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## Chapter 8

### Risk Assessment of Terrorist and Extremist Prisoners

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Our understanding of the risk assessment of terrorist and extremist prisoners is in its infancy, yet this is clearly a critical issue. History provides us with many examples of prisoners who have emerged from jail more hard-line and more dangerous than when they entered. The most wanted terrorist on the planet at the time of writing, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current leader of Al Qaeda, is a former extremist prisoner. He was arrested and imprisoned in Egypt in the early 1980s because he had links with the assassins of the Egyptian President Anwar Al Sadat. While incarcerated he was brutally tortured. Zawahiri was already a radical before he entered prison, but when he emerged he had become even more committed to the cause and considerably more dangerous and powerful. His prison experience served only to harden his zeal, he became a leader among his fellow prisoners and emerged as a prominent spokesman for the cause. Upon release he assumed the overall leadership of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, committing that movement to a campaign of extreme violence, and ultimately merging the organisation with al-Qaeda in the 1990s. Prison did not reform Ayman al-Zawahiri, it did not rehabilitate him and it certainly failed to de-radicalise him. It only succeeded in making him more dangerous.

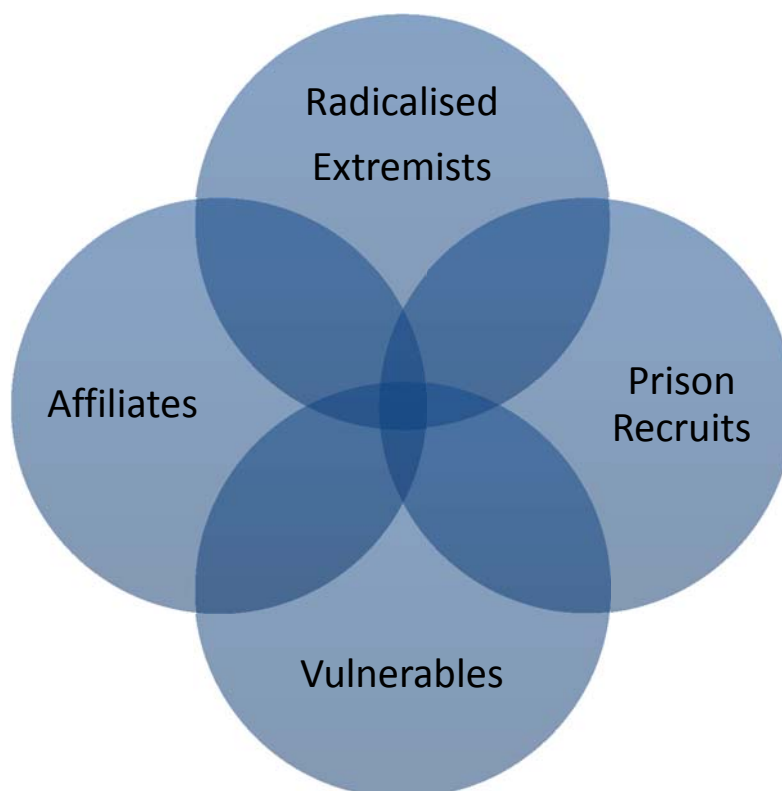
In considering risk assessment of terrorists and extremists in prison settings there are a range of essential issues to consider. To start with, not all terrorist and extremist prisoners are the same. Terrorists are surprisingly heterogeneous and they defy simple categorization into one type or profile. This applies as much to entire terrorist movements as it does to individuals,

and there are a potentially bewildering array of terrorist groups to deal with (e.g. Ganor, 2008; Marsden and Schmid, 2011). Big categories such as *Religious*, *Revolutionary*, *Anarchist* and *Nationalist/Separatist* can be further split and divided into ultimately potentially hundreds if not thousands of sub-categories. Naturally there is considerable variation between these different types of movements on important factors not least around the movement's structure and membership, but also crucially around the level and nature of the violence the groups are prepared to encourage and engage in. As a result each movement needs to be considered in its own political, social and aspirational context – the individual members who are the focus of the risk assessment are not divorced from this.

Even if one is comfortable with the particular type of movement being dealt with, there then follows the formidable challenge of the specific context of the individual. At its most basic level any effort to deal with the risk assessment of terrorists needs to be robust enough to confront the tricky question of how would one potentially have assessed Osama Bin Laden but also similarly how it would have played out with Nelson Mandela, and what would have been the result at different points in both men's lives? It is a mistake to assume that the individual's motivation will overlap 100 per cent with the stated rationale of the movement they are associated with. The motivation of young men and women to join the US military, for example, is rarely because they are immersed in the intricacies of US foreign policy and are 100 per cent in agreement with the government's aims and plans. Other factors – more immediately personal factors – tend to play a much more important role in explaining why they join. Similarly, for terrorists, joining a movement is often more about small-scale personal and social issues rather than the all-encompassing result of fully embracing a political or religious ideology.

Bearing this potential disconnect between *knowing the movement* and *knowing the individual*, a further important issue is to recognise that there are different types of roles around terrorist activity and this too results in very different types of terrorist prisoners. Figure 8.1 outlines the broad categories of who is of concern when we think of terrorism and extremism within prison contexts. Four broad groupings exist, and as the figure illustrates we should not expect that the factors which apply clearly to one group will also apply equally strongly to the others. There will certainly be overlap in places, but there will also be differences, and this means that effective risk assessment processes will need to be nuanced.

Figure 8.1: The Different Populations of Concern for Terrorist Risk Assessment in Prison



In considering the different groupings, the first and most obvious are those prisoners who entered prison already holding extremist views and who had engaged in extremist actions in the outside world. We can refer to these as the “True Believers”. Even here, however, there is significant variety between the different types of activity the prisoners may have been involved with. Some will have carried out – or have planned to carry out – extremely serious acts of violence. Others will have engaged in different types of activity which while not directly violent themselves were unmistakably intended to help or encourage others to commit violence. Thus the group will include killers, bombers, would-be suicide terrorists, and so forth, as well as ideologues, recruiters, fund-raisers and on-line propagandists. A few with longer careers may have engaged in a whole gamut of activity ranging from the relatively mild to the incredibly dangerous. Individuals who were very violent in their teens and twenties, in later decades may pose no serious risk of direct violence themselves, but could perhaps have moved into important iconic, ideologue and leadership roles. Thus the

focus of the risk assessment inevitably will vary not only across different individuals but also across the lifespan of the same individual.

The second group of concern are prisoners who have been convicted of involvement in extremism or terrorism, but where there are good reasons to suggest that they were not actually radicalised when they did so. It is often assumed that radicalisation is an absolute necessity before you can have terrorist behaviour, but this is not the case. Such prisoners may have been unaware of the seriousness of what they were involved in, or possibly they were coerced into playing a role. They may for example have been friends or family members of “True Believers”, but overall they will generally tend to have been individuals at the periphery of plots and activism. Nevertheless, within the prison system they tend to be treated as full-blown “terrorists”.

Within the prison world, a third important group are “ordinary decent” prisoners who have been radicalised *within* prison, possibly as a result of contact with extremist prisoners. These converts to the cause are distinctive because their prior behaviour outside had no political involvement whatsoever, and thus risk assessment processes with some of these prisoners may be unaware that extremism is even an issue. The spread of radicalisation among such individuals has been a recurring obsession with prison authorities, for understandable reasons, and high profile cases such as the Spaniard José Emilio Suárez Trashorras, the British “shoe bomber,” Richard Reid, and the American José Padilla, convicted of trying to assemble a radiological bomb, stand as a clear warning about the potential danger posed to the outside world by these types of prisoners (Silke, 2011a). That said, the scale of such recruitment has rarely matched the often fevered expectations of the outside world (a point made with telling precision by Mark Hamm through the title of his book on the subject: *The Spectacular Few*).

The final group can be classed as the “vulnerables”. These again will be “ordinary decent” prisoners who while at the moment may not have radicalised, may nevertheless still be assessed as vulnerable to joining the “Spectacular Few” in the right circumstances.

Assessment here may resolve around issues of who to allow such prisoners to affiliate with and co-habit with as well as considering potential programmes to inoculate resistance to radicalisation.

Thus any system for risk assessment and management needs to recognise that it will potentially have to deal with very different groups of extremist and potential extremists. Some of the differences between these prisoners will be very subtle, and others much more obvious. As a consequence, some issues which are absolutely critical for one type of prisoner may be far less important for others.

An example from my own experience can illustrate this. My very first visit to a prison was in the early 1990s to Cork prison in Ireland. This was a medium sized facility intended for medium and low risk offenders. In one prisoner's cell, however, the walls were covered with Irish Republican paraphernalia and slogans supporting the IRA. Within Ireland, IRA and other militant Republican prisoners are all normally held in the country's high security prison at Portlaoise, where the Irish military provide additional security. Why, I asked staff, was this prisoner in Cork? Shouldn't he be at Portlaoise? "Ah", they responded. "He's not the real thing. He's a wannabe."

It was clear that the staff did not regard this prisoner as a serious threat. Despite his explicit sympathy for the terrorist group and his collection of group-related paraphernalia - which in other contexts would act as major warning signs of radicalisation – were essentially dismissed here as trivial. The staff understood that it was highly unlikely that the IRA would be interested in recruiting him – the default position of the IRA in the 1990s was to view "ordinary prisoners" as scumbags, and they never showed interest in radicalising or recruiting them. While the prisoner may have liked to have been linked with the IRA, this would not have been reciprocated by the movement. Overall, the staffs' understanding both of the prisoner's background and the nature of the terrorist group, meant that they had no serious worries that this prisoner should be treated as a terrorist or extremist. If the staff, however, had been less familiar with the terrorist group or had lacked experience of dealing with "real" terrorists and extremists, then the reaction would almost certainly have been both very different and unnecessary.

### **Recidivism in Terrorist Cases**

Terrorist prisoners have very low reconviction rates. Bakker (2006) found that of 242 jihadi terrorists in Europe, 58 had a previous criminal record (24%). In only 6 cases, however, was

this prior record for terrorism-related offences (2.5%). Sageman (2004) found a similar picture albeit with a slightly smaller sample of jihadi terrorists (172 individuals), where again roughly one quarter had a prior criminal record, though these were *all* for ordinary crime rather than politically motivated crime.

Overall, probably less than five per cent of all released terrorist prisoners will be re-convicted for involvement in terrorist-related activity. For some groups the figure is potentially even lower. In England and Wales from 11 September 2001 to 31 March 2008, there were 196 convictions for terrorist-related offences, most of which were connected to al-Qaeda related extremism. Many of these individuals received relatively short prison sentences and by early 2009, nearly 100 had already been released back into society. These prisoners were released before the UK had introduced programmes in prison aimed at de-radicalising terrorist prisoners, but to date none have been re-arrested or convicted for subsequent involvement in terrorist activity. There is no evidence that any have attempted to engage in terrorist activity overseas. One has been convicted for another crime – tax fraud – though this was recognised as being purely for personal gain and not to benefit a cause.

In Northern Ireland, as part of the Good Friday Peace Agreement in 1998, 453 paramilitary prisoners were released. By 2011, just 23 of these prisoners had been recalled to custody (5 per cent). Of these 23, just 10 were recalled for alleged involvement in further terrorist offending (2.2 per cent) with the remainder being recalled for purely criminal activity.

If this is what can occur in the absence of a de-radicalisation programme we should not be too surprised then when countries who do run such programmes are able to announce re-offending rates which also appear remarkably low. For example, The Saudis for a number of years claimed a 100 per cent success rate with their programmes though that allegedly perfect result has not borne up to closer scrutiny. The official position has moved to a more realistic alleged reoffending rate of just under 3 per cent – though as Marissa Porges highlights in this volume some estimates give a higher re-offending rate. Other chapters in this volume rightly raise doubts about how accurate these and other spectacularly successful claims are, but there is still a general acceptance that the overall reconviction rate for all released terrorist prisoners is low.

The experience of imprisonment normally changes terrorist prisoners. There are many individual case studies cases to support this (e.g. O’Doherty, 1993), but stronger evidence also comes from more systematic research such as Crawford (1999) who interviewed 70 former paramilitary prisoners in Northern Ireland (as well as a small number of non-paramilitary prisoners). He found that all of the prisoners reported that imprisonment increased their level of political awareness (e.g. “we hadn’t a clue about republicanism”). What is particularly interesting is that Crawford also found that this increasing political awareness led most prisoners (70 per cent) to eventually believe that a political settlement to the conflict was the only logical solution (rather than continued violence).

Ferguson has found similar picture with republican prisoners. Most of the prisoners remained highly sympathetic to the cause but either no longer believed that violence was the most effective way to believe the movement’s aims and/or were no longer willing to break the law themselves on behalf of the movement. As one Muslim prisoner I interviewed in a UK jail put it “the cause is a moral cause”, while adding that he no longer believed that violence was the best way to achieve it.

### **What Are The Appropriate Issues to Focus On?**

Several writers have attempted to identify issues which are worth focusing in terms of assessing risk in cases of terrorism (e.g. Rehabilitation Services Group, 2011; Cole, Alison, Cole and Alison, 2012; Kebbell and Porter, 2012; Monahan, 2012; Pressman & Flockton, 2012a). For those who have produced more detailed models, the number of specific variables typically ranges from anything between 17 to 31, but figure 8.2 provides an overview of the general clusters around which most variables usually form.

**Figure 8.2 Key Factors for Terrorist Risk Assessment**



***Ideology***

Ideology plays a significant role in facilitating political violence though it is probably a mistake to view it as the most important factor. Recruits to terrorist movements often have a simplistic understanding of the ideology the movement’s leadership endorses. Indeed for some, a deeper ideological understanding only comes after time spent in prison with other members which allows them time for detailed debate and discussion. In assessing risk, key issues to consider are whether the individual’s behaviour or attitudes endorse a movement’s ideological values. To properly do this, the assessor needs to have an understanding of the ideological framework of the particular movement.

***Capability***



Individuals may have attitudinal sympathy to a movement's ideology but lack the capability to act on these. For example, the Cork prisoner mentioned earlier was of concern because of his attitudes but not because of his capability (as the movement was highly unlikely to want to recruit him or be associated with him). The more experience and training an individual has the higher the level of capability.

### ***Political & Social Environment***

Terrorism does not occur in a vacuum. Terrorist campaigns are strongly influenced by the wider political and social contexts in which they occur. This environment can either support and encourage violence, or inhibit and undermine it. Of particular importance here is the constituent community the terrorists are most associated with. It is important to consider the perceptions the individual prisoners hold of this community environment. As Crenshaw (1988) highlights "the actions of terrorists are based on a subjective interpretation of the world rather than objective reality. Perceptions of the political and social environment are filtered through beliefs and attitudes that reflect experiences and memories."

### ***Affiliations***

Terrorism and violent extremism are generally group phenomenon. Research on radicalisation highlights that social factors are probably the single most important element in the radicalisation process (e.g. Silke, 2003; 2008). Camaraderie, social support and a sense of belonging can all be powerful incentives for becoming and staying involved with a group. Any risk assessment needs to consider the affiliations of individual prisoners. Who do they prefer to spend time with? Other terrorism-related offenders? A crucial issue to consider is the degree of choice the prisoner can exercise here. For example, a prisoner who is held on a wing with a large proportion of terrorist prisoners is likely to have considerable contact with them even if he or she would prefer otherwise. In some cases, a prisoner may have explicitly requested to join (or be separated from) other terrorist prisoners which in itself will reveal much about their general political and social outlook.

### ***Emotional Factors***

A range of emotional motivational factors have been highlighted as important in understanding involvement in terrorism. These primarily cluster around issues of grievance, perceived injustice, anger and revenge. Most terrorists believe at the time of their offending that their actions are morally justified, and various psychological processes (such as

deindividuation, mortality salience, moral disengagement and risky shift) appear to play an important role in facilitating active involvement in terrorism (e.g. Bandura, 1990; Silke, 2003, 2008; Pyszczynski et al., 2006).

### ***Behaviour in Custody***

Behaviour in custody is an important factor for every prisoner in terms of risk assessment. Terrorist and extremist prisoners who engage in violence against staff and other prisoners, participate in political protests (e.g. hunger strikes) or actively attempt to compromise the operation or security of the prison (e.g. escape attempts) are clearly showing strong commitment to the cause and a willingness to engage in serious violence on behalf of it. In contrast, prisoners with a good behavioural record have shown an ability to comply with the regime and this may indicate a genuine desire for reform. For example, how jihadi prisoners relate to the prison imams may provide considerable insight into their general outlook and attitude. Other important issues to consider are whether the prisoner has shown a willingness to complete prison programmes which have been designed specifically for extremist prisoners (e.g. the Healthy Identities programme used in the UK (and described in chapter 7 in this volume)). If they have engaged with such programmes, the outcome of such involvement is obviously a significant issue to consider.

### ***Disengagement Factors***

One problem with many models of risk assessment is that they tend to focus more on factors linked with individuals *becoming* terrorists (radicalisation) and often largely ignore factors associated with individuals *leaving* terrorism (disengagement). Given that we are generally dealing with individuals who have been imprisoned because of terrorist activity, the fundamental question is arguably not about whether the factors associated with becoming involved are present – in most prison-based cases they historically inevitably will be - but rather are the factors associated with *disengagement* currently present?

Disengagement from terrorism and extremism is usually brought about by a complex set of processes (e.g. Bjørge and Horgan, 2009; Horgan, 2009; Reinares, 2011; Silke, 2011b).

These elements can interact together and picking out the primary cause in the case of any one person can be very difficult. In considering whether disengagement has occurred or is occurring for a particular individual some factors worth considering include:

- Aging. In general, individuals are less likely to remain actively involved in terrorism the older they get.
- Experiencing a turning point event (this may include incarceration, serious injury, death of a friend, divorce). Usually this is a profoundly aversive experience related to their involvement in extremism.
- The development of delayed deterrence. An increase in the fear of physical harm, future incarceration, or both. Recognising that continued involvement will inevitably have serious costs while at the same time questioning their ability to cope with these costs. There is an overall increase in the anxiety connected with a terrorist life.
- Expressing disillusionment with the movement. Is the individual showing increased dissatisfaction with the movement's policies, leadership and activities? Does he or she disagree with the overall strategy and objectives (e.g. willingness to negotiate) or with specific operational tactics (e.g. the targeting of civilian areas).
- Other negative emotions as a result of continuing involvement in terrorism. This can relate to interpersonal disputes and clashes with other group members. A growing sense that the individual no longer "fits in" or has been betrayed or disregarded by other members and supporters.
- Perceiving that the wider political and social environment has changed and that political violence is no longer necessary, or, no longer supported by their constituents, leading to a reappraisal for the need or justification for continued terrorism.
- Contemplation time away from one's offending environment, allowing the individual to evaluate past decisions and re-assess life goals, provoking a re-evaluation of their involvement in terrorism.
- Expressing changed priorities. An increased focus on wanting a "normal" life. Expressing a desire for investing in a marriage and a career, and showing more respect and concern for children, especially their own children.

## **Sources of Information**

Having reviewed the issues which are likely to be of most use when considering risk assessment in the context of a terrorist prisoner, the next critical step is to identify what sources of information can provide the necessary insight to inform this assessment. Overall, the main sources of data used for risk assessments for other types of prisoners will broadly also apply to terrorist and extremist prisoners:

1. Interview(s) with the individual being assessed
2. Specialised testing
3. Third party information (e.g. court reports, prison documentation, police reports, etc.)

### **Prisoner Interviews**

Interviews with the prisoner are the most important source of information. Interviews alone, however, should not be relied upon to reach the assessment as prisoners will frequently try to minimise the seriousness of their actions (including denying their guilt of some or all of their convictions), present their behaviour and attitudes in the best possible light, and in some cases blatantly lie. With those caveats in mind, a detailed interview nonetheless provides the best prospect to properly explore most if not all of the issues identified in the preceding section as being of importance. As a consequence it is not surprising that many terrorist groups ban their members from participating in such interview processes, or if they do participate to do so with minimal interaction and monosyllabic answers. IRA prisoners in Northern Ireland, for example, as a matter of routine refused to be involved in such processes, while more recently in England and Wales, roughly one third of jihadi prisoners have also refused to take part in the interviews connected to the ERG 22+ assessment (more on this below).

While a prisoner's refusal to be interviewed can be – and usually sensibly is - interpreted as evidence of continued extremism, this is not always the situation. In one case in my experience a prisoner had refused to participate in risk assessment interviews. When he eventually agreed to be interviewed, he did so with considerable hostility, suspicion and monosyllabic responses. The assumption made by many was naturally that this indicated he was still a radicalised extremist. Time revealed a more complex issue. The prisoner's initial refusal and first interviews occurred after he had been moved to a prison much further away from his family home, making what had been frequent family visits now very difficult and consequently rare. This led to the prisoner growing increasingly depressed and convinced that

the prison authorities were out to get him. He became convinced that the risk assessment interviews were yet another way to try to make life difficult for him. His refusal and reluctance to engage with the process was not the result of continued radicalisation but was rather about much more personal factors. When he was eventually transferred to a prison closer to his family his attitude transformed and he engaged positively and highly productively with both the risk assessment process and anti-extremism programmes.

### **Specialised testing**

Generally, research on the risk assessment of offenders has found that third-generation clinical-actuarial risk assessment measures are consistently the most reliable, however no such tools have yet been properly validated for terrorist prisoners. Some early writers argued that tests which were developed for and regularly used on other forensic populations, such as HCR20 and PCL-R, could be usefully used to help risk assessments with terrorist prisoners (Roberts & Horgan, 2008). Certainly such tools have been used in at least a few terrorist cases. However, a growing consensus has built up since then that the disadvantages of using these tests outweigh the advantages. Overall these tests are poorly designed for terrorist and extremist prisoners and in general their use should be avoided (e.g. Dernevik et al., 2009; Monahan, 2012; Pressman & Flockton, 2012b). Even the authors of the tests have themselves expressed serious reservations about their use with terrorist prisoners (e.g. Hart, 2010) and overall it seems preferable to look elsewhere for appropriate tests.

As alternatives, there are currently at least two measures which have been specifically designed for use with terrorist prisoners and which are currently in use in prison settings. These are the Extremism Risk Guidance 22+ (ERG 22+) which is used in England and Wales, and the Violent Extremist Risk Assessment (VERA-2) which is in use in Australia. It is likely that other models will emerge in the coming years.

Extremism Risk Guidance 22+ (ERG 22+) is an assessment tool developed by the NOMS Operational Intervention Services Group and was launched in 2011 (Rehabilitation Services Group, 2011). The ERG assesses offenders on 22 factors which are theoretically related to extremist offending (the “+” in the title is a reflection that the model will consider other factors beyond the 22 if they are shown to be relevant to a particular case). ERG is a

theoretical model, and as yet, does not have an evidence base demonstrating clear links to future offending. As the authors of the test highlight:

“The ERG factors are essentially working hypotheses to account for how an individual became engaged and to capture the features of their mind-set, their intentions and their capability for terrorism. None of these factors has a demonstrated link with future offending, so are as yet unproven. As such the ERG cannot predict risk with any certainty, but directs attention to aspects of the individual associated with their offending where intervention may be targeted or proportionate risk management approaches deployed.”

ERG 22+ does not provide a specific risk assessment score for an offender (in the same manner that a system such as OASys does) partly because the evidence base is much weaker and the influence of the 22 factors on risk outcomes is not yet known. The 22 factors currently all carry equal weighting in the assessment, but this is likely to change as the number of longitudinal follow-ups on prisoners assessed through the measure increases.

VERA 2 is in many respects a similar model to the ERG 22+ which is not surprising as both models are derived from a review of essentially the same literature relating to terrorism. A detailed account of VERA 2 is provided in the next chapter in this volume, so it makes sense to be succinct in considering it here. In brief, VERA 2 is built around assessing individuals on 31 factors. There is, not surprisingly, considerable overlap with many of the factors identified in ERG 22+, though the VERA 2 factors include 6 protective factors (Pressman & Flockton, 2012a). In contrast to ERG 22+, VERA 2 does supply an overall risk assessment score for the individual terrorist. Like the UK test, VERA 2 currently gives equal weighting to the different factors in arriving at this score and this state of affairs is likely to change as follow-up data becomes available.

Overall it is not possible to say at the moment which of these two tests is more reliable but it would be surprising if they produced startlingly different conclusions on the same individual given both tests have considerable similarities in origin and structure. A small-scale study by Beardsley and Beech (2013) found that the VERA-2 factors appeared to be relevant and supported its use for risk assessment, but we must wait for more robust evaluations of both models. What is clear is that both are almost certainly more useful for assessing terrorist risk

assessment than any pre-existing tests which were not explicitly designed for terrorist prisoners.

### **Third Party Information**

Third party information includes court reports, prison reports and other prison documentation, police reports, assessments by prison and probation staff, etc.. This is usually the most readily available information for the risk assessment process.<sup>1</sup> This material plays a major role in informing the overall assessment and is also critical for guiding interviews with prisoners. In cases where the prisoner refuses to be interviewed the risk assessment will essentially depend solely on this material.

While this material is more usually reliable, it should still be considered through a critical lens. For example, in my own risk assessments I am always very keen where possible to have the opinions of prison staff who have worked with the prisoner. The close proximity means that such staff can often have very remarkable and useful insights and I traditionally placed weight on their views. I adopted a somewhat more critical view after reading one particular staff assessment in support of the release of a prisoner. The statement was unremarkable in the points made and indeed was very similar to many other statements I had previously seen for other prisoners. To quote from the assessment:

[The prisoner] has shown himself to be an orderly, disciplined prisoner, not only in his own person, but also with reference to his fellow prisoners, among whom he has preserved good discipline. He is amenable, unassuming, and modest. He has never made exceptional demands, conducts himself in a uniformly quiet and reasonable manner, and has put up with the deprivations and restrictions of imprisonment very well. He has ... exercised a helpful authority over other prisoners. ... He is invariably polite and has never insulted the prison officials.

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<sup>1</sup> Though in some cases the available material can be surprisingly limited in some respects. For example, this can happen when prisoners have not actually been convicted or where much of the alleged evidence against them has not been disclosed (such as with the deeply unsatisfactory Control Order regime used in various incarnations in the UK in the 2000s).

During his ... detention while awaiting trial and while under sentence, he has undoubtedly become more mature and calm. When he returns to freedom, he will do so without entertaining revengeful purposes against those in official positions ... He will not agitate against the government, nor will he wage war against other nationalist parties. He is completely convinced that a state cannot exist without internal order and firm government. In view of the above facts, I venture to say that his behaviour while under detention merits the grant of an early release.

The problem here, unfortunately, was that the prisoner in question was Adolf Hitler.

That this assessment (supporting his release just nine months into a five year sentence) had been so shockingly wrong, and had so badly misread the man and what he was capable of, gave me serious pause for thought. Ultimately all evidence, whether it comes from the prisoner or other sources, needs to be considered in a critical framework.

## **Conclusions**

Our understanding of the risk assessment of terrorists and extremists may be in its infancy, but there is no denying that we have still witnessed enormous progress in the last ten years alone. It is very likely we will make even further progress over the next decade. The field has moved from a position where such prisoners were very poorly understood in terms of risk assessment frameworks, and where the default position was to assume that such work was either almost impossible, or else that such prisoners would *always* be high risk, no matter what.

The legacy of both these misguided perspectives is still with us and there is no question that risk assessment of these types of prisoners faces unique and serious challenges. That said, sensible risk assessment is possible in these cases. The development of theoretically informed measures to do this certainly represents a significant step forward, as is the growing recognition and acceptance of the different issues which need to be considered for these prisoners.



Risk assessment of terrorist prisoners is a work in progress. Though the picture is improving, it is still important to bear in mind the current limitations in our knowledge and competence in working with such prisoners. There remain serious gaps in the evidence base and it is likely to be some time before the current theoretical models can be properly validated by solid research evidence. In the long term, a great deal of further work is needed to identify the most reliable factors for understanding the motivations and vulnerabilities associated with prisoners becoming involved in or disengaging from terrorism. For now, the only certainty is that this will remain a complex but vitally important issue.

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