rehabilitation to Recruitment*.¹ Written by MLI Fellow Alex Wilner (co-author of this Commentary), the report was the first of its kind to proactively discuss the threat of radicalization and terrorist recruitment in Canada's prison system. Laying out a series of policy steps necessary for keeping our prisons from becoming fertile recruiting soil for homegrown terrorism, the report hit the mark. Its publication was extensively covered in print and broadcast media and Dr. Wilner was asked to give expert testimony before the *Special Senate Committee on Anti-Terrorism* in Ottawa in December 2010.²

Recently, MLI has learnt that prison radicalization has topped the list of security concerns at Public Safety Canada, Correctional Service Canada (CSC), CSIS, and the RCMP. According to our sources, Islamist radicalization and terrorist recruitment in Canada's prison system is viewed as a grave threat to national security. Building on *From Rehabilitation to Recruitment*, this brief focuses on four concerns that continue to plague Canadian security officials.

Distinguishing Between Religious and Radical behaviour

However mendacious, violent radical Islamists consider themselves pious, practicing, and believing Muslims. They rely on religious doctrine to justify, sanitize, and legit-

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imize the violence they condone and facilitate. In doing so, they purposefully blur the lines between religious practice and violence. Radicalization, however, should not be confused with religious observance, piety, or conversion. In countering terrorism, violent behaviour – not religious behaviour – is our primary concern. Canadians can practice any faith in any way they like and are free to adopt literalist interpretations of religious doctrine. Only when religion or ideology are used to facilitate political violence, including terrorism, is a line crossed and punitive action taken.

The problem for security officials, both inside and outside prison, is properly differentiating between religious beliefs and practices and *radical* beliefs and practices that may lead to violence. Pre-empting terrorism by tackling radicalization is a complex and thorny issue. As the RCMP notes in its 2009 report *Radicalization: A Guide for the Perplexed*, “while radical thinking is by no means problematic in itself, it becomes a threat to national security when Canadian citizens ... espouse or engage in violence ... as a means of promoting political, ideological or religious extremism.”³ Given the very nature of Islamist terrorism – which at its core mixes religious themes with political ones – the problem of differentiating between religious practice and radicalization is a difficult one. This may be especially the case in prison, where an inmate’s freedom routinely bumps up against various security concerns.

But it shouldn’t be up to prison officials to distinguish between faith and violent extremism. Policy guidance must flow from the government. As a recent report published by the *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence* notes, “it is not up to ... the heads of prison services to decide matters of national policy.” Rather, it should be in the hands of governments to issue “direction where national policy is not clear or consistent.” This is especially so in the contentious case of identifying potentially dangerous, radical belief systems. Combating radicalization in prison begins by first identifying radicalization in Canadian society more broadly. Mapping out the radicalization process should be a centralized, concerted, and coordinated endeavour directed by efforts taking place well beyond the prison wall.⁴ It will have to involve the participation of advisory groups stemming from Canada’s diverse Muslim community and include input from various Muslim clerics. Utmost care should be given to canvassing religious leaders from unimpeachable sources, the selection of which might be properly aided by the inclusion of non-Muslim religious leaders who can act as a form of control.

Once Canada has a government-mandated, conceptual framework for identifying radicalization, guidance can trickle down to the prison system and inform policies therein. Prison employees will then have a better idea about the kinds of behaviour they should look out for. Prison staff who work at facilities in which terrorist convicts are held should receive specific training, using these Canadian guidelines, in recognizing the difference between religious faith and radical beliefs. Guards do not have to become experts on theology or *jihadism*, but they should know enough about Islam and Islamist terrorism to be able to keep a watchful eye on social developments taking place within the boarder prisoner community. In addition, front-line staff that regularly interact with Islamist terrorist convicts should receive additional, specialised

training in radicalization awareness and should be regularly briefed on the personal details and social interactions of each particular terrorist convict. The CSC might also consider selectively hiring and training more Muslim prison staff familiar with Islam, tasked specifically with interacting with terrorist convicts.⁵ Finally, the CSC, in partnership with other security agencies, should establish an arrangement by which prison officials and staff can access and share resources – like religious leaders and experts, translators, and lists of contraband texts and documents – that can assist and advise their efforts to counter radicalization in prison.⁶

Dealing with Opportunistic Religious Conversions

Individuals who adopt new religious beliefs do so for any number of reasons. Religious conversions, inside and outside prison, often reflect a desire for personal transformation. And prisoners, like all Canadians, have a *Charter* right to choose – and change – their religious identity. And yet, in Canadian prisons, conversions to Islam also come with perceived benefits. Muslim inmates can demand to be served *halal* food, participate in religious festivals and holydays, join other inmates for Friday prayer services, and meet with certain religious leaders. Some inmates may see these rights as an incentive to convert to Islam while serving their prison sentence. While a prisoner's religion should matter little to the CSC and while, as noted, conversion is not radicalization, that of all prison groups converts to Islam may be the most susceptible to militant Islamism does suggest that the CSC should be weary of unintentionally incentivizing Islam behind bars.

While it may be impossible (and highly contentious) for the CSC to assess and gauge a prisoner's motivation for converting to Islam, the CSC doesn't really need to. Instead, the prison system should focus its energies on ensuring that Islam is neither treated more nor less favourably than other faiths.

For starters, prison staff should ensure that inmates who show an interest in converting to Islam (or any other religion) meet with the appropriate religious authorities. Chaplains should then be expected to give the inmate a precise and full overview of what conversion and Islamic practice entails and outline the consequences of later renouncing the Muslim faith. Prisoners should also be encouraged to discuss the conversion process with family members and next of kin. And, as the CSC already advocates, religious leaders, after having been encouraged to help the inmate acquire the necessary level of religious knowledge needed to fulfill a conversion process, should have final say regarding an inmate's religious status.⁷

Once an inmate converts, the CSC should ensure that an appropriate religious leader follows up with the convert, offering religious classes, tutelage, and access to certain religious texts. Ensuring a convert receives a full rather than a selective reading of their new faith may help inoculate them against more radical interpretations. As MLI recommended in its report, prisons might also, with the assistance of prison imams, identify and train inmates with liberal religious leanings and tolerant understandings of Islam to act as inmate councillors and mentors.⁸ These individuals can assist prison

chaplains in helping Muslim converts (and newly imprisoned Muslim inmates) settle into their new lifestyle and environment.

Finally, in terms of the potential pitfalls associated with serving inmates distinct meals, the CSC is already aware of the issue. As the CSC manual on religious accommodation rightly notes, “delivering religious diets in a completely separate way from regular diets cannot but constitute special treatment and, therefore, special status in the eyes of all concerned. This needs to be avoided ... since any perception of special treatment simply invites conflict.”⁹ In this respect, the best way to serve *halal* food would be to keep it nearly indistinguishable from other prison diets. The CSC already suggests that while *halal* meat “may come from a different dish” it should be prepared “to look and taste the same as what the majority of people receive on the line.”¹⁰ Doing so will counter prisoners’ claims that *halal* meals are somehow superior to non-*halal* meals.

Hindering the Promotion of Extremist Views

Since 2008, Canada has prosecuted 13 homegrown Islamist terrorists; four individuals were handed prison terms ranging from between ten and twenty years, and another three were condemned to life sentences.¹¹ In handing down these stiff sentences, the judiciary has been crystal clear that facilitating and participating in terrorism is to be deplored. In a December 2010 ruling, the Ontario Court of Appeal determined that:

Terrorism ... is in a special category of crime and must be treated as such. When the terrorist activity, to the knowledge of the offender, is designed to or is likely to result in the indiscriminate injury and killing of innocent human beings, sentences exceeding 20 years, up to and including life imprisonment, should not be viewed as exceptional. That may not be the traditional approach to sentencing, but it is the approach we believe must be taken to repudiate and deter terrorism and denounce it for the insidious crime it is.¹²

Sentencing terrorists to the fullest measure of the law signals to would-be malefactors that they will be dealt with harshly.

Surely the prison service can do no less with existing terrorist convicts. It would be justified for prisons to take all reasonable measures to prevent their institutions from becoming recruiting grounds for future would-be terrorists. If anything, the CSC has an extra responsibility in that whatever radicalization does take place within its facilities will happen while the newly radicalized are under the care and tutelage of the authorities. Complacency in the prisons will aid and abet behaviour that Canadian judges have already condemned as absolutely inimical to civilized life in Canada. Pre-empting the spread of violent ideologies in prison will require that Canadians develop a robust and unapologetic system for identifying radicalization ringleaders within the prison population and isolating them.

The point is that terrorist convicts are not ordinary prisoners. Some charismatic individuals may use their time behind bars to promote their extremist views, prosthet-

izing radical ideologies in an attempt to attract and recruit members of the general prison population. Toronto 18-member, Ali Dirie, is the best known example of a terrorist convict actively promoting terrorism behind bars. Other similar developments are taking place. The CSC must proactively disrupt any and all attempts by convicted terrorists to recruit other inmates. Doing so will require using a series of novel tactics.

As MLI suggested in its report, the CSC must impede known terrorist convicts from taking leadership roles within the prison Muslim community. When charismatic Islamist inmates find themselves in a position of influence, they will be well placed to indoctrinate others. Prison staff should monitor and control the social circles, clubs, and groups that include known Islamists and impede their attempts to lead religious services. With the help of prison imams, authorities should actively eliminate the available space in which convicted terrorists can vocalize their views. If a particular convict is hell-bent on promoting radical sentiments, then prison authorities should take steps to isolate him. This can be done by segregating the individual from other inmates. And because indoctrination and radicalization usually occurs as a result of close and personal interaction between terrorist convicts and other prisoners, prison staff should try to disrupt potentially threatening social cliques. Doing so may require repeatedly moving the radical inmate around and within the prison system.

In all cases, eliminating the promotion of extremist views by known radicals will require a sophisticated understanding of Canada's terrorist prison population that relies on repeatedly updated assessments of each terrorist convict. This information will ensure that prison staff use the right tools and tactics to disrupt potential cases of radicalization and terrorist recruitment in Canada's prison system.

Getting the Right Religious Leadership

We need to recognize that prison imams play an important role in denying radicalism. Muslim inmates, like all Canadians, have a right to access religious leaders. Ensuring there are enough qualified imams to address prisoners' needs will help sideline radical voices. At the same time, we need to exclude radical religious leaders and extremist literature from prison. Islam is a multifaceted religion with a diversity of interpretations. Some espouse violence. Making sure Canadian inmates receive mainstream and inclusive religious leadership will help stop the import and spread of radical views.

For starters, as noted, it is of paramount importance that known radical inmates and terrorist convicts do not lead religious services or give religious sermons. Allowing known extremists in the absence of prison chaplains to lead other inmates in communal prayer is a bad idea. The best defence would be to ensure that the CSC employs enough qualified imams to look after the needs of prisoners. In cases where imams cannot be present to perform their duties, they should, with the assistance of prison staff, identify, train, and designate a particular inmate to lead prayer services.

In smaller prisons and in prisons located in remote places, CSC imams may not always be at hand to offer their leadership. In such cases, it is common for the CSC to

allow volunteers from the local religious community to attend to inmate needs. The CSC needs to ensure that the volunteer system has built-in screening mechanisms that help prison staff identify and reject radical volunteers. There have been unconfirmed reports, for example, that Hiva Alizadeh, one of the men arrested on terrorism offenses in Ottawa in August 2010, volunteered as a spiritual caregiver at various Winnipeg-based correctional facilities. “In his spare time” a friend writes of Alizadeh, “he volunteered for two years at the Winnipeg Remand Center (city jail), Headingly Correctional Facility (provincial jail), and Stony Mountain Penitentiary (federal jail), as a Spiritual Care Volunteer/Chaplain. During that time he counselled many Muslims and aboriginal people who were incarcerated.”¹³ This is all fine and good, except that today Alizadeh faces three terrorism charges, including possession of explosives with the intent to kill and injure.

The CSC must ensure that its volunteer program cannot be actively exploited by radical individuals and groups aspiring to introduce extremist ideas into prison. A country-wide, volunteer review system should be established. With the assistance of the prison chaplaincy and prison imams, CSC staff should have the means and ability to assess the religious leanings and credentials of would-be volunteers. If and when they need assistance, individual prisons should be able to tap into the aforementioned pool of resources. It might also be prudent to have new clerics and volunteers accompanied and observed by veteran prison imams and/or CSC staff familiar with Islam as they begin work within prison. Finally, severe penalties should be in place for religious service providers found to be abusing their position of trust to promote extremism behind bars.

Endnotes

1. Alex Wilner, "From Rehabilitation to Recruitment: Islamist Prison Radicalization in Canada", *True North* No. 3, (Macdonald Laurier Institute, 2010); <http://www.macdonaldlaurier.ca/fromrehabilitationontorecruitment/>.
2. Alex Wilner, "Pre-empting, containing, and reversing prison radicalization in Canada", Testimony before the *Special Senate Committee on Anti-Terrorism*, Ottawa, Canada (December 13, 2010), http://www.parl.gc.ca/40/3/parlbus/commbus/senate/Com-e/anti-e/11ev-e.htm?Language=E&Parl=40&Ses=3&comm_id=597
3. RCMP, *Radicalization – A Guide for the Perplexed*, (June 2009), 1.
4. The RCMP, alongside various police agencies, CSIS, DFAIT, and Public Safety, are currently preparing a comprehensive "radicalization prevention strategy" to be used by Canadian law enforcement agencies. These efforts are being coordinated by the Canadian Association of the Chiefs of Police's (CACP) Counterterrorism and National Security Committee and should culminate in a "conceptual framework" for identifying, preventing, deterring, and reversing radicalization in Canada.
5. See, James Brandon, *Unlocking al-Qaeda: Islamist Extremism in British Prisons*, (London: Quilliam, 2009), 113.
6. See, International Center for the Study of Radicalism and Political Violence, *Prison and Terrorism Radicalization and De-radicalisation in 15 Countries*, (London: ICSR, 2010), 35-37.
7. CSC, *Manual on Religious and Spiritual Accommodation* (March 21, 2005), 38-41.
8. Wilner, "From Rehabilitation to Recruitment", 28; See also, Brandon, *Unlocking al-Qaeda*, 33-34.
9. CSC, *Manual on Religious and Spiritual Accommodation* (March 21, 2005), 112;116.
10. *Ibid.*, 112.
11. Another four Islamist terrorism-related trials are expected, stemming from August 2010 and January 2011 arrests conducted in Ontario and Alberta, respectively.
12. Megan O'Toole and Stewart Bell, "Taking on Terror", *National Post*, (December 18, 2010).
13. MLI thanks a tip provided by a *Globe and Mail* reporter for this information. See, Yahya Abdul Rahman, "A Portrait of Hiva Alizadeh", (November 9, 2010), available at <https://www.cageprisoners.com/our-work/opinion-editorial/item/797-a-portrait-of-hiva-alizadeh> (last accessed January 26, 2011). *Cageprisoners Ltd* describes itself as "human rights organization" whose goal is to "raise awareness of the plight of the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and other detainees held as part of the War on Terror."



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Allan Gotlieb, former Deputy Minister of External Affairs and Ambassador to Washington

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Hon. James S. Peterson, former Minister of International Trade and Member of Parliament for 23 years

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-Allan Gotlieb, from the foreword



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“Crowley, Clemens and Veldhuis show that if we establish a real advantage vis-à-vis the U.S. on tax and other policies, that will increase both our attraction with emerging pow-

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