

belgium: Deadly terrorist incident in Liège raises the issue of 'conversion' and 'radicalisation' in prison

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HRWF (08.06.2018) – On 29 May, a gunman killed two female police officers and a student in Liège before he was shot dead by police. Prosecutors are investigating the shooting as a terrorist incident.

The shooting occurred around 10:30am local time near a high school on a major road in the city, which lies some 90 kilometres east of Brussels.

The local public prosecutor said the man armed with a knife repeatedly stabbed the two policewomen, then used their firearms to shoot them dead, and shouted 'al-Akhbar'. One of the deceased officers had already lost her husband and leaves behind two 13-year old twin daughters.

After the killings, the man continued on foot, opening fire on a parked vehicle where a 22-year old student sat in the passenger seat. The young man, who had recently finished his exams and was to become a teacher, died. The killer then continued and entered the Leonie de Waha school where he held a cleaning lady hostage. When he realised that she was Muslim, he asked her if she was observing Ramadan. When the woman replied yes, he answered that he would not kill her. The woman pleaded with him and tried to convince him that it is bad for a Muslim to kill other people.

The killer was eventually shot in a gunfight during which several other police officers were wounded. He had past

convictions for robbery, violence and drug dealing.

In 2015 a Brussels-based Islamic State (IS) cell was involved in the attacks on Paris that killed 130 people in 2015, and in the 2016 attacks in Brussels, which resulted in the death of 32 people.

A Belgian 'convert' to Islam

The killer's name is Benjamin Herman, a typical Belgian name. He was born in 1982 in Belgium and his parents are not Muslims. He had past convictions for robbery, violence and drug dealing. During the shootings, Herman was on a penitentiary leave, which had been the case a dozen times before, and not always without problems.

Herman is suspected of having been 'radicalised' in prison by Fouad B. who has been again arrested on 7 June.

Fouad B. was sentenced for acts of violence in 2002 and 2005. In 2006, he committed a robbery at gun point in a night shop in Verviers, a small city in the east of Belgium where an extremist cell was dismantled and an imam was recently deported. Fouad B. was sentenced to a suspended sentence of two years but shortly after assaulted a man on the street and was sent back to prison.

More names of detainees said to have radicalised Benjamin Herman have emerged in the media, such as Yassine Dibi and Joey Leclercq.

It has been known for years that there are strong links between radical Muslims claiming to be pro-jihad and criminals. The meeting place between these two worlds, which are otherwise light years away from each other, is within the penitentiary system. It is in prison that Benjamin Herman began to practice Islam. A former cell-mate testified on a Belgian TV channel that Herman was praying five times a day and scrupulously observing Ramadan.

Conversion to a peaceful religion or to a deadly political ideology?

Recruiters for Islamist ideology in prisons are not spreading a peaceful and loving Islam among other detainees, which would make them better citizens, better husbands, better fathers. Instead, they spread an ideology of hate, segregation, exclusion and self-exclusion, and indiscriminate violence. They misuse Islam and exploit the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of other detainees to try to transform them into potential time-bombs and kamikazes once they are released, as the Islamic State propaganda teaches and preaches online.

Guards in prisons say that the profile of prison populations have changed. While in the past gang leaders were imposing their rule on other prisoners, Muslim criminals have now taken their place and force others to abide by their religious norms. In some prisons, Muslims are in the majority and as a dominant group, impose their rule. In a TV program, a former prisoner testified that he had been under pressure not to be naked while taking a shower. Another prisoner said they were told they would have to join the group if they want to safely use the prison yard.

Which solution? To isolate radicalisers?

Prison guards admit that it is difficult to identify signs of radicalisation of prisoners who were originally mainline Muslims or who were not Muslim. The rule of law in democratic societies prohibits the 'monitoring' of the conversations between prisoners. Moreover, many detainees speak Arabic or other foreign languages amongst themselves. Sudden intensive practice of Muslim rituals (prayers five times a day, observing Ramadan, and so on) may cause the raising of guards' eyebrows but this is questionable.

Some propose to strictly isolate radicalising and radicalised

prisoners so that they cannot communicate with each other and infect other potential victims, but this method has a price. Building more prisons takes time and money. Building one cell in the prison of Haren (Flanders) costs 1 million EUR. The accommodation of one detainee costs the state and society 170 EUR per day. Are the tax-payers ready to finance specific and costly detention facilities for such prisoners?

New threats in the near future

Returnees from the battlefields of Iraq, Syria, and other conflicts are perceived as potential threats for the security of populations in Europe, but there is another threat that is rarely discussed: the release of prisoners who have been radicalised during their detention. In France, 450 radicalised prisoners will be released next year at the end of their term. In Belgium, it is estimated that 28 radicalised prisoners will be freed this year. When Benjamin Herman was granted some freedom, we saw what happened. What will the next released individuals do?

Some conclusions

Prisons have become places of recruitment and training of future 'soldiers' at the service of a deadly ideology, but other sectors of our democratic and open societies have also been infiltrated by this ideology (internet, social media, schools...). The problem of Islamism must be tackled upstream and not downstream. This ideology must be treated with the appropriate antibiotics and vaccinations; however, the medicines have yet to be created.

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