

# UNPACKING RADICALISATION IN A PRISON ENVIRONMENT

EDITED AND CONVENED BY RYAN J. WILLIAMS

JANUARY 2017

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

HRH PRINCE ALWALEED BIN TALAL  
CENTRE OF ISLAMIC STUDIES

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مركز الأمير الوليد بن طلال للدراسات الإسلامية

HRH PRINCE ALWALEED BIN TALAL  
CENTRE OF ISLAMIC STUDIES

*This document is the transcript of a meeting held in Cambridge in January 2017, under the auspices of the University of Cambridge's Centre of Islamic Studies. The initiative, conceived and directed by Dr Ryan Williams, Research Associate at the Centre, brought together prison officers, police officers, academics and civil servants, to consider the challenges involved in managing issues around extremism in prisons. This discussion took place in the wake of the government's Acheson report last year which identified 'Islamic extremism [as] one of the most acute risks to the safety of prisoners and prison staff.' It represented an opportunity – which we hope will be the first of several – for a range of professionals and academics to share perspectives on a range of critical issues in this fast-evolving policy area. These included: the pioneering history and critical role of prison chaplaincy in Britain and in comparison to other European countries; the complex reasons behind instances of conversion, in relation to issues around belonging, care and vulnerability, as well as belief; the role of role of "emirs" within hierarchies of Muslim prisoners; managing the relationship between security processes and the duty to recognise individuals' religious rights and personal development; and the need to recognise the complexity and multifaceted nature of individual identities and motivations in assessing and understanding behaviours. Overall, the discussion highlighted the complexity of the tasks facing prison officers and staff, in managing security concerns and safety, cultivating and assessing trust, and ensuring the welfare and development of individual prisoners. This initiative has not sought to reach firm conclusions at this stage, but aims instead to play a role in fostering an ongoing conversation.*

**Dr Paul Anderson**

Assistant Director  
Centre of Islamic Studies  
University of Cambridge

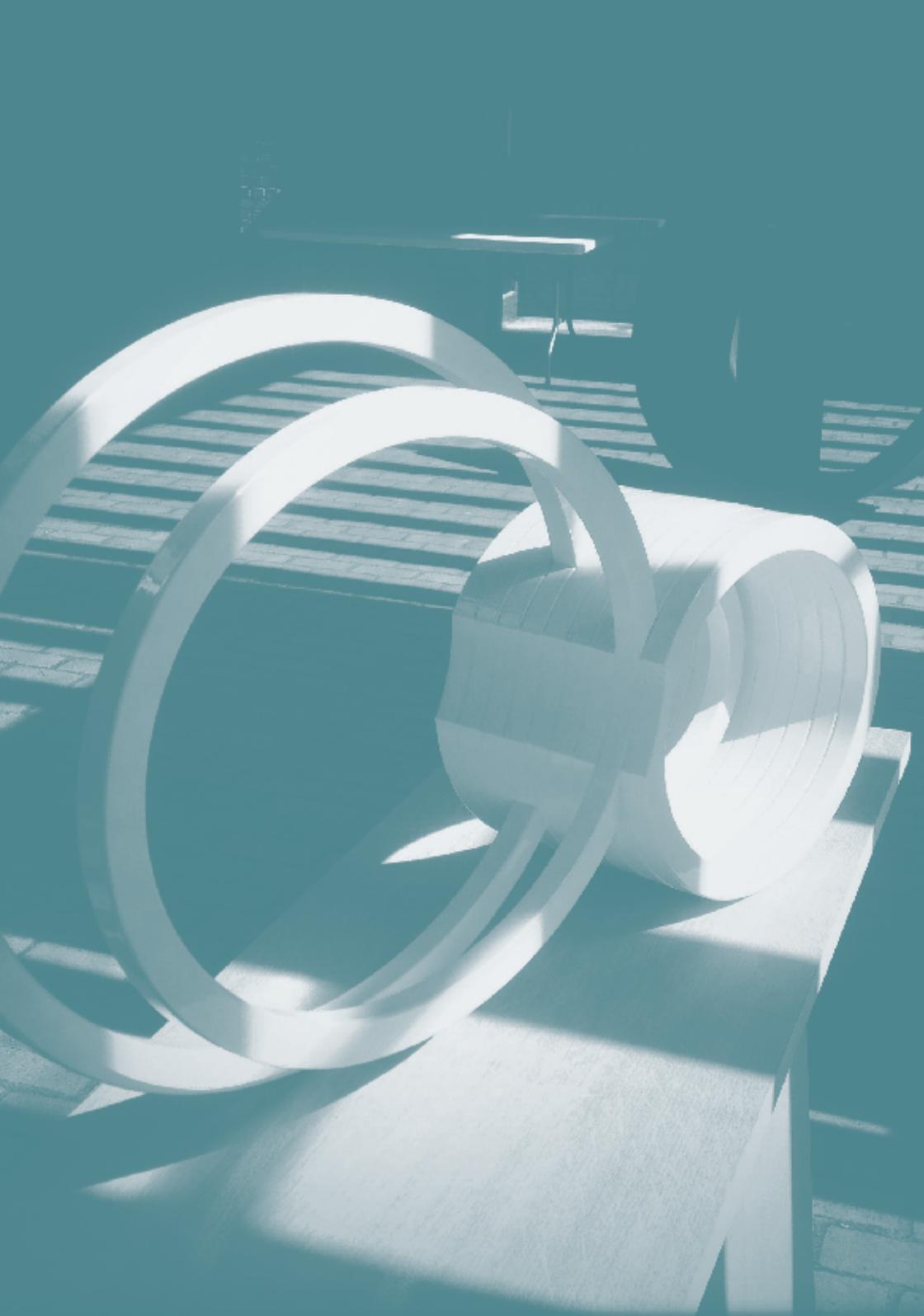
# UNPACKING RADICALISATION IN A PRISON ENVIRONMENT

JANUARY 2017

**The Møller Centre, Churchill College, University of Cambridge**

The Centre of Islamic Studies hosted a dialogue meeting on 'Unpacking Radicalisation in a Prison Environment' with the aim of fostering dialogue among a group of practitioners and academics working directly in this challenging area. The dialogue provided an opportunity to reflect on current challenges and to think about the issues around radicalisation in new ways. The event included:

- Practitioners from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), Police, the Ministry of Justice, the Home Office, and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service
- Professor Emeritus James A. Beckford, University of Warwick
- Dr Ryan Williams, Centre of Islamic Studies, University of Cambridge
- Dr Lydia Wilson, Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict, University of Oxford
- Dr Paul Anderson, Assistant Director, Centre of Islamic Studies, University of Cambridge



## INTRODUCTION

The drive behind this meeting followed the release of the *Review of Islamist Extremism in Prisons, Probation, and Youth Justice*, commissioned in September 2015 by the then Secretary of State for Justice.<sup>1</sup> The Acheson Report, as it has come to be known, was released to the public in redacted form in August 2016. The report identified 'Islamic extremism [as] one of the most acute risks to the safety of prisoners and prison staff', and the remit for the report and recommendations fell broadly under the UK government's broader counter-terrorism, CONTEST, and counter-Extremism strategies. The report was followed by a Government Response to the review findings, which included developing specialist risk management structures and procedures.<sup>2</sup>

The objective in holding this dialogue event and producing this report was simply to keep the conversation open and to allow different types of expertise and experiences to continue to shape, challenge, and refine how the problem of 'Islamic extremism' should be understood and approached in prison and probation contexts. By inviting practitioners from police to probation, and those responsible for custodial care, the dialogue event sought to encourage end-to-end thinking about individuals convicted for terrorist-related offences and those considered to be of concern for radicalising others and at risk of radicalisation. The success of this line of work lies in multi-agency cooperation and a view to ensure public safety whilst contributing to the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders back into society.

Rarely are practitioners provided the space to come together with academics and colleagues from across government sectors from police, prisons, probation, Ministry of Justice and Home Office contexts to reflect on the evolving nature of their work. As practitioners who work on a day to day basis in managing issues around extremism know, and as conveyed during the event, the issues are complex and changing. As the Acheson review highlights, it is impossible to consider the issue of managing extremism without quickly being caught up in any number of adjacent issues, including:

*the human and legal rights of offenders; the rights of offenders to be protected against direct and indirect discrimination; the rights and freedoms of offenders to practice their faith; the limits to faith practices and beliefs during custody; definitions of violent extremism and questions around its*

*genesis; the trajectory of threat, whether it be to order and control on a wing or to public safety through the planning and/or executing of a terrorist attack; and ensuring public safety whilst contributing to the well-being and rehabilitation of offenders.*

Needless to say, this is a challenging and sensitive area of work intertwined with perennial problems of punishment and society. Many of the debates that have taken shape around managing the risks around radicalisation have a long history, including debates over the most appropriate means of housing high risk offenders.<sup>3</sup> In this brief introduction, I take the opportunity to reflect on some of the points raised in the Acheson Report and some of misunderstandings that have arisen in public understanding from that report. I make these reflections by way of comparison with emerging policies and practices in Europe and beyond. This presents an opportunity to see the issues with fresh eyes, and lays the groundwork for the conversation that ensued during our dialogue event.

The challenges are constantly shifting. Terrorist-related offences cover an increasingly wide spectrum of offences, including non-violent offences related to intent to travel to conflict zones. The numbers of people incarcerated for terrorism charges is small but growing. The UK has among the highest numbers of persons incarcerated for terrorist-related offences ('Islamist' or 'international related' terrorism) compared to Europe, with the latest figures suggesting that of the 147 people in UK prisons for terrorist related offences, 137 self-identify as Muslim. Data from Europol show that the numbers of arrests for 'religiously inspired/jihadist terrorism' jumped from 216 in 2013 to 687 in 2015.

In response, this area of policy and practice is developing rapidly. Since the publication of the Acheson Report, The United Nations, Council of Europe and the European Commission have each released guidelines based on extensive consultation with member states on emerging and best practices.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to the recommendations made in the Acheson Report, there is no consensus over specialist units. Rather, these reports underscore the pros and cons of different models of placement for high risk individuals. The available options include placement among the normal population of offenders, separated in special units, or a flexible model that allows for both. There is no definitive answer for the placement of offenders convicted for terrorism offences or those vulnerable to radicalisation whilst in custody.

The recent handbooks and guidelines also stress an ambivalence around the use of tailored 'counter-radicalization' risk assessments and interventions. The development of 'effective deradicalisation interventions' (see Principal Recommendation 4 in the Acheson Report) are still in their infancy, and while they are necessary and advancements are being made, there is no 'silver bullet'. 'Normalisation' of offenders convicted for terrorism offences is an express aim in many European countries such as Norway. Offenders convicted for terrorism-related offences often have similar needs to other offenders, including access to employment post-release, the need for social support, and the opportunity to express grievances through legitimate avenues; specialized interventions and placements can reinforce "us versus them" mind-sets, risking more harm than good.

The most remarkable feature of these recent handbooks and guidelines is their insistence on a well-run and humane prison environment as the first line of defence against radicalisation. Without broader attention to the conditions of confinement –including staff professionalism, good staff-prisoner relationships, attention to offenders' well-being and development, humane prison conditions and opportunities for family contact – the impact of the specific actions taken in response to the Acheson Report are likely to be lessened.

The dialogue event in Cambridge was planned to enable a fresh perspective and multi-agency and inter-disciplinary collaboration. The discussion was anchored by three researchers who converged on the topic from their own areas of expertise.

Professor James Beckford's career is distinguished by ground-breaking work on religious rights and freedoms in prisons and the study of Muslim prisoners in England and Wales and France. The way that England and Wales have historically provided for the rights of prisoners of different faiths to practice their religion is now scrutinized as faith practice and spaces of worship, such as Friday prayers, present concerns as sites for radicalisation.

Through my own recent work in two High Security Prisons with Prof. Alison Liebling I sought to bring an analysis of prisoner social structures to reconsider the relationship between power, identity, and risk. The long history of prison sociology is instructive for understanding the complexities in disentangling the new prisoner hierarchy and the risks and character of radicalisation. I remark specifically on findings around the role of the 'emir', which the Acheson Report identified as part

of threat of Islamic Radicalization in prisons. I also discuss the role of trust in the research process and in managing offenders in prison and post-release.

Dr Lydia Wilson's work with foreign fighters brought the transnational character of radicalisation into sight. Prisons are subject to the same global forces encountered in society generally as they are intense microcosms of society. She presents her findings and the role of belonging in driving the radicalisation process. Dr Wilson also discusses the appeal of ISIS and how to counteract that appeal, and the process as a social scientist in studying and measuring radicalisation.



Participants agreed to keep a public record of the dialogue during the three conversations with James Beckford, Ryan Williams and Lydia Wilson in the form of a transcription of the conversation that ensued. The introductions from each of the participants, and the concluding discussion, were not recorded, so as to allow participants to speak openly and to benefit from collaboration off-the-record. Practitioners' comments and questions were anonymized. Participants were provided with the opportunity to review and comment on the transcript and request any details to be changed or removed. The transcript was edited in order to serve as a readable and self-contained document for others working in this field and the public more widely.

The following report is divided into three sections highlighting the work of each of the researchers and the conversation that ensued. Each section begins with a brief introduction and several key questions addressed in the discussion. Key quotes are highlighted throughout the text to enable readers to get a flavour of the major points.

What distinguished this event and report is its semi-formal structure that reflects the spontaneity of discussion and debate. The text thus has a conversational tone, which readers may find refreshing compared to the formal style of academic writing and the precision of government reports. Relevant literature is cited for the readers' reference, but this is kept to a minimum. Some redundancies were removed, some clarifications added, and sensitive information was altered or removed where it was unnecessary to the main points of discussion, though little alteration was required for this reason. The views expressed were those of individuals alone and do not represent the official view of any of the organisations involved.

The discussions were frank, open and the disagreement civil and productive. All participants commanded respect for their attention to nuance and detail in navigating this complex topic. There was a real sense that these challenges are greater than any one individual or organization. I am grateful for each participant for their contribution, to the Prisons Research Centre for support with this event through making introductions, and to the Centre of Islamic Studies and Dr Paul Anderson for generously hosting the event.

**Ryan Williams**  
Cambridge, April 2017

### **Participant Key:**

- F: Female participant
- M: Male participant
- PA: Paul Anderson
- RW: Ryan Williams
- JB: Jim Beckford
- LW: Lydia Wilson

### **Note regarding images:**

Images are of Churchill College, where the event was hosted, and Sir Antony Gormley's sculpture of the human form, DAZE IV, located on the University's Sidgwick Site, the location of the Centre of Islamic Studies. Images used with permission from University of Cambridge photo library

## JAMES BECKFORD

James Beckford introduced his research spanning over two decades on faith equality in English prisons and Muslim prisoners in Britain and France. The discussion explores questions around the complex relationship between faith provision and security.

- What accommodation and provision should be made for faith and faith diversity in prison, and what are the consequences of different approaches?
  - How has the prison service in England and Wales responded to a changing prisoner population?
  - What are the current challenges around accommodating for faith diversity?
  - What role does faith identity play in security concerns around radicalisation, violence, and threats to order and control?
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**RW:** Jim, in 2005 you published one of the most seminal research projects on Muslim prisoners, both in England and in France. Could tell us a bit about that research, and what you learned?

**JB:** I did some research on Muslims in prison, comparing the situation in Britain – that’s England and Wales, principally – with France, and subsequently I’ve added Canada and the United States, and a few other countries too. So it’s a cross-national comparative project that I did there. If I could take a step back a little bit... There was an earlier project that began in the early 1990s...and we looked at the role of the Church of England, the role that it played in prisons, in hospitals, and in what we call civic chaplaincies... In prisons, we were most concerned with how the prison chaplaincy – which was completely dominated by the Anglican church for a couple of hundred years – was responding to the growth of religious diversity, in England and Wales principally. And that’s what we did. We did a qualitative piece of research. I worked with Sophie Gilliat[-Ray] and what we were principally interested in was the balance between equality in relation to the provision of religious care in prisons, and all the security concerns that go along with that. What balance is possible?

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*Behind practitioners are apparatuses that are conditioned by political philosophies, some of them are relatively welcoming to religion some of them are not, and... that can create problems, but it can also offer certain kinds of solutions. (JB)*

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Now, this was in the early 1990s. Nobody spoke about radicalisation. Nobody was particularly interested in Muslims. So the book that came out of that, called Religion in Prison – and then it has a subtitle with the worst pun in it ever – Equal Rites in a Multi-Faith Society, has virtually nothing to say about radicalisation. It does have something to say about the difficulties that some Muslim chaplains faced in dealing with their work in a prison system where the chaplaincy was still dominated by Anglicans.

From that I then moved into the project that Ryan mentioned, comparing how chaplaincy is done in Britain and France when it comes to Muslim prisoners. Our interest there primarily was in the political philosophies that are working in the background of these prison systems with regard to chaplaincy. You know the English and Welsh system well enough; I don't have to tell you that. But what we've seen there is quite a substantial change over the last decade or so in how it is that religions other than Christianity are being brought into chaplaincy, and the position that the chaplains of those other faiths occupy in prisons; we've seen that. And of course, it's become a very acute issue when it comes to issues around radicalisation and violent extremism, sure.

But France, for the past 200-odd years, has had a political philosophy dominating the republic which separates religion from the state. They call it *laïcité*; it's a kind of secularism. What it means is that any institution of the French republic cannot accommodate religion; there is no place for religion in the institutions of the French republic. There's a lot of political angst about that. So how does that work out in prisons, and how in particular does it affect Muslims?

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*the British system...had gone a long way towards accommodating Muslims and others...That has not solved all the problems, but it's certainly made it easier. (JB)*

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This was the research that I did with a team of researchers in France and Britain, and what we discovered was that the British system – which was still, at that point in the early 2000s, heavily influenced by the Anglican church – had gone a long way towards accommodating Muslims and others, and had worked out a system whereby Muslim chaplains could be appointed on a full-time basis – and they'd gone on, and now some of them occupy senior positions. That has not solved all the problems, but it's certainly made it easier. When problems arose about radicalisation and the monitoring of certain prisoners through chaplaincy, then, again, it was easier to do in the British prisons than it was in the French. In the French prisons, there's still a tendency to try and exclude religion as far as possible. Chaplains have virtually no place in French prisons. They get in as volunteers, mainly – principally Catholic; there are some Protestants – but there are very few Muslim chaplains, and even fewer of them are actually paid for the work that they do. There are internal problems around the Islamic communities in France which have brought that about to some extent, but the French prison service is now very interested... – which is why I was so interested when you mentioned them – they were interested in our research, and they subsequently commissioned research of their own, conducted by some French sociologists – I was on their steering group – and they have been able to show that the French prison service is now realising that it cannot just exclude religion, that it has to take it into account in some way or other, and slowly and painfully they are moving in that direction. But it's been a long journey for them.

Behind practitioners are apparatuses that are conditioned by political philosophies, some of them are relatively welcoming to religion some of them are not, and practitioners operate with that as their context. And that can create problems, but it can also offer certain kinds of solutions.

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*The Muslims whom we interviewed in French prisons felt very resentful, excluded, marginalised in many ways, because virtually nothing was provided for them as Muslims. (JB)*

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**RW:** Did you find any difference in how Muslims practiced their faith or understood themselves under different political philosophies?

**JB:** Yes. Very, very sharp differences. The Muslims whom we interviewed in French prisons felt very resentful, excluded, marginalised in many ways, because virtually nothing was provided for them as Muslims. The French republic can't do that; it doesn't even count them. If you ask the French prison service, "How many Muslims are there?" they'll say, "We don't know. We're not allowed to know." Because there was a law in 1968 that made it an offence to ask anybody on behalf of the state, "What is your religion?" or "What is your ethnicity?" They don't do it. Of course they know, and their estimates are that up to 80% of prisoners on some wings in the big urban prisons in France are Muslim. So they've responded, but very, very slowly. But the prisoners themselves are still not at all satisfied with what is on offer. And what it's enabled them to do is, of course, to take the matter into their own hands. And what France has as a particularly acute problem, is that some of the "hot-heads" among the Muslim prisoners take control. There's no imam in the institution to control them, and even if there was one, they can operate behind his back anyway. So they run their own show, in effect, and they are very radical, some of them, and France has a major problem. I think it's still trying to come to grips with that. We didn't find that in Britain. We certainly found Muslim prisoners who didn't like the imam, and didn't like the imam's position on certain things, and they would say, "I'm not going to pray behind him." They would identify certain things. But beyond that, nowadays, there's not a great deal that they can complain about in the way that Muslims are accommodated.

**RW:** Those are interesting observations around the lack of faith provision in French prisons and feelings of exclusion. And added to that are questions around authority among prisoners and with Muslim chaplains. The political philosophy of excluding religion seems intimately connected to the legitimacy of the state and those chaplains who work for the prison service.

**RW:** Could you tell us more about how the structure of prison chaplaincies changed in England and Wales?

**JB:** Sophie Gilliat-Ray and I found that Anglican chaplains were predominately the ones who were really in positions of authority... And in fact, prison officers and

governors often refer to them, the Anglicans, as “The Chaplain”. It’s a subtle point, but it made the point that they regarded the Anglican chaplain as the “real chaplain”. Now that’s changed considerably over time, and now there are Muslim chaplains, for example, who are coordinating chaplains within the prisons, so they coordinate the different chaplaincies, and some are regional chaplains as well. So they’ve worked their way up, and I think there are more than 100 full-time Muslim chaplains.

In France, you could probably count them on the fingers of one hand, full-time chaplains. So ironically, although the Anglican Church dominated, it facilitated at the same time. It was in place; it was respected; and prison authorities generally listened when the Anglican chaplain said something. And so that made it easier, in a way, for Muslims, and Sikhs, and Hindus and others to come in, and to find a place for themselves within the prison. So Sophie and I referred to the Anglican chaplains as the brokers; they brokered the access to the prisons on behalf of those other faith groups. But that’s all in the past. It must seem like ancient history now for you to even think about that.

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*The French prison service is now realising that it cannot just exclude religion...and slowly and painfully they are moving in that direction. (JB)*

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**LW:** What do you think brought about this change?

**JB:** Within what became NOMS, there was a perception that something had to change, that the country was becoming so religiously diverse, and yet when you looked at the prison chaplains, they were not at all diverse in the same way, and that just wasn’t going to work. The prison population was changing in all sorts of ways. And so Britain, in a sense, was ahead of the curve in many ways, and when I’ve travelled around doing research in other countries, I have been struck by how many people have said the prison service of England and Wales was ahead of the game in many ways, particularly on race relations. It was an offence to discriminate against anybody on the grounds of race or religion in a prison before it was an offence outside prisons. The prison service statement at the entrance to every prison was way ahead of the legislation in areas of the

country outside prison. So I think prison chaplaincy has actually been quite a pioneer in that respect.

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*Within what became NOMS, there was a perception that something had to change, that the country was becoming so religiously diverse, and ... the prison population was changing in all sorts of ways. (JB)*

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**RW:** Lots has changed throughout your research career. Have you had any reflections on the current context in view of your previous research, and what are your most recent thoughts on current issues?

**JB:** Yeah. I think there's some way to go, still, in trying to achieve that balance between equality and security, and you are working it out in a sense, day by day, obviously. Just trying to work out, well, how much scope do we give to religious groups to organise themselves within prisons in the way that they do? At what point do we say what they do in the name of religion is not acceptable because it's a security risk? I mean, this is your bread and butter. You're dealing with that every day. And I don't think that's been resolved. I think that is the big challenge, as far as I see it. The work on ethnicity in Britain, multi-ethnic Britain, by political philosopher Bhikhu Parekh, I think rather dodged the issue of religion.<sup>5</sup> There is a little bit in that big report about equality and multiculturalism. It doesn't really solve the issue. There's a political philosophical problem there that still needs to be solved, and that will keep us busy for some time.

**RW:** There's a stream of thought within radicalisation research that suggests that radicalisation is fuelled by perceptions of marginalisation and a lack of recognition. **So if I'm hearing what you're saying, it sounds like these developments in Britain have actually been quite beneficial for the recognition of individuals and the significance of their faith.**

**JB:** I think that's right, but I would qualify it in one way. That is that as the position of some of the religious minorities has improved in terms of the religious care that is provided for them in prisons has improved... they have begun to ratchet up their demands. It's that process of relative deprivation. They feel unless they've

got absolutely what the Christians have got, or the Mormons, or somebody else, they're not going to be happy. So we've achieved a lot, or the prison service has achieved a lot, but it's raised expectations at the same time. And in the prisons of France, even the United States, in the federal prison system, in Canada, I don't think they've got to that stage yet. The minorities still feel very much excluded, not included.

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*there's some way to go in trying to achieve that balance between equality and security... how much scope do we give to religious groups to organise themselves...? At what point do we say... it's a security risk? (JB)*

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**RW:** Right, so accommodating for religion raises a different set of challenges. That's helpful, thank you. Now, does anybody have any questions arising from that?

**F:** I've just got a comment reinforcing Jim's point about minorities feeling excluded. I actually went on a study visit to an Italian prison, and one thing that really shocked me was just how much Catholicism plays a role in their prisons. There was Catholic symbolism everywhere, a beautiful chapel, and they have no imams and nothing for other religions. And they also have a problem whereby prisoners assert themselves as imams, and whilst they've only got a small proportion of offenders convicted for terrorism-related offences, they do have quite a big problem with radicalisation of prisoners. So it's still happening now.

**JB:** That's right, and that's what the research that I know about on Italy has found. And not just Italy; there are other countries too where it's still the case. Which does raise a big issue, perhaps for the end of the meeting: what's going to happen after Brexit? Because in some ways, Britain has been setting the pace in these matters, in relation to prison, and the sharing of intelligence in which many of you have a hand. What's going to happen to that after Brexit? So I'll just leave that hanging.

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*Prisoners are looking for meaning and hope... They're suddenly looking at 20, 30 years of being locked up. They're looking for something, and religion plays a huge part in prisoners' lives. (M)*

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- M: I was wanting to carry on a conversation from lunch. [Henry] you mentioned that recruitment to terrorist causes occur when individuals are vulnerable and they reach out and are looking for something, and the terrorist groups identify with that and fill that void. **I was wondering if you could comment, based on your experience in prisons, how often in that context religion can fill that gap.** I know it's really unfair question, I appreciate, but I'm just interested in your thoughts.
- M: Trying to tease out that problem is like looking into a bowl of spaghetti and trying to find the two ends all at the same time. You talk about marginalisation – any prisoner who comes into prison whose index offence is against a Muslim is already self-marginalised because we have a high proportion of prisoners who self-identify as Muslim. We've not marginalised them; they've marginalised themselves by their index offence. Prisoners will find out about them very quickly, and then they will feel pressure on them to convert or pay a tax. So they pay a tax. So it's really, really difficult to protect that person when the person says, "I want to change my religion." So what these people are doing are using our own rules and regulations against us, and there's not a lot we can do. We can see it's happening, but we can't particularly stop it. I keep looking towards the chaplaincy to help...
- M: Chaplains do help a lot. Prisoners are looking for meaning and hope, and they look to religion of some sort to fill that kind of gap in their lives. They're suddenly looking at 20, 30 years of being locked up. They're looking for something, and religion plays a huge part in prisoners' lives. It becomes almost a joke that they will convert to something or other when they come to jail because they need to believe in something.
- M: But there is the whole gamut. So you've got the person that's changed their religion for protection because of what they've done, what they've actually said. They could have been set up by some other prisoners to get them to make a mistake. The reasons for conversion to Islam covers the whole gamut from someone who's looking for somewhere to belong to, some brotherhood, somebody to take care of them, someone that actually understands that yeah,

“society’s shunned me and I don’t actually fit by society’s rules”. There’s a real whole gamut there, and to try and pick out certain elements of that is quite difficult, and all the time, the more radical type who are more willing to use violence. Which is actually quite a small group overall. It’s very, very complicated, extremely complicated, in a prison system.

RW: It sounds like a very complicated picture when trying to understand the reasons why people convert to Islam in prison and it involves a range of vulnerabilities. And your work is made more complicated by the few who are willing to use violence and coercion in prison and the fact that you also have to protect people’s religious freedoms. Jim, do you want to respond to that?

JB: I was just thinking about conversion and the way that prisoners change their religious registration with the prison service in order to participate in the activities of that religion. When I started my research in the early 1990s, prisoners could only do it once every six months, and it needed the approval of the Anglican chaplain. So if somebody wanted to become a Muslim, as far as the prison service was concerned, then it had to have the Anglican chaplain’s signature, and he could only do it once every six months. That got changed because of a threat of taking a case to the European Court of Human Rights and in a way, that’s the price that is paid, isn’t it, to try to introduce some sense of equality between faiths. People are free to choose their religion and you can’t have one faith deciding things for another.

M: No, you can’t.

JB: And that’s how we got to the situation we’ve got now.

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*as the position of some of the religious minorities has improved... they have begun to ratchet up their demands. It’s that process of relative deprivation... So...the prison service has achieved a lot, but it’s raised expectations at the same time. (JB)*

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M: One of the problems with that though is it always becomes a battle for souls. We have people converting, and we make them go through the process of showing their interest, learning something about the religion, all the rest of it,

but it's almost like the chaplains of particular faiths will only support them in their journey. Even when we've said, "We think this person might be under a bit of pressure to convert." They say, "No, no, no. He's fine. That's what he wants."

RW: So here's another example of the tension between religious rights and security. You have to allow for people to practice their faith and to change religious affiliation, yet you're also concerned about the reasons for that change. Is it really the best thing for them? Or does it represent them being in an unsafe position? This certainly seems very complicated, but I think it is best to see this as a necessary tension that is not easily resolved by, say, removing religious freedoms. Do you want to jump in here?

F: I'm interested and curious to know about the role of chaplains and Imams around security. What is their role and responsibility around security?

M: They are very much involved. I think, like Jim said, we're actually one of the only countries that treats our Muslim chaplains as full time staff: we vet them to a very high level, we give them training, we then give them keys and access. They're part of senior management meetings and security meetings; in fact, we insist that the Muslim chaplain is there. (...) In some ways, Muslim chaplains are in quite a privileged position. All chaplains are. They're almost seen as outside of... Because they don't wear a uniform, they're trusted by prisoners, and they tend to confide in them with certain things. Muslim chaplains, as with all chaplains, report things that are security concerns and have good relationships with the security departments. This example that Jim raised of the new structure of prison chaplaincy departments and managing chaplains – well we have managing chaplains that are Muslim, and they manage the multi-faith department and are quite an important part of each establishment.

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*The reasons for conversion to Islam covers the whole gamut from someone who's looking for somewhere to belong to, some brotherhood, somebody to take care of them, someone that actually understands that yeah, "society's shunned me and I don't actually fit by society's rules". (M)*

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RW: There may be a bigger question here: what's good security intelligence? There might be competing views as to what's relevant to this issue, and security can be achieved in different ways. My hunch is that chaplains help in security not only by following prison procedures related to security intelligence, but also by caring for the needs and development of prisoners.

Just to wrap up the questions around Jim's talk here, can I ask how relevant the tension between equality and religious freedoms and security is in your day to day work? There is this need to recognise individuals' religious rights, their personal development, but yet that's also been enfolded within some new security concerns, and it's all making the situation very complex? **Does this tension between equality and religious recognition and security sound right in describing some of the new challenges?**

M: It's certainly true for us. We recognise the need to encourage all faiths, but there's a definite perception that the more we give, the more gets asked for. So that's very, very true at the moment.

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*Muslim chaplains [are] full time staff: we vet them to a very high level, we give them training... All chaplains are...trusted by prisoners, and prisoners tend to confide in them. (M)*

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JB: I would say it's not so much a recognition of individual religious rights in this country. I mean, this is a colonial country. We still divide people up by religions and ethnicities, and we control them and regulate them largely in those terms. The prison service still identifies people, in part, by their religion. That wouldn't be possible in many other countries. So I think if it was the United States, or perhaps even Canada, you might talk more about individual rights; certainly the US. Here it's a matter of faith communities, and the rights that are given to communities to organise themselves in certain ways, and do certain things within prisons, which is very distinctive of this country and not other countries. That, I think, has a lot to do with colonialism.

RW: That's very helpful, thank you. One last comment and then we'll switch...

F: I'll just say, it seems that everyone's kind of turning to chaplaincy on this issue, but is this even an issue for chaplaincy and around religion? Because what [Henry] is describing centres more are people converting for reasons that are not necessarily a genuine interest in religion. It seems to be, like you were saying, more gang issues, so the other systems in place in prison already deal with those kind of issues, rather than looking to chaplaincy.

RW: Interesting, thank you, it seems that the tendency is to look to the chaplaincy for a solution as though it is their problem, but as you say, it involves prison dynamics that prisons are equipped to deal with in other ways.

F: The issue is about why people join groups rather than whether they have genuine interest in religion.

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*The issue is about why people join groups rather than whether they have genuine interest in religion. (F)*

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## RYAN WILLIAMS

Ryan Williams discusses his research in two English high security prisons and explores his experiences as a researcher in developing trust with research participants. The discussion leads to analyse the challenges of building trust in a prison environment and in relation to managing offenders post-release.

- How do different prison cultures and forms of order produce different prisoner social structures and types of leadership?
- How is trust cultivated? What is at stake in cultivating trust in prison and probation contexts?
- What are the practices and systems that are in place that make trusting, and demonstrating trustworthiness, easier or more difficult?
- Trust is important, but it involves taking risks and skills of discerning trustworthiness. How is this balanced achieved?

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PA: Ryan started at the Centre of Islamic Studies a couple of months ago. He previously had experience working within two high security prisons in the UK and conducting a fairly long-term research project in those settings, and he is beginning a new research project with us on Muslim offenders and citizenship as it relates to rehabilitation. But I wanted to ask you Ryan about your previous research: *What were the main findings and issues that interested you?*

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*my background in theology and religious studies was crucial for exploring how religion, and Islam especially, is coming to redefine the prison experience, especially in high security prisons. (RW)*

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RW: Yeah, so from 2014 – 2015 I worked with Alison Liebling and colleagues<sup>6</sup> at the Institute of Criminology here in Cambridge on a study funded by the ESRC called “Locating Trust in a Climate of Fear”. I didn’t have experience working in prisons prior to this, though I had a background in studying interfaith relations and Muslims in community settings. It turned out that my background in theology and religious studies was crucial for exploring how religion, and

Islam especially, is coming to redefine the prison experience, especially in high security prisons. The study wasn't focused on radicalisation, though questions around radicalisation formed part of the context in which we worked; we were instead interested in studying trust. We thought it was important to understand how trust works in a place as stark as a high security prison, where trust breaks down, where it can be found and how it can be built. We conducted a total of about 10 months of fieldwork in two high security English prisons. I personally spent about 80 days in prison, so this was intensive and immersive work.

We were given an incredible amount of freedom in the research, and we're very grateful for the prison service for facilitating this. We were given keys; we could walk around; we interviewed staff as well as prisoners. And because I have a background in religious studies and theology, my interests tended to lean towards the chaplaincy, and towards Muslim prisoners. I was surprised by how open people were to tell their stories. We interviewed probably about 45 of Muslim prisoners, and the rest were a diverse mix of other people, with over 100 prisoner interviews and 60 staff interviews in total.

One main finding came from our explorations around the concept of "intelligent trust", borrowed from Onora O'Neill, and a comparison of trust between two prisons. Studying "intelligent trust" enabled us to ask questions around whether the right levels of trust are being invested in the right people, and whether the right levels of distrust are being invested in the right people as well. Trust is important because individuals who are mistrusted for the wrong reasons may perceive power by staff and the institution as illegitimately imposed, and because it can, as Alison Liebling has explored in different ways, damage character. We found that there were significant differences between intelligent trust in the two prisons and this triangulated with what prisoners were telling us about each of the prisons during our interviews.

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*individuals who are mistrusted for the wrong reasons may perceive power by staff and the institution as illegitimate, and because it can, as Alison Liebling has explored in different ways, damage character. (RW)*

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There were also very different forms of order and control in the two prisons. We found in one prison a particularly heavy-handed use of power, and so for instance, prisoners' described frequently being moved to the segregation unit for infractions that they had considered quite minor or that ended up being overturned in adjudications. In the other prison, we found a much lighter and negotiated approach to order and control among staff. So this was a bit of a more informal and dynamic. Staff drew boundaries, but there'd be more of a negotiation between some of the prisoners that were out of line; there might be conversation first before something else happened. So prisoners in that prison described a very different sense of being in that prison – it was lighter; it felt less oppressive – whereas prisoners in the other prison described it as heavy and that staff were always very close and on you in a way that was quite oppressive-feeling.

This was important for a third finding related to the prisoner hierarchy – or the sources of status or leadership among prisoners. I don't have time to detail this fully, but what we found was a clear prisoner hierarchy in one prison but not in the other. Current thinking on the new prisoner hierarchy and radicalisation suggests that "terrorist kingpins" run the wings, and that this is creating worrying social dynamics. Our study, by contrast, found that leadership – the "Emir" – was not characterised by a propensity for extremism or violence, but rather was much closer the "real man" that Gresham Sykes explored in his classic 1940s work on *The Society of Captives*. The "real man" served to broker conflicts on the wings and with staff so as to keep the balance and keep the peace. The hierarchy emerged within the heavy-handed prison, where prisoners recognized that the actions of 'hot-headed' prisoners brought consequences for everyone and generally disrupted their daily lives. So contrary to the media headlines of emirs who are running the wings and concerns over Muslim gangs dominating, the prisoner hierarchy that we found served to keep the balance of peace.

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*it's really hard to rebuild trust once it's broken* (RW)

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- PA: Very interesting. You were coming into prison as an outsider, as a temporary visitor, so you obviously had to deal with issues of trust and mistrust yourself. **Can you say a bit about your experiences of perhaps people mistrusting you or people trusting you? How did you try and initiate those relationships? How did you go about it?**

RW: Yeah, as a researcher, it's very difficult to get people to talk to you and to open up to you. I think in a prison setting it was helpful that I was separate from the prison establishment or NOMS as that position naturally aroused a sense of curiosity among prisoners. I recently followed up with a prisoner and had this strange experience of having someone describe me in a way that I didn't recognize. I thought that we were pretty confident as we spent time on the wings, but this prisoner told me otherwise, he said: "No, you guys looked awkward. You looked uncomfortable!" And so he kind of felt sympathy for us. So I guess we looked a bit uncomfortable and out of place, and so there was a natural curiosity, a natural empathy towards us. But it took time. Some people were more forthcoming than others. We were after all in their living space, and we had to respect boundaries as outsiders.

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*contrary to the media headlines of emirs who are running the wings and concerns over Muslim gangs dominating, the prisoner hierarchy that we found served to keep the balance of peace. (RW)*

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I think what opened the door the most was the topic of the research, that we were interested in trust, and building trust, and we were interested in their experiences. The theme of trust and mistrust resonated with them and that opened a door. They recognised that they are distrusted and often mistrusted and that it's really hard to rebuild trust once it's broken and to develop trust within the prison system in order to progress. So trust was a theme that followed them through their life stories as well as their own histories and experiences in prison. So I think the theme helped.

Also, I think spending a lot of time with people helped. We were on the wings; we went into education, the workshops, and attended religious services. I remember one individual who called me a spy for about eight months and then all of a sudden he came up and said, "I heard you're studying religion in prisons." I said, "Yes." He said, "I want to talk to you," and so we finally had a conversation.

So it takes a lot of time to build up trust, and it's the same for practitioners. I remember one very inspiring prison officer who had said that his day to day approach was to "wear prisoners down with kindness". And so every day there was this one lucky prisoner who would never say hello to him, never even

acknowledge him with eye contact, but every day the officer would make an effort to look him in the eyes and say, "Good morning." He did that, I think, for something like two years, and he said finally the guy broke down and said "good morning" back! So I think that's a good illustration of way that practitioners and researchers, in different ways and for different reasons perhaps, are in it for the long haul and playing the long game of building up trust.

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*One way of thinking about trust is it's something that's nice, and warm, and positive, and it helps relationships to function. But another way is actually to recognise that trust and risk always go hand in hand. If I trust you, at some level I'm taking the risk... I'm entrusting something. I'm sort of making myself vulnerable. (PA)*

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**F:** Ryan, did you ever get asked what religion you were, and did that change the response you got from Muslim prisoners?

**RW:** Yes, I did. I'm Christian by background, and I think being able to identify from a faith perspective was useful. People I spoke to were able to see that I'd come from a particular position, and I think that sort of transparency reciprocates transparency. It's important to come to an interview as a person. I don't mask things; I am just curious with other people. So that's helpful.

**PA:** One way of thinking about trust is it's something that's nice, and warm, and positive, and it helps relationships to function. But another way is actually to recognise that trust and risk always go hand in hand. If I trust you, at some level I'm taking the risk... I'm entrusting something. I'm sort of making myself vulnerable. So I'm wondering, how did the prison authorities, people whose job it is to keep the order, see trust? Did the act of trusting certain prisoner groups feel like a risk? Did they recognise that things could potentially go wrong?

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*it takes...time to build up trust...I remember one very inspiring prison officer who had said that his day to day approach was to "wear prisoners down with kindness". (RW)*

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RW: Yeah, I like that way of framing it, that trust involves a bit of risk, like the fact that we were trusted with keys – it took a bit of risk to let researchers into prison. I think that prisons can become places where the aim is to allow as little trust as possible because no one wants to take a risk. But if that's how society works, then that's the end of society as we know it. Nobody would go outside, because we wouldn't take any risks. In more concrete terms, there were some differences between the two prisons we studied in terms of trust towards Muslims as a group. In one prison, Muslims were treated as a group rather than as individuals, and there was a good deal of distrust of the group as whole. In the other prison, which had fewer Muslim prisoners, they were seen in day-to-day practice as individuals, and treated with their own individual needs for respect and dignity.

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*In one prison, Muslims were treated as a group rather than as individuals, and there was a good deal of distrust of the group as whole. (RW)*

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So for instance, in that one prison there was one prisoner who said, "Yeah, being in other prisons than this place is different," and he gave the example of just doing pat-downs on the way to Friday service, for instance. He said they have a laugh and a giggle with you while they're doing it, rather than making it a military-type operation. They make you feel like a person as it's being done rather than representing a group that is part of a wider threat. So there's little things that help to build trust, and being seen as an individual, rather than as a group, part of a Muslim gang, is an important starting point.

F: **Did you look at how trusting they were of staff, and whether staff being trusting of prisoners had an impact on their trust of the staff?** I had a recent meeting where we discussed whether prisoners would go to staff if they felt vulnerable, and the overwhelming conclusion that came out was that prisoners don't trust staff, and would not go to staff.

RW: Yeah, that's a good question: how much do prisoners trust staff? I think there's always instances of prison officers who prisoners will trust, and I think that's what's quite key. Even in a prison that had very low levels of trust, there was always an exception. There was one officer who prisoners thought, "Oh

yeah, I'd go to him or her." So there's always an exception, even if there is that divide.

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*how much do prisoners trust staff? I think there's always instances of prison officers who prisoners will trust...one officer who prisoners thought, "Oh yeah, I'd go to him or her." So there's always an exception, even if there is that divide. (RW)*

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M: Yeah, but trust is relative. It's trust that they'll do what they say they're going to do. Not necessarily that they're going to trust them with their lives or confide in them. It's about "Yeah, I will look into whatever and I'll see it through." And others will say, "Yeah, I'll look into it," and they will forget about it. So it's a qualified trust.

RW: Yeah, it doesn't sound like it's much, but that's everything in a prison when you have no control. For somebody to actually follow through with what they're going to do.

M: Yeah, if we say we're going to do it, we have to do it. It's one of the things we're taught right from the word go is never promise a prisoner you're going to do something for them if you're not going to see it through, because otherwise you lose your credibility. But unfortunately, plenty do lose it.

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*building up trust is a very, very important thing. At the end of the day, successful offender management, just looking purely from the practitioner's side, involves putting a level of trust in that person, and vice versa. (F)*

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M: I'm managing high risk offenders on license. I think that trust is a massive issue to get them to engage with us, and often it would be that if we saw good progress, that we would relax license conditions. Obviously that was a big risk from us, because you're relaxing the conditions that are managing their risk, but if they saw that they'd got those incentives, and that license conditions did get relaxed, that they would definitely have to build trust with those cases. But it did involve us taking a risk, and often an argument with the police in order to get those conditions relaxed.

M: That is really true. We used to make these decisions around offenders, and coming up with these decisions about how much trust we've got in them to relax license conditions, therefore make our management easier but also probably slightly riskier. Again, as you said about the prison officers, building up trust is a very, very important thing. At the end of the day, successful offender management, just looking purely from the practitioner's side, involves putting a level of trust in that person, and vice versa.

M: But that's really difficult, especially with the type of people we're discussing today. I use the term deceptive compliance, which they use to garner trust. On the face of it, they will follow your rules, or they will play the game, but through various means of intelligence gathering, you know that they're lying to your face, and that does happen. And that's in order to progress to a lower category of prison where there's less monitoring. I know that's not a nice thing, but that's what makes it even more complicated, because then you've got to try and work out who is deceptively compliant and who is being genuine.

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*there's little things that help to build trust, and being seen as an individual, rather than as a group, part of a Muslim gang, is an important starting point. (RW)*

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**RW:** I guess that suggests that there's very low levels of trust to begin with, and it's a relationship. It works both ways.

M: I think that whilst I appreciate what you've just said, it does suggest low levels of trust, but as practitioners I think what you have to appreciate from our side as practitioners is the level of risk that we carry and work with. If we make that mistake it comes down from very high up, and it's just one of those things that you've got to learn to work with, but you are still taking risks every time you make a decision around the management of an offender. It's part of a natural process. And yet we know there's those that are playing the system, saying the right things to the right people. So when we do sit round a table, we all come back with the same stories saying, "Yeah, that's fine." But, I, because of the position I work from, might have another piece of intelligence that completely puts that in a totally different perspective. But that's what we

have to balance, and all the time you're doing that. Unfortunately, you are going to disrupt that trust.

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*what you have to appreciate from our side as practitioners is the level of risk that we carry and work with. If we make that mistake it comes down from very high up, and it's just one of those things that you've got to learn to work with, but you are still taking risks every time you make a decision around the management of an offender. (M)*

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- M: For staff, working with prisoners who they know are incredibly violent, they also suspect – and are quite right, usually most of the time that these prisoners are far more intelligent than them... They're always going to struggle to build trust with them because they think, "Crikey, this bloke can run rings around me." And that's what we're dealing with. So it's easier to hold them at arm's length, and just don't trust anything.
- M: Right. There's another huge barrier to building trust as well. If you compare this to other crime sites where you've got gang crime or something, they might not trust the authorities. But part of the political ideology, is that we, as the government, are the enemy in terms of political ideology that people sign up to. Right from the off, you're already the enemy, so establishing trust from that position is really difficult.
- PA: I just wanted to ask, chaplains must be in an interesting position in relation to questions of trust, being part of the prison establishment, but also being in a different kind of moral relationship to the prisoners, offering pastoral support and guidance and so on. Is this an issue that your staff regularly think their way through, how to cultivate trust? What do they come up with?
- M: I think it's one of the things that imams are continuously faced with, especially within high security, more so than other prisons, where the imam is seen as a government imam, employed by the state and they see them as being part of the system. You will get prisoners that refuse to pray behind that particular imam, because again, they see them as being part of the system. But thankfully they're very much in a minority. I think most Muslim prisoners appreciate and

value the position of the imam. We're very particular as to who we endorse. We make sure they have a certain level of learning and scholarship behind them, which makes them recognised as imams before we can say, yes, they can work as Muslim chaplains. I think most prisoners accept that actually they have a great deal of knowledge within Islamic theology, and carry that sort of expertise that they feel that they can turn to. But it definitely does happen. Sadly, sometimes an imam may be seen as just part of the system and so on, and these things do happen, but like I said, I think they're actually very much in the minority.

PA: I think these are all fascinating questions. The question of how authority and perceptions of authority relate to trust. Questions around risk: Trust is all very well, but you're managing various types of risk. What's at stake? What are the regulatory systems that make that easier or more difficult? I think all this shows is that this research is probing some very important and fascinating issues, and I'm sure that this will provide food for thought in the coming months. But we should draw it to a close.

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*Is this an issue that your staff regularly think their way through, how to cultivate trust? (PA)*

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## LYDIA WILSON

Lydia Wilson discusses her research in active conflict zones around the world and interviews with foreign fighters in prisons in Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Jordan, and Kosovo. The conversation turns to discuss problems around doing research in conflict zones with vulnerable people, the possibilities and limits of risk assessment, and opportunities for reducing the appeal of engaging in foreign conflicts.

- What are the motivations and pathways towards extreme violence?
- What are the global and local drivers behind foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria?
- How do social scientists, and practitioners working in this challenging area, trust their data and know that the information they are getting is reliable and accurate? What role does trust-building play in the quality of information and understanding?
- What can be done to prevent the appeal of ISIS? What can be done to assess and reduce the risk of those engaged in foreign combat and returning home?

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RW: Yeah, let's move on to Lydia Wilson, who has conducted some extraordinarily interesting research in lots of different places. [Where has your research taken you, Lydia?](#)

LW: Most of my research has been in Iraq and Lebanon, but also I have interviewed in Morocco, Jordan, Kosovo, Belfast and a little bit in America with American colleagues. The basic questions I examine are motivations for and pathways to extreme violence. So I started about six years ago in Iraq, where I was working with different factions of armed Kurdish groups, PKK, but also the groups that at that time weren't actively involved in any fighting, but they had been. We were looking at different routes to joining armed groups, and what motivated different choices, and those sorts of questions. I did work in Lebanon, and then, of course, eventually ISIS emerged, and the conflicts in the Middle East got very active. That took me back to Iraq for a while. I go to the front line fairly regularly, a couple of times a year. I spend a few weeks in Iraq going back to the Kurdish groups again, so that's had a very interesting longitudinal aspect

to it, but also ISIS prisoners that the Kurds have captured. These are mostly sleeper cells, because so few people on the battlefield actually survive, and if they do, sadly, the Kurds mostly kill them anyway. So I interview people who have done things like car bombs or assassinations.

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*The basic questions I examine are motivations for and pathways to extreme violence. (LW)*

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**RW:** And what are you learning on the front line of the conflict in Iraq?

**LW:** The Sunni militias on the frontline are from exactly the same tribes as ISIS, and are actually shooting at their tribes. What's driven those fractures in tribal society? They're getting text messages from their auntie saying, "Please don't join this fight. My son's there; your cousin's there." And then that man will text his cousin saying, "Prepare to die. I'm going to kill you." And they're both saying "Allahu akbar". So I'm interested in the sorts of decisions that people make when they engage in violence. Sunnis on the frontline of Iraq don't have to pick up a gun on either side, and yet they are killing their families. So I'm doing that research in very active conflict places, which is useful for understanding certain psychological features. The features that I study are most pronounced on the front line, when people are in a very real way facing their death.

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*I'm interested in the sorts of decisions that people make when they engage in violence [and] I'm doing that research in very active conflict places (LW)*

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With ISIS and the flow of foreign fighters my research has also gone relatively global. And I'm trying to find out why people are travelling there, from Morocco, Jordan and Kosovo at the moment. I'll be in Macedonia soon, and back to Jordan in a couple of weeks, trying to find the extremists, the returnees, or the ones prevented from going, the ones that were fully radicalised to the point that they actually made the effort to go to Syria, whether they succeeded or not. The people I interview are mostly in prison, though some have been involved in certain deals with the government if they've been assessed to be low risk,

and especially if they're being used in deradicalisation programmes in various countries to help prevent others from going.

Governments' demands have shifted my research questions a little bit, because they really want this assessment work. I don't really like doing it, because it hasn't been my research background, but we're gathering colleagues together to try and map this out a little bit, try and get more robust data on risk assessment in very varying contexts.

**RW: What are the drivers you're finding?**

LW: The drivers to ISIS? There are some very clear global trends, such as the promise of a utopian Islamic State through struggle and hardship and the clear way that ISIS structures the group and satisfies the human desire to belong.<sup>7</sup> But the local drivers are sometimes very surprising. These include the use of local grievances to fuel alienation from competing identities, including national ones. Criticism of the Saudi royal family over teaching piety yet practicing hedonism, or leaders in Morocco and Jordan seeking the incompatible goals of combining democratic ideals with Islam.

In the last three months my interviews in Morocco, Jordan and Kosovo have been very intense and close together. Morocco and Kosovo were way more similar than Jordan in terms of local drivers. I'm finding that there aren't links with other Arab countries, there isn't that consistency through the so-called Muslim world. Kosovo isn't really considered part of the Muslim world, though it's 95% Muslim, and yet there that's what was so close to Morocco, in terms of the questions I was asking, the issues I was probing.

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*they just want to tell me what I want to hear so that I will then feel good about them and help them, and no matter what I say, that can be a very big problem in doing this type of research (LW)*

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There are so many similarities to your research, Ryan, even though the context seems to be so different. Especially in relation to trust-building. But in my research I don't have a long period to get through to people and build trust. Quite often I'm interviewing people on death row. I'm interviewing people

who I will never see again, for many different reasons, and I can have maybe one or two hours. So taking the time to build up trust with them is basically impossible; we've had to devise proxy questions instead. We devise questions which come at the same issue from very different areas, so the context of the questioning is different. By proxy questions, I mean things like... They'll say how much they hate the Islamic State, or whatever. Then you'll say, "Now imagine somebody that you fought with but is still there. How do you think they would be answering?" And you go through all those sorts of things, and it's very telling because sometimes they go straight into "we": "We had our faith; we had our commitments; we had each other," or whatever it might be. So then you can easily see that they are beginning to speak for themselves as well. It's very, very difficult, and it's so much better to spend the time with people when I do have that luxury. I'm revisiting prisoners in Kosovo, and sometimes they say no the second time round, but enough say yes and I can then start asking again.

**RW:** That sounds very challenging and I'm wondering: How do you trust your data – the information you're getting – during your interviews?

**LW:** Trust-building and the validity of data is one of the major flaws in this line of work. I mean, it dogs social sciences, and it has done forever. How do you know people are telling you the truth? You don't. Or how do you prove they are telling the truth or lying to you. It's very hard. I think the social sciences have developed some quite robust ways of getting round that, but yeah, social desirability remains an issue.

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*people were sacrificing their lives for their buddies, rather than democracy or the motherland (LW)*

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There's two major problems with this particular group that I encounter. One is that they think I can help them. That's often the case in the Middle East, because I think white people still have this power. Well, I mean, it just is true. Certain types of white people do have an enormous amount of power over their societies, and that's very dangerous because social desirability comes in; they just want to tell me what I want to hear so that I will then feel good about them and help them, and no matter what I say, that can be a very big problem in doing this type of research, and it comes up in all sorts of ways.

But then the other massive problem in doing this research is that they are just so resentful and so angry, and I represent everything they hate. That is much easier to deal with, because if the anger is close enough to the surface, it's very easy to say, "Well, just tell me. Please, explain it to me. If you could say anything to the prime minister or the president of America, what would you be saying? This is exactly what we need to hear." And then, of course, if they are at that emotional state, they desperately want to tell their story. It's something that... It's not like I'm probing to say, "Well, what did you mean by that?" The words kind of come out.

I'm also finding that trust-building with the institutions is very hard, which is why my work is easier in Iraq because I've been there so much. Kosovo has given me huge access because I really do think they think I can profile these people, no matter how many times I've said that isn't what I can offer. I think there's that residual faith in psychology as a discipline. And then Morocco and Jordan is a nightmare. You have to jump for any opportunity you can, and then they say, "Oh, actually we couldn't do it today." When you're already at the ministry, they're like, "Oh, sorry. There's a bit of a problem." And there's never any real excuse. It's just always like, "Oh no, you can come. You can come tomorrow. That's very hard.

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*What the theory has predicted and routinely shows is that when one form of identity is the most extreme, when that supersedes every part of the identity (LW)*

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**RW:** Thank you. Can you take a step back and tell us about what you're measuring and what you're finding?

**LW:** So my work relies fusion theory. So each of these sets of circles show different aspects of people's identity. Now, I have all of these in the person's own language and they are labelled; so this is a blank one just to give you the idea. Now, I'll just offer the question exactly how I would express it to an interviewee. The small circle on this diagram is you. The big circle is a group that I'm going to tell you about. Normally under the big one, I start

with family. This is you; this is your family. On the far left, you are so far apart from your family that you're not even touching. The next one shows you just touching with your family. Then you're overlapping, half-half, quite close... But on this last one, you are entirely inside your family. You are part of your family's identity. You are at one with the identity of your family. Now, the family is easier to start with because it's not very controversial, and normally people in all cultures go for one of the last two. Then I follow up with, "Who do you mean, and what does your family mean?" because that of course varies.

When we ask fighters about their friends, they will pretty much always think in terms of their comrades, their fighter friends. This is a feature of conflicts throughout history. For example, in World War II, there was extensive work done with the American army that found that people were sacrificing their lives for their buddies, rather than democracy or the motherland, or whatever. When we ask non-fighters about their friends, their friend group is always related to school or university and other sorts of things.

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*when we break that down we see that extreme action has nothing to do with the ideology. Rather, it's a question of the group; it's the belonging rather than the ideology. (LW)*

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These, of course, are redacted for different countries, but I often then go onto ethnicity. So Arab, Kurd etc. How Arab do you feel? How important is Arab-ness to your identity? Nationality? Jordanian, Kosovar, whatever. Religion as an entity, but I also ask about the ummah, the Muslim ummah... Every Muslim in the world from Indonesia to America, when you think of that whole community, how close are you? Now, that's the one that I have to often probe. With the ummah, I follow up with, "How about Iranians?" Because that immediately tells me so much about sectarianism. There are huge divisions often between countries. It's like, "Well of course, Iran, what do you mean? They're Muslim." But for most countries, especially in the Middle East, it's, "Not Shia. I didn't mean them," as if I'm really stupid, and then you can start talking about sectarian issues, in-groups, out-groups and those sorts of things.

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*the messages coming back from Moroccans in Syria is real homesickness...they've got this very strong identity, and that's being used to tempt them home. (LW)*

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**RW:** That's a fascinating approach, can you tell us what you're finding?

**LW:** What the theory has predicted and routinely shows is that when one form of identity is the most extreme, when that supersedes every part of the identity – so when your group starts becoming more important than your family, whether that's nation, ethnicity or religion or anything, any ideology – that's when people are most tipped into extreme action. And so sacrifice, torturing, women and children, targeting civilians, all of those things... It's predicted by the fact that one element of identity has come to dominate above all others.

But when we break that down we see that extreme action has nothing to do with the ideology. Rather, it's a question of the group; it's the belonging rather than the ideology which structures that group, for most of the foot soldier level of groups like the Islamic State. So this tests the nature of belonging to a group, but also that idea that complete fusion... When you feel at one with the group, when you haven't got any other identity to balance it in some way, that's when the boundaries of yourself start being very porous with your group.

So for example, when the group is insulted or praised, or humiliated, you perceive that as a personal insult/praise/humiliation. You perceive that personally, and then that reinforces that identity. So it's a total circle, whether you call it virtuous or vicious. Every single good or bad thing that happens to the group reinforces your own identity within that group. And that's why once you are fully fused to a group, it is very difficult to defuse you.

We haven't really done the implications for deradicalisation, but I just began, about four months ago, testing this to do the opposite. We were testing different aspects of psychological elements to probe motivations to commit extreme violence. But now we're just beginning to use exactly the same theory for deradicalisation, leaving these groups rather than joining them. So, yes, the implications are there, but I haven't got robust data yet.

F: Can I interrupt? This is really interesting to me, because the Healthy Identity Intervention is based on exactly this.<sup>8</sup> But we call it over-identification. So the whole programme is aimed at helping people develop a healthy identity that's not all focused in one area of their lives, to try and support them to look at other aspects of identity and how they can strengthen them. It's also a big factor in our assessment tool, where we look at over-identification as being a huge driver of intent to actually commit extremist offences. So all this resonates really strongly with what we do.

LW: I'd love to know more about the research basis of all of that, thank you.

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*[De-fusing extremist identity is] about strengthening other elements of their identity that is of no threat to a Muslim identity. (LW)*

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**RW: Can you tell us more about the possibility of the de-fusion of identity. How might this be possible?**

LW: So maybe you can speak to this more than me, really, but we're probing in Morocco strengthening nationalist identity, because often the messages coming back from Moroccans in Syria is real homesickness. They band together, all the Moroccans. I mean, it's even more complicated than that because there's strong regional identity in Morocco. So the people from Casablanca will not fight among Tétouanis, let alone Jordanians or somebody. So they've got this very strong identity, and that's being used to tempt them home. There have been some imams, one particular in Tétouan, who is very active on social media, saying to these people out there, "What's wrong with jihad here? Do these Syrians want you? Why are you there? Why aren't you doing your duty over here? I don't understand why you would go to somewhere entirely different with people who aren't like us. Do you understand their language? No. Do you eat their food? No. You're making couscous on Friday." So it's that idea of drawing on their other identities.

Something that's being piloted in Jordan is the use of mothers to say, "You really have failed in your duty that is throughout the Qur'an and the hadith of your duty of care to your family." Mothers play this huge role. That has had very

interesting feedback from people who have moved away from the extremist identity in Jordan. So again, it's about strengthening other elements of their identity that is of no threat to a Muslim identity.

Another idea is to encourage people to think about other duties in their life. "You can really feel connected to a Muslim in Indonesia. That is absolutely right and proper. We share our faith, we share so much..." There's all sorts of hadith to say that there are no differences within Islam. But you can't do that at the expense of looking after your sick mother. So it's these things of, like, "Well, of course we know how you feel, but there are other duties in life. You can't just be this unbalanced."

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*I think one of the things that we always try to counter in our efforts is "us and them" thinking. (F)*

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Yeah, Kosovo is having difficulties. The other major identity that they can strengthen in Kosovo is the Albanian ethnicity, that they all feel extremely Albanian. Sometimes it trumps Islam, even amongst extremists, because they say, "Well, Albanians are Muslim. I don't get the question. Of course I'm Albanian first." So that's been useful, but it turns out that has prompted problems in the Balkans more widely, because Albania don't want Kosovo. So these people had this dream of going to Albania, but the Albanian government are doing deals with Serbia and all the rest of it. So there are all these geopolitical concerns that make all of these things extremely challenging. But that's the basic idea.

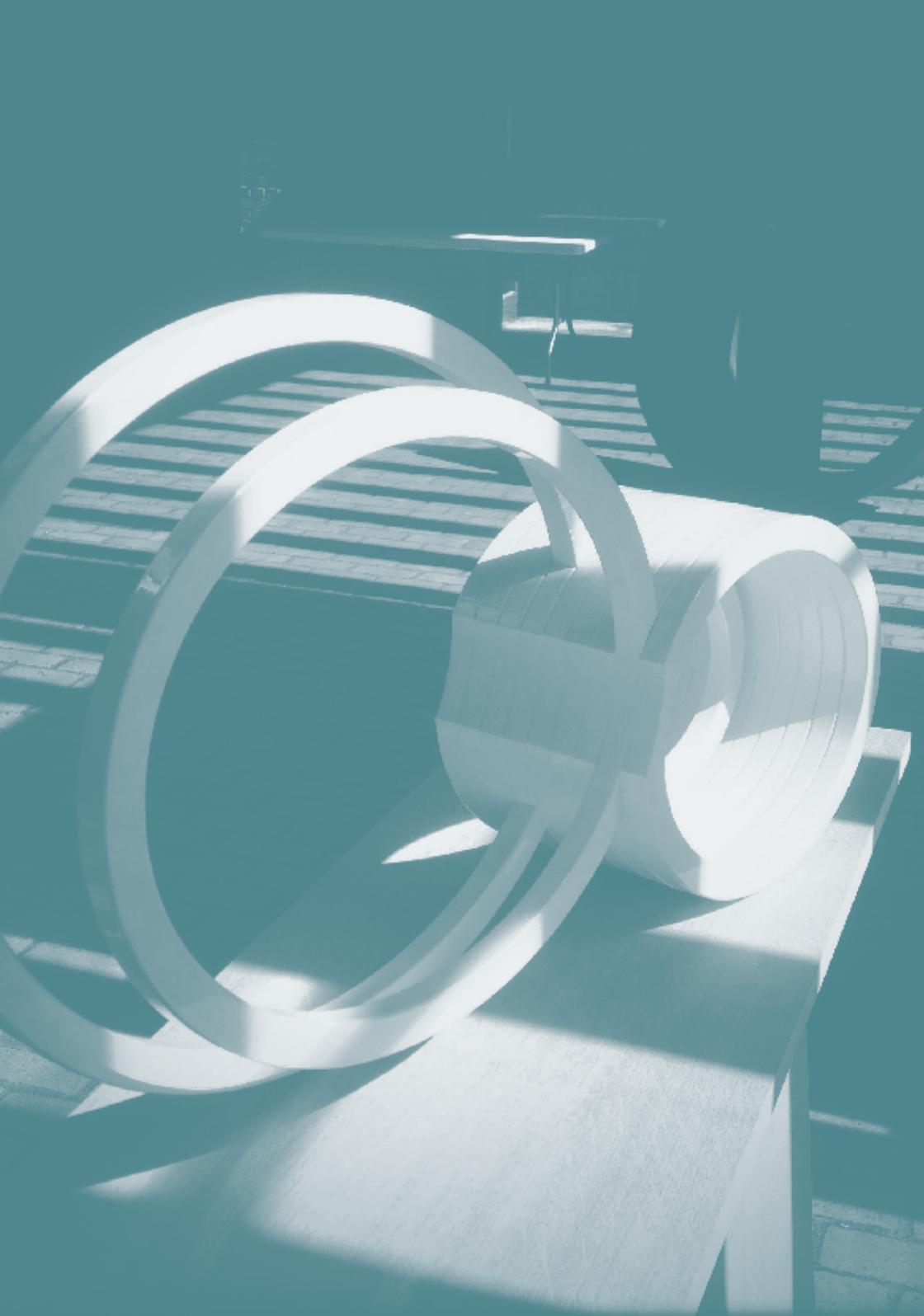
F: I've got two quick things. One on the identity fusion and replacing Islamic identity with nationalism. I think one of the things that we always try to counter in our efforts is "us and them" thinking. I would be inherently cautious about replacing a religious identity with a nationalistic identity.

LW: Yeah, not replace. Definitely not replace.

F: Yeah, but I think it doesn't deconstruct the "us versus them" thinking, and that would be my caution.

RW: That's interesting, thank you, and what I'm noticing Lydia is that you have an in depth local knowledge of the contexts and politics in the areas you work. There doesn't seem to be a one-size-fits-all solution as there are local complexities around identity that texture the problem, and it seems future work in this area needs to grow from understanding local places and issues.



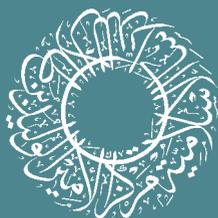


## End notes

- 1 This summary is available online at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/islamist-extremism-in-prisons-probation-and-youth-justice/summary-of-the-main-findings-of-the-review-of-islamist-extremism-in-prisons-probation-and-youth-justice>
- 2 This response is available online at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/islamist-extremism-in-prisons-probation-and-youth-justice/government-response-to-the-review-of-islamist-extremism-in-prisons-probation-and-youth-justice>
- 3 See for example Roy King's work on this issue, and formative debates following from the Report of the Radzinowicz Subcommittee. King, Roy D., and Sandra L. Resodihardjo. 2010. "To max or not to max." *Punishment & Society* 12 (1):65–84; Advisory Council on the Penal System (1968) The regime for long-term prisoners in conditions of maximum security (Report of the Radzinowicz Subcommittee). London: HMSO.
- 4 United Nations. October 2016. Handbook on the Management of Violent Extremist Prisoners and the Prevention of Radicalization to Violence in Prisons. New York: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime; Williams, Ryan J. 2017. Approaches to Violent Extremist Offenders and Countering Radicalisation in Prison and Probation contexts. Practitioners Working Paper by RAN Prisons and Probation. Amsterdam: Radicalisation Awareness Network; Council of Europe. 2016. Guidelines for Prison and Probation Services Regarding Radicalisation and Violent Extremism.
- 5 Parekh, Bhikhu. 2000. The Future of Multi-ethnic Britain: Report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain: Profile Books.
- 6 Liebling, Alison, Ruth Armstrong, Ryan J. Williams, and Richard Bramwell. 2015. Locating trust in a climate of fear: religion, moral status, prisoner leadership, and risk in maximum security prisons – key findings from an innovative study. Prisons Research Centre, Institute of Criminology: University of Cambridge. Available online at: <http://www.prc.crim.cam.ac.uk/publications/trust-report>
- 7 Wilson, Lydia. 2017. "Understanding the Appeal of ISIS." *New England Journal of Public Policy* 1 (29):1–10.
- 8 Dean, Christopher. 2014. "The healthy identity intervention: The UK's development of a psychologically informed intervention to address extremist offending." In *Prisons, terrorism and extremism: Critical issues in management, radicalisation and reform*, edited by Andrew Silke, 89–107. London: Routledge.

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