

## Two Views of Prison Radicalization

As demonstrated by the previous section, several scholars and practitioners in the field of terrorism believe radicalization is the beginning of a process that may lead to extremist views and political violence. This discussion has overflowed into studies of prison systems. Many people believe that prisons are academies for crime; that is, less experienced inmates learn how to become more effective criminals from older inmates. A similar argument is applied to terrorism. Terrorists must be separated from the general population. Otherwise, they will convert inmates from the general population and transform them into fellow terrorists. In other words, prisons run the risk of becoming schools for terrorism.

Many scholars are leery of such simple generalizations, but they do believe that prisons present opportunities for radicalization. Excellent researchers, such as Mark Hamm (2007 and 2009) have uncovered processes and stages for conversion to, immersion in, and acceptance of violent radical philosophies or religions within prison walls. Such research is more sophisticated than generalizations about terrorist schools. However, other scholars and practitioners find little or no evidence for prison radicalization.

## The Process of Radicalization in Prison

Recent reports suggest that groups are being radicalized in prison, and Mark Hamm (2007) has conducted a definitive study of prison radicalization in the United States. The process in prison usually involves a charismatic leader who gathers a number of individuals in an entourage. A leader will often target selected prisoners for a group or will dominate new inmates, intimidating them until they join the group. Hamm maintains that this recruitment is similar to procedures used by street gangs.

Terrorists also use recruiters who are not incarcerated. This is most frequently associated with religion, and the person who recruits and radicalizes potential terrorists may be a visiting chaplain. A chaplain has access to prisoners and may claim freedom of religion while delivering a radical message. Hamm says militant chaplains also distribute radical literature in the form of religious works.

Most of the people who enter prison have to adjust psychologically to the loss of freedom, constant monitoring, and threatened violence from other prisoners. This frequently leaves a new inmate, especially someone in prison for the first time, in a state of crisis. Recruiters for a radical cause often recognize differing types of crises, and they try to bring individuals to the radical cause with strategies that match the psychological state of the person they hope to entice.

Hamm found five common patterns of converting people to violent radical causes. The first contains people in crisis, who will respond to religious overtures for emotional support. A second involves people seeking protection in the prison environment. These people will convert because the radical group offers safety. The third group of potential converts—Hamm calls these people searchers—have had little exposure to religion, and they are fascinated by both the multiplicity of religious expressions inside prison and the feeling of belonging among members of the group. The fourth involves a personality that is common in prison—manipulating people for personal gain. Finally, Hamm classifies chaplains from the outside as free-world recruiters.

Behind almost every conversion, according to Hamm, lies a friendship or kinship link, but sometimes, a new inmate simply meets somebody in the yard and converts to a new faith. Radicalization tends to take place among two factions and three major groups. The first faction involves various Muslim groups who use cut-and-paste

**PRISON RADICALIZATION**—Mark Hamm's research for the National Institute of Justice concludes that inmates are recruited and radicalized in a number of ways:

Crisis Convert—joins a radical group as a result of a personal crisis

Protection-Seeking Convert—seeks a group out of fear

Searching Converts—have been exposed to religion, but seek deeper meaning while in prison

Manipulating Converts—are controlled by a strong member inside a group

Free-World Converters—result from chaplains outside of the system who spread literature and preach radicalization

Source: Hamm, 2007.

## FIGURE 2.4

versions of the Quran, and the second group centers around white supremacy. This results in three major groups: (1) Islamic extremists, (2) Christian extremists who use selected biblical passages to justify their views, and (3) white supremacists who have adopted the Norse pantheon of Odin, Thor, Frida, and the other gods and goddesses (Martin, 2007; Hamm, 2009).

Patterns of prison radicalization in other countries seem to follow patterns similar to those uncovered by Hamm, but the level of the threat they represent varies. In Central Asia, the prison systems are deteriorating, and it is difficult to monitor outside religious leaders who make visits to inmates. Militant Islamic missionaries use this situation as an opportunity to radicalize individuals. Militant converts are growing inside Central Asian prisons, threatening to further disrupt correctional operations. In addition, individuals seek to join other militant groups outside the prison after they are released. Prison radicalization is a growing threat in Central Asia (International Crisis Group 2009).

The United Kingdom, on the other hand, has experienced growing prison radicalization, but it does not present as great a problem as in Central Asia (Gartenstein-Ross, 2009). At this point, researchers know that radicalization takes place inside prisons, but there is not enough evidence to indicate how dangerous the threat is.

## Questioning Prison Radicalization

Other research studies point in a different direction. Richard Pickering (2012) says the Prison Service in the United Kingdom has developed a program to prevent radicalization. Officials monitor the behavior of outside chaplains, move to isolate and counter inmates who champion radical ideas, search for the presence of radicalization in prison, and continue searching during the management period for released inmates. Although he maintains that these activities are important, the Prison Service has little evidence that radicalization occurs in British prisons.

A government-sponsored study in the United Kingdom found that many terrorists have been in prison, but there is scant evidence that they were radicalized within the walls. Pickering believes that radicalization has multiple causes, and it is difficult to differentiate the ways people develop violent extremist views. Further, radicalization is a nebulous concept and hard to quantify. The best preventive approach, he concludes, is standard inmate monitoring. A person is shocked upon entering prison. Pickering

says radicalization may be possible, but it is more important to ensure that a new inmate does not withdraw into self-isolation.

Louise Porter and Mark Kebbell (2011) examined 21 male inmates convicted of terrorism in Australia and found that they shared several commonalities. Exposure to radical theology was the most common denominator in their decision to engage in violence, and almost all of them expressed religious intolerance. Sixteen of the men adapted radical views from exposure to the Internet. Most of the subjects had close family ties, but they were not connected with their respective communities. Interestingly, they tended to separate themselves from the local Muslim community and their mosques as their extremist views increased. All claimed a desire to seek revenge for a perceived injustice or attack on their faith. The men did not turn to violent theology because they were isolated. They became isolated after they turned to extremism. A final important point: They taught theology to themselves.

Although the 21 subjects shared these characteristics, Porter and Kebbell point out that the remainder of their social behavior was similar to the rest of the population. They tended to be older than terrorists in other countries, but most of the men were married, had children, and were employed. Two of them were professionals with advanced education, and only one was a committed felon before he became radicalized. Some of them claimed to have trained with terrorist groups in other countries, but the researchers doubted these claims. Each of the attacks that led to their arrest and conviction for terrorism had been unsophisticated. The attacks did not bear the marks of basic tactical training. Basically, they looked and acted like most other people, which led Porter and Kebbell to conclude that the men convicted of terrorism were just ordinary individuals. They had little influence in the prison community.

Clarke Jones (2014) reviewed cases from several Asian and Western countries. He says mainstream beliefs are that prisons housing terrorists are schools for recruiting and training new terrorists, and this fact means that terrorists should be separated from the general population to eliminate their influence. These concepts are based on limited research on radicalization.

The discussion of prison radicalization takes place in the media, government circles, and academic settings. These portrayals overemphasize the existence of radicalization. Jones is not suggesting that the process of developing violent extremist views is unimportant, but the ideas are misrepresented. Prison officials equate radicalization with the fear of Islam. Both staff and fellow prisoners treat many Muslim inmates poorly as a result. In addition, since Islam is perceived to be the problem behind radicalization, there is little differentiation between Muslim inmates in general and their radical counterparts. Both sets of people are lumped together. Ironically, Jones concludes, when convicted radicals are placed in the general population, peer pressure causes them to conform to the norm.

Bert Useem and Obie Clayton (2009) take the argument further. Their research found no statistical data to demonstrate massive radicalization in U.S. prisons, and the actual probability that it will occur is far less than popularly believed. Radicalization in prison is one of the most discussed and least understood subjects in modern American corrections. Prisons seem to inhibit radicalization for a number of reasons. Inmates are subjected to rigid, structured order, and there are social boundaries between prisoners who hold extremist views and those who do not. The institution continually emphasizes and reinforces a message of nonradicalization, rewarding inmates who behave accordingly. Most inmates in the United States have completed less formal schooling than the general population, making the abstract ideas in complicated radical ideologies difficult to understand. Useem and Clayton say that although they found no evidence of prison radicalization, it could happen. Vigilance is the key to preventing it, just as with most of the other problems in American prisons.

## Rejecting the Term

There is another position that is in opposition to both the acceptance of theories about the process of radicalization in general and prison radicalization. Some scholars question the value of the term *radicalization*. Others vehemently reject it. From the perspective of practical criminology, some practitioners believe that research in radicalization and alienation will produce valuable knowledge. The National Counterterrorism Center (2010c, p. 133), a federal agency created in 2004 to integrate information gathered on international terrorism, officially says that this type of information does not help analysts understand the process of radicalization. Indicators of radicalization reflect experiences and behaviors seen in all people. In addition, people who are radicalized are motivated by local issues, and radicalization is so diverse that its myriad sources are difficult to discern. Therefore, the so-called signs of radicalization are really only signs of human behavior. According to the National Counterterrorism Center, there is little need to study the processes of radicalization.

Neither scholars nor practitioners are quite sure about the meaning of radicalization. It has been operationally defined, and most working definitions approach it as the process of adopting violent extremist views. Yet, as Mark Sedgwick (2010) notes, there is no consensus about the definition of radicalization. Many researchers use the term, but it is used in a variety of different contexts. Security experts see radicalization as a problem for law enforcement, while those concerned with eliminating relative economic deprivation seek to integrate minority groups into the dominant system. On a grander scale, foreign policy experts look at radicalization as a problem created by networks of groups, schools, and national or regional ideologies. All of these contexts are different, and each approach has its own set of assumptions and research agendas. Sedgwick believes that the term *radicalization* simply confuses everybody. He proposes a solution: Abandon the use of the word as an absolute, definitive concept.

Chetan Bhatt (2010) believes radicalization is associated with alienation. He looks at Muslim populations inside the United Kingdom and argues that Western governments seek to integrate and assimilate immigrant populations. This poses a problem because many immigrants choose to maintain their native identity, including political and religious affiliations. This does not represent a path toward political violence; however, it does indicate a rejection of Western norms. It is possible to argue that continued identification with traditional values is a form of purposeful alienation. The new country's values and norms are rejected, while the old country's ways are incorporated in a different society.

Bhatt compares Pakistani militia movements to the activities of Central Asian immigrants in northwest London. The issue does not appear to be alienation. Bhatt argues that the Muslim community is exposed to a wide array of militant thinking, and this thinking may impact the subsequent decisions of young people to support militant groups or to take violent action. Militant ideology is not the main source of the decision to engage in violence; rather, the growth of international organizations that train paramilitary fighters is the source of militancy. The primary culprit is Pakistan's intelligence agency. By supporting militant groups that use terrorist tactics, Pakistan has created new associations between international paramilitary groups and Muslim immigrants in the United Kingdom. Militancy is not a result of alienation; it is a conscious decision to maintain national identity and sacrifice for a greater cause.

Frazer Egerton (2011) states that the common perception of the Salafi-jihadist movement is related to alienation. Yet, writers in this field seldom define what they mean when they use the term *alienation*, and the term is generally undertheorized and over-applied. The discussion of alienation, he asserts, is intuitive but unsubstantiated. One of the common approaches, he argues, is to look at structure. It is commonly assumed

that young Muslim males between the ages of 15 and 30 are alienated from social structures and as a result, they are frustrated and are attracted to violent ideologies.

In other versions of structural alienation, young males are seeking meaning, and they move toward religion to find that meaning. As a young man becomes more and more involved in religious activities, he moves toward radical interpretations of the religion and subsequently to violence. A variant of the religious journey involves the relationship between economic deprivation and terrorist violence. This version of structural alienation maintains that poor economic conditions alienate young men from society and lead them to take out their frustration in violence. Another popular version of structural alienation involves ethnic exclusion. Proponents of this theory maintain that when people are excluded from normative society due to their race or ethnicity, they respond with violence.

Egerton concludes that while such theories are attractive and are used to explain terrorist violence, they are overly generalized. For example, very few people respond to alienation with terrorist violence. In addition, most religious behavior, even fervent, intolerant religious beliefs, does not lead to terrorism. Egerton suggests that social scientists avoid referring to alienation. He says that the concept is nuanced and complex and linking it with alienation only makes things more confusing. Radicalization and alienation exist in degrees, and they are manifested in several different ways. To suggest that someone is alienated is to ignore the complexity of human behavior. Researchers will obtain more fruitful results by examining militant ideology and finding the concepts that attract followers.

Some researchers simply reject the term *radicalization*. Arun Kundnani (2012) says the use of the term *radicalization* has become normative in practical and scholarly approaches to terrorism, but it distorts both perspectives. When it is used in the West, radicalization has become synonymous with Islam. It has been used by a host of scholars and self-proclaimed experts who claim that a process of de-radicalization can be created. Others believe they can intervene and prevent radicalization. The result is that the whole Muslim community is potentially susceptible to the process and because of this, Islam is viewed with suspicion.

Kundnani may be correct, but in terms of practical criminology, security personnel are served by looking at the behavioral characteristics of violent extremists. This may provide tools to counter violence. *Radicalization* is a broad term that has little practical value. Violent extremists, however, tend to have their own ways of talking and acting. These actions are unique to particular ideologies. Law enforcement, intelligence, and military units are best served by learning the behavior cues, jargon, and indicators of the particular type of terrorism they face.



**Self-Check**

- > Why do some officials and scholars fear prison radicalization?
- > What evidence contradicts the concept of prison radicalization?
- > Why do some people reject the idea of radicalization altogether?

## Types of Terrorism

Regardless of your interpretation of the radicalization process, terrorism is the result of extremists deciding to use violence. It may appear to be random, unorganized, and senseless. Yet, these common assumptions are incorrect because terrorism has a purpose. It is designed to frighten a targeted audience, coercing its victims to behave in a particular manner. While the greatest form of political violence is due to nation-states engaged in war or political repression, security forces often deal with lesser forms of