

# Imprisoned for Terrorism: The Experiences of Inmates in Roumieh Prison in Lebanon

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## Purpose

This policy paper assesses the impact of imprisonment and Lebanon's criminal justice system on radicalisation and violent extremism. In recent years, the issue of prison radicalisation has been at the forefront of policymakers' agendas. Concerns focus on the potential for terrorist offenders to recruit, radicalise, or strategise and how violence may result from their release from custody. Various interventions have been adopted to attempt to disengage, deradicalise, or rehabilitate violent extremist offenders, though the evidence base for what works is poor.

However, what is missing from these efforts is a nuanced understanding of how imprisonment affects terrorists – whether convicted offenders or those held on remand. How does imprisonment affect their attitudes towards violence and peace? What is their experience of the criminal justice system? This paper examines these issues. It is based on interviews with 38 ex-prisoners from Tripoli, Lebanon, who spent time in Roumieh Prison for terrorism offences. It contains insights into how prisoner attitudes and experiences can be used to inform policy and practice regarding how extremist offenders are managed.

## Key Findings

- ▶ **Prisons should not be seen as separate from the communities from which their inmates are drawn.** For over a decade, there has been a symbolic revolving door between Roumieh Prison and the neighbourhoods of Baddawi, Mankoubin, and Bab al-Tabbaneh in Tripoli, with hundreds of young men entering and leaving custody.
- ▶ **Islamists can circumvent the Lebanese criminal justice system using wasta, or personal connections.** Access to Lebanese politicians is considered the ultimate wasta. Ex-prisoners used their connections to speed up their trial dates, change where they were imprisoned and access goods and services in prison.
- ▶ **Many prisoners detained for terrorism offences claim to have been the victims of mistreatment and torture.** Some claim their confessions were extracted using torture. Ex-prisoners described verbal abuse and threats, physical beatings, stress positions, threats made against their family and sexual humiliation.

# Key Findings


- ▶ **When the authorities have left the prisoners to their own devices, Islamists have filled the vacuum and self-governed in prison.** Groups such as Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra took advantage of the absence of state authority by enforcing punishments, resolving disputes, recruiting and coordinating with militants outside prison.
- ▶ **Inmates have a strong feeling of injustice toward the Lebanese authorities, regardless of the level of their offending or status within the Islamist scene.** Grievances centre on the need for waste, deprivation of basic rights, amorphous accusations and charges, a slow and corrupt justice system and disproportionate or inconsistent sentencing. This has led to perceptions of double standards and Sunni victimisation, thus vindicating Islamist narratives.
- ▶ **Prison radicalisation is not a foregone conclusion. Even in Roumieh, disengagement is possible.** In-person socialisation can lead to Islamists becoming disillusioned with Islamist leaders' personalities, behaviour and lifestyles. Others want to turn a page in their life upon leaving prison. Disengagement from Islamist movements is possible even without a formal rehabilitation, disengagement or deradicalisation programme. However, post-release support is minimal.

## Policy implications

- ▶ In prisons where particular communities are disproportionately represented among inmates, **interventions should not solely focus on the prison environment. Instead, work in those communities should exist in tandem;** there is a need to address the symbolic revolving door between Roumieh's Blocks B and D and Baddawi, Bab al-Tabbaneh, Mankoubin and other impoverished neighbourhoods of Tripoli. **This should include work to assist prison leavers, as the first few months after release appear particularly vulnerable.**
- ▶ The main grievance of prison leavers is that the prison system is unjust and corrupt. Prisoners feel cheated by the failures in due process. Many of the flaws of the criminal justice system are deeply embedded in institutions and working cultures. Yet **any interventions aimed at mitigating the risk of violent extremism should also include corresponding interventions to improve the efficiency, impartiality, and transparency of the criminal justice system in Lebanon.** Focusing only on the risk of violent Islamist extremism – whether through ideological or psychosocial interventions – only sees one side of the picture.

There is a need to address inmates' perceived grievances regarding how the prison system functions.

- ▶ Efforts should be made to **encourage the Lebanese criminal justice system to respect and prioritise universal human rights. Prison management should be centred on human dignity.** The prison environment should guarantee safety and security, and that food, drink, clothing and medicine do not need to be bartered, negotiated, or smuggled in. Detainees should know that they will be dealt with fairly by the criminal justice system. Policymakers should encourage any efforts to eradicate torture within the Lebanese penal system. This is challenging and will involve disrupting embedded practices. Continued failure to address basic needs will likely undermine rehabilitation efforts and perpetuate Islamist narratives of victimhood and injustice. Fulfilling these basic requirements should take priority.

**Efforts should be made to encourage the Lebanese criminal justice system to respect and prioritise universal human rights.** 

## Findings

- ▶ Interviewees spoke about the difficulties of their time in prison, emphasising their feelings of humiliation, indignity and unfairness. Their experiences of mistreatment and deprivation of basic human rights have resulted in a strong sense of injustice, double standards and victimisation. In turn, this could vindicate Islamist narratives.

At the centre of their experiences is Roumieh Prison, which is Lebanon's main location for holding terrorists, whether serving their sentence or held awaiting trial. It consists of several buildings and wings, of which Block B is the most notorious, as it houses Sunni inmates convicted for or charged with terrorism-related offences. Their experiences in Roumieh highlight profound shortcomings within the Lebanese criminal justice system and how this affects attitudes towards the state, society and the Islamist movement.

## Methodology

This briefing note is based on interviews conducted with ex-prisoners in Tripoli, Lebanon. We interviewed 38 individuals (15 of them twice), all of whom spent time in Roumieh Prison, for varying durations, between 2013 and 2021. They were either held in custody awaiting trial or serving a conviction for terrorism-related offences. Their offences were related to their membership of Islamist groups (such as Islamic State and Nusra) or involvement in violent skirmishes between the neighbourhoods of Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen in Tripoli. Further interviews were conducted with two former prison officers who served in Roumieh between 2013 and 2021.

**Interviewees spoke about the difficulties of their time in prison, emphasising their feelings of humiliation, indignity and unfairness.** 

## Islamists can circumvent the Lebanese criminal justice system using *wasta*, or personal connections

Ex-prisoners stated that *wasta*, or personal connections, could be used to navigate the opaque Lebanese criminal justice system. Relationships with significant political and economic figures can help influence inmates' treatment, meaning "who you know" is paramount. It influences big decisions and mundane matters, affecting everything from future trial dates to the delivery (or smuggling) of items into Roumieh. Access to Lebanese politicians is considered the ultimate *wasta*.<sup>1</sup>

For example, one interviewee who wanted to make money in prison by becoming a barber said he could not arrange equipment because he had no *wasta*. Meanwhile, others who did have personal connections took precedence.<sup>2</sup> For the ex-prisoner, this was far from a trivial matter, as it meant the denial of his livelihood. Others blamed their distant trial dates or sentence lengths on their lack of *wasta*. Yet for those who could call upon their connections, *wasta* could be used to good effect, especially if they also had money.<sup>3</sup>

The use of informal influence is not unique to the prison system. Indeed, it is characteristic of Lebanon's broader socio-political landscape, as another ex-prisoner explained: "Of course there is *wasta*. Lebanon is *wasta*".<sup>4</sup> The prevalence of *wasta* within the Lebanese prison system is thus unsurprising. However, its role in shaping norms and regulations concerning extreme "Islamist prisoners" in Roumieh's Block B is particularly striking. It confirms Chafic Najem's contention that Roumieh Prison has become a "grey zone where illicit practices can prosper" and where Islamists may have more reach and capacity than ordinary prisoners.<sup>5</sup>

*"Personally, I tried all the methods to get out of prison, my parents got a lawyer ...and nothing worked, until they knocked on the doors of certain politicians".<sup>6</sup>*

## Roumieh Prison should not be seen as separate from the communities which its inmates are drawn from

Interviewees described arrests and detentions as commonplace in their neighbourhoods in Tripoli: Bab al-Tabbaneh, Baddawi, and Mankoubin. Rarely were they the only people accused of involvement in terrorism from their peer groups, family, or social networks.<sup>7</sup> Terrorism cases were so prevalent that new prison entrants could reconnect with family, friends and acquaintances from their neighbourhoods.<sup>8</sup> This means news spreads quickly. One ex-prisoner saw Roumieh as a central hub of information on the jihadist scene in Tripoli: “Those who are in prison find out information more than those outside. They know what happens outside more than those outside”.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, the lines between the inside and outside of Roumieh are blurred, with a flow of traffic: newly arrested men entering and prison leavers moving back into the community.

Roumieh Prison cannot, therefore, be separated from the communities its inmates are drawn from. What happens inside prison affects those communities and vice versa. The interviews suggest that imprisonment results from a culture of violence embedded within Tripoli’s poor suburbs, that leads to easy mobilisation through local gang leaders, clerics and, at times, Lebanese politicians.<sup>10</sup> Interviewees stated that carrying weapons is commonplace, due to the possibility of spontaneous violence. The prevalence of weapons is often dismissed as a Lebanese norm or a justified response to the threat and abuses of Lebanon’s armed non-state actors, such as Hezbollah. Tripoli’s “extremist image” and historic legacy provide convenient space for political manipulation and periodic cycles of violent escalations, mass arrests and controlled releases.<sup>11</sup>

*“There is a variety of people [implicated in terrorism]. Any family has this; this is normal. Every Tripoli community”.*<sup>12</sup>

## Many prisoners detained for terrorism offences claim to have been the victims of mistreatment and torture

Within our sample, 13 of the 38 ex-prisoners stated that they were victims of torture, which generally occurred during their interrogations. These were unprovoked comments, as none of the interview prompts asked about torture or beatings. Ex-prisoners described verbal abuse and threats, physical beatings, stress positions (such as being suspended by their arms tied behind their backs), sexual humiliation, threats against their family, and threats of further torture. Some claimed their confessions were extracted using torture.<sup>13</sup>

Given the stigma and fear about speaking of mistreatment, it is likely that more ex-prisoners have had similar experiences and chose to remain silent. Yet disclosure or silence was not the only response: some interviewees were adamant they were not mistreated. It is not possible to independently verify the ex-prisoners’ claims. However, our interviews with two former prison guards who worked in Roumieh confirmed that beatings did occur.<sup>14</sup>

The allegations match with NGOs and human rights organisations, which have widely reported allegations of torture.<sup>15</sup> No interviewee stated they filed complaints or sought accountability. Historically, prosecutions relating to torture are rare in Lebanon. In September 2017, the Lebanese Parliament passed a law criminalising torture. Since then, at least on paper, formal procedures have been put in place to stop the torture of detainees, and a five-member body (the National Preventative Mechanism Against Torture, or NPM) has been tasked with its enforcement. However, precisely what budget has been allocated to NPM’s mission and what work it has done to date is unclear.<sup>16</sup>

*“It was the hardest phase in my life, and there was a lot, a lot of cruelty”.*<sup>34</sup>

How ex-prisoners recalled and framed their experiences varied. For many, it was further confirmation of the persecution of Sunni communities in Lebanon or a local manifestation of the global persecution of jihadists. For others, mistreatment was accepted as inevitable or a further sign of Lebanon's degradation. In all cases, it added to the sense of injustice felt by prisoners.<sup>17</sup> Torture is known to leave its victims with various physical, psychological, and emotional issues.<sup>18</sup> Studies on the victims of torture show that they are more likely to exhibit symptoms of PTSD and depression.<sup>19</sup> It is possible that former Roumieh prisoners have similar lasting effects resulting from their alleged mistreatment.

## When the authorities have left the prisoners to their own devices, Islamists have filled the vacuum and self-governed in prison

The authorities' approach to managing Roumieh Prison has undergone several cycles, ranging from full securitisation to entirely ceding control over certain wings. Whenever they stepped back and left the prisoners to their own devices, Islamist groups such as Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra filled the vacuum. This gave groups a dramatic sense of their own power, as one ex-prisoner explained: "The [Lebanese] State controlled it from the outside, but from the inside, we controlled it".<sup>20</sup>

They took advantage of the Lebanese state's absence to enforce punishments, resolve disputes, recruit, and coordinate with militants outside prison.<sup>21</sup> Islamic State's practice of declaring *takfir* (ex-communication) was considered a volatile and negative influence on inter-prisoner dynamics, resulting in threats and violence.<sup>22</sup>

Key to their exercise of self-governance is the presence of *shawish* (supervisors or decision-makers). Inmates appoint various individuals to act as *shawish* to mediate among themselves and represent their interests to prison authorities.<sup>23</sup> In turn, prison authorities can influence the internal workings of prison society by offering benefits to *shawish*.<sup>24</sup>

Those who are selected as *shawish* are therefore key interlocutors with considerable influence in Roumieh. Interviewees spoke favourably about the system and considered it an effective system of governing the prison's internal affairs.<sup>25</sup>

*"When you live inside the prison, the state does not have control. There are courts, there are Sharia courts. Anyone who makes a mistake, from the prisoners, they take him to a Sharia court and a ruling is made against [him]".<sup>35</sup>*

The strongest sentiment among interviewees is that the Lebanese prison system is fundamentally corrupt and broken. Ex-prisoners have several grievances – regardless of their offences or status within the Islamist movement. These include the perceived deprivation of basic rights, difficulties accessing lawyers, amorphous accusations, fabricated or embellished charges and disproportionate or inconsistent sentences. Furthermore, prison conditions were described as dire, with outbreaks of disease (even before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic), poor hygiene facilities, limited access to healthy food and severe overcrowding.<sup>26</sup>

## Inmates have a strong feeling of injustice at the Lebanese authorities, regardless of the level of their offending or status within the Islamist scene

Yet for many ex-prisoners, it felt like it was intentional sabotage, deliberately targeting Sunnis. Compounding this was the feeling of double standards within Lebanese society: interviewees occasionally asked why fighters from Hezbollah had not been arrested and punished when they had also travelled to Syria to participate in the Civil War. Similarly, when recalling their experiences, some ex-prisoners saw a sectarian cause behind their

problems; that Sunni victimisation results from Shia Hezbollah dominance. In this way, the framing of their prison experience mirrors the Islamist framing of broader Lebanese society.<sup>27</sup>

*"I was ruled innocent. But after what? I was ruled innocent after seven years ... They didn't appoint a lawyer until after seven years. When they did appoint a lawyer, I was ruled innocent. There was no support or anything, no lira [money] from the state."<sup>28</sup>*

Despite the violence, overcrowding, and control of Islamist groups in Roumieh, it is possible to leave prison less committed to the jihadist cause than upon entry. Several interviewees described how

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their imprisonment left them feeling disillusioned with the jihadist movement. Common sentiments included feeling like they had been led astray or abandoned by sheikhs, ideologues, and leaders.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, some ex-prisoners confessed their disappointment when meeting Islamist leaders in prison, who did not match their expectations regarding personality, behaviour, or religiosity.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, in-person socialisation with other terrorists does not always lead to greater radicalisation.

This disengagement from Islamist movements occurred even without a formal rehabilitation, disengagement or deradicalisation programme. It is unclear why some inmates felt this sense of disillusionment and others did not. Each circumstance appears unique to that individual, contingent upon their life experiences, family situation, criminal history, personality, and perhaps even luck. The context of their disengagement was just as unique as that of their radicalisation.

However, support for prison leavers is minimal. Almost all prison leavers interviewed stated they had difficulties in finding legal employment. Social stigma and criminal record checks mean employers

are hesitant to hire them. As a result, they tend to look for work in Lebanon's shadow economy.<sup>31</sup> With the country experiencing an economic depression, their situation has become more desperate. This may make them more vulnerable to recruitment from Islamist groups that pay a salary to fighters.

It remains possible for prison leavers to engage in political violence upon release, whether travelling to fight in a conflict zone or engaging in terrorist attacks in Lebanon. The most notable example occurred in June 2019, when Abdul-Rahman Mabsout shot and killed two ISF officers and two soldiers in Tripoli.<sup>32</sup> He was released from Roumieh Prison in late 2017 after serving one year for his participation in the Syrian conflict. Yet, to date, there has not been a large-scale study detailing a comprehensive picture of the post-release circumstances of prison leavers from Roumieh.

*Directly after I left [Roumieh], I wanted to get married and establish a family, and thank God, I got married and I came to have a son a while ago. At the time of the first interview, my wife was pregnant. Thank God, two days ago I came to have a son ... So I decided that, it is done, I want to stabilise, I don't want to get involved in political affairs or to get involved in anything."<sup>33</sup>*

# Endnotes

1. Ex-prisoner interviews with the authors, February 2022.
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3. Ex-prisoner interview with the authors, February 2022.
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21. Ex-prisoner interviews with the authors, February 2022.
22. Ex-prisoner interviews with the authors, February 2022.
23. Ex-prisoner interviews with the authors, February 2022.
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26. Ex-prisoner interviews with the authors, February 2022.
27. Ex-prisoner interviews with the authors, February 2022.
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34. Ex-prisoner interview with the authors, February 2022.
35. Ex-prisoner interview with the authors, February 2022.

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