

UK government proposes to set up Muslim-only jail

Barry Mason
25 February 2016

The UK government is considering setting up a secure prison unit solely to house convicted Islamist terrorists. The UK has 130 such prisoners, who all face being moved into the proposed secure prison.

If the proposal were implemented, it would overturn the standard practice in place since the 1960s of housing convicted terrorists in the general prison population. Currently, convicted terrorists are held in one of six maximum-security jails, Frankland near Durham, Full Sutton near York, Long Lartin in Worcestershire, Wakefield, Whitemoor in Cambridgeshire and Belmarsh in south London.

Convicted terrorists held within these prisons are regularly transferred to different locations. A single unit for Islamist terrorists has been dubbed by the media a “British Alcatraz,” a reference to the US prison built on an island off San Francisco to contain dangerous prisoners. A more apt analogy would be the “British Guantanamo,” in reference to the United States military prison camp in Cuba, where prisoners deemed “unlawful combatants” are held by the US authorities in order to deny them official prisoner-of-war status and the most rudimentary human rights.

The new secure unit could be contained within one of the six maximum-security prisons—a “prison within a prison”—or could be established as a new separate entity.

The proposal for a separate unit comes from a review of how to deal with prisoners convicted of terrorist offences, set up by the Justice Secretary Michael Gove. The review, led by former prison governor and senior Home Office official Ian Acheson, is to be published in March.

The last occasion in the UK when prisoners were held together based on sharing an ideological belief was the infamous “H block” cells in the Maze prison in

Northern Ireland in the 1980s. In the H blocks, the inmates were deemed to be political prisoners and were classed as either loyalists or nationalists, and duly segregated.

In a recent speech, Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron all but signed up to setting up a separate unit for Muslims convicted of terrorist offences. He said, “I am prepared to consider major changes: from the imams we allow to preach in prison to changing the locations and methods for dealing with prisoners convicted of terrorism offences, if that is what is required.”

The proposals to isolate Muslim prisoners in British prisons is part of the demonization of Muslims, who are constantly associated with “terrorism” and “extremism” in the press.

Prior to Cameron’s speech, Home Secretary Theresa May called for an “extremism officer” to be sited in prisons to deal with “radicalisation.”

What is defined as “extremism” by the government is now so broad, it could include virtually any form of opposition to the British ruling elite. In December 2013, the then Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition published a report entitled “Prime Minister’s Task Force on Tackling Radicalisation and Extremism.” It defined “extremism” as “vocal or active opposition to *fundamental British values*, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. We also include in our definition of extremism calls for the death of members of our armed forces, whether in this country or overseas. *There is a range of extremist individuals and organisations, including Islamists, the far right and others.*” [emphasis added]

There are now more than 85,600 people in UK prisons. While five percent of the general population is

Muslim, in prisons the figure is one in seven (roughly 15 percent) and in high-security prisons the figure is nearer 20 percent. The number of Muslims in jail has roughly doubled over the decade from 2004 to 2014, with their numbers going up from around 6,500 to over 12,000.

A Muslim Council of Britain report published last year, based on the latest census data, showed the unemployment rate among Muslims to be higher than the average. It found that around half of the British Muslim population lives in the bottom 10 percent of local authority districts rated by deprivation.

Cameron and May are following the example of the escalating assault on the social and democratic rights of Muslims being enforced in France. The French government trialled a separate secure unit for convicted Islamist terrorists at Fresnes prison, near Paris. This has now been extended to five other prisons throughout France, with the prospect of eventually setting up such units in 26 prisons nationwide.

Each of these units holds between 20 and 25 prisoners. Their access to social and recreational activities is severely restricted, as is their access to the Internet and phone communication. They are held under close surveillance. This level of isolation and surveillance is comparable to that imposed at Guantanamo Bay.

A February 12 *Guardian* article on the secure units in France noted: “Inmates are selected based on the supposed radicalization threat they represent using a ‘detection grid’ assessing personality, background and observed religious behaviour. France has also recruited nearly 400 extra wardens, social workers, psychologists and surveillance specialists for its larger prisons, as well as more Muslim chaplains.”

The over representation of Muslims in French prisons is even more stark than in British prisons. The *Guardian* noted a 2004 survey by Farhad Khosrokhavar, an Iranian-born Professor of Sociology at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences in Paris. He estimated that around 50 percent of the French prison population are Muslims. This figure rose to 70 percent for those short-term prisoners held in jails on the outskirts of large cities.

As in Britain, many French Muslims, mainly of Algerian origin, live in conditions of deprivation and wretched poverty in areas of high unemployment, such

as in the *banlieues* (housing estates) around Paris. Many of the Muslims held in French prisons come from such run-down estates.

The assault on the democratic rights of Muslims is far advanced in France. As far back as September 2010, the French Senate voted into law a bill banning the wearing in all public places of full-face veils, such as the burqa or niqab, worn by some Islamic women. Following the terrorist attacks in Paris in November last year, a state of emergency was declared. Recently, the lower house of the French parliament voted for the state of emergency to be incorporated into the French constitution, making it a permanent feature.

A report issued at the beginning of February by Human Rights Watch noted how the state of emergency was being used to target Muslims and create an atmosphere of fear and panic. It noted, “France has carried out abusive and discriminatory raids and house arrests against Muslims under its sweeping new state of emergency law. The measures have created economic hardship, stigmatized those targeted, and have traumatized children.”

The Cameron government’s pursuit of anti-Muslim policies *à la française* is ominous. The ongoing scapegoating of Muslims is being consciously utilised in order to shift politics further to the right.

The demonization of Muslims in France has only benefited far right and fascistic forces. Although it eventually came third, the far-right Front National emerged strengthened from the December regional elections, after winning the first round amid a poisonous atmosphere of police repression and anti-Muslim hysteria.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact