Militant Jihadism
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Among the causes for radicalisation, the literature distinguishes geopolitical-historical, social and personal factors (Beelman et al., 2018). Personal factors may be, among others, problematic personal characteristics (Besta et al., 2015; Campbell and Volhardt, 2014; Pauwels and Heylen, 2017) that can be complemented by such social ones as intra-family conflicts or the absence of integration on the labour market. It is mainly youngsters among 18 and 25 years old who correspond to that profile and may end up in prison and become or are already radicalised. One may say that the step to delinquent behaviour, in their case, is already a form of radicalisation. With their deviant and delinquent behaviour they already challenge society or an important part of its norms. However, there exists not only jihadist radicalisation. There is also extreme right and extreme left radicalisation; and there is delinquency as such.

Imprisonment and Jihadisation

When I asked the question “What is the profile of radicalised prisoners in Belgian prisons?”, the psychologist Nico Braspenninng and the psychologist-criminologist Astrid Boelaert, who are both the coordinators of the Belgian “Central Psycho-Social Service Extremism,” distinguished various profiles, even of men older than 60, and also of women (Braspenninng and Boelaert 2018). As the most common profile, they find young men, married or unmarried, who via processes inside as
well as outside prison, find a route to becoming still more sympathising with violent jihadism, or who empower this route. They themselves never saw people in prison who went to fight after leaving prison. They see prisoners “in” jail who seem to have radicalised, or who seem to have radicalised “more” (cf. “seeing their canal empowered”). They, however, also see prisoners who entered prison as (strongly) radicalised (for example condemned for terrorist crimes), but seem to have “deradicalised” there, or at least no longer behave in an activist way (i.e. disengagement).

They ask to pay attention to the fact that the age category between 18 and 25 among young men has always been a sensitive age with regard to several forms of general criminality. Their overrepresentation in the penitentiary population illustrates this fact. To my question whether jihadists are becoming younger and younger as of 2018, they answered that they also observe this; but they cannot totally verify it in their function since they have no access to the files of people younger than 18. Such access is a specific mission for the juvenile court and this is not a federal competence in Belgium, but a competence of either the Flemish or the French Community.

Karim El Khmilichi (2018), the director of St.-Gilles prison in the Brussels region, puts the challenge with which he is confronted in this way: “for primarily radicalising youngsters attracted to delinquent behaviour, prison may become an in-between space where radicalisation may become jihadisation or where jihadisation may receive a more clear form. It may become explicitly formatted as jihadisation.” The opposition between the youngster and society can become confirmed and empowered. When older prisoners, in the event that some of them are perceived as charismatic, present to the youngster the possibility of a jihadist “noble” self-image, the young man may feel touched and open himself to it. In this sense, one may say that radicalisation comes first, and then Islamisation may become intermingled with it. But it would be misleading to state that jihadisation is mainly spread via prisons. Nevertheless, once someone is deprived of freedom, he may become more easily exposed to the jihadist propaganda. What follows is a possibility that the youngster may meet people who have a longer and more developed career in delinquency and he takes over some of their practices and/or enters in a network.

There is in fact more jihadisation outside than inside prisons. However, prisons are more dangerous because they are places where one may meet people who have passed some barriers. It is more likely that they will normalise the behaviour, insights and practices of true criminals. “Prison is one of the places
of Islamisation of an already existing radicalisation, but also of the constitution of possible networks among people already condemned for criminal association. The official figures in France inform us that among 68,000 prisoners, more than 1,500 have been identified as sympathisers of IS in Syria. Many violent jihadists who conducted attacks in France stayed more or less for a long time in prison, namely Mohamed Merah, Fabien Clain, Mehdi Nemmouche, the Kouachi brothers and Amedy Coulibaly” (Khosrokhovar, 2018: 237).

Devalorisation of the West

El Khmilichi (2018) observes that there is a complementary element that one should not underestimate; namely, candidate jihadists do not hold the moral and religious value of the West in high esteem. In fact, what is typical in the West is that the foundation of spiritual authority is questioned. Spiritual authority is shifted from religious institutions to science and/or to the market (Stedman Jones, 2010; De Ridder, 2018). To the religious believers who still look for spirituality in a “sacred book”, Western society tells that such an attitude and value system no longer has any place in public space and should be privatised. We all know, however, that most human beings do not participate in “science” and are in fact not really interested in it. But secular authorities and dominant public opinion in the West, even if the latter remains ethnically Christian, push as much as possible to the private sphere what still remains based on biblical (or Qur’anic) spirituality. Institutional religions continue to offer important services, such as education and health care in the public space. But these services are however treated from a consumption perspective. Thus, a Western person may have recourse to it or not. For most Westerners, and surely for those who are not interested in “science” or who do not develop a strong personal private spirituality, it is the “market” and “consumerism” that build the new spirituality. At least, this is what many youngsters experience.

For the young criminal with an immigrant background, the moral and religious spirituality he recognises or projects in non-Western societies does not match with the one that is experienced in a Western society. But at the same time he has only very limited or no access to what he thinks to be the Western spirituality: materialism and consumerism. He feels it as unfairness. Why cannot he participate just as his peers to the Western spirituality of consumerism? He thinks he has the right to undo this unfairness, even if it can only happen via
criminal acts. When he is put in prison afterwards, it is a shock. When obliged to remain in prison, he feels it as a new injustice. Prison may thus radicalise him still more. At a second moment, this radicalisation may be filled by some jihadist ideological content, recently even with content that remains confined to extremely poor one-liner content. We can thus nowadays witness an “instant ideologisation.” This is different from the Fouad Belkacem type of jihadisation that we saw between 2012 and 2015.

**Short versus Long Stay in Prison**

Karim El Khmilichi emphasises that one should make a distinction between those who are imprisoned for a short time (4 to 6 months) and those imprisoned for a longer time. In reflecting on the prevention of radicalisation, one should surely also keenly take short-term prisoners into account. Most of the time, the youngsters who stay in prison for a short period of time are not jihadists, but they are very vulnerable to jihadism. They may have the idea that their imprisonment is unfair and start resenting society. It is a dangerous moment and precisely at that moment not much is done with them. They are rather abandoned to themselves and to “other co-prisoners.” The feeling of injustice may become a source of jihadist radicalisation for them. Others who have already become jihadist sympathisers may become their influencers and fill the radicalisation process with jihadist ideas.

For four to six months, these youngsters may feel that they are being reduced to their ethnic identity or to being only a number. Such reduction may create a stigma that can become a source or starting point for Islamist radicalisation. This is a reason why moral and religious counsellors have an important role to play in prisons for this category of prisoners. They should discuss citizenship values with these short-stay young prisoners. It concerns questions such as: What is *laïcité*? Is sacredness really absent in our society? Do we live in a society without values? One should also discuss their professional future with them. One may work on identity. One should not wait for a judgment by a judge coming only after 4 to 6 months. Moreover, prison warders should be better trained as their conversations with the young prisoners can positively contribute to the prevention measures against radicalisation and to their later reintegration into society.

The question is then: is it better to bring them together in small separate pavilions with educators? Discussing the reception of youngsters in general,
Brasperning and Boelaert (2018) follow El Khmilichi’s reasoning and propose to keep youngsters in small separate pavilions. They, however, warn that in such a formula there may also be young strong informal leaders among them who already have a serious criminal past. The criminal records of such leaders are often not shared in advance with the adult prisons because their cases are dealt with juvenile courts. Thus, such information can be lacking for the managers of adult prisons. They also say that it always may be interesting to have some quiet older prisoners among the youngsters. In this case, the profiles of young and senior prisoners must match to each other. What is critical is that the youngsters should be avoided to come into contact with serious criminals or jihadist influencers during their stay in prison. Therefore, in order separate pavilions to be an effective solution in preventing radicalisation of young prisoners, the authorities should design them in a way that both a well-balanced composition of the prisoners and the pedagogy they apply have positive effects on these young people who would serve their short-term sentence. Some youngsters wait for 4 to 6 months before they hear a first judgment about their future. Nothing happens with them during that period. Prisons are also much too large. If nothing positive happens with them, “negative” leaders, with some charisma are more likely to become their mentors.

Evidence of a Co-Prisoner of Fouad Belkacem

The following evidence of a co-prisoner of Fouad Belkacem, the leader of the influential jihadist recruiter of Sharia4Belgium illustrates quite well how a jihadist leader assumes this role in prison:

I was in prison in Merksplas, near Antwerp, when Fouad Belkacem was imprisoned. He was in the same pavilion. So we could meet at the inner court when we could leave our cells. He was a quiet person, very kind. He was silent. Very often he sat on the ground, surely in summer. Once I sat next to him during a visit, when his children visited him. Sometimes I could make some jokes with him. ‘Tell me, what did you do? Are not you a Belgian, born here in Belgium? Why then are you here?’ He never answered in an aggressive way.

If your question is if I understand that young people may radicalise in prison, my answer is: sure, I understand it perfectly. First, you feel
abandoned. You are in a no man’s land. If you have no money, you cannot even brush your teeth. You cannot buy toothpaste. You don’t receive soap. Food is very elementary. If you want something else with it, you have to pay for it. Drink is water from the tap. Secondly, there is not really legal security. It all depends on what direction and chiefs decide. There is much arbitrariness. You feel that so often. Thirdly, they treat you very often in an unfair, crazy way. Fourthly, young Belgian Moroccans do not enjoy the sympathy of the other non-Moroccan prisoners. They do not receive much money from outside. So they look for some grip elsewhere. The Muslim counsellor did not come so often. The Protestant counsellor was really ok. The Catholic counsellor was not bad at all. But Islam was quite absent. Fifthly, many of the young prisoners are small criminals. They do not see much future for themselves. I saw a youngster who crapped always in his pants. No one took care of him. Sixthly, among equals you understand one another in such a situation. Your sympathy and loyalty increase vis-à-vis the ones who signify something positive to you. Fouad Belkacem had become a person of reference in our small pavilion. He gave a feeling of stability.

How did these youngsters around him feel about themselves? For them, society did not inspire them as something just and correct. It was not that difficult to convince them that this was not only the case in prison, but also outside. O yes, they know that they did something wrong, but their impression was that they now understand why they did wrong things, what they did not see before being put in prison. For these kinds of young people Fouad brought quietness. He gave them an identity and a future, a hope.” (Personal communication of a former prisoner to Johan Leman, 2018).

Isolating Hardliner Jihadists in Prisons

In August 2018 in Belgium, 23 hardliner jihad sympathisers (nine Dutch-speaking in Hasselt and 14 French-speaking ones in Ittre) were put together and separated from all others in a so-called “D-Rad:Ex” section. Some of them never left for Syria, but strongly incited others to do so. They are jihadists who radiate some leadership and charisma and who try to influence other prisoners for their ideas. The authorities do not want them to recruit others. For the moment and for some of them, there are no indications that they want to change their convictions or behaviour. When they become free, they will most probably adhere again to
Salafist jihadism. This confines us to two possibilities about their future: Some of them will probably leave again for jihad, while others, who would become older, still will not change their ideas but will probably disengage. The risk for the latter second case is that some of them may influence younger people for the jihadist cause.

Once hardliner jihadists are brought into D-Rad:Ex, they are not condemned to remain there for the rest of their stay in prison. If someone feels himself deradicalised, he can propose to the local director of the prison that he be transferred to another prison. The local director can ask, with the required arguments, for a re-evaluation.

Concluding Considerations

In Belgium and probably in many other countries, the prison system should be reformed if the real concern is the prevention of jihadism in the future. Youngsters who are imprisoned for reasons where jihadism is completely absent should be separated from the genuine jihadists. There should be more investment in the reintegration in society of these youngsters, with the support of educators and social workers and in small groups, hence avoiding the criminal leaders among them orienting them again to delinquency. It is also a defendable option to separate hardliners from the others, for the reasons developed by the interviewed psychologist and criminologist. Religious and philosophical counsellors have an important place in prisons. Nevertheless, they should invest less in doctrines but more in a sense of citizenship, as the quintessence of the counselling efforts.

Notes

1 I had a good talk with both professionals about radicalised prisoners in Belgian prisons. Under their supervision they have about 200 files from the Dutch side of Belgian prisons, covering the period between 2015 and July 2018, actual prisoners included. Currently they closely follow around 80 files. In Belgium, there are also files written in French, which are followed by other professionals.

2 "On a sample of 1,200 individuals who left between 2012 and 2015 from Western countries to join Syria and Iraq, 14% are younger than 18 years old, 27% are between 18 and 21, 26% between 22 and 25, 17% between 26 and 29, 9% between 30 and 35 and 7% are 36 and more (Perliger and Milton 2016). If one qualifies "youngsters" as the category of age from
14 to 25 years old, they then represent 67% of the total. This is more than two thirds” (Khosrokhavar, 2018: 101).

3 I interviewed him in July 2018 on many important issues about Belgian prisons. His observations are similar to those of Khosrokhavar. Khosrokhavar writes about second, third and even fourth generations in some poor marginal city districts: “Prison has an important meaning, it is a place of socialisation and of adoption of a counter culture, but also the place where hatred of society becomes obstinate and where the link between various imprisoned guys leads to the creation of networks that may become activated in jihadism” (Khosrokhavar, 2018:238). El Khmilichi observes it in this way: “What Belgium and France have in common is that there are ghettos outside and inside the prisons. The prisons in St-Gilles and Forest, both in Brussels, are good for 15 to 20 per cent of the prison population in Belgium.”

4 This leads us to Khosrokhavar’s conclusion: “The real problem is the articulation between radicalisation of Islam and Islamisation of radicalism” (Khosrokhavar, 2018:9).

5 For more on the detailed presentation of isolation measures in Belgian prisons see Vervaet, 2017.

References


