

The role of the community in preventing religious radicalization in prisons
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Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues,

In this presentation I will attempt to speak in my capacity as Head of the Islamic chaplaincy/spiritual care service. The organization of Islamic chaplaincy, which I have been leading for nine years, already consists of 40 prison imams (men and women). This means that in each prison a prison imam is available. We are very close to the inmates (for every 90 to 100 inmates there is a full-time chaplain). We have been part of the judicial system since 2007, which means that we are integrated in the custodial organization, with equal status as the established chaplaincy. We are professionals with our own standards and skills in dealing with detainees with religious and spiritual needs. From this perspective we have been dealing with radicalization, when it occurs and in a preventative way, as a side dimension to our profession. We collaborate and work interdisciplinary with all levels of staff in the organization when it comes to radicalization and violent extremism. Although the connection between prisons, radicalism and violent extremism is a recent phenomenon, we have started our efforts to prevent radicalization for a long time. So, what is the role of the “community” in the process?

Let me first say that I will address both concepts, the “community” and “radicalization”, from our point of view: the religious and spiritual perspective.

Context

Religious radicalization is a social problem which, as I have said, many prisons have faced in the last few years. Though prevention and countering radicalisation is, first of all, a responsibility of the prison service, the latter should work with several so-called significant partners. The community is one of these significant partners and its involvement is a key condition to effectively prevent and counter radicalisation.

The aim of this workshop is to share our experience as the Dutch Islamic chaplaincy regarding the role of the community in preventing and countering religious radicalization in prisons. I will focus on some success factors and some risks we try to avoid. I will concentrate, of course, on Islamic religious radicalism.

How big is the problem?

The Netherlands now has around eight thousand prisoners, a number which will continue to decline in the coming period. Approximately 27%, that is more than 2,000 detainees have an Islamic background. When detainees are registered they are not asked about their faith, so this assessment is based on how many detainees wish to receive services from the prison imam. Our detainees are distributed over around 30 state prisons, which means that there is no problem of overcrowding. Furthermore,

as the Director General of our Ministry Michèle Blom said this morning, about 70% of the detainees stay between 3 and 6 months behind bars.

Another important factor is, as you probably know, that in the Netherlands we make, and for good reasons, a clear distinction between radicalization and violent extremism, which means that prisoners suspected or convicted for violent extremism have been separated into the so-called (separate) terrorist wings. At this moment there are about 27 prisoners in these two wings. In regular prisons there is no evidence that radicalization is a big issue, which means that the phenomenon is under control so far. This means also that we primarily focus on the prevention of radicalization. So the question is what is the role of the community in carrying out this task?

Types of communities

When it comes to the concept of community, we can speak of different layers of the community. I mean by “community” a relatively autonomous network (see keynote speech of Beth Weaver) part of civil society.

In the situation of a religious minority, such as Muslims in the Netherlands, we have identified 5 layers. The first one is the overarching religious community. That is the recognized representative body of all Muslims. Different local religiously motivated groups, such as those coming together around a given mosque, are another aspect of the community. We also have identified the engagement of international movements (states, charitable organisations and so on). The fourth level consists of non-organized individuals. And, finally, we have the family and family members which are, of course, of key importance in this process.

Of course, the society as a whole can be seen as a community. But I limit myself to that part of society which is involved in the Islamic community and which, in fact, is the most affected by religiously motivated Islamic radicalization.

The representative religious body

The greatest community contribution when it comes to preventing radicalization in our prisons is provided by the national representative religious body. This body, the Contact Organ of Muslims and Government (CMO) has been the official partner of the state on religious and social issues since 2004, and the partner of the state and the Custodial Institutions Agency regarding the organization of the Islamic spiritual care since 2007. Being a partner in the organization of the Islamic spiritual care means, in our context, bearing a shared responsibility for the management of religious issues in prisons. This occurs through the way CMO prison imams are selected, nominated and instructed regarding their religious attitudes and interventions. To give you an impression, let us look at this quote formulated in 2007 in the document ‘Religious Policy of CMO on Islamic Spiritual Care (ISC) at prison services’:

- The ISC contributes to future prospects, promotes the general welfare of detainees and the supervision of humane detention.
- The ISC contributes to security, peace and public order in the broadest sense

of the word. The Islamic spiritual counsellor considers it his responsibility to assess, within the bounds of his office, security risks and to respond to them appropriately.

- The ISC contributes to the cohesion of society by promoting encounters between religions and cultures and combating disruptive phenomena such as (religious) extremism.
- The ISC promotes tolerance within their own group of Muslims and between other groups in society

By providing such clear guidelines on Islamic philosophy, which should be promoted in prisons, the CMO, as the representative of the Muslim community, responds in a preventive way to religious radicalization (something the state itself cannot do because of the principle of separation of the state and the church, lack (lack) of legitimacy and skills and so on). This approach is part of an integral anti-radicalization narrative which we apply in all our prisons.

As I said before, this is the most abstract form of community involvement in preventing religious radicalism. And, I believe it is the basic step. Furthermore, the whole set of Islamic religious guidance and counselling in our prisons is aimed at being alert to this phenomenon and at responding appropriately to it from the point of view of safety and control.

I would like to add here an important point which is the need to bring prisoners together in group activities under the supervision of prison imams. This is also perceived by them, the prisoners and imams, as a form of community that has a positive effect on the prevention of radicalization. In community, even within the prisons, one can discuss, debate and nuance his or her religious thoughts and attitudes.

Individual volunteers

Volunteers have an important role in connecting prisoners with the outside world. By doing so, the prisoners do not feel that they have been abandoned. We, as spiritual care givers, recruit and select volunteers from the community who like to contribute by supporting detainees in general. Most activities which they are involved in are communal rituals (Friday) and religious celebrations such as the End of Ramadan and the Sacrifice feast. They contribute with their presence in discussions and assist the imam in organizing different activities. Our volunteers also contribute by donating food and material attributes, especially during the Ramadan period (this does not mean that there is a lack of such things, but it is all about the gesture from the community, which is appreciated).

We strongly believe that this kind of involvement by individuals from the communities contributes to preventing radicalization.

Family

Another aspect of the community which we rely on is, of course, the family. Particularly in specific cases where people are radicalized or risk becoming radicalized, we bring the family to the table. We try to help the prisoner remember their families and we mediate with them when this is required (often there is a large gap between (radicalized) prisoners and their families).

Risks

There are also some risks when it comes to community involvement. Detainees are dependent and in a vulnerable position, so they are sometimes targeted by religious networks and other external networks (states included). These networks try to access Muslim detainees, offering them religious reading material, goods or personal contacts. Although good intentions can usually be assumed here, many of these networks display 'evangelising' tendencies and ideological and religious indoctrination whose effect is not subject to control.

We do not cooperate with such organizations and networks and we advise prison directors to take the same approach.

Ambitions

Our ambitions for the future lie mainly in:

- The involvement of more volunteers in cases where radicalization occurs
- Working on building relationships with local mosques that are suitable to help former prisoners who tend to radicalize

Thank you.