

University of Terror

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SOME DAYS AGO, a man committed an act of terrorism in the center of London, a city I love.

He ran over several persons on Westminster Bridge, stabbed a policeman to death and approached the doors of Parliament, where he was shot dead. All this in the shadow of the tower of Big Ben, an irresistible photographic target.

It was an electrifying world-wide news item. Within minutes, Daesh was blamed. But then the truth came out: the terrorist was a British citizen, a Muslim convert born in England. From early youth he had committed a string of petty crimes. He had been in and out of prison several times.

So how did this individual, of all people, become a religious zealot, a Shahid —a witness to the truth of Allah, who sacrificed his life for the greatness of Islam? How had he become the perpetrator of an act that shook Europe and the world?

BEFORE TRYING to answer this mystifying question, one remark about the effectiveness of “terrorism”.

As the term implies, it is a matter of spreading fear. It is a method of achieving a political end by making people afraid.

But why are people so afraid of terrorists? This has always puzzled me, even when as a boy I belonged to an organization that was labeled by our British overlords as “terrorist”.

I don't know how many people died in road accidents in the United Kingdom in the same month as the Westminster killing. I surmise that the number was vastly larger. Yet people do not greatly fear road accidents. They do not refrain from walking out into the street. Dangerous drivers are not held in preventive detention.

Yet a very small number of “terrorists” suffices to create a climate of fear throughout entire countries, entire continents, even the entire globe.

Great Britain should be the last place in the world to succumb to this totally irrational fear. In 1940, this small island stood against the colossus of Nazi-conquered Europe. I remember a stirring poster that was pasted to the walls in Palestine. It showed the head of Winston Churchill with the slogan: “Alright Then, Alone!”

Could a lone terrorist with a car and a knife frighten

such a country into submission?

To me this sounds crazy, but this is only a side remark. My purpose here is to throw light on an institution few people think about: prison.

THE WESTMINSTER terrorist attack raises a simple question: how did a petty criminal become a shahid who attracts world-wide attention?

There are many theories, many of them raised by experts vastly more competent than I. Religious experts. Cultural experts. Islamist experts. Criminologists.

My own answer is very simple: it's prison that did it.

LETS MOVE as far away from Britain and religion as possible. Let's come back to Israel and our local crime scene.

We often hear of major crimes being committed by people who started as juvenile delinquents.

How does an ordinary person become a chief of organized crime? Where does he study?

Well, in the same place as a British jihadist. Or an Israeli Muslim jihadist, for that matter.

A boy has trouble at home. Perhaps his father regularly beats up his beloved mother. Perhaps his mother is a prostitute. Perhaps he is a dumb pupil and his comrades despise him. Any one of a hundred reasons.

At 14, the boy is caught stealing. After being warned and released by the police, he steals again. He is sent to prison. In prison, the most respected criminals adopt him, perhaps even sexually. He is sent to prison again and again, and slowly he rises in the invisible prison hierarchy.

He is respected by his fellow prisoners, he has authority. Prison becomes his world, he knows the rules. He feels good.

When he is released, he returns to being a nobody. Correction personnel treat him as an object. He longs to go back to his world, the place where he is known and respected. He is not sent to prison because he has committed a crime. He commits a crime in order to be sent to prison.

So he commits a crime, more serious than all before. He becomes a crime boss himself. When he returns to prison, even the chief warden treats him as an old acquaintance.

Throughout the years, prison has acted for this person as a university, a University of Crime. It is there that he

learned all the tricks of the trade, until he himself becomes a professor.

The little Muslim thief sent to prison may meet there an incarcerated Muslim preacher, who convinces him that he is not a despised criminal but one of the few selected by Allah to destroy the infidels

ALL THIS is old stuff. I am not revealing anything new. Every inmate, criminologist, senior police officer, chief prison warden or correction psychologist knows it, far better than I.

If so, how come nobody does anything about it? Why does prison function today as it did centuries ago?

I suspect the simple answer is: Nobody knows what to do instead.

The British once had a good answer: they sent all criminals, even petty thieves, to Australia. If they did not hang them first.

But in modern times, even these remedies were abandoned. Australia is now a strong nation, that sends hapless refugees to remote Pacific islands.

The United States, the world's foremost power, with some of the best universities, keeps millions of its citizens in prison, where they turn into hardened criminals.

Israeli prisons are bursting with inmates, many of them "terrorists" sent there without trial. This is euphemistically called "preventive detention"—an oxymoron if ever there was one.

If one asks a police officer about the logic of this entire system, he shrugs his shoulder and answers—the Jewish way—with another question: What else can you do with them?

So for year after year, century after century, society has sent its criminals to Crime University, where they learn to become better and more professional criminals. Tuition with full board, all expenses paid by the state.

And, of course, a huge army of prison personnel, po-

licemen and women, experts and academics depend on this system for their livelihood. Everybody happy.

Prison is not only counterproductive. It is also inhuman. It turns human beings into zoo animals. (And these should be liberated, too.)

CURIOSLY ENOUGH, I was never in prison, though I came close to it several times.

As I have recounted elsewhere, the chief of Israel's political police (sorry, I mean "security agency") once proposed to the Prime Minister to put me in "administrative detention", without involving a judge, as a foreign spy. This was only prevented by Menachem Begin, the leader of the opposition, who refused his assent.

Another time was after my meeting with Yasser Arafat during the siege of Beirut, when the government officially requested the attorney general to investigate me for treason. The attorney, a nice person, decided I had committed no crime. I did not illegally cross any border, since I was invited to occupied East Beirut by the Israeli army as a newspaper editor. Also, there was no suspicion that I had the intention of harming the security of the state.

So I have no personal experience of prison so far. But the absurdity of the entire situation has occupied my mind for many years. I made several speeches about it in the Knesset.

To no avail. No one knows of an alternative.

My late wife, Rachel, was a teacher. She always refused to move up from the second grade (age 8). She maintained that at that age the character of a human being is already fully formed. After that, nothing can be done.

If so, perhaps all efforts should be concentrated on a very early age.

I am sure that somewhere experiments with other answers are being carried out. Perhaps in Scandinavia. Or on the island of Fiji.

Isn't it about time?