Jihadist Radicalisation in Prisons

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The reported cases of radicalization and jihadist recruitment in prisons have determined and highlighted, not only in Italy, a strong weakness of the penitentiary system, an institution left on the sidelines with respect to social and cultural developments that have affected the community.

Prisons are considered a fertile ground for radicalization, in general because the diversity of origins and the unconvincing atmosphere of the penitentiary, lead individuals to relate with the most compatible inmates in terms of language, culture or religion. But this natural process can degenerate into proselytism if certain elements intervene to destabilize the detainee's identity.

In the case of foreign inmates, there are many obstacles that staying in prison involves: linguistic difficulties, cultural differences, and a general lack of stable reference points in the external environment (distant or absent family, domicile, work). Consequently, it is more complex to watch to stem the alienation that even the structural defects of the same prisons feed, in order to ensure the full reintegration in society of those who serve their sentences.

Starting from the consolidated assumption that there is no single profile that attests the risk, there are some causes that emerge from the study of the profiles of jihadists. First of all, we need to exclude psychological pathologies, so much so that one of the characteristics is precisely the "normality" of those who are at risk and who then become radicalized, but here too there have been exceptions. Secondly, it would be men between the 18 and 30 years, immersed in European culture, with generally, but not exclusively, a medium-low cultural level, second or third generation. They are often children of the first wave of immigration, generally disappointed by the scarce opportunities and victims of social problems such as marginalization, unemployment, crime. Another common feature is the feeling of non-belonging, of alienation from society and the dominant culture, as well as that of family members. All these factors and characteristics, amalgamating, place the individual in a state of identity crisis capable of bringing the subject to a "cognitive opening" that makes him receptive to proselytism and jihadist ideology.

The jihadist radicalization process can be summarized with the four-step NYPD model. The first stage is "pre-radicalization", where the collective and individual sociological and psychological causes that predispose the individual to the vulnerability of radical narratives, proselytism and jihadist rhetoric reside. The second stage is "identification": the individual deviates from his social and religious identity or from the behaviour that until then characterized him. The third stage is "indoctrination": the individual begins to deepen the narratives and extremist ideologies, consolidating a new identity and a new vision of the world, Weltanschauung. The fourth is the "manifestation" or "jihadization", characterized by the full awareness of acting in the cause through proselytism, recruitment, logistical aid as well as in the act of terrorist acts, including martyrdom. Generally, this process takes place with different timing from subject to subject, it can be short or with a long schedule, moreover, this process could be interrupted at any time and in any phase.

The factors that can speed up the process are of different nature, for example, of a contextual nature, such as assiduous attendance of radical places, halal restaurants, sports centers, garage mosques, vice versa. There are socio-psychological catalytic factors, such as the strong bond that can be established with a recruiter in prisons, the state of strong vulnerability that generates a void filled by immense gratification, a sense of belonging and protection that can give an individual or a radical group, or the full sharing of facts and rhetoric advocated jihadist propaganda easily available online but also in prisons. Also participation in jihadist forums, where you can interact with people with similar ideology and that are the cause, partial, of the departure of a good percentage of FTF, which, in these encrypted forums, they found contacts with facilitators to reach the Syrian territory.

As a matter of fact, prisons are a garden for recruits! There is a manual published by al-Qaeda online, during the 2009 with the title "A course for the art of indoctrination", so the recruiters know perfectly how to identify vulnerable subjects, how to attract them, how to make them friends and how to indoctrinate them. In prison there is a high percentage of converts or re-converts, born again, who find in religion a way of escape from the sense of alienation and other factors fed by entry into a penitentiary institution. This sense of unease is co-opted by the recruiters, giving back protection, aids of various kinds and a solid existentialist response. Consequently, the aspects of prison life that favour the approach to jihadism, masked with refinement by the recruiters as the real Islamic religion, are the problems found in many prisons: the lack of an imam, the difficult practicability of nutrition halal, the disturbance brought to non-Muslims or non-practitioners for example by night prayer, ṣalāt al-'ishā', the difficulty of practicing religious duties, wajibat, the non-possibility of having sajjāda or the carpet for prayer...

All these religious prescriptions make the life of the Muslim inmate difficult but, what is very important is that not all those who want to practice religion are jihadists, indeed, on the contrary, religion can be a "control technique" of prisoners and an easy educational system to be accepted for the same, but clearly there are management difficulties, lack of personnel, lack of imams such with the scrutiny of the Ministry of the Interior, as well as a lack of knowledge of Islam and jihadism.

The identity crisis or, as I define it, using De Martino, "the crisis of presence" is identifiable through the ways of acting, interacting, talking, behaviour, for example an individual suddenly grows a beard, begins to pray or intensifies the attendance of prisoners who until a certain time did not attend, the change of opinion, the interest of particular political facts, in short, the identity crisis is an important moment and in my opinion is the main factor that triggers the radicalization.

The identity crisis involves the passage determined to the so-called "cognitive opening", that is the particular moment of an individual, characterized by an openness to alternatives able to compensate for the state of discomfort derived from the crisis, and therefore, with Demartinian words, the "Return to presence", so much so that recruiters are often the first to induce the crisis, thus shortening the timing of the radicalization process, anticipating the process of indoctrination.

In February 2017 was signed the "National Pact for an Italian Islam, expression of an open community, integrated and adhering to the values and principles of the state system" between the State and the main Islamic associations and organizations in Italy, representative of about 70 percent of Muslims currently living in Italy. Among the salient points of the pact there is the "formation of imams and religious guides" which is a prelude to a list of imams. On this line, what is needed is a greater collaboration with Islamic associations and NGOs for the training of certified imams, making them become a strong point to fight radicalization.

It often happens that in the prisons there are charismatic figures who proclaim themselves imams. Given the rarity of the latter and to make up for this lack, the self-proclaimed lead prayer and give religious support to all those who need it, moreover supplanting this figure with an external imam, is considered an act badly seen by the faithful inmates and, in a sense, it is rejected and not listened for the most disparate reasons, for example for the spoken language or for the different theories.

This problem is central to combating radicalization and above all to make progress more and more a moderate Islam and far from jihadism, but it will be difficult to make further progress, especially for the internal division that characterizes Italian and global Islam and for the serious shortcomings that

the penal institutions must face, waiting in vain for a reform that provides instruments suitable for the fight against threats such as radicalization.

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