

Following the trial of three Royal Marines accused of murder, Anthony Tucker-Jones reports on the emergent terror threat to members of the British armed forces living – and serving time – in the UK



INCUBATORS OF

What is the threat to Sergeant Alexander Blackman after his conviction for murdering a Taliban fighter and having his anonymity lifted? In November 2012 the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre stated, “The exposure, during a public enquiry or via the media, of allegations of military personnel mistreating persons during such conflicts, may lead to extremists regarding those individuals as legitimate targets for attack. JTAC therefore judge that, in such cases, there is a heightened threat to those identifiable as being involved in allegations of mistreatment.”

Nonetheless, the threat level to Blackman and his co-accused was judged moderate (an attack is possible, but not likely), which is the generic threat assessment for all military personnel in the UK. The MoD did, however, place these Marines on the MoD Contingency Threat List. This suggested a higher level of threat than that faced by other military personnel; not all military personnel in the UK are on this list. Because the marines were on the list, the MoD took specific security measures to protect them and their families. No further confirmation was offered as to the exact nature of these measures or whether they were stepped up. This is understandable as there would be an operational security issue surrounding such measures.

During Sergeant Blackman’s trial, the MoD provided

no further threat assessments and supported lifting the anonymity order. This was on the basis that, upon conviction, Sergeant Blackman would become the responsibility of the Home Office; the others would return to the security of their unit on acquittal. The MoD does not appear to have addressed the security of Sergeant Blackman in prison or the security of his family, however. They do not appear to have specifically addressed the security of the other Marines when they are not serving with their unit and of their families.

Nevertheless, the fact that these individuals were placed on the “MoD Contingency Threat List” suggests the MoD believed that there was a heightened risk to them. No evidence has been produced of any change in circumstances to remove that risk. Sergeant Blackman will remain at risk while in prison through out his sentence. Indeed, evidence shows that there are substantial numbers of attacks in prison and that such attacks are on the increase. Statistics, revealed in a Freedom of Information request show there were more than 14,000 assaults on inmates and prison staff in the UK in 2012, with many of the most violent attacks happening in jails in London and the South-East.

Most specifically, a very real risk exists in HM Prisons stemming from Muslim radicals convicted in the years

JIHAD

– PART 2

©Getty Images

following 9/11 and in particular 7/7 and the effect they have had and are having on the UK's prisons. Few realise the extent or ongoing nature of this problem – while the Security Service has been highly successful in thwarting jihadist plots in the UK, it means there has been a steady flow of Islamist terrorists through the prison system.

Muslims who make up roughly five per cent of the British population constitute 13 per cent of the prison population (compared to just six per cent in 1997). Over the past 15 years, the number of Muslims in British prisons has jumped by more than 200 per cent. The rate of increase of Muslim inmates is eight times faster than that of the overall prison population, and the numbers show a clear overrepresentation of Muslim convicts. Statistics from a 29 July 2013 House of Commons report entitled, Prison Population Statistics show that the number of Muslim inmates in England and Wales jumped to 11,248 in 2012, up from 3,681 in 1997.

James Brandon at the Quilliam Foundation reported that the British Government was concerned the UK's prisons were becoming "incubators of jihad". He noted, "Extremists, particularly in Category A prisons, deliberately aim to recruit individuals into their ideology... Many of the recruits are ordinary Muslims doing time for minor crimes... Already we are starting to see the consequences

of extremist preaching in prisons. In Franklin prison, for example, Muslims and white non-Muslim prisoners have engaged in tit-for-tat violence."

Ministry of Justice figures show at HMP Belmarsh (a maximum security Category A prison) there were eight serious attacks on prison officers in the past year – one of the highest numbers anywhere in the UK – while there were also 68 other assaults at the jail. A report entitled *An exploration of staff-prisoner relationships at HMP Whitemoor: 12 Years on* published by the Ministry of Justice on 18 May 2012 concluded: "The threat of assaults motivated by religious fanaticism or extremist ideology added weight to the atmosphere at Whitemoor ... The new population mix, including high numbers of Muslim prisoners, was disrupting established hierarchies in the prison. Social relations among prisoners had become complex and less visible. Too much power flowed among some groups of prisoners, with some real risks of serious violence. There were high levels of fear in the prison. In particular, there were tensions and fears relating to 'extremism' and 'radicalisation'."

James Brandon's *Unlocking Al-Qaeda Islamist Extremism in British Prisons* (published in 2009) highlighted that the HMP Inspectorate 2008 report identified problems Muslim gangs at HMP Whitemoor, Long Lartin and Belmarsh. This report observed, "While Muslim-centric prison gangs may evolve for protection against other prisoners, Islamist prison gangs often additionally promote an exclusive, separatist ideology that glorifies violence and intolerance. Islamist extremists who are already keen to assume a leadership position among Muslim prisoners will also seize on such gangs as a vehicle for radicalising others."

The Brandon report concluded that the Prison Services needed to review how it dealt with Muslim prisoners and that although the Prison's Service's central Extremism Unit was doing valuable work co-ordinating and shaping the counter-extremism efforts across the service it was suffering funding problems. Likewise, some prisons were struggling to prevent the flow of pro-jihadists messages to those outside. Preventing the exploits of jihadists and the call for revenge getting in is also a problem.

In 2012 a Parliamentary Home Affairs Select Committee report acknowledged that radicalisation in prisons is still very much a problem: "The National Offender Management Service must be an equal participant in the Prevent [counter-terrorism] strategy, alongside other agencies. We are very concerned that prison authorities are not receiving feedback about prisoners vulnerable to radicalisation after their release. Such information would be critical to improving understanding of prison radicalisation and prison processes for monitoring and dealing with it. We recommend that the Government should a) implement a system whereby this information is fed back into prisons and b) develop a portal that would allow the relevant agencies dealing with prisoner intelligence, including the UK Border Agency, to share data more quickly and easily."

In June 2013 Muslim gang culture was still an escalating problem. Steve Gillan, the Prison Officers association general secretary warned, "There is clear

INCUBATORS OF JIHAD – PART 2



© Getty Images

evidence of gang culture and radicalisation of young men. They use the name of religion as an excuse to behave badly and in a threatening manner. ... It is clear from incidents in the Prison Service that it is problematic. It is a drain on resources and indeed safety. Terrorists in maximum-security jails have increased dramatically in number. It puts pressure on prisons at a time of cost cuts and overcrowding."

While violence among prisoners is on a large scale and prison officers struggle to contain this, prison officers also struggle to safeguard themselves. During the years 2010-2012 some 3,303 prisoner officers were assaulted, suffering varying degrees of injury. Indeed, the situation is such that the National Offender Management Service is assessing the benefits of issuing frontline prison staff with stab vests.

The inconsistency in the MoD's approach to Sergeant Blackman's case was highlighted by the treatment of the Apache helicopter pilots who fired the rounds that wounded the individual killed by Sergeant Blackman. They gave evidence at the trial and the MoD successfully sought anonymity, presumably on the basis of a threat assessment in relation to them. Nevertheless, the threat to these individuals was substantially less than the threat to those who were on trial for murder.

There is also inconsistency concerning the approach of the MoD to the actual video footage which formed the main prosecution evidence at the trial. The Judge Advocate General accepted that the footage was so disturbing it could be used to incite attacks against British troops and members of the public. As a result, he accepted the release of the DVD would "generate significant feelings of anger and revenge among certain people and will incite attacks on British service personnel at home and abroad".

Paul Mott, the deputy head of the research, information and communications unit in the office of security and counter-terrorism, said it was the most

potent footage of its kind he had viewed. "I've seen nothing that surpasses it in terms of radicalisation potential," he said. "It's exceptionally worrying. There's nothing I have seen that ... matches its emotional power. It is a gift in propaganda terms."

Although there is a difference between the release of images and the naming of a defendant, Paul Mott's assessment was based on the extremely potent and toxic nature of the case and the likelihood of very strong reactions amongst jihadis and other radicals. Releasing Blackman's name has personalised his crime within the Muslim world and makes revenge attacks that much easier. There is a real and immediate threat to the life and safety of Sergeant Blackman while serving his sentence.

Muslim radicals have regularly shown their intent and ability to carry out attacks inside prison. In addition, radicals are clearly influenced by outside events as evidenced by the Lee Rigby murder and the subsequent Long Sutton attack. This happened just four days after Lee Rigby's murder and shows how easily such news percolates through the prison system and how quickly prisoners can conduct revenge attacks.

Even if Sergeant Blackman is held in a Vulnerable Prisoners Unit (segregated and normally associated with sex offenders) there remains a serious risk of harm in prison. Whatever protection can be extended to him in prison will not extend to his family and to Marines B-E and their families, however. If revenge attacks cannot be carried out against Sergeant Blackman, then his family could become targets. Radicals have shown intent to attack British Army snipers and their families in punishment for their operational success in Afghanistan. Radicals will see Marines A-E and their families as fair game for the murder of a fellow Muslim. Some might question what price open justice; how was the public good – and indeed security – served by the naming of Sergeant Blackman?

Population transfer: the number of Muslim inmates in England and Wales jumped to 11,248 in 2012, up from 3,681 in 1997