De-Radicalization in Israel's Prison System

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An effective de-radicalization process in prisons is intended to facilitate the renunciation of violence and terrorism by those that have carried out such offenses. A key lesson that can be drawn from Israel’s de-radicalization efforts is that it is possible, indeed recommended, to treat inmates—regardless of their level of radicalization—in a dignified and humane manner. However, Israel’s ability to significantly de-radicalize security prisoners is limited if it is at all existent in its current form. Security prisoners with the potential for positive change should be placed in a different, perhaps foreign setting. This article provides an overview of Israel’s prison system, the challenges it faces, its efforts to de-radicalize security inmates and suggests additional courses of action.

Background

Since, and even prior to, its establishment in 1948, Israel has suffered from conflict, war, and terrorism. In fact, six decades after the reestablishment of a Jewish homeland, the State of Israel continues to be plagued by terrorism in general and, for the past 15 years, by radical Islamic terrorism, in particular. Aside from fighting conventional wars in 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973, 1982, and the summer of 2006, Israel has continuously confronted the challenges of terrorism.

Throughout the early 1950s, Israel was attacked by insurgents, referred to as “fedayun,” who were based in Jordan, Syria, and the Egyptian-occupied Gaza Strip. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) launched its first attack against Israel in 1965, targeting the national water carrier. During the 1970s Israel was plagued by hijackings and hostage situations, while the 1980s were characterized by a barrage of Katyusha rockets from Lebanon and the outbreak of the First Intifada in 1987. In 1993, suicide terrorism was...
introduced into the Israeli arena; since then, it has been the most lethal form of terrorist attack, accounting for over 1,500 civilian deaths in one of the smallest countries in the world. The suicide terrorism campaign reached its peak in March 2002. Subsequently, primarily between 2005 and 2008, Israel endured the launching of thousands of Kassam rockets into its southern regions from the Gaza Strip.

Israel has applied a number of different counterterrorism measures over the years in its attempt to confront these varying types of attack. The country was relatively successful in mitigating suicide bombings after it made the transition from an ineffective policy of military deterrence and political reform to a policy of prevention and preemption. This revamped counterterrorism policy featured a number of specific offensive and defensive measures. More importantly, the new policy—based on enhanced intelligence-gathering—included a concentrated campaign of preemptive targeted killings, which focused on terrorist leaders and operatives prior to their strike.

One of the most common means of preventing terrorism and punishing terrorists is incarceration. However, a principle problem with prisons is that they often serve as a platform for radicalization, rather than mitigation. Extremist ideologies flourish in prison, where conditions are often conducive to radicalization. In fact, an American policy paper on the subject concluded that the potential for radicalization of prison inmates in the United States poses a threat of unknown magnitude to that country’s national security. That threat is not limited to the United States.

Israel’s experience de-radicalizing security inmates is unique, and is the focus of this article.

The Israel Case Study

The Israel Prison Service (IPS), administers 32 prison facilities located throughout the country. Until the recent Shalit swap, a total of some 22,200 prisoners were incarcerated in the system, approximately 70 percent of whom were categorized as “criminal prisoners” and the remaining 30 percent were considered “security prisoners” (Figure 2). As defined by the IPS, a security inmate is “an inmate who has been convicted and sentenced to incarceration, or is arrested on suspicion of an offense which, by its nature or under the circumstances, has been deemed a security offense or nationalistically-motivated offense.”

Criminal and security inmates are separated during their detention period, whether in different facilities entirely or in different wings of the same facility. The treatment of security and criminal inmates is similar in nature, in that both groups are guarded by IPS personnel who are trained to treat inmates with due respect. There are nevertheless discrepancies between the treatment of security and criminal inmates, primarily due to security considerations. Table 1 highlights the main discrepancies.

The IPS budget is approximately NIS 1.4 billion (approximately US$380 million). About 70 percent of this budget is allocated to salaries, with the remainder evenly distributed to cover the costs of both criminal and security facilities.

After the Six-Day War of 1967, both the Israel Prison Service and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) were responsible for incarcerating security inmates, who were held primarily in military-police facilities. At first, the IPS shared responsibility for detaining criminals and terrorists throughout Israel and the Territories, including in prison facilities in Jenin, Nablus, Ramallah, Hebron, Tulkarem, and Gaza, with the IDF and the Israel Police Force. Beginning in 2004, the IPS took over sole responsibility for security prisoners—a shift from this previous arrangement.

In the mid-1970s, security inmates began organizing themselves according to the Palestinian faction with which they were affiliated. These “prisoner associations” gave
Table 1
Main discrepancies in treatment of security and criminal inmates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Criminal inmates</th>
<th>Security inmates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30 min. visits every two weeks</td>
<td>45 min. visits every two weeks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correctional activity, exercise, workshops</td>
<td>One hour of daily exercise in wing yard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permitted occasional vacations</td>
<td>Not permitted vacations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational or Occupational Training</td>
<td>No Vocational or Occupational Training¹</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communion with spouse</td>
<td>No communion permitted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹IPS attempts to provide security inmates with vocational and occupational training were rejected by security inmates.

security prisoners increased organizational strength and coordination, which they sought to use against prison authorities to improve prison conditions.

During the latter part of the 1980s, the number of security inmates sharply increased—to about 4,000—due largely to arrests and detentions associated with the 1987 Intifada (the popular uprising in the Territories). With the end of the Intifada in the early 1990s and the start of a political peace process, signaled by the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, the number of security inmates significantly decreased as thousands were released. At the beginning of 2000, approximately 800 security inmates were incarcerated in Israel. This number began to increase, however, after the second—and much more violent—Intifada erupted in September 2000.⁹

An intensified campaign to confront terrorism soon followed, resulting in more arrests and detentions and thus in a subsequent increase in the number of security inmates. By 2003, after the so-called “Al-Aqsa Intifada” had been raging for three years, the number of inmates had jumped to nearly 3,000. When security inmates became the sole responsibility of the IPS in 2004, the number of inmates again increased. As of November 2007, the number of inmates under IPS responsibility stood at approximately 10,000 (Figure 1). Many of

Figure 1. Number of inmates. All data provided by the Israel Prison Service is accurate for November 2009. (Color figure available online).
the inmates under IPS jurisdiction, especially those arrested in recent years, are considered very radical. The following charts and figures provide a breakdown and general information concerning the security inmates under the responsibility of the Israel Prison Service. Figure 1 provides the number of criminal and security inmates incarcerated in the Israel Prison System between the years 2000 and 2009. Figure 2 provides general data on the breakdown of criminal prisoners and security prisoners. Figure 3 illustrates the breakdown of security inmates by terrorist organization. Table 2 shows the breakdown of inmates according to origin. Table 3 shows the breakdown of inmates by gender. Table 4 shows the security inmates that were convicted of murder or killing in accordance to their terrorist organization membership. Table 5 shows the breakdown of security inmates according to sentence length.

**Policy and Approach**

The official policy of the IPS regarding prisoner treatment and detention is to completely comply with international and local laws and to act in the most humanitarian manner towards inmates, so long as doing so does not compromise security in any way. According to the IPS mission statement, the IPS is responsible for “ensuring the incarceration of prisoners and those remanded in custody in a secure and suitable environment, while respecting their dignity and accommodating their needs.”

Approximately 3,350 of the nearly 10,000 security inmates being held in Israel’s prisons as of 2007 had been arrested for murder or attempted murder. With over 6,800 security inmates coming from Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip (Table 2; also

**Table 2**

Breakdown of inmates according to place of origin (2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of residence</th>
<th>No. of inmates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Israel Proper</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judea and Samaria</td>
<td>6,096</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaza Region</td>
<td>739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7,300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
known as “the West Bank and Gaza,” hereinafter “the territories”), the IPS incarcerates the largest number of non-local resident security inmates of any national security prison system. By comparison, the U.S. prison in Guantanamo holds fewer than 1,000 detainees.13

It is important to note that although the geographic distance between the IPS security inmates’ place of residence and place of incarceration is usually small, the cultural gap between their upbringing and the environment necessary to de-radicalization could not be greater. Many security inmates were subjected to incitement against and hatred of Israel prior to their incarceration; regardless of rehabilitation efforts, once prisoners return to a setting rife with such incitement, the efficacy of any rehabilitation efforts may prove to be very limited—if they are effective at all. This obviously presents a significant challenge and a clear obstacle to de-radicalizing prisoners.

While no official policy regarding the de-radicalization of security inmates has ever been made public in Israel, much can be learned from Israel’s approach over the years in dealing with security inmates. Between 1967 and 2004, most security inmates were incarcerated in military-police facilities. During that period, it seems that the main objective of the military police was to contain and prevent a prisoner uprising within those facilities.

In fact, during that time, prison authorities were criticized by the Eden Commission, mandated to review Israel’s security prison system in 1990, for providing inmates with too much independence and freedom in managing their daily lives in prison and allowing them too much contact with the community outside of prison.14 Based on its investigation, the

Table 3
Gender breakdown (2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>7,266</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4
Security inmates as of 2009 convicted of murder or killing according to organizational alliance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational alliance</th>
<th>Number of inmates convicted of murder or attempted murder</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fatah</td>
<td>1,860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamas</td>
<td>866</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamic Jihad</td>
<td>419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular Front</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Front</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestinian Popular Struggle Front</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular Front—General Command</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestinian Democratic Union</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestinian Liberation Front</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Eden Commission concluded that the main goal of IPS authorities was to restrain prisoner turmoil and preserve calm. To meet that end, it seems the authorities acted with great leniency towards inmate demands, and at times even colluded with unorthodox behavior. The committee stated:

> It seems that, in essence, the rules of the game have established a give-and-take relationship between the authorities and the inmates, whereby the inmates receive privileges in return for quiet, even if that comes at the expense of obeisance. This, on one hand, strengthens the status of inmate leadership and, on the other hand, weakens the status of prison authorities.\(^{15}\)

To maintain law and order within the prison system and ensure that the prisoners remained calm and the authorities remained in control, the following practices developed in prisons.

**A Central Spokesman**

Since most inmates do not speak Hebrew and many guards do not speak Arabic, a need arose for translation. Also, to ensure efficient communication between prisoners and prison authorities in general, the latter allowed inmates to hold biannual elections to choose representatives from each Palestinian organization (e.g., Hamas, Fatah, Islamic Jihad), who would serve as their spokesmen and liaisons to prison authorities. These spokesmen, approved by prison authorities, were designated as interlocutors; they also conveyed prison directives, and handled daily prisoner affairs (Figure 4).\(^{16}\) The system was instituted in this way because of rivalry among the various Palestinian factions; the authorities were concerned that messages would not be relayed from a spokesman from one organization or faction to inmates from another. However, this unconventional ritual proved troublesome. For example, prison guards complained that “there were cases when we addressed inmates to give them instructions, and they refused to talk to us directly and referred us to their spokesman . . . the situation became absurd.”\(^{17}\)

Following the reports of the Eden Commission and other, subsequent commissions (the Shaul Commission, appointed in 1992, and the Farenbach Commission, appointed in 2000), and, perhaps more importantly, after responsibility for security inmates was fully
transferred to the IPS in 2004, this spokesman policy was changed. Today, the members of each Palestinian organization still elect spokesmen, but their role is primarily limited to the translation and transmission of prison instructions and orders. Only one central spokesman represents inmates to the authorities, and prison guards and authorities make their presence known and are in contact with any and all inmates at the authorities’ discretion.

After the responsibility for security prisoners was transferred to the IPS, an attempt was made to integrate inmates affiliated with different factions by housing them in the same prison wing. However, after Hamas violently wrested control of the Gaza Strip from the Palestinian Authority in June 2007, these efforts came to an end. At that point, officials feared that a violent clash between inmates from rival Hamas and Fatah factions posed an imminent security threat.

**Inmate Organizational Structure**

During the 1980s and early 1990s, prison inmates were permitted to choose committees to represent them to negotiate issues of education, food, cleaning, and security. Essentially, over the years, security inmates have formed an unofficial “inmate organizational structure.”

**Family Visits**

Despite very challenging circumstances, the IPS takes pride in acting in complete compliance with domestic and international law covering prison conditions and privileges. Family visits to security inmates present a significant challenge to prison authorities; in fact, the threat of smuggled weapons and mobile phones has proven to be all too real. Thus, twice a year, pending the approval of the chief intelligence officer, a civilian photographer visits the prisons and takes three pictures of each inmate. The pictures are then sent to the inmates’ families; inmates with residence abroad are entitled to film a brief video and send it to their family. The IPS also permits inmates to send and receive mail regularly, and to receive short videos conveying greetings from family once a year.

By law, security inmates are entitled to visits every two months. However, the prison warden usually allows visits as often as every two weeks (in practice, detainees usually receive visits every week). Visits are held in designated rooms with a divider between inmates and visitors (for security reasons), and last 45 minutes. The authorization of visitors from the territories is subject to the authorization of the security authorities.

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**Figure 4.** Communication channels between prison authority and security inmates. (Color figure available online.)
the 2007 Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip, entrance to Israel from the Gaza Strip has become a significant security concern. Consequently, about 900 families in Gaza have been barred from visiting their relatives in Israeli prisons.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) also plays an imperative role in ensuring contact between inmates and their families, and in monitoring the fair treatment of detainees and inmates. In fact, from April to June 2009, the ICRC facilitated the visits of over 38,000 Palestinians from the West Bank to their close relatives who were being held in Israeli prisons.19

Education

Inmates are permitted to study topics of their interest, subject to security restrictions.20 Many inmates study for tawjihi—Palestinian matriculation exams—which are offered once a year. In addition, inmates are permitted to purchase books, magazines and newspapers, and have access to a large library.

The Challenge of De-Radicalizing Security Prisoners in Israel

When the United States and many European nations discuss de-radicalization in prisons, they usually mean they are combating a phenomenon of petty criminals finding refuge among radical Islamic elements within prison walls, subsequently becoming radicalized, and then carrying out much more dangerous attacks once they have been released from prison.21 One well-known such case is that of Richard Reid (a.k.a. the “shoe bomber”), who is believed to have converted to Islam and been radicalized by an Imam while incarcerated in Great Britain. He was apprehended when he attempted to detonate a bomb on a U.S. commercial flight in December 2001.

An example of an American domestic terrorist is provided by Gale Nettles, who was originally convicted of counterfeiting. While serving a prison term in Mississippi, he plotted to blow up a federal building in downtown Chicago after his release, using a bomb more powerful than the one used in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. Another inmate reported Nettles. Following his release from prison, Nettles indeed purchased 2,000 pounds of fertilizer—but from an undercover FBI agent—and paid for the fertilizer using counterfeit currency. Nettles was again convicted, and is serving a life sentence.22

Similar processes of radicalization occur in prisons throughout the world. There has been growing concern about the presence of radical Islam in European prisons. For example, French officials report that radical Islamic views are being preached in a majority of French prisons.23 And the U.S. Director of National Intelligence recently issued a report stating that more than 15 percent of the individuals released from Guantanamo had returned to terrorism.24

While Israel faces similar concerns of inmates leaving prison more dangerous than they were before being incarcerated, the challenge it faces is somewhat different: many (if not most) of its security prisoners are already radicalized when they enter prison. Israel must thus prevent relatively moderate inmates from becoming more radical, and mitigate the level of radicalization exiting among most security inmates.

In this context, it is worth noting that a number of the terrorists released in exchange for IDF soldier Gilad Shalit in 2011 have already indicated their willingness to return to terrorism. Ahlam Tamimi, who was originally arrested for driving a suicide bomber to the Sbarro restaurant in Jerusalem in August 2009 (he killed 15 and wounded nearly 100 people), has already expressed her willingness to return to terrorism. She stated in an
interview: “I will do it again, because the act came from deliberation, conviction, and faith in Allah, praise be to Him, because a jihad fighter [mujahedd] always expects martyrdom [shahada], imprisonment, or success . . . I was imprisoned, I overcame that predicament, and now I’m free. Why would I regret it?” Similarly, Yehia Sanwar, the founder of Hamas’s security force in Gaza, said that he “prefers to live as a fighter and die as a fighter.” He stressed that the warning issued by Israel’s prime minister to the released prisoners not to return to the “resistance” would not make them stop.25 In fact, historically, some of the most prominent Palestinian terrorists, responsible for the most horrific attacks against civilians, were released convicts. Many examples exist. According to an Algmor Terror Victims Association report, “Data from past terrorist releases show that terrorists commonly return to terrorism. Indeed, terrorists who served time between 1993 and 1999 were responsible, after their release, for at least 30 attacks on Israelis. Many others train or otherwise support the next generation of terrorists.”26 In January 2004, Israel freed almost 400 prisoners in exchange for an Israeli businessman kidnapped by Hezbollah. According to Tzachi Hanegbi, former chairman of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, by 2007, convicts released in that exchange had already murdered 35 Israelis.27

The Aim of De-Radicalization

An effective de-radicalization process will, first and foremost, lead a terrorist and former inmate to renounce terrorism. Renunciation of terrorism can stem from moral considerations, or a rational cost–benefit calculation—or perhaps both. It can be motivated by a desire to gain the benefits of ceasing to participate in terrorist activity, or by a reluctance to pay the high price of continued involvement in terrorist activity. It is very rare for security inmates to completely renounce terrorism. Nevertheless, partial de-radicalization can also be considered (partially) successful. Partial success in de-radicalizing a security prisoner in Israel, for example, might be reflected in a change in the inmate’s organizational affiliation, in the nature and characteristics of his activities, or in the extent of his involvement in terrorism.

Organizational Affiliation

In general, for the past decade and a half, it has been possible to classify Palestinian terrorist organizations into two different groups: (1) organizations that openly support a political process with Israel and (2) organizations that categorically oppose such a process. Organizations that declare support for the political process with Israel are usually non-Islamic radical organizations (the term “secular” is not appropriate, as it is not accepted by these organizations). Fatah is chief among such organizations; its leader signed the 1993 Oslo Accords, and to this day it persists in some official or unofficial political process with Israel. Organizations that categorically oppose any political process, reconciliation or peace with Israel are mostly radical Islamic terrorist organizations, the most significant of which is Hamas. The decision of a Palestinian terrorist to change his affiliation or support from a more dogmatic to a more pragmatic organization (e.g., in certain cases from Hamas to Fatah), could be considered the result of partially successful de-radicalization.

Extent and Nature of Involvement in Terrorism

The vast majority of Palestinian security inmates imprisoned in Israel are terrorists who have been convicted of a variety of felonies, which are classified according to their level of
Table 5

Breakdown of security inmates according to length of sentence (2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of sentence</th>
<th>No. of inmates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under Arrest</td>
<td>1,953</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Up to 6 months</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 months to 1 year</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 3 years</td>
<td>925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 to 7 years</td>
<td>986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 to 10 years</td>
<td>698</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 to 15 years</td>
<td>718</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 to 20 years</td>
<td>474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 20 years</td>
<td>597</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life sentence</td>
<td>803</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of inmates</td>
<td>7,331</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

severity: support for a terrorist organization; membership in a terrorist organization; active participation in administrative activity within a terrorist organization; operational support of terrorism (e.g., recruiting, training, manufacturing explosives, driving perpetrators); or perpetrating terrorist attacks. A prisoner who engaged in, and was convicted of, perpetrating a severe terrorist act (e.g., perpetrating or operationally supporting an attack), and who subsequently decides to halt or limit his participation in terrorism (e.g., membership in or passive support of a terrorist organization), should also be regarded as having undergone a partially successful process of de-radicalization (see Figure 5).

Any attempt to analyze the de-radicalization process of security prisoners in Israel should consider that prisoners face two contradictory forces. On one hand, prison authorities seek the most effective tools for de-radicalizing prisoners. On the other hand, other elements perceive de-radicalization as a dangerous and negative process, and seek to prevent and abolish it. The latter include the terrorist organizations with which prisoners are affiliated; a prisoner’s fellow inmates (particularly those affiliated with the same organization); and sometimes even a prisoner’s family (who enjoy financial and other types of support from the terrorist organizations). In fact, it has recently been reported that 73 Palestinian security inmates serving life sentences receive significant wages from the Palestinian Authority, and are considered “employees” of the Authority. Both prison authorities and terrorist organizations use rewards and (threatened or actual) sanctions—“carrots and sticks”—to push prisoners toward, or deter prisoners from, the de-radicalization process.

Prison authorities have a variety of rewards and sanctions at their disposal, all of which can be used to convince inmates to participate in the de-radicalization process, or which may influence their individual cost–benefit calculations. In return for cooperating with and participating in meetings, de-radicalization lessons, indoctrination sessions, non-religious/non-ideological work, or academic, vocational or professional education, a prisoner may be rewarded with family visits, telephone calls, canteen purchases (goods and food), preferred cooking facilities and accommodations, and leisure activities. A prisoner who fails to cooperate with or participate in such activities, may be penalized in these same areas.

In direct opposition to the efforts of prison authorities, however, terrorist organizations do their best to convince or deter prisoners from taking part in activities aimed at
de-radicalization. Terrorist organizations usually maintain direct, ongoing contact with the families of prisoners, and support them with monthly stipends and special needs-based grants. This support can be used to influence a prisoner’s behavior and secure his obedience and commitment to the organization. Families may use their visits to send a prisoner messages and instructions from organization leaders. A terrorist organization can also exert direct influence on a prisoner’s behavior through his peers—that is, other prisoners affiliated with the same organization, higher-ranking ones who monitor inmate behavior, and who coerce their fellow inmates to obey the organization’s orders and policies. A prisoner’s disobedience may lead to severe sanctions, enforced by the prison peer group: the loss of group protection, ostracism, torture or physical harm, even murder.

However, the peer group need not use violence or strict sanctions to influence a prisoner’s behavior or willingness to take part in de-radicalization programs. The peer group is both frame of reference and, with its cohesive power, source of support in times of need; it quells the inmate’s ideological doubts and meets at least some of his psychological and physical needs. Therefore, a prisoner who participates in any de-radicalization program against the orders of his organization and peer group may face severe consequences.

As such, unless candidates for de-radicalization are segregated from their peers, held in special prisons or separate sections within a prison, and their families provided with the necessary setting and protection by authorities, any de-radicalization initiative will most likely fail. Alternatively, prison authorities can try to develop sophisticated de-radicalization programs that are defined in such a way as to not raise objections among the organizations, or the antagonism of fellow prisoners.

Figure 5. Partial de-radicalization of Palestinian security prisoners. (Color figure available online).
For the terrorist inmate, successful de-radicalization may thus largely depend on his understanding and acknowledging that his previous behavior, his involvement in terrorist activity, was immoral. The success of de-radicalization may also depend on the inmate’s belief that it would be more beneficial to him and his family were he to cease his or her involvement in terrorism, than it would be were he to persist. Since most Palestinian security inmates view their incarceration as an integral part of a national or religious struggle and not as the end of their terrorist activities, few of them recant or actually show remorse. Moreover, since most Palestinian security inmates were raised in a society that glorifies terrorist activity, promotes adoration of terrorists in general and suicide attackers (“shahids”) in particular, and honors Palestinian security prisoners, any effort to change their perceived moral standards or beliefs has a very low probability of success. Furthermore, as long as the Palestinian narrative encourages and rewards terrorism, it will be a challenge for Israel to significantly influence Palestinian inmates.

Unfortunately, attempts to change a security inmate’s cost–benefit analysis of his involvement in terrorism are also unlikely to succeed, given the multiple ways in which terrorist organizations can influence inmates (much more than prison authorities), and their staunch opposition to de-radicalization. Even if prison authorities do find ways to convince inmates to participate in de-radicalization programs, they will again be vulnerable to indoctrination, incitement, and narratives that promote terrorism once released to their homes in the territories.

In addition, the incentive of security inmates to consent to de-radicalization is diminished by their prospects for release under unrelated circumstances. Although over 800 inmates are serving life sentences in Israel, and more than 1,000 others are serving sentences of over 15 years, few of them have lost the hope of being freed in the near future. Many of the inmates who have been convicted of the most horrendous crimes imaginable are convinced they will soon be released in the context of a political process, or perhaps as part of a prisoner exchange, in the wake of a terrorist extortion attack (a hijacking, hostage-barricade situation, or kidnapping). It should be noted that the prisoners released in recent Israeli deals with Palestinian and Shi’ite terrorist organizations were primarily chosen by those organizations, and not by Israeli state or prison authorities. This state of affairs engenders the mindset in the security prisoner that the best way to get out of prison is to be loyal and obedient to one’s terrorist organization. Clearly, this makes any effort at de-radicalization very challenging.

The Effectiveness Question

Similar to the assessment of any counter terror method, when determining, whether to initiate or continue to attempt to induce security prisoners to participate in de-radicalization programs, one must assess the effectiveness of their strategy. Are de-radicalization programs effective? The New Britannica Dictionary defines “effective” as “producing a decided, decisive, or desired effect.” What, then, is the desired effect of de-radicalization programs in prisons? Does the strategy behind it achieve what the state intended it to achieve? And why is the state embarking on a de-radicalization program in the first place?

In introducing de-radicalization programs for security inmates, it is clearly Israel’s aim, and desire, that prisoners refrain from returning to terrorism. Consequently, and based on interviews with decision makers, our working assumption is that the key factors in determining the effectiveness of a de-radicalization program are the extent and rate of return to terrorism of discharged prisoners.
In this respect, Israel has not succeeded. Its de-radicalization efforts have not been effective in preventing released terrorists from returning to lethal terrorism. In fact, of the 6,912 convicted Palestinian terrorists released as part of the confidence-building measures that attended the Oslo Peace Process between 1993 and 1999, 854 of them had been re-arrested for acts of terrorism by August 2003. Moreover, since 2000, 180 Israelis have been killed and hundreds injured by terrorists released from Israeli jails.34

Concern has been expressed that Israel’s release of over 1,000 security inmates in return for the release of one Israeli soldier in October 2011 will have similar ramifications. Given these risks, it is difficult to imagine any other country in the world carrying out a similar deal.35

Conclusions

De-radicalizing prisoners is complex. De-radicalizing Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons is very complex, and poses unique challenges. Among these challenges are the substantial number of radical prisoners incarcerated in Israeli prisons; the lack of a death penalty for terrorists—which gives even the most radical prisoner the hope of release; the external support provided to radical prisoners and their families; the incitement to which all prisoners are exposed; and—most challenging of all—the mass release of radical prisoners by Israeli governments over the years, which gives all terrorists hope of release, and little reason for de-radicalization.

A key favorable lesson that can be learned from Israel’s experience is that it is possible—indeed recommended—to treat inmates, regardless of their level of radicalization, in a dignified and humane manner. The IPS treats its inmates in complete compliance with international and humanitarian law, which may very well be one of the reasons it has been able to contain and prevent major violence within prison compounds—a significant accomplishment, considering their highly charged environment.

Notwithstanding, Israel’s ability to significantly de-radicalize its security prisoners is questionable. Clearly, an effective de-radicalization program for militant Islamic prisoners should be built on vocational training and education. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, de-radicalization programs should include religious rehabilitation facilitated by moderate clergy who can persuade prisoners to turn away from terrorism and toward normative, productive professions. At the same time, all adverse activity that might influence security inmates from within or outside prison walls should be monitored and mitigated—a practice that has shown signs of success elsewhere in the world.36

Recommendations

Due to the complexity of the prison dynamics in the Middle Eastern setting, it is recommended that security prisoners with the potential for positive change be placed in a different setting outside of Israel. A setting capable of providing a de-radicalization program is offered, for example, by Singapore. Singapore’s efforts to rehabilitate Jemaah Islamia members have received considerable attention. Cooperation between secular authorities and local religious leaders in Singapore appears to have benefitted this rehabilitation program, a pillar of which is debate among moderate clergy, Islamic scholars, and prisoners. Through this, the program “attempts to persuade prisoners that their religious justification for their actions is wrong and based upon a corrupted understanding of Islam.”37 Such a solution can be relevant and helpful for Palestinians radicalized in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.
Offering Palestinian security inmates a Singapore-style program, outside of the Middle East, would pose many logistical and operational challenges difficult to overcome: the inmates and their families would probably oppose such a program; agenda driven human rights groups might protest; and inmates’ organizations might revolt. Such a solution might be seen as collective punishment of the inmates and their families. Legal compliance with such a scheme would need to be ensured. And, once the prisoners returned to their original setting, they might nevertheless become re-radicalized. The existing situation, however, is even much more challenging.

The Future

A de-radicalization program that succeeds in diminishing the fundamentalist religious zeal of security inmates would be a substantial blow to terrorism. However, it would only be an important first step in the right direction, since de-radicalization should begin, and come to fruition, in the prisoners’ home community—not in prison. Positive processes of rehabilitation and moderation are squandered when released inmates return to a radical environment that does not offer appropriate education opportunities, and where incitement and hatred are rife. Unfortunately, such is the environment to which most Palestinian inmates return after being released from Israeli prisons. Although the solution to that key problem is beyond the scope of this article, it is a matter of the great consequence to the entire international community and should be given the highest priority.

Notes

6. Ibid.
8. Benny Kaniuk, interview with the authors, 14 October 2009.
10. Ibid.
12. Ibid.


18. Ibid.


20. For example, inmates are not allowed to study how to prepare improvised explosive devices (a topic of interest for a few inmates).


25. “A number of prominent terrorist operatives released in the Gilad Shalit prisoner swap expressed readiness to return to terrorism, calling for abduction of more Israelis. Their statements play into Hamas’ propaganda campaign, according to which ‘resistance’ (terrorism) has proven superior to negotiations as a means to achieve the Palestinian objectives.” The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center (2011). Available at http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/ipc245.htm (accessed 27 March 2012).


29. There are no death sentences in Israel; therefore, even inmates who carried out or were responsible for murderous acts of terrorism and subsequently sentenced to life in prison still have hope of release.

30. In the context of her presentation at the recent ICT Conference, held on 9 September 2009, Orit Adato, a former chief commissioner of the IPS, stated that “no political process can be implemented without taking the release of inmates into consideration.”

31. Israel had a declared policy that it would not negotiate with terrorists and would not release terrorists who had murdered innocent civilians. That policy stood firm during hostage-taking incidents in 1974 (Ma’alot) and 1976 (Entebbe), and on a number of other occasions; however, it changed in May 1985, when Israel agreed to carry out a prisoner exchange with Ahmad Jabril’s organization, releasing 1,150 terrorists, including 300 who had been sentenced to life in prison, in exchange for the release of three abducted IDF soldiers. The released terrorists were permitted to return to the territories; they subsequently took part in scores of terrorist attacks. Many analysts believe that the released inmates served as the building blocks of the First Intifada, which began in 1987. Many expressed concern that the 2011 release of over 1,000 security inmates in return for the release of one Israeli soldier would lead to a similar or worse result.


37. Ibid.