Fighting Against Inmates’ Radicalisation

Radicalization has a vague definition. It probably means a personal fixation on thoughts against the empire’s strategy of prolonged illegal war against its hidden enemies. It follows a vague legal definition of terrorism as a crime. It is not only a crime to get involved in planning and doing violence. It became a crime to support the life or the ideas of those who use violence as a political tool.

The US constitution and democracy are based on broad freedom of speech against the state and the powerful. When it comes to the global war on Islamic terror, following the Al Qaeda 9/11 attacks, its preventive strategy justified the development of new approaches to intelligence, including preventive imprisonment, torture and kinetic actions or selective killings (which include collateral damage, i.e., killing innocent people because they are near the target, because bad intelligence leads to the selection of the wrong target, or simply because the preventive war choses to target people who have the wrong opinions regarding the War on Terror).

The War on Terror, as Guantanamo prison demonstrates, is not a penitentiary problem: it is a problem that transcends common judicial procedures. It is an executive privilege to address it in innovative ways. Why should prisons be included in a war on radicalization?

First, the War on Terror is not a war policy: it is a mixed security and military project that mixes private a public security and war, and also the Manichean politics that force each state to define itself by choosing a side between the two declared belligerents: the US and its faceless enemies, defined loosely as terrorists and their supporters, including people who think that this war is self-damaging to western societies. Secondly, the only modern institution that explicitly admits to having as an objective purpose to change the mind of people is the prison. Countries, such as France and Belgium, report that some terrorist attacks were perpetrated by former prison inmates. So, as a preventive strategy, the question of what can be done to detect those who after leaving prison would participate in terrorist attacks presents itself.

Experience shows that imprisonment, meant to change the mind of inmates for the better, does not work. What has been observed after experimenting with imprisonment for over 200 years is an increase in the probability of those who are incarcerated to reoffend upon release. One can speculate that imprisonment reinforces ideas that support criminal actions, including those which may lead to terrorist acts..

Common prison studies do not follow the research of radicalization because soft law on human rights adopted by the Council of Europe forbids policies intended to brainwash or change the mental self-determination of inmates, arguing that such practices tend to have the opposite effect of that desired: the inmates´ already low probability of not returning to crime after release becomes even lower when they learn how to mask their intentions in response to institutional attempts to ‘reshape’ their mind in order to control their behaviour after release.

Most US policies on preventing terror are extra-legal and extra-penal. There, prison de-radicalization policies are framed differently than in Europe. One of the reasons for this is that the US penitentiary system uses life-sentences and permanent isolation policies that avoid any contact between the so-called dangerous prisoners and the rest of the population. The same does not happen in Europe, where life sentences are nor so common and those who are sentenced to life can expect to leave prison at some point.

If prison radicalization means being brainwashed or undergoing a deliberate change of mindset while resisting institutional attempts to do the same in the opposite direction, one can assume that there is the possibility that clandestine Islamic organisation will develop and master methods for tapping into the fertile ground of resistance that is prison in order to produce radical Islamic activists capable of committing atrocities, weather as lone wolves or as part of larger operational cells controlled through social media, etc.

There is no parallel between the above and the radicalization of, say, nationalist movements. Some radicalized nationalists are caught by the state, as is the case of Catalonia's political prisoners, and some of them are in power in European countries – and across the world. No parallel either with mass radicalization such as the French Gillets Jeunes.

Radicalization is a vague conceptual formula to understand the Islamic fundamentalist recruitment of militants in the war of civilizations/war on terror framework. Prisoners and other marginals are ease targets for war fodder and other suicidal activities (the French Foreign Legion was famous for taking such individuals), in Europe and elsewhere, given that the majority have only known the hopelessness of the vicious cycle of social institutions, typically culminating with prison, where societies attempt to forget their marginals. Growing numbers of prisoners and people living in precarious conditions fuel the number of potential targets to recruitment. Perhaps a solution starts by our not trying to forget them.