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DIIS Brief

RADICALISATION IN DANISH PRISONS

- What is happening, and what can we do about it?

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Abstract:

The particularly polarizing environment in prisons creates an increased risk of religious radicalisation, especially among young people with a newly formed religious identity. Prison inmates are used to dividing the world into separate groups and cementing their identity by rhetorically dissociating themselves from other groups of inmates. The risk of radicalisation is increased when this world view is applied to religious identity formation.

Therefore, it is important that there is a good and stable representation of imams in prisons who can convey an inclusive understanding of religion to the inmates so that they do not use their religion to dissociate themselves from the surrounding society. A noticeable presence of an imam in a prison also makes it harder for other inmates with a radical religious world view to assume an authoritative role in relation to the young converts. This requires an increased focus on the issue as well as a co-ordinated effort. This brief looks at radicalisation in prisons and how it can be dealt with.

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Radicalisation in Danish prisons: what is happening, and what can we do about it?

The growing interest in radicalisation processes, radical Islam and the possible efforts to counter radicalisation in Europe has given rise to a search for the places where radicalisation can be expected to take place. The focus has typically been on places where Islam is the predominant religion, such as mosques, ethnically segregated residential areas etc. However, a number of episodes since the terrorist attacks on 9/11 in 2001, in which the involved terror suspects or convicted terrorists began their radicalisation process during or immediately after a stint in prison, have prompted authorities and researchers to focus their attention on prisons as possible radicalisation centres. In Denmark, this increased focus on prisons has among other things meant that The Danish Security and Intelligence Service, PET, teaches prison staff how to spot radicalisation processes. This takes place at a time when the percentage of young Muslims in Danish prisons is growing and the Danish Prison and Probation Service has become aware that Muslim inmates have special needs that require an increased effort, e.g. access to specific foods, praying rooms, the opportunity to speak to an imam etc. Hence, the Danish prison service is aware of its statutory responsibility to cater to the needs of inmates with a different religious orientation than the evangelical-Lutheran one. The prison service is also aware that prisons are places where especially young Muslims are at risk of undergoing a radicalisation process.

This brief looks at the correlation between inmates' conversion in prison and radical religiosity, and what we can do to reduce the dissemination of radical religious ideas in Danish prisons. This includes among other things preventing radical Muslim inmates from gaining religious authority over their fellow inmates and thereby winning over new hearts and minds.

Radical Islam as an identity marker

A radicalisation process is defined as the development that an individual undergoes towards the polarization – in principle – of any given viewpoint. In this case, it is a religious radicalisation process, with an increasing degree of exclusion and polarization in the interpretation of religious ideas, shutting out the surrounding world and focusing primarily on a few, particularly symbol-laden religious concepts .

In radical Islam, a greater degree of exclusion and polarization in relation to religious ideas can be seen in the perception that the understanding of Islam by an individual or group is an expression of the only true religion. An agreement on such an understanding of Islam can be reached between groups or individuals with different goals, approaches or understanding of some concepts, as long as there is agreement on the fundamental religious universe. Among those who regard themselves as belonging to this one true understanding of Islam, radicalised Muslims come to feel distanced from the surrounding world, and a polarized reality with a clear-cut distinction between two static groups emerges: true believers and infidels. People who reject the surrounding society with reference to a lack of insight into the true faith have often felt

marginalized in society, deprived or in some other way displaced from society. For these people, the radical world view means that they are able to see themselves as strong individuals who take action, instead of victims of exclusion. They are now doing the excluding, and are not excluded themselves. The distancing from the surrounding world is communicated through a number of specific symbol-laden religious concepts, which are interpreted in a certain way. By choosing cardinal points that are to the widest extent possible in opposition to the values in the surrounding society, these radical Muslims (who are often young) quickly and easily position themselves vis-à-vis the surrounding world. For example by declaring themselves proponents of Sharia or by being opposed to democracy or women's rights. In this way, the rhetoric itself becomes a way of taking action, and simply by making use of a particular rhetoric, the radicalised feel that they are actually doing something and rebelling against the society, which they so greatly oppose.

The prisonizing process

The radicalisation process described above is interesting in relation to prisons because it resembles the way in which inmates organise themselves in prisons and other types of secure institutions.

It is characteristic of prisons that upon arrival, the inmates have to learn to be a part of a new and unknown social structure consisting of strangers, new ways of interacting, new rules etc. To start out with, the inmates only share two circumstances, which form the basis of their future common identification. First, they have been convicted of a punishable crime, and they have been given a prison sentence; second, they are part of a large group of prisoners that is under constant surveillance and control by a far smaller group of prison officers. According to criminological research, some of these conditions have negative consequences for inmates' lives – both during and after the serving of their sentences. The fact that the inmates primarily use their common criminal experiences as a basis for the formation of a common identity often leads to an increased accept of crime. The structure of the prison, which is based on the surveillance of a large group of people by a much smaller group of people, and the fundamentally skewed power structure between the two groups, mean that the inmates build up communities in groups that are strongly demarcated from other groups. First and foremost, there is a large group of inmates which acts as a natural antipole to the prison staff; then there are groups based on ethnicity, religion, types of felony, neighbourhood or the like. Inmates often experience polarization of these groups, where it is important to distance yourself from some groups in order to cement your affiliation with other groups. As in the radicalisation process described above, the affiliation with one group is made clear by way of a rhetorical dissociation from other groups. Given that in prisons there are inmates convicted of violent crimes, violent assaults against other group members are often a consequence of this rhetorical identity positioning.

Thus, the inmates are a part of an environment in which social interaction is organised into small closed groups, primarily based on crime and criminal values, where inmates have a marked sense of loyalty towards their own groups and a high degree of hostility towards others, particularly the incarcerating power – the state – its representatives, and their values. In this way, there are

obvious similarities between the prisonizing process and the radicalisation process; the same logic, rhetoric, group structure and relationship to other groups are employed. For an inmate who goes through a religious conversion in a prisonized environment like this, the road to also undergoing a radicalisation process is short, given that the polarized and often simplified way of viewing the world makes sense and feels natural for him/her.

Inclusive and anti-criminal identities

It is important to stress that the connection between religion – in this case particularly conversion in prisons – and radicalisation only represents a very small problem. It is not possible to ascertain the number of converts in Danish prisons since prisons are not allowed to register inmates on the basis of their religious orientation. However, we do know that some of the inmates in Danish prisons are very interested in speaking with priests and imams, and that there is full house for services and Friday prayers – often, the demand cannot be met. If it is true that the awareness of and interest in religion is heightened in prisons, and that inmates' conversion in prisons leads to radicalisation, radicalisation processes in prisons would be a much larger problem than it actually appears to be. A deeper analysis of the role and application of religion in prisons indicates that the religious community based on the new or increased religious awareness that develops among the believers counteracts in a number of ways the prisonizing process. In this way, the religious community helps to hold the negative consequences of the prisonizing process at bay.

Some of the imams who work in the prisons mention that re-socialization and the fight against crime are significant elements of their job. In their conversations with inmates, during Friday prayer, in various study groups, Koran groups etc., the imams stress the connection between Islam and non-criminal behaviour. This is done in order to avoid that inmates commit new crimes following their release from prison, but it also has a positive effect on the inmates who have been a part of these groups – they now find the motivation to break loose from the negatively defined closed communities based on crime. These inmates now have an incentive to create new communities based on adissociation from crime, abstention from hash and other drugs available in prisons, non-acceptance of violence as a model for solving conflicts etc. A strong focus on creating a sense of inclusion among the inmates is also needed in order for them to learn to see themselves as part of the surrounding society and not in opposition to it. In this way, the inmates learn to distance themselves from the polarized environment in prisons and to see themselves as an important part of a community that extends beyond prison, and thus construct an identity based on inclusion instead of exclusion. The inmates develop an independent identity, which is further strengthened by the daily performance of a number of religious rituals. On the one hand, these rituals are instrumental in dissociating an inmate from commonplace prison culture, and on the other hand they help to confer upon the inmate an identity that he/she has chosen himself/herself. For the inmate, this feeling of being able to act independently is of great importance, and it brings about a belief that there is a life after prison. An inmate who has a strong identity that goes beyond the normal inmate-warden oppositional relationship, and which is based on something fundamentally different from that, more easily disengages himself/herself from polarization, which easily develops in prisons. Thus, religion in prisons can both break down the prisonizing process and presumably counteract radicalisation.

Conclusion

The inmates who undergo a process of conversion are part of a framework which is comparable to radicalisation. Because of this, the process of radicalisation seems to be an easy step to take for the converted inmates. Thus, it makes sense to retain focus on prisons in the effort against the spread of radical religiosity, and it is important to be aware of the role of imams and the religious community's positive role for the inmates. The inmates who have belonged to groups based on inclusion in relation to the surrounding society make use of this approach in their future religious life. The experience of having received a prison sentence and thus being removed from daily life and prison life in general, causes most inmates to have less confidence in the constitutional state and society in general. Religious conversion in prison can also be seen as a wish to stay on the right side of the law. For some inmates, conversion brings about a wish to live by religious rules such as Sharia law, which prevents them from committing crimes. For other inmates, it can lead to philosophical reflections on their place in society and the importance of always being good role models, for example by always respecting the laws of the country they inhabit, by acting nobly and being trustworthy and respected citizens.

Thus, many factors suggest that for some inmates, conversion processes lead to radical Islam, while for other inmates they represent a movement away from radicalisation – representing instead a way of obtaining a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of Islam. Therefore, it appears that the recruitment of more well-qualified Imams and better conditions for practising Muslims are the best way for the prison service to prevent radical Islam from gaining currency in Danish prisons. This could be done in a number of ways, e.g. providing easier access to imams by keeping them on duty for longer hours would shorten the wait for a talk; providing better rooms where religious ceremonies and Friday prayers can be conducted so that Muslims do not have to resort to using random empty rooms such as lumber rooms, common rooms etc.; and giving practising Muslims an opportunity to meet across sections for communal eating, study groups etc. In addition to the objective of creating better communities, it is of great importance that it becomes harder for random inmates with a radical Islamic world view to gain authority over the other inmates. In prisons where inmates do not have access to an imam, or where an imam only visits rarely, it is possible for an inmate with just a little knowledge of Islam to gain authority over the converted inmates, who often have little or no knowledge of Islam. In order to counter this trend, it is important that the imam has an inclusive view on Muslims in Denmark, that he is willing and able to discuss concepts such as jihad with inmates, and that he spends enough time at the prison to maintain his authority towards the inmates. A strong religious community, centred around an imam with good opportunities and good backing from the prison service, will make it harder for a radical charismatic inmate to take on the role of the imam towards young converts.

Similarly, it would be advantageous to maintain focus on converts after their release from prison. Those who do not give up the faith following the serving of their sentence find themselves in a difficult position, since they have to establish contact to new religious communities. This group of former inmates must be deemed to be in the recruitment zone of radical religious groups. The

radical groups, which are often very close-knit and loyal, appeal to people who have to build up brand new social networks, and especially to people who, as described above, base their world view on polarized divisions between good and evil. Thus, in the effort to counter radicalisation, it would be advantageous to establish contact between an inmate and an established religious community before the inmate is released from prison so that he/she can make use of that contact following the serving of his/her sentence. Due to security reasons, several prisons have prohibited their employees from associating with former inmates, which is why prison imams are not able to follow up on their work. For these inmates, it would be helpful if an imam could visit them in prison and be at their disposal following their release from prison. This would make it less appealing for former inmates to be swayed by charismatic religious leaders with a radical religious orientation.

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