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# Defining and Illustrating “Extremism” Using the Largest Investigation into Islam in Prison

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## ABSTRACT

In the context of a damaging absence of clarity, we define “**Islamist Extremism**” as: **the absolutely divided and antagonistic Worldview of the “Us”-true-Muslim “in-group” who must strive to live in an “Islamic” State versus “Them”-non-Muslim’ and “wrong”-Muslim “out-groups” who are stripped of their human status due to their opposition to “true Islam.”** We illustrate this definition of “Extremism” - including showing how Islamist Extremism is different from Mainstream Islam - using fresh empirical data from the largest ever study of Islam and Muslims in prison. We proceed to show how this definition of “Extremism” can be used as the basis for understanding processes of radicalization and de-radicalization in and outside prison. We then extrapolate from the case of Islamist Extremism in prison to suggest a working definition of “Extremism” more generally as: **any absolutely divided “Us” versus “Them” Worldview by which a “chosen” in-group strips “condemned” out-groups of their basic human qualities, properties and rights and thereby sets them up for harm.**

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## *Islamist Extremism in Prison: A Complex and Contested Picture*

The last two decades have witnessed a sharp focus upon US and European prisons as potential sites for the incubation of dangerous terrorist ideologies, including the Worldviews of Islamism and Islamist Extremism.<sup>1</sup>

This focus on prison as an “incubator” of Islamist Extremism has grown in tandem with:

1. a growing population of incarcerated people convicted of terrorism and terrorism-related offences in the wake of the US-led War on Terror in Iraq and Afghanistan (2001–2022) and the Syrian Civil War (2011–present);
2. the increased prosecution and incarceration of infamous Muslim “hate preachers” such as Abu Qatada (1960–), Mostafa Kamel Mostafa (a.k.a. Abu Hamza al-Masri) (1958–) and Anjem Choudhary (1967–);

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3. an alarmed political and public awareness that many recent terrorist offences perpetrated on the European mainland and in the UK from 2010 onwards were connected to people who had embraced Islam in prison.<sup>2</sup>

This, in turn, has triggered political concerns about the degree to which such high-profile and lesser-known incarcerated people could negatively influence or radicalize individuals they encounter whilst serving prison sentences.<sup>3</sup> In the UK, these concerns prompted the *2016 Acheson Review* which, although it was controversially never published by the UK Government in full, asserted that Islamist Extremism was a growing problem in prisons requiring *inter alia* the establishment of “separation centres” to isolate influential incarcerated people, including White Supremacists and members of the Far Right.<sup>4</sup>

Despite a growing policy consensus that Extremism poses a threat to prison life, the academic evidence has contested the degree to which prisons are fertile grounds for radicalization and terrorist recruitment. For example, Useem and Clayton’s study in US prisons concluded that Muslim inmates tended to express considerable collective solidarity *against* terrorism.<sup>5</sup> Other research has revealed that when those holding extremist views are able to interact with these not holding extremist views, there is a moderating impact on extremist views thus weakening the argument for separation units or separation centres.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Absence of Definitional Clarity: What is Extremism?***

The question of whether prisons in Europe and the US can be said to incubate Islamist Extremism that can lead to terrorism has been further muddled by a damaging lack of definitional clarity about what Islamist Extremism *is* and, therefore, what constitutes radicalization into Islamist Extremism.<sup>7</sup>

Accounts of “Extremism” - such as those developed by the UK Government - have tended to draw on nationalist-style references to “democratic values” and define 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.”<sup>8</sup>*

While opposition to facets of British life and core democratic values and activities may well be *outcomes* of Islamist and other forms of “Extremism,” this account does not help people to know what Extremism - Islamist and other - actually *is*. Failure to understand the ideological and Worldview-nature of Extremism is also exposed by the focus placed by the UK Government’s Commission for Countering Extremism<sup>9</sup> on the idea that Extremism is fuelled by hate and leads to hateful behaviours. It defines Extremism as:

*“Behaviours that can incite and amplify hate, or engage in persistent hatred, or equivocate about and make the moral case for violence.”<sup>10</sup>*

This definition does not account for the thought-belief element in Extremism, and that experience shows that while “Extremism” is likely to be hate-driven and/or lead

to hateful acts of violence, it does not necessarily do so. Similarly, in the United States despite a 20-year long (2001–2021) global combat with Violent Extremism costing tens of thousands of lives and trillions of taxpayers' dollars, commentators note the persistent focus of US governmental agencies on the *outcomes* of Extremism and Extremist activities rather than in addressing what Extremism actually is.<sup>11</sup>

For example, recent guidance to the US military states,<sup>12</sup>

*“(1) Extremist Activities. The term “extremist activities” means: (a) Advocating or engaging in unlawful force, unlawful violence, or other illegal means to deprive individuals of their rights under the United States Constitution or the laws of the United States, including those of any State, Commonwealth, Territory, or the District of Columbia, or any political subdivision thereof. (b) Advocating or engaging in unlawful force or violence to achieve goals that are political, religious, discriminatory, or ideological in nature.”*<sup>13</sup>

### **What is Islamist Extremism?**

In the absence of clear definitional guidance and despite the urgent need to understand the nature, factors and causes of the resurgent, religiously-inspired terrorism of the twenty-first century,<sup>14</sup> both academic and policy accounts of radicalization into religious extremism have often taken “the elephant in the room” or the “by their fruits ye shall know them” approach: you will know an Islamist Extremist when you see one by what they have done.

This approach reflects a deeper philosophical reticence to grasp an ontological nettle with a potentially sharp normative sting: defining a person as an “extremist” implies that that person is morally wrong. This is a step which few academics are prepared to take, especially those who are uncomfortable with the idea of radicalization and extremism<sup>15</sup> or with the idea that terrorism can manifest a particularly religious nature.<sup>16</sup> The only robust and widely recognised definition of Islamist Extremism is the 2016 ten-point definition given by His Justice Haddon-Cave in the civil defamation case of Shakeel Begg versus BBC (2016)<sup>17</sup>, points 1 to 8 of which were drawn from the Expert Witness report for the BBC of Matthew Wilkinson<sup>18</sup>

*“Ten extremist Islamic positions”*<sup>19</sup>

*The Court highlighted ten examples of classic extremist Islamic positions [ §§118–128], viz.,*

1. *an extremist Manichean “Us” versus “Them” worldview which divides the world into “good” Muslims versus “bad” Muslims or kafir (unbelievers);*<sup>20</sup>
2. *giving jihad an exclusively violent meaning (qital);*<sup>21</sup>
3. *ignoring the Qur’anic conditions for declaring qital;*<sup>22</sup>
4. *ignoring the Qur’anic conditions for conducting qital;*<sup>23</sup>
5. *encouraging Muslims to believe it was their individual religious duty to go off and fight “in the name of Allah”;*<sup>24</sup>
6. *any interpretation of Shar’ia (religious law) which requires Muslims to break the “law of the land”;*<sup>25</sup>
7. *the classification of all non-Muslims as unbelievers (kuffar);*<sup>26</sup>
8. *the Salafist Islamism doctrine that the precepts of the Muslim faith negate and supersede all natural ties, of family, kinship, and nationhood;*<sup>27</sup>

9. *the citing with approval the fatwa (legal opinions) of Islamic scholars who espouse extremist views (e.g., the Salafi-Wahabi scholar, Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Baz), or praising notorious violent, extremist, Islamic ideologues (e.g., Sayyid Qutb and Abdullah Azzam); and*
10. *any teaching which, expressly or impliedly, encourages Muslims to engage in violence or terrorism “in the name of Allah.”*

This policy-based reticence to get to grips with defining Extremism, in particular Religious Extremism, is exacerbated by the broader intellectual context of the global North which is characterized by high levels of secularism, low levels of religious literacy<sup>28</sup> and a deep-seated secular assumption<sup>29</sup> that religions cannot be defined and understood with the same systematic rigour as other social and natural phenomena because they are supposedly based on purely personal, subjective, metaphysical choices.<sup>30</sup>

### **Absence of Empirical Evidence**

In addition to the obstacle of an absence of definitional clarity, empirical scholarship on Islamist Extremism in prison is hampered by the fact that extremists do not wish to be mapped or to be understood by those who are minded not to follow them. In this regard, it is estimated that **80%** of published articles on terrorism provide no empirically new knowledge about the subject and still less about terrorism that is generated from prison.<sup>31</sup>

### **Aims of This Paper**

#### **Developing a Clear Definition of Islamist Extremism**

In this context of the unhelpful avoidance of the ontological question: what is Islamist Extremism?, in the absence of fresh empirical data and of the consequent disagreement about how much Islamist Extremism can be said to exist and be propagated in European prisons, this paper aims to follow the course of a clear and useful definition of Islamist Extremism, in particular, and Extremism, in general, suggested by Elahi and Hargreaves<sup>32</sup>, following Sartori.<sup>33</sup>

A clear and useful definition of Islamist Extremism is achieved in this paper by:

1. establishing the characteristics of the concept of “Islamist Extremism” in relation to the Worldviews of Mainstream, non-Extremist Islam and Islamism using Islamic Theology and Worldview Theory;
2. providing examples from prison life to determine what the Worldviews of Mainstream Islam, Islamism and Islamist Extremism denote, using original data from an indicative sample of 279 Muslim incarcerated people in England, Switzerland, and France;
3. demonstrating - both in theory and by using empirical data - how a “shift of Worldview” can describe and help understand both radicalization into Islamist Extremism and de-radicalization away from Islamist Extremism;

4. offering a working definition of “Extremism” that can be applied to Worldviews beyond Islamism to other religious and ideological contexts.

## Generating the Empirical Data

Set in the broader national and international context of the pressing political concern about Islamist Extremism in theory and in prison, this paper is an outcome of the largest study on Islam and Muslims in prison called, *Understanding Conversion to Islam in Prison* (UCIP). UCIP was a mixed-methods, collaborative, independently funded study undertaken at SOAS University of London from 2018–2021.

UCIP was not looking for Islamist Extremism: the focus of our research was on the pro-social capacity for religious change to promote prisoner rehabilitation.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, we were also determined that our research should be non-naive and accurate about the nature and effects of Islam in prison.

Our six Research Aims were to understand:

1. Who are Muslim prisoners, socio-demographically and religiously?
2. Why do people in prison choose to follow Islam?
3. What types of Islamic Worldview are embraced in prison?
4. What are the benefits of conversion to Islam for rehabilitation?
5. What risks are connected to starting to practise Islam in prison?
6. How is the process of conversion managed by the prison authorities and by the Prison Chaplaincy?

## Methodology

UCIP’s methodology was guided by the critical realist principles of the primacy of ontology<sup>35</sup> and an awareness of judgmental rationality.<sup>36</sup> Religious experiences amongst Muslims in prison exhibit both individual detail, intensity and depth, and national and international breadth which mandated a mixed-methods approach.

UCIP’s methodology took the form of the following sequence:

1. *Pilot Semi-Structured Interviews* to test UCIP’s theoretical framework and identify suitable quantitative variables.
2. Quantitative *Attitudinal Surveys* with **279** incarcerated people.<sup>37</sup>
3. Full *Semi-Structured Interviews* with **158** incarcerated people.<sup>38</sup>
4. **32** Observations of the Friday Prayers and Islamic Studies Classes.<sup>39</sup>

We triangulated our data by interviewing:

- a. **19** Prison Chaplains
- b. **41** Correctional Officers
- c. **15** Prison Wardens

Therefore, our study exhibited triangulation of method and triangulation of actor. Please see [Table 1](#), below.

**Table 1.** Summary of UCIP research prisons by jurisdiction.

Country	Prison <sup>40</sup>	Prison Security Category <sup>41</sup>	# of Surveys	# of Interviews with Incarcerated People	# of Interviews with Muslim Prison Chaplains	# of Interviews with Correctional Officers	# of Interviews with Prison Wardens	# of Observations of Friday Prayers and Islamic Classes
England	<b>5</b>		<b>191</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>21</b>
	HMP Coquet	C	57	33	2	8	4	5
	HMP Forth	A	24	19	3	5	2	4
	HMP Parrett	B	52	36	6	8	2	5
	HMP Stour	D	19	12	1	0	3	3
Switzerland	HMP Severn	B	39	22	1	4	1	4
	<b>4</b>		<b>54</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>10</b>
	Miteithlen	A	20	14	1			2
	Fontgrise	B	15	5	2	11	1	5
	Doriath	A	11	1	1	1		2
	La Citadelle	A	8	5	1			1
France	<b>1</b>		<b>34</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
	Hauterive	B	34	11	2	4	2	1
TOTAL	<b>10</b>	<b>Cat. A=4</b> <b>Cat. B=4</b> <b>Cat. C=1</b> <b>Cat. D × 1</b>	<b>279</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>32</b>

### **Basic Contours of the Research Data Sample**

UCIP researched in 5 English prisons, 4 Swiss prisons and 1 French prison in a variety of geographies, holding both sentenced and remand prisoners and covering all prison security categories. UCIP's research sample included all four Security Categories used in England, from A (Maximum Security) to D (Open). To ease comparison, UCIP adapted the equivalent security categories for use in Switzerland and France.

Our descriptive *Attitudinal Survey* results showed that UCIP's sample was socio-demographically and religiously consistent with what is already known about Muslim prison populations in the three jurisdictions. Therefore, we regarded UCIP's sample as a characteristic sample of Muslim prisoners.<sup>42</sup>

### **Theory: The Concept of "Worldview"**

A key element of our critical realist-inspired methodology was to understand different types of Islam as philosophically distinct "Worldviews." Worldviews are integrated ways of knowing-the-world and behaving-in-the-world that draw together facts and fictions, laws, norms, generalizations, and answers to ultimate questions,<sup>43</sup> with the aspiration of the person to form a consistent idea of the self and its relationship to the world.<sup>44</sup> Worldviews, as opposed to merely views of the world, are understood as the combined force of outlook *and* action. This idea of Worldview as the combined force of outlook *and* action acted as a useful theoretical construct because its simplicity allowed for its translation into the empirical testing tools.

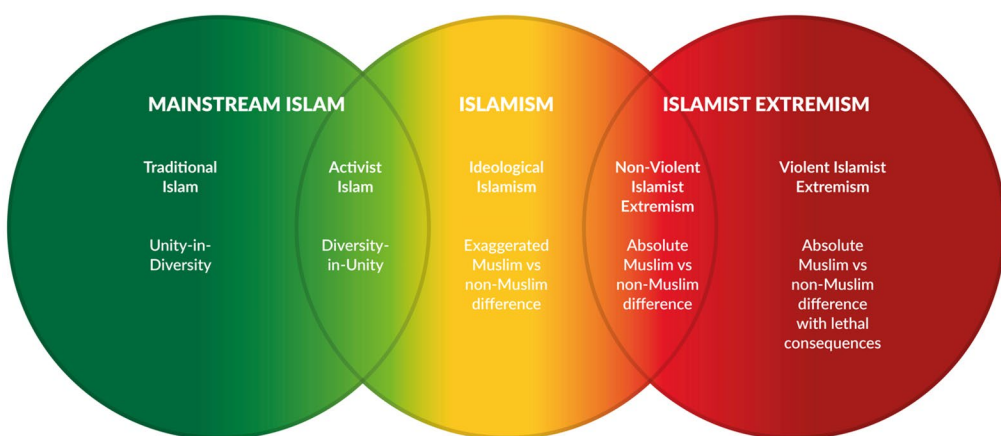
Aptly for our research, the concept of Worldview also mapped closely onto the Islamic idea of religion as “*deen*”, defined in the Islamic primary sources of the *Qur’an*<sup>45</sup> and the *Sunna* of the Prophet Muhammad as the integrated combination of Godly belief *and* righteous behavior.<sup>46</sup> Recent policy literature around Religious Education in the UK has also recognized the value of the concept of Worldview to make sense of the universal aspiration of human beings to find ultimate meaning in their outlook and behavior.<sup>47</sup>

### ***The Worldviews of Mainstream Islam, Islamism, and Islamist Extremism***

As a result, we built upon the earlier research of UCIP’s Principal Investigator, Matthew Wilkinson, and his model for telling the difference between Islam, Islamism, and Islamist Extremism as distinct Worldviews<sup>48</sup>. This model combines traditional Islamic theological understandings of Islam with contemporary insights from critical realist theory about the philosophical relationships between unity/identity and difference/diversity<sup>49</sup> and social identity theory about the nature of<sup>50</sup> and relationships between “in-groups” and “out-groups.”<sup>51</sup> This model for telling the difference between Islam, Islamism and Islamist Extremism has been used successfully as the theoretical basis for expert analysis of evidence in 34 UK-based terrorism and Hate Crime trials, including the Public Inquiry into the 2017 bombing of the Manchester Arena.<sup>52</sup>

We further tested and ascertained the Worldview model’s empirical utility by means of a pilot study of 15 interviews, which suggested broadly that the descriptions by people in prison of their religiously-inspired beliefs *and* behaviors mapped onto our categories of Worldview, which were primarily understood by their overall philosophical character rather than connected theologically to any religious affiliation or denomination.

We present the definitions and relationship of these Islamic “Worldviews” to each other here. [Figure 1](#) is intended both to show the qualitative distinction between the Worldviews and the fact that there exists some overlap and intermingling between them, particularly around the category of Islamism.



**Figure 1.** The Worldviews of Mainstream Islam, Islamism, and Islamist Extremism<sup>53</sup>.



1. **Traditional Islam** is the Worldview of **MAINSTREAM ISLAM** that is characterized philosophically by **Unity-in-Diversity** and by the belief in the essential equality of all human beings before God, with secondary differences of race, faith, gender, and class.<sup>54</sup> **Traditional Islam** is generated by the religious practice of those who accept and follow to the best of their ability the basic injunctions of the *Qur'an* and the Customary Prophetic Behavior (*Sunna*) of the Prophet Muhammad in a way that is appropriate to their circumstances without their aspiring to effect change in the political space. It is the Worldview of the “everyday Muslim”.
2. **Activist Islam** is the Worldview of **MAINSTREAM ISLAM** as practiced, at least in part, to effect transformative personal change and/or transformative structural change in the public space according to Islamic principles of equality and fairness.<sup>55</sup> Activist Islam has a long and strong pedigree in Islamic doctrine and practice, as well as representing an important distinction between “activism” and “radicalism”<sup>56</sup>: the former being legal, non-violent political action, and the latter being illegal and violent political action.<sup>57</sup>

Both **Traditional Islam** and **Activist Islam** are regarded as **MAINSTREAM ISLAM** since they are followed by a significant majority of the Muslim world<sup>58</sup> are clearly substantiated in the mainstream *Sunni* and *Shia*’ Schools of Law.<sup>59</sup>

3. **ISLAMISM** marks a paradigm shift to a Worldview of exaggerated separation and difference between “*Us*”-*Muslim* versus “*Them*”-*non-Muslims* which holds Muslims and non-Muslims to be essentially different types of human being. Islamists typically claim that, in order to be a full and not a partial Muslim, one must strive to live in an “Islamic” State.<sup>60</sup> Importantly, **ISLAMISM** is qualitatively different from Activist Islam. Activist Islam is the Worldview of the *transformation* of unjust or vicious elements of personhood and of society according to Islamic principles of justice and equality. **ISLAMISM** construes Islam as *revolutionary* political ideology directed at overthrowing - rather than transforming - existing political structures and replacing them with an “Islamic” State governed by a literalist interpretation of *Sharia* Law. As a result, Islamists typically decry democratic governance as “un-Islamic.”<sup>61</sup>
4. **Non-Violent Islamist Extremism** is the Worldview of **ISLAMISM** as it sharpens antagonistically into an absolutely divided Manichean<sup>62</sup> “*Us*”-*true-Muslim* versus “*Them*”-*Non-Muslim* or “*wrong*”-*Muslim* Worldview that stresses the absolute, irreconcilable difference between the “true” ideological Muslim “in-group” that strives to live in an “Islamic” State versus the “non-Muslim” and “wrong” Muslim “out-groups” who are afforded a less human or sub-human status. This oppositional “*Us*” versus “*Them*” Worldview is typically justified using The Doctrine of Loyalty & Disavowal (*Al-Wala’ wal Bara’*).<sup>63</sup>
5. **Violent Islamist Extremism** is the is the Worldview of **ISLAMIST EXTREMISM** of the *absolutely divided, Manichean* “*Us*”-*true-Muslim* versus “*Them*”-*Non-Muslim* or “*wrong*”-*Muslim* Worldview by which the cosmos is constructed as a manifestation of the Eternal Struggle between Islam and Unbelief (*Kufr*). The non-Muslim and the “wrong” Muslim who do not struggle violently to establish a global “Islamic” state are construed as eternal enemies of “true” Islam, sub-human and therefore fit to be exterminated.

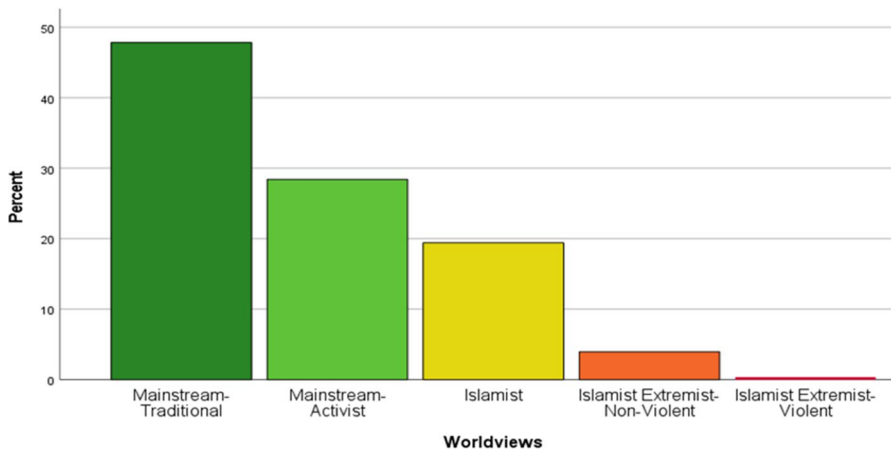
## Ascertaining the Worldviews of Incarcerated People

Once we had established through 15 *Pilot Semi-Structured Interviews* that these Worldview types were both accurate and useful and that they mapped onto the way incarcerated people described their own religious beliefs and concomitant behaviours, we needed to gauge our participants' Worldviews by translating the Worldview framework outlined above into a quantitative empirical understanding. We did this by designing variable statements for our *Attitudinal Survey* for our 279 incarcerated participants that both aggregated and individually tested attitudes associated with different Worldviews. For further information on how we calculated the Worldviews, please see [APPENDIX 1](#) and [APPENDIX 2](#).

## Our Findings

### The Worldviews of Incarcerated People Understood Quantitatively

Across our whole data sample, incarcerated people whose Worldview was characterized by **Mainstream Islam** and Unity-in-Diversity were significantly in the majority at 76% of the data sample. Those incarcerated people categorized with the Worldview of **Islamist Extremism** represented 4% of the whole data sample ([Figure 2](#)):

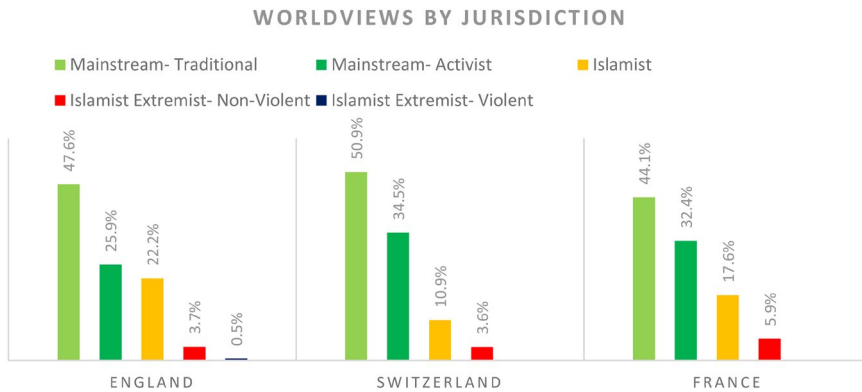


**Figure 2.** Worldviews of Muslim incarcerated people.

- 48% (n=133) were characterized as holding the Worldview of **MAINSTREAM ISLAM: Traditional Islam**.
- 28% (n=79) were characterized as holding the Worldview of **MAINSTREAM ISLAM: Activist Islam**.
- 19% (n=54) were characterized as holding the Worldview of **ISLAMISM**.
- 4% (n=11) were characterized as holding the Worldview of **ISLAMIST EXTREMISM: Non-Violent Extremism**.
- 0.4% (n=1) were characterized as holding the Worldview of **ISLAMIST EXTREMISM: Violent Extremism**.

There were significant differences in incarcerated people's Worldviews according to (Figure 3):

1. *Jurisdiction*
2. *Conversion*
3. *Security Category*



**Figure 3.** Islamic Worldviews of incarcerated people by jurisdiction.

### ***Differences in Worldview by Jurisdiction***

#### ***English Incarcerated People Were More Islamist than Swiss Incarcerated People***

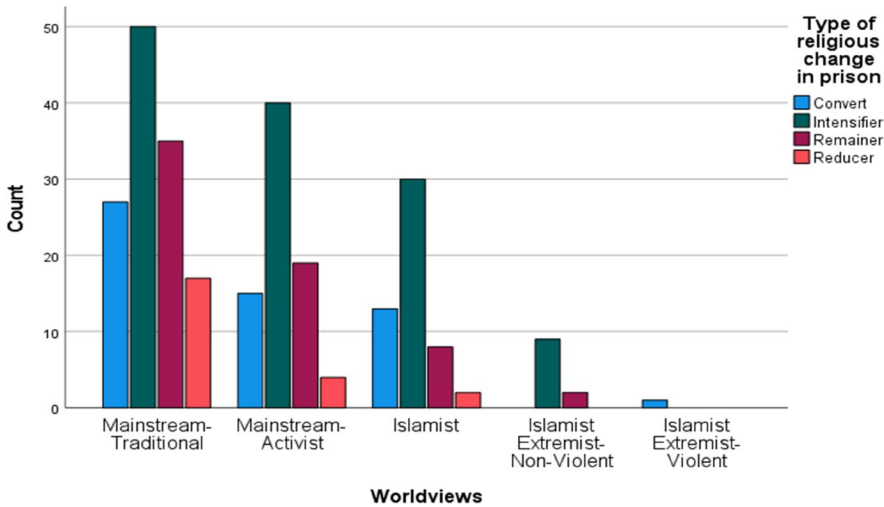
The most obvious variation between jurisdictions was the different levels of those with the Worldview of **Islamism**. Significantly more English incarcerated people (22%) held the Worldview of **Islamism** than Swiss incarcerated people (11%).<sup>64</sup> This difference was related to the significantly higher levels of “**Converts**”<sup>65</sup> and “**Intensifiers**”<sup>66</sup> in our English prisons than in our Swiss prisons, since “*Conversion to*” and “*Intensification in*” Islam were significantly correlated with the Worldview of **Islamism**. Please see Figure 4.

### ***Differences in Worldview by “Conversion”***

#### ***“Converts” and “Intensifiers” were more likely to hold the Worldviews of Islamism and Islamist Extremism than “Remainers” and “Reducers”***

Thus, our data also showed-up significant differences in Worldview due to type of conversion and change. “**Converts**”, who had chosen to follow Islam for the first time in prison, and “**Intensifiers**”, whose faith of birth had deepened in prison, formed 68% ( $n=185$ ) of our total data sample. However, “**Converts**” and “**Intensifiers**” constituted 81% ( $n=43$ ) of those holding the Worldview of **Islamism** and 83% ( $n=9$ ) of those holding the Worldview of **Islamist Extremism**, which was significantly different<sup>67</sup> from those whose faith remained the same, “**Remainers**”, or reduced, “**Reducers**”. Indeed, the only recorded incarcerated person with the Worldview of **Violent Islamist Extremism** (100%,  $n=1$ ) was a “**Convert**” from HMP Cherwell, England, Category C Medium Security Prison.

This finding suggested that there existed some risk connected to conversion to Islam of an incarcerated person adopting an “Us” versus “Them” Worldview which can, on



**Figure 4.** Islamic worldviews of incarcerated people by type of religious change.

occasion, exacerbate the existing “Us” (The Incarcerated People) versus “Them” (The Prison Staff) of the prison environment. Conversely, “Conversion to” and “Intensification in” Islam were also significant predictors of strong “Attitude to Rehabilitation”<sup>68</sup> in the form of engagement with work, education and the aspiration to avoid further crime, in particular for those incarcerated people who held the Worldview of Mainstream, Activist Islam<sup>69</sup> suggests that “Conversion to” and “Intensification in” Islam in prison present both rehabilitative opportunity and some criminogenic risk.<sup>70</sup>

### ***Differences in Worldview by Security Category***

#### ***Category D Open Prison Incarcerated People Held the Most Mainstream Worldviews***

We also observed a significant difference in Worldview according to Prison Category. Significantly fewer incarcerated people in our Category C Medium Security prison, HMP Cherwell, held the Worldview of **Mainstream Islam** and significantly *more* held the Worldview of **Islamism** than incarcerated people in either our Category A Maximum Security prisons or our Category D Open Security prison.<sup>71</sup> Of all our participant incarcerated people, those in our Category D open security prison, HMP Stour, were significantly the *most* likely to hold the Worldview of **Mainstream Islam**. Considering that these incarcerated people were the closest to Release of all our participants,<sup>72</sup> this fact allowed us to make the tentative suggestion that prison sentences had tended to produce a moderating effect on the Worldview of Muslim incarcerated people in terms of helping them to develop an outlook of Unity-in-Diversity and a commitment to lawfulness (Figure 5).

### ***Examples of the Worldviews of Islamism and Islamist Extremism Expressed at Interview and Observed in Prison Life***

As well as nuancing the relatively blunt research instrument of our *Attitudinal Survey*, our qualitative data – *Semi-Structured Interviews* and *Formal and Informal*

## WORLDVIEWS BY PRISON SECURITY CATEGORY



**Figure 5.** Differences in worldview by prison security category.

*Observations* - illustrated both our theoretical categories of Worldview, and the effects of Worldviews on prison life. This research data corroborated and illustrated our quantitative findings: incarcerated people who held the Worldview of **Islamist Extremism** were not the norm in prison, but where they did exist, they generated fear, violence, and crime and were sometimes protected by a hinterland of Islamist sympathisers.

### **Mainstream Islam - Unity-in-Diversity**

As a product of their varied commitment to believe and practise **Mainstream Islam**, 76% of Muslim incarcerated people understood and enacted the Mainstream, Islamic values in a wide range of ways. For one such Mainstream Muslim, Riyadh, the equality of humanity before God was a core element of his Islamic belief,

*“We’re all God’s creation. Nobody is above nobody, and we all come from one place. We all come from Adam. If you’re a believer, you believe we come from Adam, so [we are] all the same.”*

#### **Riyad**

(male, 28, British Indian, Born Muslim, HMP Stour, Category D Open Prison)

Another Mainstream Muslim prisoner, Adnan, explained the value that he placed on the Islamic ethos of fairness,

*“Even when we’re talking about Sharia Law or judgements [...] Allah says, “Deal with people just” and as a Muslim, if I want to deal with a person, whether they’re a Muslim, non-Muslim, whether they’re pink, gold, purple, all the colours of the rainbow, Allah says deal with people fairly. And if you’re not going to deal with that person fairly, it’s called “Adalat” [Divine Justice].*

*You need to fear Him.”*

#### **Adnan**

(male, 27, British Black Caribbean, Muslim Convert, HMP Cherwell, Category C Medium Security Prison)

## **Islamism - Rejecting Democracy and Secular Lawfulness**

By contrast, incarcerated people with the Worldview of **Islamism** saw others and behaved in terms of an exaggerated sense of Muslim versus “*Kafir*” (infidel). For people with the Worldview of **Islamism**, for example, secular laws and secular governments were, in principle, in conflict with Islam. Kevin exemplified this aspect of the Islamist Worldview in his belief that participation in democracy was forbidden to Muslims.

*Interviewer: Do you think we should be participating in democracy?*

*Kevin: No, it's not part of our culture. It's not part of our way to do that. You can't vote. There is this belief. There are opinions about it. So, I follow the opinion that you can't vote. It will take you out of the fold [of Islam] [...] You can't vote. I'm not allowed to. It's not allowed.*

**Kevin**

(male, 45, White British, Convert, HMP Severn, Category B High Security Prison)

Similarly, Kevin believed that only Islamic religious laws could be the basis of a legitimate government,

*Kevin: Yeah, if you want to get into the depths of it, I don't even believe in prison, but I believe in laws, just laws and basically, I don't believe in prison.*

*Interviewer: So, let's say that prison didn't exist and that you believe in “just laws”. So, in your mind, how would you enforce “just laws”?*

*Kevin: Basically, that the rulers would enforce their laws of the books. So, the Laws of Moses, the Sharia Law, that's it.*

**Kevin**

(male, 45, White British, Convert, HMP Severn, Category B High Security Prison)

Jamal also rejected the idea of accepting non-Muslim laws,

*“Well, I don't know. Can anybody bring me a verse in the Qur'an where it says, “Obey the Law of the Land”?”<sup>73</sup>*

**Jamal**

(male, 27, British Black Caribbean, Muslim Convert, HMP Cherwell Category C Medium Security Prison)

## **Non-Violent Islamist Extremism**

### **“Us” Muslim versus “Them” Non-Muslim**

In prison, we also observed how the **Islamist** Worldview sharpened antagonistically into the absolutely divided “*Us*” Muslim versus “*Them*” Non-Muslim Worldview of **Non-Violent Islamist Extremism**. Jake (male, 42, white British convert) gave a clear example of the absolutely divided “*Us*” Muslim versus “*Them*” Non-Muslim Worldview of **Non-Violent Islamist Extremism** held significantly more frequently than normal by Converts to Islam,

*“I would not take a non-Muslim as a friend. I believe my Qur'an teaches me this and it's something I would not do. Because I believe Muslims and non-Muslims, as a whole, we're incompatible”.*

**Jake**

(male, 42, white British convert, HMP Coquet, Category C Medium Security Prison)

Similarly, at HMP Forth Category A, England, one incarcerated person who did not want to formally engage with our research expressed his belief that Muslims and non-Muslims should not co-exist in society,

*“I don’t agree with your research. Muslims and non-Muslims shouldn’t live together.”*

**Abdullah**

(male, c. 30 years old, Black Caribbean British convert, HMP Forth, England, Category A Maximum Security Prison)

**The Doctrine of Loyalty & Disavowal**

Other prisoners bore witness to how those with the Worldview of **Islamist Extremism** policed other Muslim incarcerated people by pointing out their deficiencies of faith and how they were “wrong” Muslims. For example, Bashir said,

*“I don’t know how to explain it [...] because, like I say, you get these other people, they’re just reading the book, every day, every day, every day, every day. So, everything is, “Your haircut is wrong” and “You’re this” and “You’re that”, “You should be walking in side-ways to the mosque.” They’re just making things up.”*

**Bashir**

(male, 33, Asian, born Muslim, HMP Coquet, Category C Medium Security Prison)

These incarcerated people exercised an informal policy of The Doctrine of Loyalty and Disavowal (*Al-Wala’ wal Bara’*) by shunning, or pretending to shun, the “infidel” (*kafir*) - both incarcerated people and prison staff - and by encouraging other Muslim incarcerated people to follow suit. In some instances, interviewees described how they had seen non-Muslim incarcerated people get bullied out of jobs on the servery or off the wing/the range. Jabari described an example an informal policy of The Doctrine of Loyalty and Disavowal (*Al-Wala’ wal Bara’*) in prison,

*“I remember when I got to 2B in Copsegate, I saw a brother, he’s called Loco [...] he was an alright guy. And then because he wasn’t Muslim, they kicked him off. The Muslims on the wing made him quit servery. They started doing a little bit of malice to him and he moved to the wing [the range]. He was alright with everyone, and I see them oppressing him and I didn’t like it. I told them, “Why are you lot doing this to him?” [They answered] “He’s not Muslim.”*

**Jabari**

(male, 26, Black Caribbean, Convert, HMP Parrett, Category B Security Prison)

Jelani (male, 31, Asian, Born Muslim, HMP Coquet, Category C Medium Security Prison) described how he was told off by Muslims on his wing from socialising with non-Muslim prisoners and how he was reminded threateningly not to socialise with non-Muslims and “to keep your difference’ [from] “*kafirs*” [infidels].

The testimony of Bashir below shows the “unserious”<sup>74</sup> nature of the Worldview of **Non-Violent Islamist Extremism**: even if an incarcerated person with the Worldview of **Islamist Extremism** wanted to “shun the *kuffar*” in a prison environment, practically it was impossible to do so,

*“But you get a handful that just look at you a bit funny, because you talk too long [to non-Muslims], but I said, “How do you expect them to come into Islam if you’re saying “Kafir,” “Kafir.” Don’t speak to them, they’re Kafir. They believe in this.” But it goes back to what I was saying, they’re hypocrites, because secretly you do talk to them because when you go to work, you do converse with them. They say, “No, no, no,” but I’ve seen them, I have actually seen them [talking to non-Muslims].”*

#### **Bashir**

(male, 33, Asian, born Muslim, HMP Coquet, Category C Medium Security Prison)

In this discourse, Bashir used the language of religious hypocrisy (*nifaaq*) to distance himself from extreme religious narratives used by “*a handful*” of incarcerated people with the Worldview of **Islamist Extremism**.

### **Violent Islamist Extremism**

In our interviews, no incarcerated respondent openly expressed the legitimacy of using violence in the name of Islam. Nevertheless, our observations and interviews with Terrorist Act (TACT) offenders showed that pockets of **Violent Islamist Extremism** formed a part of the religious landscape in prison with its range of doctrinal themes and tropes.

### **Migration to Oppose “The Tyrant”**

Nicolas explained that he had joined Al Qaeda in Syria to,

*“oppose a tyrant”.*

#### **Nicolas**

(male, 32, white, French Convert, Hauterive High Security Prison)

Nicolas understood his journey of migration as a religious obligation, and therefore he did not consider himself guilty of any crime. Nicolas accepted his conviction but refused to participate in a penal system which, as a “*kafir* entity,” he denied had legitimacy.

Moussa had joined ISIS in order to fight to establish an Islamic State, which he saw in terms of historical nostalgia to reclaim a glorious Islamic past,

*“What motivated me to go there was the perspective of the Islamic State, the return to the golden age, to live a historical moment and to participate in it”.*

#### **Moussa**

(male, 26, French-born Algerian, born Muslim, Hauterive High Security Prison)



### ***The Belief in Armed Jihad (Struggle) as an Individual Obligation***

We also encountered individuals who were convinced of the use of violence to propagate and spread Islam. At HMP Forth, Category A Maximum Security Prison, England, one incarcerated person who declined to formally engage with our research said,

***“When Islam comes, it always comes by force.”***

#### **Abdullah**

(male, c. 30 years old, Black Caribbean British convert, HMP Forth, England, Category A Maximum Security Prison)

In this statement, Abdullah echoed statements from the Palestinian founder of Al-Qaeda, Abdullah Azzam (1941–1989), that armed Struggle (*Qital*) was an Individual Religious Obligation and that only armed Struggle constituted the true Jihad,

***“Jihad and the rifle alone: no conferences, no negotiations, no dialogue”.***

#### **Abdullah Azzam (1941–1989), Palestinian founder of Al-Qaeda**

Similarly, another incarcerated person who had been convicted under the UK Terrorism Act 2000 (TACT) and who declined to formally engage with our research, discounted the possibility of amicable religious dialogue,

***“I don’t believe in talking; I believe in direct action.”***

#### **Mike**

(male, c. 35, white, British Convert, HMP Forth, England, Category A Maximum Security Prison)

### ***Making Takfir (Infidel) against Other Muslims***

Incarcerated people with the Worldview of **Islamist Extremism** also deployed the Islamist Extremist technique of declaring other Muslims “infidels” (making *takfir*). This practice became prevalent in the Syrian Civil War (2011 to present) as a prelude to Muslim-on-Muslim violence. For example, Abdullah, the same incarcerated person as above, expressed his belief that,

***“Shia’ Muslims are kafir [infidels].”***

#### **Abdullah**

(male, c. 30 years old, Black Caribbean British convert, HMP Forth, England, Category A Maximum Security Prison)

In HMP Severn (Category B, England), an incarcerated person expressed the view that a stabbing during the Friday Prayer had constituted a legitimately religious act because the person was,

***“a snitch”***

and had therefore reneged on his “Loyalty” (*Wala*) to other Muslims. This shows how violent, criminal activity is typically given a “religious” justification and veneer by Islamist Extremists.

### ***Disrupting the Teaching of Muslim Prison Chaplains***

These small pockets of Islamist Extremists made efforts to weaken the engagement of Mainstream Muslims with Muslim Prison Chaplains and undermined their authority. During the congregational Midday Prayer at HMP Forth, we witnessed groups setting up alternative prayer lines as they refused to pray behind the Imam on the grounds that Muslim Prison Chaplain was a civil servant and therefore, in their eyes, a “*kafir*.” During an Islamic Studies Class in HMP Severn, one incarcerated person aggressively questioned the Muslim Prison Chaplain as to whether the Friday Prayer should be performed at all in,

“*Dar al-Kufr* [The Land of Unbelief, i.e., England].”

This aggressive questioning occupied ten minutes of an Islamic Studies Class, making the other incarcerated people in the class and the Muslim Prison Chaplain who was leading the class frustrated and uncomfortable. This was one example of four loaded questions “from the wings” that were raised by the same individual in a two-hour Islamic Studies Class which interrupted the tenor and the teaching of the Muslims Prison Chaplain. In an interview at HMP Severn (Category B), another incarcerated person expressed his support for Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (1971–2019) who at that time (May 2019) was leader of the so-called “Islamic” State group (ISIS). This incarcerated person also expressed the view that to support the “Islamic” State was not an extreme point of view and that the real extremists were actually back on his wing!

### ***Islamist Extremists Deter the Engagement of Mainstream Muslims with Productive Activity***

In HMP Severn (Category B) at the Friday Prayer and in Islamic Studies Classes, we also observed a small number of Violent Islamist Extremists with an exaggeratedly “Islamic” appearance - long robes, long beards, and shoulder-length hair - and who were known for their conviction as adherents and/or sympathisers of “Islamic” State. This “uniform” is associated with an extremist “hegemonic” masculinity<sup>75</sup> and it served to distinguish these incarcerated people from their fellow worshippers. This group were often the most vocal during Islamic Studies Classes in terms of challenging the view of the Muslim Prison Chaplain, and most vocal during “association” that followed the Friday Prayers where they seemed to exert a higher than usual degree of authority over other prisoners. At HMP Severn, we were told that this small but influential pocket of Islamist Extremists had warned the majority of Mainstream Muslim prisoners not to engage with our research. From this episode, we can infer that Mainstream Muslim prisoners were also discouraged by Islamist Extremists from engaging with other types of healthy and interesting activities run by “the *kuffar*” (infidels) that might have supported their rehabilitation.

### **A Model of Radicalization as Shifts of Religious Worldview**

Once we had achieved a working understanding of *what* constituted **Mainstream Islam**, **Islamism**, and **Islamist Extremism**, we could now go on to explore *how* and *why*

people shifted across these Worldviews, including how they become radicalized into the Worldview of **Islamist Extremism**.

Despite continuing ambiguity and controversy over the concept and the extent of prison-based radicalization,<sup>76</sup> useful models of Islamist radicalization have been developed since 2005 by Wiktorowicz (2005), Taarnby (2005), New York Police Department (Silber & Bhatt, 2007), Sageman (2008), Gill (2008) and Moghaddam (2009) and others.<sup>77</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this paper to conduct a detailed analysis of the individual features of these models of Islamist radicalization. Nevertheless, they share some common features in that, with different emphases, they view Islamist radicalization as an integrated, psychological, emotional, and social process. The process of Islamist radicalization is presented as often - but not always - as a gradual one that occurs in identifiable stages of increasing attachment to both the Worldview and to the corresponding “in-group”<sup>78</sup> of Islamist Extremism. Through these stages of radicalization, the idea and reality of the “Us” extremist “in-group” is maintained in increasing fictitious circumstances through the aggressive propagation of negative images of the “Them” “out-group” of non-Muslims and “wrong” Muslims, until they are stripped of all humanizing qualities. What these existing models have tended to ignore or underplay is the specifically religious/theological component in Islamist radicalization, which we account for below. In a dialectic between the wisdom contained in these models and our own Worldview theory and empirical data, we identify stages of the process of individual radicalization typically as:

### 1. A Crisis or Grievance

A crisis event, prolonged grievance, or a gradual alienation causes a de-identification, a profound questioning, or a jettisoning of the Worldview of mainstream in-groups. For example, the young Australian suicide bomber, Jake Bilardi (1996–2015), reputedly started to identify with the Worldview of Al-Qaeda after his mother’s death of cancer.<sup>79</sup> The wanted Violent Islamist Extremist terrorist, Samantha Lewthwaite (1983-present), and wife of the 7/7 bomber, Germaine Lindsay (1985–2005), was badly affected by her parents’ divorce in 1994 and sought sympathetic company initially with her Muslim neighbours.<sup>80</sup>

A grievance may also be generated and/or exacerbated by an awareness, especially in working-class males from migrant families, of the relative inaccessibility of the economic, cultural, and status-based rewards of the society in which they live as a result of a deficient education and/or from structural hurdles, such as racism or Islamophobia.

Typically, empathy with the “distant suffering” of a Muslim community in conflict zones may also generate a sense of grievance.<sup>81</sup> In the late 1990’s and early 2000’s, the Bosnian War (1992–1996), the Siege of Sarajevo (1992–1996) and the genocidal episodes by Serb-backed forces on Bosniak Muslims including the Srebrenica Massacre (1995), produced documented radicalizing effects on members of the extremist group Al-Muhajiroun. Also, the “distant suffering” of Muslim communities in the Iraq War (2003–2006) and the Syrian Civil War (2012-present) produced radicalizing effects on people who came to express allegiance to the so-called Islamic State group.

## 2. An unsettling and a shattering of inherited Worldviews

This sense of disorder, grievance or injustice can typically lead to a re-evaluation of core values and a quest for a radically different Worldview from that of one's parents or from one's immediate peer-group and stimulate an interest in literalist forms of Islam, Islamism, and Islamist Extremism.

## 3. An introduction to an "in-group" with the Worldview of Islamist Extremism

This shattering of an existing Worldview can lead to a deepening curiosity about the Worldview of **Islamism** or **Islamist Extremism** usually at the behest of a charismatic and/or trusted individual or small group who is often already known or introduced to the individual, often online.

The appeal of this Worldview of **Islamist Extremism** may typically be generated by the charisma of the introducer and the attraction of the simplistic Islamist "good" versus "evil," "Us, Muslim" versus "Them, Non-Muslim" account of the world. This account renders complex and messy issues, such as international conflicts and unemployment, readily comprehensible.

## 4. Identification with and/or joining an "in-group" with the Worldview of Islamist Extremism

As the Worldview of **Islamist Extremism**, and its related "in-group" – whether big or small – becomes more familiar and more trusted, the radicalizing person begins to identify with and internalise a Worldview of **Islamist Extremism** and to use its framework of "Us" versus "Them" to interpret all contemporary and historical events. At this stage, the radicalizing person is likely to externalise his or her new Worldview of the Extremist "in-group" by adopting and displaying its symbols – such as an exaggerated "Islamic" dress-code and "Islamic" patois – and to hold and express a theoretical commitment to violent behaviour towards non-Muslim and "wrong"-Muslim "out-groups." For example, the Manchester Arena bomber, Salman Abedi (1994–2017), was noted to begin expressing views in support of so-called Islamic State at the same time as he began to dress in an "Islamic" way by wearing a *thawb* (robe) and by growing a beard.<sup>82</sup>

## 5. Indoctrination

Identification is likely to be accompanied or followed by formal or informal indoctrination either in-person through a charismatic trusted individual(s) and/or online through videos and social media. In the case of *Islamist* Extremism, ideologues or charismatic individuals typically carry out a variety of theological sleights of hand to convince the radicalizing person both of the absolute difference between Islam and *Kufr* and that illegal violence is, in fact, sanctified in Islamic Law. This specifically theological element of radicalization has often been wrongly ignored.

Typically, as part of the process of indoctrination, these theological sleights of hand include:

1. Reducing the multi-faceted nature of "Struggle" (*Jihad*) in Islam, only to fighting (*Qital*).
2. Making fighting (*Qital*) an Individual Religious Obligation (*Fard al-'Ayn*) on a par with the Obligatory Prayer (*As-Salah*).
3. Making the Qur'anic verses about fighting (*Qital*) that were Particular (*Khass*) to the Prophet Muhammad's circumstances<sup>83</sup> General (*'Am*) to refer in a legally binding way to all Muslims at all times.

4. General (*Am*) verses of Qur'an that mandate suing for peace at the earliest opportunity are undermined as abrogated.
5. Contemporary legal judgements (*fatawa*) about the conditions for defensive fighting are construed as the product of "apostate" regimes.
6. **Moving to act violently for the "in-group" with the Worldview of Violent Islamist Extremism, including choosing a target of symbolic importance.**

The final stage of radicalization is making the commitment to act violently on behalf of the Worldview and its "in-group." Fighting, especially suicide killing, represents the ultimate act of identification with the Violent Islamist Extremist "in-group" and its Worldview of absolute Muslim versus Non-Muslim difference, together with rejection of the non-Muslim out-group. The act of self-immolation on behalf of the Islamist Extremist "in-group" and its Worldview is the ultimate statement of the absolute difference between the "true" Muslim who seeks death in martyrdom and the rewards of the Next Life, and the infidel (*kafir*) who seeks to live at all costs in This World.<sup>84</sup>

Any one of these six stages may be prone to pausing, repetition and feedback loops. An individual may remain "dormant" in an early phase of radicalization for years and then turn away from the process. By contrast, someone can shift from Crisis to Action in a few days. The key element in the model of Islamist radicalisation outlined above is that it is a **process of a shifting Worldview with an associated "in-group" towards an antagonistic and absolutely divided "Us" versus "Them" Worldview, by which the "in-group"-extremist-"Us" becomes committed by degrees to violence against the "out-group"- "Them"** (See Figure 6).

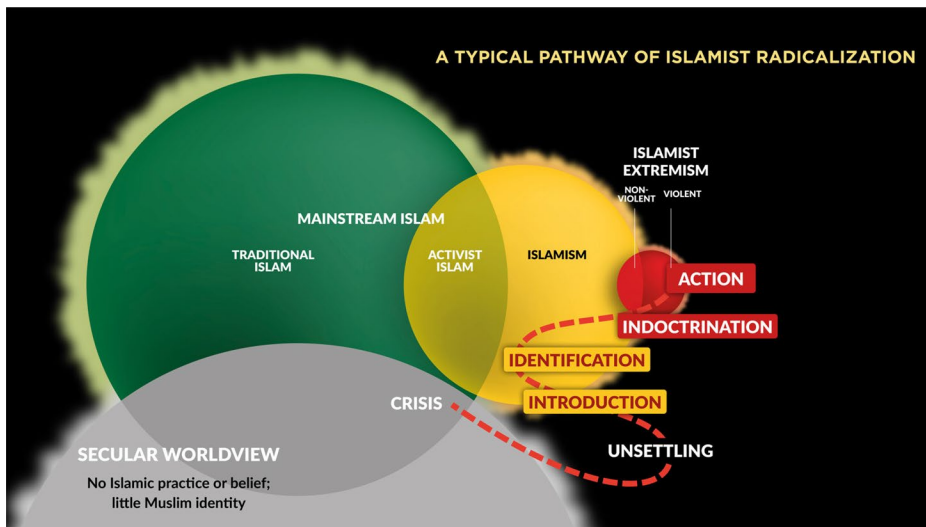


Figure 6. A typical pathway of Islamist radicalisation.

## **The Radicalization of Ethan**

By way of illustration, the radicalization in prison of Ethan (male, 43, White British, Convert, HMP Forth, Security Category A) followed this simple, staged process of shifting Worldview towards **Violent Islamist Extremism**.

- **Stage 1: A Crisis or Grievance leading to Stage 2: an Unsettling and a Shattering of Inherited Worldviews**

Ethan described how the process of his radicalization began when he was suffering crippling feelings of guilt over his crime (murder). His psychological and spiritual crisis was exploited by extremist prisoners who gradually recruited him to commit acts of violence on their behalf in the name of Islam.

*“I tried to kill myself in Blackheath [...] and the [Muslim] brothers have got me on the wing and the brother [asked], “Why are you always upset?” and stuff like that.”*

**Ethan**

(43, White British, Convert, HMP Forth, England, Category A Maximum Security Prison)

- **Stage 3: Introduction**

Ethan was introduced to a group of Islamist Extremists who told him that they had a plan for him by which he could wipe away his guilt and sins, whilst at the same time surrounding him with much-needed apparent protection and love.

*“And I went, “Brother, I killed two innocent people.” [He said] like, “Do you not feel regret for your crime?” kind of thing. [I said] “Yes, yes, of course I do, brother” and all that “but you’re always upset”. [He said] “What’s going on? Tell me the story. Tell me the story”.*

*So, I told him my story and he went, “Brother, you’re so remorseful, you’re so remorseful. I’ve got a plan for you. I’ve got a plan for you, brother. I love you. You’re my family now. I love you”.*

*And he used to bring me food, and he used to come in and talk to me and cuddle me and hold me and say, “Listen, I love you”.*

**Ethan**

(43, White British, Convert, HMP Forth, England, Category A Maximum Security Prison)

- **Stage 4: Identification and Stage 5: Indoctrination**

Having been introduced to the Islamist Extremist group, Ethan was induced by their apparent empathy into deeper trust of the radicalizing group and then indoctrinated into a spurious religious justification for murdering “the oppressors,” i.e., correctional officers who were opposed to the criminal activity of the Islamist Extremists on the wing,

*“And other brothers used to come in and say, “Listen, trust me, we’ve got a plan for you. Brother, the sorrow that you feel, we know how to take this sorrow away”.*

*I said, “How is that?”*

*And he said, "Listen, the only way that you can get any justification for killing those two innocent people is if you kill one of our oppressors. And in the melee, you might even, you're a big strong brother, yes, you might get two or three more, and then all your sins will be wiped away for that, and then you will definitely be accepted into Paradise".*

*And the problem is, at one stage, they turned my head.*

*I actually was starting to believe them.*

**Ethan**

(43, White British, Convert, HMP Forth, England, Category A Maximum Security Prison)

- **Stage 6: Action**

Having been introduced and indoctrinated into the Worldview of Violent Islamist Extremism of Muslim prisoners versus the "*kafir*" prison officers and non-Muslim prisoners, for a while Ethan acted as an "enforcer" on his wing. He would beat up other incarcerated people when asked to by the "Muslim" incarcerated people who had "befriended" him. Ethan confessed to beating up "*many, many*" incarcerated people "*for Islam*".

At one point, Ethan was asked to kill a particular incarcerated person. When he refused, the group turned against him. Ethan's vulnerable mental state further deteriorated and, in a fit of paranoia, he attacked and badly injured the group leader who was pressurising him to kill other incarcerated people. After this event, Ethan became afraid of being targeted for attacking the Muslim wing leader and was put on the vulnerable wing in the Segregation Unit.

### **Hussain's Induction into the Narrative of Martyrdom**

Similarly, Hussain (male, 35, Asian, born Shia Muslim Muslim, HMP Coquet, Category C Medium Security Prison) slowly shifted towards the Worldview of Islamist Extremism to the point at which he was prepared for violence. Hussain in his own words,

*"changed slowly, slowly"*

**Hussain**

(male, 35, Asian, born Shia Muslim Muslim, HMP Coquet, Category C Medium Security Prison) from accepting gifts, to praying on a daily basis with a group of TACT offenders, to being inducted into the Violent Islamist Extremist idea of "martyrdom" through accounts of other prisoners' "dreams" of him doing "*Jihad*", to acting violently in the prison on behalf of "*the brothers*". The result was,

*"My hatred towards everyone who's not Muslim is increasing, increasing, increasing. Now I'm following an agenda. I've got tunnel vision. Now what I want is Jannah [Paradise]. I don't want This World. I don't want nothing. I want to die. I want to kill one of these people in the process."*

**Hussain**

(male, 35, Asian, born Shia Muslim Muslim, HMP Coquet, Category C Medium Security Prison)

### **Islamist Extremist Gangs**

True to our theoretical model, we observed this process of radicalization as shifts of Worldview typically taking place in the context of a hierarchical “in-group” in prison. Ethan described a gang-hierarchy on his wing: the Muslims on the wings had formed a hierarchical gang of puppet leaders which they gave the title “Amir” but who were directed by hidden senior leaders. The hidden senior leaders directed the *Amirs* to go around issuing orders on the wings. The *Amirs* had enforcers who intimidated and violently attacked any incarcerated people who went against the wishes of the “in-group.” Ethan was told to attack and kill a group of incarcerated people,

*“as many as you can manage”.*

**Ethan**

(43, White British, Convert, HMP Forth, England, Category A Maximum Security Prison)

Another Muslim incarcerated person on Ethan’s wing was being pushed to kill a Muslim prisoner who was smoking spice,<sup>85</sup>

*“Oh, yes, every wing will have an Amir. In some cases, you might even have a couple of Amirs. Yes, because what happens here, you’ve usually got what’s called the Public Amir, the one that the staff thinks are doing whatever. And then you’ve got the person who is standing back telling him what to do and say [...] Some of them are horrific. Mohammed, he’s one of the most brutal. He’s the one that loves giving young buggers lashes and stuff like that.”*

**Ethan**

(43, White British, Convert, HMP Forth, England, Category A Maximum Security Prison)

Despite enforcing a skewed version of a moral code on the wings, gang members were usually associated with an “unserious” practice of religion in which what Extremists said and did was inconsistent and contradictory,

*“Unfortunately, you’ve got a lot of people that read hadiths [sayings of the Prophet Mohammed], even quotations from books like, “Fortress of the Muslim” and stuff like that. And they will say, “Look! You’ve done this! You must be punished”. It’s power. And they’re telling you with the right hand that you must obey them and obey the rules of Islam and this, that and the other. But, with their left hand, they’re selling cocaine, drugs over there, using phones and looking at dirty magazines and stuff like that.”*

**Ethan**

(43, White British, Convert, HMP Forth, England, Category A Maximum Security Prison)

This hypocritical gap noticed by Ethan between policing others whilst engaging in un-Islamic and/or criminal activity was one of the typically reported attributes of those with the Worldview of **Islamist Extremism**.

### **De-Radicalization as Shifts of Worldview towards Mainstream Islam**

While prisons provided an environment characterized by some criminogenic risk of prisoners being radicalized into the Worldview of **Islamist Extremism**, our



quantitative and qualitative findings showed that prisons also afforded the circumstances and the opportunities for convicted Terrorists and other Extremists to shift *away* from the Worldview of Islamist Extremism into the Worldview of **Mainstream Islam**.

We documented the stories and experiences of a number of TACT offenders who were “**Shifters**” who had undertaken a spiritual, psychological and social journey away from an operational adherence to the Worldview of **Violent Islamist Extremism** into the Worldview of **Activist Islam**. Again, as with radicalization, this shift or Worldview also entailed a significant theological component, which was an important factor in effecting change.

One case of a “**Shifter**” was Nadim (male, 45, Asian, born Muslim, HMP Forth, Security Category A) who was a high-profile terrorist offender convicted under the UK Government’s Terrorism Act 2000.

Four related factors - in stages - had been key to Nadim’s “shift” of Worldview *away* from the Worldview of **Violent Islamist Extremism** into the Worldview of **MAINSTREAM, Activist Islam**.

#### 1. Drawing back due to shame and maturation

Nadim had started to question his past and recoil from his Worldview of **Islamist Extremism** due to feelings of shame that his children had a convicted terrorist as a father, and his guilt about his children being teased at school as a result,

*“... looking at, you know, my family, my children, my parents, the things that I’ve missed out on. Not being there for the kids for going to school. The first football matches or Parents’ Evenings. And the stigma of the kids having bad experiences from other kids or teachers, “Where is your father? Where is your dad?” Or some people being rude or being cheeky with them, and the kids don’t understand and them coming home, and I phone, and my wife says, “She’s [my daughter] upstairs” or “He’s [my son] upstairs in bed, they don’t want to talk today” or “They’re upset because somebody upset them at school because they made a comment.”*

**Nadim**

(male, 45, Asian, born Muslim, HMP Forth, Category A Maximum Security Prison)

Nadim had also reached the “criminal menopause”<sup>86</sup> of his 40’s and was no longer angry at both Muslim society and mainstream British society in the way that he was as a young man,

*“Whereas, after a bit of time, you have to realise, me personally, no, there’s too much that’s happened and it’s time for me to change and accept and make Tawba [repentance].”*

**Nadim**

(male, 45, Asian, born Muslim, HMP Forth, Category A Maximum Security Prison)

This combination of shame and maturation had been pivotal in Nadim deciding for himself that his Worldview needed to change and to his drawing back from his commitment to the Worldview of **Violent Islamist Extremism**.

## 2. Deconstruction of Violent Islamist Extremism through forensic Muslim Prison Chaplaincy

Once Nadim had made his commitment to draw back from the Worldview of Violent Islamist Extremism, he began to engage with Muslim Prison Chaplains. A skilful Muslim Prison Chaplain with whom Nadim had developed a rapport offered Nadim consistently good advice about not branding other Muslims as “infidels.”

In particular, this Muslim Prison Chaplain had deconstructed the Worldview of **Violent Islamist Extremism** by showing Nadim how Islamist Extremists substantiate the Worldview of Violent Islamist Extremism by deploying the types of theological sleights of hand detailed in the radicalization process above (please see [Figure 6](#)) and by falsifying primary Islamic texts. For example, he showed Nadim how a *fatwa* (Islamic Legal Ruling) issued by so-called “Islamic” State was based upon fabricated sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.

*And Chaplains give us some good advice [...] be very careful not to call anybody a kafir [infidel], you know. Also, not to, on your own back, say without any textual backing, what is halal and what is haram. Don't just say it without any knowledge. First research and ask, because you might be questioned on that Day [The Day of Judgement].*

### Nadim

(male, 45, Asian, born Muslim, HMP Forth, Category A Maximum Security Prison)

## 3. Addressing an absence of Religious Education

Importantly for the avoidance of future re-radicalization, this deconstruction of the Worldview of **Violent Islamist Extremism** was accompanied by a *re-construction* of Nadim's religious Worldview by addressing a childhood *absence* of Religious Education which had rendered Nadim vulnerable to the extremist narratives that had led to his crime.

Nadim said that prior to his imprisonment, he had not possessed a good Islamic knowledge. His engagement in religious education in his local mosque had been hampered by a language barrier as his local mosque Imam spoke poor English, whereas his Muslim Prison Chaplain was English-speaking. The lack of meaningful contact with educated, English-speaking Imams in Nadim's upbringing was in sharp contrast to the accessibility and professionalism of English-speaking Imams in prison,

*“Because now I can ask a question if there's an issue, the confidence is there, direct to the Imams and the Imams can answer me in a language that I understand. They're multi-lingual. So, there's no, like, taboo subject or no grey area. You can just ask directly and you get the answer. Whereas they used to just say, “Oh he's asking too many questions.” or “Why are you asking these questions?” and it used to be frowned upon.”*

### Nadim

(male, 45, Asian, born Muslim, HMP Forth, Category A Maximum Security Prison)

Nadim explained how his engagement with the Muslim Prison Chaplains had allowed him to develop a more nuanced understanding of how fellow Muslim incarcerated people may or may not engage with their faith. For example, that someone abandoning

the Five Daily Prayers was not a cause for denouncing them as non-believers as he would have done prior to imprisonment,

*“So those kinds of things where some people say, “This person isn’t a Muslim because he’s not praying!” Then the Imam will clarify that [...] because of your Shahada [the Islamic Declaration of Faith] part of the condition is that you will observe the Five Pillars <sup>87</sup>so you can’t jump to conclusions or have that kind of mentality, where you say, just because you don’t see a person praying you don’t class him as a Muslim”.*

**Nadim**

(male, 45, Asian, born Muslim, HMP Forth, Category A Maximum Security Prison)

Nadim had acquired a basic religious education through his participation in eleven modules of a prison-based voluntary religious education programme called, “*Tarbiya*” (Learning). Nadim said he found the *Tarbiya* course, “**very helpful and interesting.**” Nadim explained that it had been transformative in moderating his Worldview in terms of how he understood his Islam as a broad and flexible religion that was sustained by “*differences of opinions*”.

#### 4. **Re-exposure and re-integration through charitable work**

Finally, Nadim had found a way to re-engage productively with wider social groups using his religious faith by performing charitable works about the prison. For example, he volunteered regularly as an orderly for disabled prisoners, and he had learnt brail in order to translate key Islamic texts in the library for blind Muslim incarcerated people,

*“I’ve just spent two years, or a year and a half, learning brail and that’s it. Why am I not going to put it to use? So, I asked the Chaplain, I said to the Chaplain, “Have you got anything that you would want me to transcribe into brail?” And the Chaplain went and he wrote to some publishers and he got this Islamic book called, “Islamic Starter Kit.” It’s an official book. I think it’s by an author called Metcalfe or somebody [...] So for me now [it’s important] to do that, do something like that in prison and to help other people.”*

**Nadim**

(male, 45, Asian, born Muslim, HMP Forth, Category A Maximum Security Prison)

As a result of these shifts in his Worldview, Nadim movingly described how his faith was now the engine of resilience against extremism and a determination to avoid future crime,

*“That is what being strong is: just to be strong, to be honest, honest with yourself and say, “Okay, I’m not going to, just because everyone is speaking in this kind of attitude, speaking in this manner, I’m going to toe the line”. No, I’m going to do what’s right for myself and what is right for my family and, at the end of the day, what is right for my Islam. I’m not going to do, just because some people are frowning, some people are even mocking or sniggering at me, but this is where you need to be strong.”*

**Nadim**

(male, 45, Asian, born Muslim, HMP Forth, Category A Maximum Security Prison)

We also noticed in five observations of the Obligatory Daily Prayer (*As-Salah*) in the prison workspaces how most of the *long-term* Terrorist Act (TACT) offenders willingly prayed behind the Muslim Prison Chaplain, while the *recently* convicted TACT offenders tended to pray separately with another group of prisoners who rejected

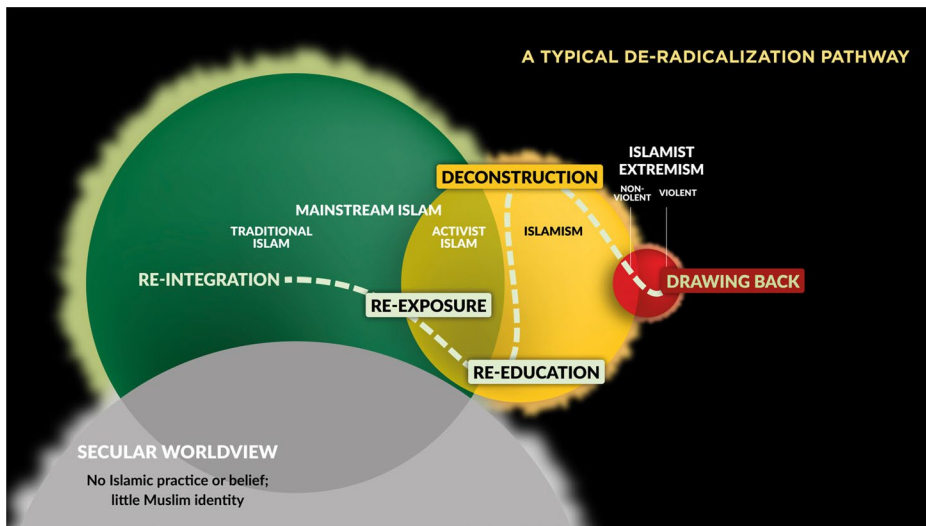


Figure 7. A Typical Pathway to De-Radicalization: the case of Nadim.

the religious credentials of the Muslim Prison Chaplain. This confirmed what Nadim had told us at interview, that the Worldview of these incarcerated long-term terrorist offenders had gradually shifted over time (Figure 7).

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have defined “Islamist Extremism” as:

*the absolutely divided and antagonistic Worldview of the “Us”-true-Muslim in-group who must strive to live in an “Islamic”-State versus “Them” non-Muslim-and-“wrong”-Muslim-out-groups who are stripped of their human status due to their opposition to “true Islam.”*

Using variables derived from this definition and related differences between the Worldview of **Islamist Extremism** and the Worldview of **Mainstream Islam**, we have shown that prisons in England, Switzerland and France are not wholesale “incubators” of **Islamist Extremism**.

In our study, the large majority (76%) of our characteristic sample of Muslim incarcerated people held the Worldview of **Mainstream Islam**, characterized philosophically by Unity-in-Diversity and theologically by the equality of all humans before God. For most of this group, their faith was one of a variety of coping mechanisms for life in prison and was likely to nudge them towards purposeful work, engagement with education and the aspiration to avoid future crime.<sup>88</sup>

A significant minority of Muslim incarcerated people (19%) held the *exaggerated* “Us”-Muslim versus “Them”-Non-Muslim Worldview of **Islamism**. Their understanding of their faith fed off and into the prison culture of a divided “Us”-the-prisoners versus “Them”-the-prison-authorities.

Incarcerated people who held an *antagonistic and absolutely divided* “Us”-Muslim versus “Them”-Non-Muslim Worldview of **Islamist Extremism** represented a small minority (**less than 5%**) of our characteristic sample. Those who were actively

committed to the Worldview of **Violent Islamist Extremism** against non-Muslims and “wrong Muslims” represented a small proportion of these people.

Nevertheless, this small minority (**less than 5%**) that were actively committed to the Worldview of **Islamist Extremism** and their hinterland of Islamist sympathizers exerted a disproportionate influence on life in the prisons in terms of resisting and subverting the authority and teaching of Muslim Prison Chaplains and in generating gangs that justified violence and crime with a religious veneer. This group exhibited the typical tropes that “religiously” buttress the Worldview of **Islamist Extremism**:

1. The Doctrine of Loyalty and Disavowal.
2. Opposition to “Tyrants” and “Oppressors.”
3. Making *Takfir* (infidel) of other Muslims.
4. *Violent* Struggle as an Individual Religious Obligation (*Fard al-'Ayn*)
5. Ignoring and/or subverting the legal conditions of armed struggle (*Qital*).
6. Belief in “martyrdom” (suicide-murder) for God.

Using our Worldview model, we then described and illustrated the **process of radicalization** as “shifts of Worldview” into Islamist Extremism, which factored in the religious component of that process, by stages of:

1. Crisis.
2. Unsettling.
3. Introduction.
4. Identification.
5. Indoctrination.
6. Action.

While prisons can provide the conditions for the radicalization of a small minority of incarcerated people, we also showed that prison can also provide the conditions and tools for shifts *away* from the Worldview of **Islamist Extremism**, i.e., de-radicalization. We described and illustrated the **process of de-radicalization** into the Worldview of **Mainstream Islam** by stages of:

1. Drawing back.
2. Deconstruction.
3. Re-education.
4. Re-exposure.
5. Re-integration.

We believe that the effectiveness of our definitions for determining what is and is not Islamist Extremism in prison **allows us to further define “Extremism” more generally as,**

*Any absolutely divided “Us” versus “Them” Worldview  
by which a “chosen” in-group strips “condemned” out-groups  
of their basic human qualities, properties, and rights,  
and thereby sets them up for harm.*

The implication of this general definition of Extremism is that if any given Worldview does *not* sub-humanize an “out-group” in a way that sets them up for harm, it is not Extremism.

We tender this definition of Extremism for further discussion, debate and, hopefully, for use.

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39. The Qualitative Data – the interviews, the observation protocols, and the field notes - was triangulated with the Quantitative Data. Observations of Friday Prayers and Islamic Studies Classes were particularly useful for understanding the meso-level relationships between the incarcerated people and the Muslim Prison Chaplains.
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56. To wit, for example, the well-known Prophetic saying, "Whosoever of you sees wrongdoing, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then let him change it with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart – and that is the weakest of faith." Narrated in Muslim (d. 874 CE).
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and which fed into Activist Islam. However, this revival was often generated by means of an exaggerated oppositional dichotomy between the Muslim versus the non-Muslim (*kafir* / 'infidel') as essentially different types of human being; a dynamic which to this day also provides a pathway to Extremism. Second, the term 'Islamism' is derived from Western ideological nomenclature rather than from Islamic tradition. We assert that the term 'Islamism' is appropriate because Islamist ideologues themselves aped ideological ideas and forms, such as political parties, manifestos, and the generation of parallel societies (Wickham, 2002) and setting-up demonised out-groups such as the *Kuffar* who were the equivalent of the 'bourgeoisie' (to Communists) and the 'Jew' (to fascists). Hence, Islamist ideologues created a new ideologized form of Islam: Islamism.

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65. **Converts** were those incarcerated people who had chosen to follow Islam for the first time from another faith or from no-faith in prison. They represented 22% of our data sample.
66. **Intensifiers** were those incarcerated people who were born Muslim and who had become *significantly more devout* in terms of performing the Islamic Obligatory Prayer more regularly and finding their religion "*more important*" than before they went to prison. They represented 48% of our data sample. By contrast, **Remainers** were those Muslim incarcerated people whose understanding and commitment to their faith remained *broadly the same* in prison as before prison. They represented 23% of our data sample. **Reducers** were those Muslim prisoners whose commitment to their faith had decreased. They represented 8% of our data sample.
67.  $p=0.021$ .
68. The attitudes of incarcerated people towards rehabilitation were measured by three related variables that loaded onto a single underlying factor: 1. "I give up bad behaviour because of my religion". 2. "I have taken up some course, training or private study due to my religion." 3. "I am motivated to work hard because of my religion". We labelled this underlying factor "Attitude to Rehabilitation".
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72. ...and using Security Category as a proxy for prison length.
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  83. e.g., Qur’an 2:191
  84. Wilkinson, *The Genealogy of Terror*.
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    - (2)The performance of the Five Daily Prayers (*Salah*);
    - (3)The giving each year of 2.5% of one’s unused wealth to the needy (*Zakah*);
    - (4)Fasting for one month from sunrise to sunset (*Ramadan*);
    - (5)Making a pilgrimage to Mecca once-in-a-lifetime if one’s responsibilities permit (*Hajj*).
  88. Wilkinson et al., *Islam in Prison*.
  89. See [Appendix 2](#) for the full account of how we used these variables.

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## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Appendix 1

### *The Variables Used to Calculate Worldviews of Muslims in Prison*

- **Survey Statement: 22**  
*“It is part of Islam to treat Muslims more fairly than non-Muslim.”*  
 This statement was a test for a commitment to the basic human equality of all people of MAINSTREAM ISLAM, e.g., *Qur’an* 49:13.
- **Survey Statement: 23**  
*“I avoid prisoners who are not Muslim.”*  
 This statement was a test for sympathy with the Islamist Extremist ‘Doctrine of Loyalty & Disavowal’ which makes the theological justification for a sharp distinction between ‘Us’-Muslim versus ‘Them’-non-Muslim.
- **Survey Statement: 24**  
*“It is part of Islam to change things that are unfair in society.”*  
 This statement was a test for legitimate ACTIVIST ISLAM.
- **Survey Statement: 25**  
*“Islam teaches that wisdom can be found in many religions.”*  
 This was a test for religious pluralism and inclusivity as mandated by the *Qur’an*, e.g., *Qur’an* 5:48.
- **Survey Statement: 26**  
*“Islam teaches that I must follow the law of this country.”*  
 This was a test for a commitment to lawfulness of MAINSTREAM ISLAM, e.g., *Qur’an* 4:59, (Al-Oadah, 2014).
- **Survey Statement: 27**  
*”Islam teaches that the laws of this country should be replaced by Sharia Law.”*  
 This was a test for the Worldview of ISLAMISM and the replacement of existing legal structures by a version of *Sharia* Law.
- **Survey Statement: 28**  
*“Islam teaches me that human life is sacred.”*  
 This was a test for a commitment to the value of the sanctity of life of MAINSTREAM ISLAM, e.g., *Qur’an* 5:32.

One of the virtues of these variable Statements was that, although they reflected contemporary understandings of critical realist and social identity theory, they also represented ‘insider’ Muslim perspectives rather than being imposed with a security agenda from without. This represented a fair and respectful research attitude to the chosen faith of those being researched.<sup>89</sup>

## Appendix 2 Testing for Mainstream Islam, Islamism and Islamist Extremism

- The **Survey Statements 22, 24, 25, 26** and **27** measured attributes used to distinguish between the basic Worldviews of Mainstream Islam, Islamism, and Islamist Extremism. Please see above, [Figure 1. The Worldviews of MAINSTREAM ISLAM, ISLAMISM, and ISLAMIST EXTREMISM](#)
- In order to develop a Worldview Scale, we combined the scores from these **Survey Statements 22, 24, 25, 26** and **27** and calculated the Mean.
- In order to avoid Acquiescence Bias, these Statements contained both negative and positive questions.

- **Statement 25 and Statement 26** were positive statements:
  - ‘Strongly agreeing’ with both Statements suggested a Worldview of **MAINSTREAM ISLAM**.
  - The responses were coded: 4 = ‘I strongly agree’ to 1 = ‘I strongly disagree’
- **Statement 22, Statement 24, and Statement 27** were negative statements:
  - ‘Strongly agreeing’ with all three Statements was regarded as support for the Worldviews of ISLAMISM or ISLAMIST EXTREMISM.
  - ‘Strongly Disagreeing’ with all three statements was regarded as an indicator that the respondent had a Worldview of **MAINSTREAM ISLAM**.
- In order to maintain consistency, these Statements were reverse-coded so that ‘*Strongly Disagree*’ was coded as 4 and ‘*Strongly Agreeing*’ was coded as 1.
- An overall high score was regarded as supportive of a Worldview of **MAINSTREAM ISLAM**.
- An overall low score suggested that the Worldview was closer to **ISLAMISM and ISLAMIST EXTREMISM**.
- Mean Scores were calculated by adding up the response to each of the five **Statements 22, 24, 25, 26, 27** and dividing that by the number of Statements answered.
  - **Mean Score = Total score/Number of questions**  
Mean Score intervals were determined for each Worldview category as follows:

Mean Score Range	Worldview Category
3–4	MAINSTREAM ISLAM
2.1–2.9	ISLAMISM
1–2	ISLAMIST EXTREMISM

- **Testing for Activist Islam:** In order to test for the more nuanced Worldview of **Activist Islam**, **Statement 23** tested for sympathy with an ‘Activist’ ethos of change, *“It is part of Islam to change things that are unfair in society.”*
- Participants who manifested a Worldview of **MAINSTREAM ISLAM** and who ‘strongly agree’ with **Statement 25** were seen to belong to the Worldview of ‘**Activist Islam**’, *“It is part of Islam to change things that are unfair in society.”*
- Participants with the Worldview of **MAINSTREAM ISLAM** who did not ‘strongly agree’ with **Statement 25** were regarded as having the Worldview of ‘**Traditional Islam**’.
- **Testing for Violent Islamist Extremism: Statement 28** was used to test for attitudes towards violence, *“Islam teaches me that human life is sacred.”*
- Participants who had the Worldview of **ISLAMIST EXTREMISM** and who ‘strongly disagree’ with **Statement 28** were regarded as having the Worldview of **Violent Islamist Extremism**.
- Participants who had been categorized as having the Worldview of **ISLAMIST EXTREMISM** who gave any other answer were regarded as having the Worldview of **Non-Violent Islamist Extremism**.
- Thus, **Statement 28** provided a robust double-test for adherence to the Worldview of **Violent Islamist Extremism**.