

Muslim prisoners through a global lens

by Hindpal Singh Bhui

How do wider narratives about migration, Muslims and security affect prison policy and the experiences of Muslim prisoners? Muslims are increasingly over-represented in prisons and detention centres across the world and in Europe today. At the same time, it appears virtually impossible to create a practical or conceptual division between the perceived threat from migration and from Islamist terrorism. Following the attacks on Paris in November 2015, it was discovered that the known attackers were nearly all EU citizens. However, media and politicians called for tougher controls on migration into Europe as a way of responding to such threats.

Greek and Italian politicians have similarly used threats of migration and terrorism together, with talk of 'flooding' Europe with migrants including 'jihadists of the Islamic State' (Bove and Bohmelt 2016: 573), and some politicians have been quick to suggest a need for cultural defence. For example, in Hungary, the prime minister argued that he was defending European Christianity against a Muslim influx that threatened the continent's identity.

This narrative has been strengthened by further terrorist attacks in 2016 and 2017, this time perpetrated by non-EU nationals, including former asylum seekers and refugees. After a Tunisian man awaiting deportation was identified as the perpetrator of the attack in Germany in December 2016, the far right political party quickly ascribed the problem of terrorism to migration. While these facts now seem to support an anti-immigrant critique more neatly, this cannot yet be seen as any more than a coincidental alignment. Some studies suggest that many transnational terrorists are migrants to their host country, but there is no direct evidence that immigration actually induces terrorism. There is better evidence to show that many of those arriving in Europe from Muslim countries are themselves fleeing the consequences of a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam (see, for example, Shankland 2016). Bove and Bohmelt's (2016) large-scale study analysed migrant inflows and terrorist attacks in 145 countries between 1970 and 2000. It found that a minority of migrants from terrorism-prone states were indeed associated with increases in terrorism, but not necessarily in a direct way, and that migration in general (i.e. that is not linked to terrorism in the migrant's home country) was associated with lower levels of terrorism. The blurred lines between migrant and citizen in debates about terrorism are illustrated by the man who perpetrated the Manchester attacks earlier in 2017; he was born in Britain but had gone to Libya, the country his parents had left as refugees fleeing persecution, before returning to the UK to commit a terrorist atrocity.

Western Europe's long colonial legacy has generated strong post-colonial, socio-economic, and cultural ties with former colonies with large Muslim populations. This has contributed to high numbers of Muslims migrating to Europe, both as asylum seekers and economic migrants. Edward Said's (1978) notion of 'Orientalism' is useful for understanding the deep-rooted nature of anti-Muslim racism, contributes to the prevalence and power of anti-Muslim and anti-migrant imagery. Said's work suggests that reductionist depictions of Islam and the West can be seen as neo-imperialist echoes of the debate about empire and the psychology that sustained it. Said (1978) argues that the West's fantasy of the Islamic world relied on colonizers producing knowledge about the colonized that sought to justify oppression, imposing a degenerate identity on colonial peoples that stresses their inferiority, dangerousness, and need to be controlled. This makes it easier to perceive Muslims today as part of an alien 'other', to be feared and opposed. For example, the dehumanization of Algerian Arabs in colonial France that was arguably required to legitimate their oppression (Said 1993; Fanon 1967a; 1967b) has perhaps been renewed today through the identification of Arabs not only as somehow inferior or foreign or black or Muslim, but also

as the source of terrorism. The label of terrorism draws in and binds those other identities with a particular stress on the negative imagery associated with them; this in turn helps to justify powerful mechanisms of state control.

In a book chapter to be published later this year I draw on empirical research in prisons and connect such theoretical understandings about Muslims, migration and security, with current developments in prisons in England and Wales. I suggest that the damaging aspects of narratives about Muslims, migration and terrorism can be challenged through better incorporation of the insights of research on foreign and Muslim prisoners. I draw in particular on a major review of the experiences of Muslim prisoners by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP 2010). It found that prisons tended to use two separate, and sometimes conflicting, approaches to a complex and multi-dimensional Muslim population. The first, in which prisoners were managed through a 'diversity lens', focused on ensuring appropriate religious observance and identifying and preventing discrimination on grounds of religion – prisons had become reasonably proficient at this. The second approach, which emphasized security, tended to focus on Muslims as potential or actual extremists, and was 'better resourced, better understood and more prevalent' (HMIP 2010: 5). One of the few clear conclusions the study was able to draw about the drivers of radicalisation was that a sense of grievance was key to the process, and addressing perceptions of Islamophobia was important to counter the ideology feeding violent radicalisation. The study remains highly relevant today given current efforts to confront the dangers of prison radicalization in England and Wales (Acheson 2016) that seem to be encouraging narrower security-focused policies that may encourage the alienation that anti-extremism strategies seek to address.

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Note: The chapter (Bhui, H.S., 'Understanding Muslim Prisoners Through a Global Lens'), will be published in a book: *Race, Criminal Justice and Migration Control*, edited by Alpa Parmar, Mary Bosworth and Yolanda Vázquez, which attends to questions about the concepts of race, racism, gender, ethnicity, identity and their complexities in border studies.

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