

From Spandau to Guantanamo: Prisons as Propaganda Instruments for Extremists and Terrorists

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Abstract

Prisons have featured repeatedly in narratives of terrorist and other violent extremist groups. Such groups have exploited the imprisonment of their members as a propaganda tool aimed at eliciting support and attracting new members through discourses of struggle and oppression. This article examines three such cases, to isolate key elements that support the use of prisons as a symbol of the ideological struggle of violent militants. It encompasses cases of right-wing extremism as well as nationalist and religious terrorism. With an emphasis on illustrating how terrorist groups utilize prisons to achieve various aims, this article seeks to provide a preliminary understanding of the symbolic and iconic use of prisons across a variety of ideologies. Greater understanding of the factors that promote the choice of prisons as symbols of ideological legitimization could serve to support approaches to minimise the representation of prisons in legitimizing ideologically motivated violence.

Keywords: Narratives, prisons, propaganda, symbols, terrorists, violent extremists

Introduction

Prisons have featured repeatedly in the narratives of various terrorist and violent extremist groups. For example, violent right-wing ideologues have emphasized the incarceration of Adolf Hitler at Landsberg Prison in 1924, following his failed Beer Hall putsch. It was during this term of imprisonment that Hitler commenced his National-Socialist Party manifesto, *Mein Kampf*, and accordingly, Landsberg Prison became intrinsically embedded within the ideology of the Nazi regime, and after 1945, the neo-Nazi movement.[1] Contemporary manifestations of this phenomenon are also observed in Israel, where the widespread incarceration of Palestinians has become a potent source of identity and celebration as evidenced by the Palestinian Prisoners' Day on 17 April each year.[2] In each case, imprisonment has been exploited by the respective extremist and terrorist groups to serve as a symbol of their ideological struggle. Accordingly, when prison terms are transformed into a *quasi rite-of-passage* or viewed as a demonstration of one's commitment to an ideological cause, the prison potentially loses its intended deterrent effect and instead acts to reinforce the perceived legitimacy of the extremist group and its narrative.[3]

While Silke and Veldhuis comment on the "vast amount of scholarly and policy attention" that violent extremism in prisons has attracted, they also highlight significant gaps in the existing body of literature. Primarily, attention has been focused on the individual level, investigating aspects of prisoner radicalization and deradicalization.[4] However, enquiry into the role of prisons in the narratives at a collective or organizational level has been largely neglected.[5] With a focus on group narratives, this article goes some way to addressing this gap by articulating the nuanced way in which terrorist and other violent extremist groups capitalize on imprisonment and conditions of incarceration as a tool to promote their cause. Adopting an inductive approach, this article examines historical and current cases, namely the Spandau Prison in Germany, the HMP Maze in Northern Ireland, and the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp in Cuba. The article sets out to identify the unique circumstances that have transformed these particular prisons from institutions of sanction to icons that can lend support to the perceived legitimacy of a violent ideology. Three key commonalities can be observed following an analysis of the cases examined: exclusivity of the prisons housing only terrorists (or those accused of terrorism), martyrdom, and infiltration of the mainstream media. It is argued that these three factors contribute to the efficacy of prisons as symbols of injustice in terrorist narratives and propaganda. Whilst acknowledging that there are other cases of terrorist imprisonment that have attracted negative media attention for human rights abuses—most notably Abu Ghraib in Iraq, and Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan

[6]—the three prisons analyzed here have become paradigmatic cases for the symbolic value of prisons for terrorist groups and their propaganda. Accordingly, the scope of this article is limited to Spandau Prison, HMP Maze, and Guantanamo.

Background and Context

Although terrorism has historically been perceived and punished as a criminal act, it differs from ordinary criminal offending and consequently requires a specific response of its own. A key factor distinguishing incarcerated terrorists and violent extremists from their ‘ordinary’ criminal peers is that of motive which can be broadly explained by contrasting instrumental and expressive offending.[7] Instrumental offenses are committed to attain a personal gain, such as material or financial benefits and status. Expressive offenses are primarily committed with the objective of furthering ideals, or in response to a perceived injustice against the group with whom the offender identifies. A further key difference is linked to the level of visibility. While instrumental offenders seek to avoid detection, expressive offenders generally seek to attract attention to their acts to gain maximum recognition for their cause.[8] This visibility is pertinent when considering violence through the lens of symbolism. For these reasons, terrorism and some other acts of violent extremism primarily fall within the scope of expressive offending.

Expressive offending is often further characterized by a perceived legitimization of the use of violence, inasmuch that advancing the ideological objective is meant to justify the means of attaining it. Documented examples include Adolf Hitler who, while addressing the court at his own trial, relied on such an altruistic justification as a defense in his proposition that “I alone bear the responsibility. But I am not a criminal because of that. Today I stand here as a revolutionary...”[9] Similarly, in Northern Ireland, interviews with former incarcerated IRA members found that “[t]here was no indication that they possessed criminal motivation or were motivated by personal gain. Emphasis was placed on support for republican ideals...”[10] This denial of the criminality of their acts of violence often translated into a perception that these offenders were being persecuted for their beliefs and as such, the prison was, for those who followed this line of reasoning, transformed into a symbol of persecution.[11] As Neumann noted, prisons have featured in such circumstances in a variety of terrorist and extremist group narratives, irrespective of the nature of their ideology:

“No matter how different their causes or backgrounds, Egyptian Islamists, German Marxists, and Irish Republicans have all regarded their comrades’ imprisonment as traumatic turning points in the histories of their movements. The prisoners and the ways they were treated came to be focal points for their groups’ campaigns, and they significantly influenced their supporters’ attitude towards violence and the state.”[12]

More specifically, terrorist groups have leveraged the imprisonment of their members as a propaganda mechanism, with the objective of publicizing their perceived persecution as a measure of the legitimacy of their cause.[13] To gain support for the cause, terrorism relies on both terroristic acts and graphic propaganda. A concept originally championed by Kropotkin, *propaganda of the deed* is the actual perpetration of violence to gain publicity that can serve to highlight political goals.[14] As terrorism is an expressive form of violence, visual propaganda comprises a core component of the strategy.[15] Effective propaganda is defined as “a deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.”[16] As we shall demonstrate, terrorist groups rely on the use of prisons as symbols in their propaganda to exacerbate the perception of grievances, justify violent action, and subsequently incite others to act on behalf of their violent ideology.

Spandau Prison – Berlin

Constructed in 1876 in Berlin, the link between Spandau Prison and the Nazi regime commenced around 1933 when it was utilized as a holding center for political prisoners and used by the Gestapo as a torture center. [17] Following the second World War, a number of high-ranking figures from the Nazi regime were tried for war crimes at Nuremberg. In July 1947, seven of those convicted were transferred from Nuremberg to serve

their sentences at Spandau Prison.[18] In preparation, the prison's existing population of approximately 600 convicted criminals was transferred to other penitentiary facilities. The 134-cell prison was redesignated *The International War Crimes Prison* and it served to exclusively accommodate seven senior-ranking members of the Nazi regime.[19]

Quadrupartite management of the prison comprised monthly rotations shared between Britain, France, Russia, and the United States, who were each responsible for staffing the prison during their rotation.[20] A strict regime prevented the prisoners from communicating with each other or with staff and the inmates were addressed only by their number (one through seven). However, over time these restrictions were relaxed, with the exception of the Russian rotations, when stringent adherence with the original prison regime was maintained.[21]

Despite various attempts by the prisoners to intimate that they had denounced their Nazi ideology, the majority of the inmates were observed to have maintained their extremist worldview during their incarceration and the prison became synonymous with Nazism.[22] By the early 1950s, the symbolic significance of the prison and its inmates was recognized. Following the discovery of inmate Rudolph Hess's shirt, which was stencilled with his iconic prison number and discarded in the prison rubbish, prison staff members were instructed by supervisors that no personal items from the prisoners were to leave the prison for fear that they would become prized memorabilia for Nazi sympathizers.[23]

By 1966, of the original seven prisoners only Rudolph Hess remained: the one-time deputy Führer.[24] As the last incarcerated Nazi, Hess was viewed as a hero by supporters of the nationalistic far right.[25] The prison's significance was elevated to that of a shrine, and Hess's birthday became the subject of an annual pilgrimage for neo-Nazis. Amassing at the prison gate, openly displaying forbidden symbols of Nazism such as the swastika, they glorified the third Reich narrative and demanded that Hess be released.[26]

Despite mounting pressure to concede the release of Hess, Russia resisted on the grounds that he "was the last living symbol of the Nazi regime...and would stay there until he died". Although contemplating his release, the British were equally concerned that Hess had not denounced his Nazi ideology and feared that his release could motivate a Nazi revival.[27] Consequently, Hess remained the sole prisoner at Spandau Prison until his suicide in 1987. His death in prison further reinforced a cult following within far-right circles and elevated his status to that of a martyr.[28]

Immediately following Hess's death, the four victor nations governing the prison regime agreed to demolish the prison to prevent it from continuing to serve as a Nazi shrine. The demolition was carried out under the eyes of armed guards, who were authorized to use lethal force against anyone attempting to remove souvenirs from the site. Despite the risks, Nazi sympathisers were reported to offer up to 100 German Marks for a single Spandau brick, ostensibly confirming the prison administration's concerns that the prison continued to represent an icon to neo-Nazis.[29] The rubble was pulverised before being disposed of at either a British airbase or at an undisclosed location in the North Sea. Evidently, these extreme measures had become necessary due to the symbolic significance that the prison had gained.[30]

This significance was derived not only from the prison's role as the International War Crimes Prison, but as the place where the final surviving member of the Nazi regime was housed and had died. Exacerbated by the fact that only high-ranking Nazis were incarcerated there, Spandau represented the final material link with pure National-Socialism for right-wing extremists. Some have argued that the decision to detain Hess until his death was a mistake and acted to further elevate the prison's symbolic status.[31] Subsequently, both Rudolph Hess and Spandau Prison became inseparable in the narratives of the German far-right and have been immortalized in neo-Nazi propaganda, including music festivals and annual commemorations. The reasoning behind Spandau's hasty destruction was arguably validated by the fact that Hess's grave in Wunsiedel became the new focus of the annual pilgrimages that formerly headed for Spandau.[32]

HMP Maze – Northern Ireland

The symbolic significance of the Maze Prison to Irish republican militants encompassed three key elements. Firstly, the location of the permanent cellular prison on the existing site at Long Kesh signified a link with the former practices of internment and Special Category Status. The second element was the protests culminating in the 1981 hunger strikes, and the third factor was the mass escape of republican prisoners in 1983.

The origins of the Maze Prison go back to the introduction of internment in 1971, whereby individuals who were suspected or known to be involved in terrorist activity, or providing support to terrorist groups in Northern Ireland, were detained without charge or trial. Detainees were held in compounds at Long Kesh and separated, based on the paramilitary group that they were affiliated with. Following a hunger strike at Crumlin Road Prison in 1972, convicted terrorists secured for themselves a Special Category Status which afforded conditions comparable with those experienced by the detainees, including placement in the compounds at Long Kesh. In preparation for the reception of convicted terrorists, the facility was redesignated as *HM Prison Maze*. [33]

By 1976, Special Category Status was phased out and convicted terrorists were treated as ordinary criminals. A key element of this *Criminalization Policy* was the creation of a cellular prison in which terrorist prisoners were to be accommodated separately from other inmates. [34] The review chaired by Lord Gardiner cautioned against the construction of the new cellular prison at the existing Maze Prison site, asserting that to do so would associate the new prison with the site's history of detention and the previous Special Category Status. [35] Due to time constraints (amongst other reasons), the permanent cellular prison comprising eight H-Blocks was constructed alongside the compounds and designated *Maze-cellular*. It was later conceded by the British government that “we finished with the prison in the wrong place” and the new cellular prison became associated with the former practices of internment and Special Category Status. [36]

The government's move toward criminalization was met with resistance, primarily by incarcerated republicans. Commencing with the ‘blanket protest’, terrorist prisoners who were denied Special Category Status refused to wear the prison uniform as it was viewed to represent the status of a common criminal. This passive form of protest escalated to the ‘dirty protest’ where prisoners refused to wash and fouled their cells with excrement. This specific protest attracted significant attention both within the Catholic Church and across the wider community. Concerns were raised in relation to the prisoners’ living conditions despite the government arguing that the conditions were self-inflicted. [37] The protest action was further escalated in October 1980 with a hunger strike which lasted until December. The second hunger strike, which began in early 1981, was evidently more significant in cementing the link between republican terrorism and the Maze Prison, due primarily to the death of ten republican prisoners, who became martyrs within the republican narrative. [38] British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is remembered for her “Let them starve” rhetoric in response to the hunger strikes. [39] Not only did this result in an attempt on her life, but it consolidated the symbolism of maltreatment and oppression at the hands of an intransigent government regime. [40] Whilst further research is required to determine direct causality, increased IRA terrorist activity was observed the following year, with the number of deaths as a result of terrorism increasing from seventy-six to 101. [41]

The final element is the mass escape from Maze Prison in 1983, which involved thirty-eight republican terrorists successfully breaching all layers of the security measures at Britain's flagship supermax prison in Northern Ireland. Termed *Ealu Mor* (The Great Escape), the escape was profoundly significant in that it was perceived to represent a humiliating defeat of the British government and the prison administration who had served as their captors since 1976. [42] The symbolic value placed on this escape is evident in Sinn Fein's propaganda publication *An Phoblacht*, where ten years later it was described as “the greatest of all escapes”. The coverage of the tenth anniversary of the escape dominated a further six pages of that issue. [43] This illustrates that the use of prisons as a propaganda tool was a prominent feature throughout “The Troubles” in Northern Ireland. Weekly newspapers such as the aforementioned *An Phoblacht/Republican News* and the *Irish Liberation Press* were the propaganda organs through which the republican movement sought to influence public sentiment, attract financial support, and recruit new members. [44]

The republican propaganda campaign also focused on presenting a justification for the violence of the

Provisional IRA and portrayed its incarcerated members as victims of an oppressive and illegitimate British regime. The Provisional IRA utilized republican newspapers as its principal propaganda medium.[45] These newspapers presented republican perspectives of the conflict with a regular focus on “their” prisoners, to the point that it was conceded that the republican campaign was being fought as much in the H-Blocks as it was on the streets.[46] The IRA commercialized the prison protests and the subsequent deaths of the hunger strikers, seeking to exploit public sympathy to garner widespread community support.[47] The role and significance of propaganda became increasingly evident for the government, specifically in relation to the prison protests, and was manifested in frequent reports that “...the H-Block campaign was essentially a propaganda exercise for the benefit of the IRA” and that “...the H-Block issue is a major item in the propaganda of PIRA, PSF and the relatives’ action committee.”[48] The efficacy of the republican propaganda campaign was such that the British government moved to prohibit mainstream media coverage of terrorist activity. Further consideration was given to classifying the republican newspapers as ‘seditious publications’, with the intention of banning their publication and distribution, ostensibly to throttle the republican narrative and the support it was attracting for the incarcerated members.[49]

The outcomes experienced at Spandau were arguably replicated at Maze whereby concerns that it would become an icon of republican terrorism were realized. The redevelopment of the prison site following its closure in 2000 included a proposal to preserve several of the prison structures, including the prison infirmary where the hunger strikers died in 1981, as an *International Centre for Conflict Transformation*. [50] However the prison was considered “a potent symbol of the troubles”, and preservation of any of the prison infrastructure would “become a focus of republican pilgrimage” and a shrine to Bobby Sands and the other hunger strikers.[51]

Consistent with the outcomes at Spandau, the martyr status of key figures within the republican narrative became inseparably enmeshed with the prison. The physical infrastructure of Maze Prison became the symbolic embodiment of both the hunger strikers and arguably, though to a lesser extent, of those involved in the successful mass escape from prison in 1983. A fundamental cause of this symbolic transformation was the IRA’s normalisation of imprisonment, and through the promotion of the narrative that those who were imprisoned for terrorism offenses would be the subject of an amnesty and released as a condition of the peace process.[52]

Guantanamo Bay - Cuba

Authorities responsible for the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp (Guantanamo) did not capitalize on the knowledge gained from the experiences of Spandau and Maze prisons. In fact, a number of similarities can be observed with the other two cases. Guantanamo is a prison in Southeast Cuba renowned for practices tantamount to torture inflicted on some of those imprisoned there.[53] The prison was opened in 2002 by President George W. Bush in response to the emotively framed “War on Terror” and despite numerous calls for its decommission, it is still in operation as of mid-2021.[54] The prison itself is widely known for the images released a short time after its opening. The release of these images was described by then–Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld as “unfortunate”.[55] The images depicted prisoners held in stress positions wearing the now-notorious orange overalls. As will be discussed below, these overalls have become synonymous with the grievance of oppression conveyed by the Islamic State and Al Qaeda in their media propaganda operations.

The legality of detentions in Guantanamo has been extensively contested. For the purposes of this article, it is helpful to understand its character as a “legal black hole”.[56] According to many Western constitutions and various international treaty instruments, those who have been arrested for crimes must be brought before a court of law and provided with a fair trial. This aligns with article 11 of the United Nations Charter of Human Rights.[57] However, a declaration of war does more than merely change the public perception of an out-group. Whilst a full review of international law is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that a declaration of war enables those fighting for an enemy state to be treated not as criminals, but as prisoners of war.[58] The conditions of treatment of prisoners of war is stipulated in the Geneva Convention of 1949.[59] However, the United States Supreme Court determined that those being held at Guantanamo were

neither criminals nor prisoners of war, but “enemy combatants”, thereby providing for the aforementioned legal loophole.[60] Evidence of inhumane treatment has surfaced from Guantanamo.[61]

The legal terminology used by the United States Supreme Court of “enemy combatants” serves to reinforce the notion that the prisoners detained there are *not* criminals. This contributes among parts of the public to a sense that, consistent with Spandau and Maze, those imprisoned at Guantanamo are merely imprisoned for their beliefs. This notion is further supported by the fact that numerous prisoners in Guantanamo have never been charged, never been before a court, and are indefinitely detained as per the powers conferred by the US Supreme Court.[62] Similarly to Spandau and HMP Maze, those imprisoned at Guantanamo are exclusively inmates suspected of perpetrating, or assisting others to carry out, terrorism offenses. Terrorist organizations like Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda (AQ), both of which have members incarcerated within Guantanamo, have capitalized on infringements of the human rights of those held there in their propaganda to bolster support for their respective narratives. The use of Guantanamo as a mechanism of justification for terrorist violence is demonstrated both overtly and subtly in a number of propaganda events released by AQ. For example, in February 2014, in a media release, the leader of AQ, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, intimated that the United States of America (USA) does not treat the prisoners at Guantanamo as humans.[63] This sentiment resonates with those who do not agree with the practices in Guantanamo and serves to justify acts of retaliation. In a more subtle manner, IS has utilized the symbol of the orange jumpsuits in a number of productions, the most infamous comprising the beheadings of American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff, and British humanitarian worker David Cawthorne Haines in 2014.[64]

The use of thematic imagery coupled with acts of violence portrayed in propaganda such as beheading videos serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it invokes an emotional response in the target audiences—both among those who support and those who denounce IS.[65] Secondly, the violent nature of the propaganda results in the infiltration of Western mainstream media, garnering wider attention also in the West.[66] A symbol such as Guantanamo’s orange overalls serves to underscore the perceived grievance, and has been depicted as a prominent example of a “transnational injustice symbol”.[67] The belief that those held in Guantanamo are being detained unlawfully and treated inhumanely is widespread though not uncontested. IS capitalizes on the doubts cast by those who denounce US policies in Guantanamo, and similarly to the IRA, the Islamic State capitalized on public sympathy by staging propaganda events featuring symbols reminiscent of Guantanamo.

The consequences of IS’s use of symbols are evident. Whilst not solely attributable to the symbolism of the orange overalls, jihadist media operations resulted in more than 40,000 foreign fighters being drawn to join IS in Syria and Iraq.[68] A number of terrorists who have been arrested for joining IS or AQ, or for having committed or preparing to commit an attack on their behalf, have been found to have consumed IS propaganda.[69] Further research could serve to quantify the extent of the importance of propaganda consumption for recruitment and the perpetration of attacks.

Although prisoner hunger strikes are often associated with HMP Maze, Guantanamo has also experienced this form of inmate protest. In 2005, more than 200 detainees participated in a hunger strike, and more than 100 inmates participated in a second hunger strike in 2013. On both occasions the prisoners were protesting against their indefinite detention and inhumane treatment.[70] Notably, the hunger strikes at Guantanamo have been compared to those at HMP Maze with authorities often expressing a desire to avoid “another Bobby Sands”.[71] Sands and the other nine Irish inmates who died as a result of hunger strikes in HMP Maze became martyrs: a sentiment exacerbated by Thatcher’s response, subsequently causing a noticeable increase in support for the IRA cause.[72] This is a scenario that the US government has been trying to avoid in Guantanamo.

Whilst the physical locations of both Spandau and Maze have been destroyed to prevent a tangible symbol which may serve to legitimize their respective ideologies and justify attacks, Guantanamo is still in operation as a detention camp. Accordingly, policy makers should consider the cases of Spandau and Maze when determining the outcome of Guantanamo both now and in the future to prevent it from also becoming a symbol of oppression and injustice which may in turn serve to support the terrorists’ justification for violence.

Discussion

As evident in the previous paragraphs, the utility of prisons as a symbol of oppression and struggle is not a novel concept. Notwithstanding, the efficacy of the use of prisons as symbols remains largely under-explored. Moreover, a full understanding of why these specific prisons have been utilized as symbols and not others remains elusive. In an attempt to reach a better understanding, a number of common elements evident across the three case studies are presented here.

Firstly, a key finding in each of these cases is that of exclusivity. Spandau Prison, while designated as the International War Crimes Prison, was far from it. As its sole function was to accommodate convicted members of the Nazi regime, its identity was symbolically linked to the Third Reich and to National Socialism.[73] Northern Ireland presents comparable findings. While Maze Prison accommodated both loyalist and republican prisoners, the significant majority of that prison population was republican. Accordingly, Maze Prison became synonymous with republican militants. This perception enhanced the ability for republican paramilitary groups to influence public sentiment and to utilize their imprisoned members as propaganda tools. The same is true for Guantanamo where the only prisoners housed there are suspected of terrorism yet designated enemy combatants. With Guantanamo's questionable record of justice and humane treatment, IS has tried and partly succeeded in exploiting Guantanamo as a symbol of injustice against all Muslims, thereby adding to the narrative that the West is at war with Islam.

Secondly, the role of martyrdom within the prison narratives has provided a mechanism which delegitimizes the purposes of imprisonment itself. The death of prisoners leading to a cult of martyrdom has been observed in many contexts throughout history. A famous example is Sayyid Qutb, a leading ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood's interpretation of Islam, who was sentenced to death for terrorist offenses. When Egypt's President Nasser realized the potential consequences of executing Qutb, he offered Qutb clemency if he confessed to his crimes.[74] Qutb declined, expecting that he would be viewed as a martyr upon his execution. The leader of AQ, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, later noted that Qutb's writings gained greater attention after his death.[75]

Equally, the decision to keep Hess incarcerated until death afforded him martyr status throughout the neo-Nazi movement. Subsequently, his perceived sacrifice continues to serve as a source of legitimacy for incarcerated neo-Nazis, many of whom consider a prison term as part of "the battle for the reestablishment of National Socialism." [76] More recently, researchers Ben Am and Weimann observed that right-wing extremists observe imprisonment to be a form of martyrdom, having made a sacrifice for the cause.[77] The historical role of Spandau Prison has created a perception of legitimacy for the narratives of neo-Nazis, and strengthened their belief in the existence of an ideological struggle against a corrupt government and the notion of a Jewish conspiracy.[78]

Similarly, in Northern Ireland, the assignment of Special Category Status at Maze Prison was "...regarded as a badge of respectability particularly amongst young prisoners...[and] the family attitude is almost invariably that they can hold up their heads in the local community if their son is with his paramilitary colleagues." [79] Such perceptions and attitudes were reinforced by republican propaganda which glamorized their imprisoned members by portraying them as brave, heroic, and victorious.[80] Such perceptions diminished the prison's ability to function as a legitimate sanction mechanism for those convicted of politically motivated violence. Instead, it offered an opportunity to paramilitary groups to leverage their imprisoned members to garner community support.[81] Furthermore, those who died while engaging in hunger strikes in Maze Prison also became viewed as martyrs for the cause.[82]

In contrast to both Spandau and Maze, those incarcerated in Guantanamo are often presented by terrorist organizations as innocent civilians who are victims of an oppressive, anti-Islamic regime. However, in Guantanamo, martyrdom has often been attempted but seldom achieved. In a similar manner to what was observed in Northern Ireland, many prisoners in Guantanamo have engaged in hunger strikes. Echoing the sentiments of Yuill, in response to the British experience with incarcerated republicans, Nieminen argues that hunger strikes are symbolic resistance to the state apparatus.[83] To prevent the hunger strikers from succeeding in martyrdom, they are being force-fed through nasogastric tubes, with some having not eaten food

voluntarily for more than a year.[84] This practice is widely discussed and debated, with Ibrahim and Howarth eloquently arguing that

“The aesthetic of the force-feeding chair as an instrument of torture and pain performs to the pornography of American hegemony marking out the body of the Other as not possessing the right to death and to be held within a liminal state of bare life (yet one not worthy of death).”[85]

Such sentiment echoes the earlier British experience of force-feeding hunger-striking IRA members. This practice was quickly abandoned in British prisons due to heated debates concerning its legality and descriptions of it as being the most offensive form of bodily assault that could be inflicted upon prisoners.[86]

Respect afforded to prisoners both alive and after death serves to reduce the perceived legitimacy of their incarceration. In the case of the Provisional IRA, the potential for release prior to serving their sentences in full also represented a potent source of influence, which the republicans traditionally exploited in their recruitment narratives.[87] By treating imprisonment not as a punishment but as a badge of honor, the efficacy of goals such as deterrence and punishment are significantly diminished. The use of propaganda to communicate with both those in the in-group, to provide instruction and encouragement of attacks and legitimacy of the potential outcomes (imprisonment or death), and the out-group, to justify and legitimize attacks, is an important feature of terrorist campaigns.

The expert use of technology and violence in propaganda has ensured successful dissemination to their target audiences. It is no coincidence that many high-quality video productions made by terrorists and their supporters are in English. This is one reason why these productions are picked up and distributed by mainstream media outlets. Mainstream media attention is the third and final consistency across the three cases. In the case of IS's propaganda campaign, a number of factors are at play. It has been argued that an effective social media campaign can infiltrate mainstream media.[88] The violence and brutality depicted in IS propaganda ensures that the mainstream media reports on, or further distributes at least part of the images as well as some ideological materials.[89] Finally, mainstream media is somewhat reliant upon terrorist propaganda outputs, as first-hand reporting in conflict theatres can be dangerous.[90] All of these factors have resulted in IS's propaganda, both subtly and overtly, becoming widely distributed across the West. Consequently, in the case of the Guantanamo prisoners, the visibility and relatability of both the prison and the prisoners as an icon of Islamic persecution have been amplified.

Such findings are in line with the experiences realized at Spandau and Maze. As Hess's imprisonment progressed, even some mainstream media portrayed him increasingly as a victim. Presented as an elderly man who was being unnecessarily kept in solitude, the crimes for which he was imprisoned and his violent ideological background became secondary. Framed as a victim, narratives of injustice proliferated throughout the neo-Nazi movement which served to cement his martyr status both prior to and following his death.[91]

In Northern Ireland, mainstream media served a comparable role, specifically in their reporting of the 1981 hunger strikes which became a daily feature in most Catholic print media. Consistent with the Spandau experience, media focus on human rights aspects of the hunger strike further acted to frame the republican prisoners as victims. This served to enhance community support and sympathy for the incarcerated terrorists among Catholics.[92] Arguably, and consistent with Hess's experience, the crimes for which they were incarcerated became a secondary issue. Subsequently, in 1988, the British government introduced a broadcasting ban which prohibited all mainstream media from broadcasting the voices of members of terrorist organizations. The effective abuse of the mainstream media to promote the republican narrative was conceded by the Home Secretary, Douglas Hurd, in his address to the House of Commons:

“The terrorists themselves draw support and sustenance from access to radio and television—from addressing their views more directly to the population at large than is possible through the press. The Government [has] decided that the time has come to deny this easy platform to those who use it to propagate terrorism.”[93]

This ban continued until 1994, ostensibly with the objective of throttling the republican narrative. It served to reduce publicity for calls for an amnesty for incarcerated members, which had become a major point of contention before the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998. Accordingly, mainstream media features in all three cases examined in this article and are likely to continue to amplify terrorist narratives which portray prison as a symbol of injustice.

Despite existing practices of the promotion of prisons as symbols of oppression and persecution, many countries have opted to continue to separate their terrorist prisoners from ordinary criminals in their prison systems.[94] The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) provides guidelines for incarcerating violent extremist offenders.[95] Two salient objectives emerge from these guidelines: (i) that the prisoners and staff are housed in a safe manner, and (ii) that radicalization of other prisoners or staff is avoided.[96] Whilst some scholars suggest that the separation may not be warranted [97], many governments and legislators around the world continue to emphasize the risk of terrorist prisoners radicalizing others.[98] Further research is required to determine the likelihood of terrorists radicalizing others in prison, although the level of risk is undoubtedly multifactorial.[99] Ultimately, the most appropriate method of detaining terrorist prisoners depends on both social-political context within which the imprisonment occurs, as well as on the risk tolerance of the government in power. In this context, the risk of prisons becoming symbols of injustice for terrorist organizations and their constituencies is an important consideration for policy makers to keep in mind.

Conclusion

There are a number of factors which result in the effective use of prisons as symbols of injustice by terrorist organizations. Firstly, evident in IS's and AQ's extensive use of the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp in their propaganda media, exclusivity provides terrorist groups specific prisons to focus on. This is exacerbated by the perception of terrorist prisoners as martyrs, coupled with the mainstream media reporting on, and disseminating, terrorist propaganda which frames prisons as symbols of injustice and persecution. Whilst incarceration as a mechanism of counter-terrorism generally aims to deter, punish and incapacitate terrorist offenders [100], it is evident that the efficacy of imprisonment is diminished when prisons become symbols which terrorist groups exploit in order to promote their ideological narrative. Consequently, certain counter-terrorism policies and strategies on occasion exacerbate the very problem they are designed to overcome.[101]

Although two of the main terrorist groups currently utilizing prisons as symbols in their propaganda war have largely been subdued, the challenges for governments and policy makers will remain relevant well into the future when considering the prison-terrorism nexus. To minimize the ability of terrorist groups to successfully portray prisons as symbols of injustice and persecution, policymakers should consider the factors which result in prisons becoming such symbols. Policies of exclusive use of designated prisons for terrorists only, should be reviewed and reconsidered, given the potential impact of terrorist prisoners being viewed as martyrs for the cause. Editors of mainstream media should be made aware that they could become involuntary instruments for the further dissemination of terrorist propaganda by allowing thoughtless reporting. However, reducing the efficacy of terrorist group narratives based on exploiting prison situations for propaganda purposes is first of all incumbent upon government officials, policy makers, and correctional administrators.

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