

Prison Radicalization: Are Terrorist Cells Forming in U.S. Cell Blocks?

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Chairman Collins, Senator Lieberman, and distinguished members of the Committee, it is a privilege to be afforded the opportunity to testify before you today. Your leadership in examining the issue of prison radicalization is to be commended. It has not been among the many homeland security matters that have received extensive scrutiny to date. Your initiative in pushing this issue to the fore is crucial – proactive consideration of this challenge and a carefully calibrated response, implemented in timely fashion, will place the United States ahead of the curve and bolster national security. Let us not wait until we are faced with the need to manage a crisis.

Prison radicalization is, of course, a subset of the more general phenomenon of radicalization that has manifested itself in a series of terrorist attacks and activities including the bombings in Madrid (3/11) and London (7/7), and operations recently uncovered in Canada. The larger terrorist threat is the tapestry against which prisoner radicalization must be studied, but that fabric is ever changing. Al Qaeda in its classic form is now a degraded entity, with many of its remaining key figures on the run. However, it has franchised itself across the globe, with its franchisees prepared to act locally, and largely independently – in effect a network of networks. Recently, we have seen the emergence of a leaderless movement, marked significantly by self-enlistment, and taking its inspiration from “Al Qaeda classic” to join the global Salafi jihad. The internet has fuelled this development by encouraging and accelerating the formation of stronger initial bonds inside chat rooms than would occur through face-to-face interaction, and facilitating the re-affirmation of aberrant attitudes – building in essence a virtual umma. Ironically, it is when homegrown groups attempt to reach out to Al Qaeda that they have been caught in key instances; fortunately, these groups have not yet attained a higher level of competence. The internet has also provided an avenue for participation in jihad for women who could not otherwise become involved.¹

Whether beyond prison walls or inside them, it is essential to better understand the life cycle of a terrorist – specifically, the process by which an individual becomes motivated to listen to radical ideas, read about them, enlist oneself or respond to terrorist recruiting efforts, and ultimately, undertake terrorist activity. This issue of how an inspired sympathizer turns into an activist who then goes on to kill innocents will be addressed in greater detail later this morning by my fellow witness, Dr. Gregory Saathoff, who

¹ Interview with Scott Atran, Professor of Psychology and Public Policy, University of Michigan.

possesses a wealth of behavioral science expertise. Dr. Saathoff will also elaborate on some of the terms of art that are used in this context. For my own part, I will add only that the term “radicalization” should here be taken to mean “the process by which inmates...adopt extreme views, including beliefs that violent measures need to be taken for political or religious purposes.”²

Prison radicalization is not a new threat. To the contrary, prisons have always been an incubator for radical ideas, in part because there is a captive audience. Recall that Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* while in prison; and Stalin, while himself incarcerated, recruited inmates to power the Bolshevik Revolution. Zeljko Raznatovic, the founder of Arkan’s Tigers, took part in the ethnic cleansing of Bosnia in the 1990s, was just a petty criminal until he spent time in Western Europe’s prisons. The spiritual philosopher of Al Qaeda, Sayyid Qutb, wrote the radical Islamist manifesto *Ma’alim fi al-Tariq (Milestones Along the Road)* while in an Egyptian prison; and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi recruited followers while imprisoned. Of course, religious radicalization is not unique to Islam – and remains the exception rather than the rule, irrespective of the faith at issue. What follows is a distillation of the most salient findings on the subject of religious radicalization of inmates, as generated by a unique partnership and multi-disciplinary joint undertaking which I co-chaired with Dr. Saathoff.

Some months ago, Dr. Saathoff and I were asked to brief, in a closed door session, a bipartisan panel of congressional members on the very issue before us today. That discussion, a spirited one, and other conversations with representatives of both sides of the aisle, served to reinforce our belief that there was a real need to explore the question of prisoner radicalization in order to sharpen our sense of the nature and scale of the problem, and thereby serve as a spur to action. Indeed, congressional leadership and political will in connection with this challenge has been manifestly evident, and for this you should all be recognized for your proactive leadership. Getting ahead of the curve requires the courage to assume risk, and those who embrace risk in the interest of furthering public safety should be supported in their efforts to serve the public interest.

Against this background, The George Washington University’s Homeland Security Policy Institute (HSPI) and the University of Virginia School of Medicine’s Critical Incident Analysis Group (CIAG) blended their expertise and networks, and jointly convened a dedicated volunteer task force of subject matter experts to examine radicalization in prisons from a multi-dimensional perspective. Rather than studying the issue through a single lens or solely from a traditional law enforcement and/or intelligence perspective, the task force interviewed and received briefings from imams and chaplains, and brought together officials at all levels of government with scholars of religion and behavioral science experts. The aim was to integrate insights from each of these professions (received under “Chatham House rules” and in the experts’ individual rather than institutional capacity), and recast their distinct lenses on this issue as a prism. Each community represented is a critical part of the solution and no analysis would be

² *A Review of the Federal Bureau of Prisons’ Selection of Muslim Religious Services Providers*, Department of Justice, Office of The Inspector General, April 2004.

complete without the benefit of their insights and input. The task force report is a product of its members' collective talents and I would be remiss if I did not express my gratitude for their willingness to join in this endeavor and share their valuable insights.

To date, select cases that have revealed connections between former/current prisoners and terrorism have each held the potential to be a high-consequence event:

- In 1985, a group called El Rukn brokered a deal with the Libyan government to carry out attacks on US police stations, government facilities, military bases, and passenger airplanes in exchange for \$2.5 million and asylum in Tripoli. El Rukn was founded by a Chicago gang leader who converted to Islam while imprisoned in 1965.
- When the compound of the extremist Christian group Covenant, Sword and Arm of the Lord (CSA) was raided, authorities discovered landmines, US Army anti-tank rockets, and a large amount of cyanide apparently intended to poison a city's water supply. CSA's founder had earlier received spiritual tutelage in prison from a fellow inmate – a leader in the radical “Christian Identity” movement.
- John King and Russell Brewer were convicted of murdering African-American James Byrd Jr. in 1998. The two had entered prison as petty criminals, but left startlingly transformed, having joined a white supremacist group and covered their bodies with racist tattoos. King's own attorney "...admitted the significance of the prison experience. 'What I do know is [King] wasn't a racist when he went in. He was when he came out'."³
- Richard Reid, apprehended while attempting to detonate a bomb on a US-bound commercial flight in December 2001, is believed to have been radicalized by an imam while incarcerated in Britain.
- A recently foiled plot to attack numerous government and Jewish targets in California was devised inside New Folsom State Prison. Two men implicated in the scheme were recruited from a local mosque by a former prisoner.
- Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, the emir of Egypt's Gama'at al Islamia (the Islamic Group), is the radical cleric who plotted to bomb New York City landmarks in 1993. Upon being sentenced to a life term, he issued a decree from federal prison, declaring of Americans that “Muslims everywhere [should] dismember their nation, tear them apart, ruin their economy, provoke their corporations, destroy their embassies, attack their interests, sink their ships,...shoot down their planes, [and] kill them on land, at sea, and in the air. Kill them wherever you find them.” Osama bin Laden later claimed that this fatwa provided religious authority for the 9/11 attacks. Abdel Rahman has continued trying to run his organization while

³ Anti-Defamation League, *Dangerous Convictions: An Introduction to Extremist Activities in Prisons* (2002), p. 2.

incarcerated – and three defendants were convicted of terrorism charges in 2005 for helping him do so.

These cases would appear to be just the tip of the iceberg, however. According to authorities who briefed the task force, numerous other examples exist, but due to the sensitive nature of ongoing investigations, cannot be discussed publicly in detail. In short, we have snippets of data but do not currently have a sense of how these various “pixels” fit together as a mosaic – the big picture as it now stands is fuzzy, and needs to be brought into focus in order for effective response measures to be formulated and implemented.

That said, officials in California confirm that “for every rock they turn over” in this context, they “find something there.” While resource and personnel constraints have inhibited further investigation of many of those leads, at least the bounds of what we do not know may be apparent to those authorities. Potentially even more disturbing is the further scenario in which we do not know what we do not know. In short, there is a dearth of data in this area which inhibits a fulsome assessment of the threat posed by religious radicalization of inmates in the US correctional system. Further, social scientists and other academicians interested in examining the issue have been largely unsuccessful to date in gaining access to prison facilities to conduct research, and prisoner radicalization therefore remains a poorly understood phenomenon.

The task force set out to determine what is currently known about radicalization and recruitment in the US prison system at the federal, state and local levels. From the outset, however, I should emphasize that the problem is by no means unique to the US. In Europe, for instance, the number of Muslim inmates has been growing for decades, and their numbers incarcerated are not in proportion to their representation in the general population.⁴ By comparison to American Muslims, Muslims living in Europe are more socio-economically marginalized, and therefore more vulnerable to radical messages, religious and otherwise. Indeed, the *Washington Post* recently reported that whereas Muslims living in the United States “tend to be more educated” and “have higher incomes than the average American,” the reverse is true for Muslims in Britain.⁵

The European experience is relevant to our own in at least two ways, though: as a containment challenge and a learning opportunity, respectively. First, inmates radicalized in Europe may travel to the US or participate in networks with individuals inside the US; and indirect internet access, which may be accorded to prisoners in the US, facilitates such cross-border networking. Second, and more encouragingly, the European experience offers us a chance to learn and adapt lessons, and craft effective tailored strategies to the US context before the problem manifests itself here to the extent that it

⁴ N.H. Ammar et al., “Muslims in Prison: A Case Study from Ohio State Prisons,” *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, Volume 48, Number 4 (2004), pp. 416-17.

⁵ 59% of US Muslims hold a Bachelor’s degree or more, versus 27% in the US overall; and 52% of US Muslims earn \$50,000 or more, versus 45% in the US overall. Geneive Abdo, “America’s Muslims Aren’t as Assimilated as You Think,” *Washington Post* (August 27, 2006).

has overseas. In point of fact, the problem is a global one and, moving forward, information-sharing between and among the US and other countries will be crucial.

Within the US, the potential scope of the challenge is considerable: America's prison population is the world's largest at over two million, and our incarceration rate is the world's highest at 701 out of every 100,000.⁶ The overwhelming majority of these inmates, that is ninety-three percent, are in state and local prisons and jails.⁷ As a result, the threat of prisoner radicalization gains even greater salience here than at the federal level. The figures for California alone are staggering. There, thirty-three adult prisons contain an inmate population in excess of 170,000. With facilities hugely overcrowded – operating at 200% capacity – staffing, management, funding, and logistics pose a tremendous challenge, and wardens there understandably have their hands full dealing with day-to-day operations alone. All of these inmates must be fed, clothed, housed and, most importantly, supervised and secured. Concerned with dangerous inmates and hardened criminals, prison officials simply do not have the manpower to oversee every prayer service or investigate every lead. Further, prisoners with extremist religious views often conduct themselves as model prisoners, hence, wardens (and other prison staff) who are already overburdened may have little incentive to focus on these inmates.

Notwithstanding such overstretch, officials at the state level have demonstrated an impressive level of resolve and commitment to countering prisoner radicalization. The issue has been identified as a priority, and a concerted investigative effort is underway in California (within the bounds of prevailing resources). A deliberate effort to identify and remedy key gaps in the state's prevention and response posture has given rise to a number of noteworthy initiatives including pilot programs intended to draw on the expertise developed over time by institutional gang investigators, and model terrorism and training awareness courses under development for correctional officers. State liaison officers posted at each prison meet monthly to share information across facilities. Beyond the prison-to-prison network, the long term and crucial process of building relationships and trust between and among officials at different levels of government is furthered by monthly meetings of a collective including prison staff, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD), the Los Angeles Police Department, the FBI, the Drug Enforcement Agency, and the Assistant US Attorney for the area. Notably, California is not alone in doing good work – Arizona and New York have also been forward-leaning in their approach to this problem, and they too should be commended for their proactive efforts.

Even in California, however, publicized successes may be due in no small part to luck. For instance, while the LASD in conjunction with the area's Joint Terrorism Task Force managed to foil the New Folsom plot referenced above, it was the fact that one of the plotters carelessly left a cell phone behind during a robbery that provided the key break in the case. While strides have been made in the wake of this episode, disconnects remain – crucially, local information has yet to fully find its way into regional and national

⁶ Roy Walmsley, *World Prison Population (5th Ed.)* (Home Office Publication 234, 2003).

⁷ Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Prison Statistics*, August 15, 2006; <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/correct.htm> (September 13, 2006).

intelligence processes and networks, and strategic analysis is not yet fused with investigatory efforts so that synergies emerge. Significant cultural obstacles also hinder the information-sharing process, highlighting further the complexities of working across jurisdictions. Bureaucratic infighting continues to hamper information sharing even between and among federal agencies, in part because of differing views on tradecraft – while some agencies are inclined to string people up at a relatively early stage, others are predisposed to stringing them along in order to tease out additional valuable information.

The implications are deeply disturbing. Radical preachers might be caught in one prison, fired, and simply move on to work at another prison. Radicalized prisoners might be transferred between prisons, giving them an opportunity to spread their message to new audiences, without prison officials on the receiving end knowing the threat posed by their new charges. Radical groups might be communicating between different prisons, coordinating their efforts, without prison officials being aware of links between them. The importance of information and intelligence sharing cannot be overstated, in part because it is essential that operations be intelligence-driven. Complicating the matter, there is currently no database to track inmates after they have served their sentence or to identify prisoners associated with radical groups. Further, there is no comprehensive database that tracks religious service providers that have exposed inmates to radical religious rhetoric. The sort of database that is truly needed is one that encompasses both the prison context and beyond, and covers who joins jihad, when, and how.⁸ In any case, it is critical that information regarding the radicalization of prisoners in state, local, and federal correctional facilities be included as part of the body of information shared through the Information Sharing Environment called for by the *Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act* of 2004.

Compounding the threat posed by Islamic radicalization is the established presence of violent gangs and extremist Christian groups in prisons. Gangs have a long history of organizing, recruiting, and violence within prisons, giving Muslim extremist groups an opportunity to learn lesson organizational lessons. Many terrorist groups use crime, including extortion, kidnapping, robbery, document fraud, drug smuggling and arms trafficking to fund their enterprises⁹, offering an opportunity for the groups to cooperate to their mutual benefit. More ominous is the potential for cooperation with right-wing Christian extremist groups, which not only have a history of terrorist attacks on US soil, but also a longstanding relationship with prisoners. These groups, which ascribe to “Christian Identity” ideology, include Posse Comitatus, The Order, and Aryan Nations. Some of these groups have found common cause with extremist Muslim groups, who share their hostility towards the US government and Israel – the “enemy of my enemy is my friend” effect. Most recently, a number of white supremacist groups vocalized their support for Hezbollah. Furthermore, radical Islamic groups have already begun adapting practices of gangs and extremist Christian groups. Where White Supremacist gangs use

⁸ Scott Atran and Marc Sageman, “Connecting the Dots,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (August 2006).

⁹ Steven C. McCraw, Assistant Director, Office for Intelligence, Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Narco-Terrorism: International Drug Trafficking and Terrorism – A Dangerous Mix,” Testimony before the Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. Senate, delivered on May 20, 2003.

ancient runes or Masonic symbols as secret codes, radical Muslim groups increasingly use Arabic language and script to communicate in secret while imprisoned.

A key factor in the growth of prisoner radicalization is the shortage of suitably qualified Muslim religious service providers available for work in prisons. Prisoners have a legal right to practice their religion, and prisons are legally bound to provide for inmate worship. This has opened the door to under-qualified and, dangerously, radical preachers to enter prisons. Strikingly, the Federal Bureau of Prisons (FBOP) currently employs only ten Muslim chaplains for the entire federal prison system, while the California state prison system employs twenty Muslim chaplains for its 300,000 prisoners and parolees. This handful of chaplains cannot possibly tend to the religious needs of every Muslim prisoner or oversee every religious service. As a result, prisoners often take on the role of religious service providers and prayer leaders. A 2004 survey of 193 wardens of state correctional facilities showed that half the institutions allowed inmates themselves to act as spiritual leaders.¹⁰ Radical prisoners who volunteer for religious functions and assume religious authority benefit from a captive audience which may, in large part, have had no prior exposure to Islam, and no way to put the radical message into context. Hence, the only version of their religion that they have ever known is a “cut-and-paste” version of the Qur’an that incorporates violent prison gang culture, known as “Jailhouse Islam” or “Prislam”. (It should go without saying, however, that in general terms religion may have a tremendously constructive impact upon inmates, imbuing them with a sense of discipline and purpose, among other things). Radical prisoners who want the role of religious leader for themselves have also been known to intimidate suitably qualified religious service providers into ceding their role.

The FBOP has attempted to deal with this problem by instituting new standards for prison religious service providers, and identifying a national organization that could vet religious service providers, ensuring a certain level of education and experience, as well as weeding out potential radicals who would incite violence. However, there has been no such national organization identified by the FBOP. As a result, prayer leaders and religious service providers only require endorsement by local organizations, making it more difficult to identify and track radical preachers, who often move between prisons freely. The situation at the state level is by no means more comforting. By way of illustration, there is no standard policy for vetting religious service providers in California prisons, leading potentially to thirty-three different policies in thirty-three different prisons. Without standard policies, it is possible for a chaplain to be removed from one prison for spreading radical ideas and inciting violence, only to find work at another prison, with officials none the wiser.

Due to the lack of proper religious authorities and academically credentialed experts available to review all materials entering the prison system, no consistently applied standard or procedure exists to determine what reading material is appropriate. In the absence of monitoring by authoritative Islamic chaplains, materials that advocate

¹⁰ George W. Knox, “The Problem of Gangs and Security Threat Groups in American Prisons Today: Recent Research, Findings From the 2004 Prison Gang Survey,” (National Gang Crime Research Center, 2005)

violence have infiltrated the prison system undetected. The lack of individuals with a thorough knowledge of Islam, the Qur'an and other religious materials entering prisons offers an opportunity for recruiters outside of prisons to paint a violent picture of Islam. Radical literature and extremist translations and interpretations of the Qur'an have been distributed to prisoners by groups suspected or known to support terrorism. The use of Arabic language materials obscures the content to untrained prison officials. Radicals often do not even need to rely on secret codes or foreign languages to smuggle in radical tracts. The Noble Qur'an, a Wahhabi/Salafi version written in English, is widely available in prisons. A recent review in *The Middle East Quarterly* characterized this version as reading more "...like a supremacist Muslim, anti-Semite, anti-Christian polemic than a rendition of the Islamic scripture."¹¹ Of particular concern is its appendix, entitled "The Call to *Jihad* (Holy Fighting in Allah's Cause)." Another text of concern is Saeed Ismaeel's *The Differences Between the Shee'ah and Muslims Who Follow the Sunnah*, written in plain English. Extremist interpretations of the Qur'an use footnotes and supplements to lead the reader to a radical interpretation of the scripture. The FBOP is now requiring that Islamic teaching materials and study guides be prepared by Islamic chaplains who are full-time FBOP staff,¹² but FBOP represents only a small fraction of the US prison system.

The threat posed by prisoner radicalization does not end when inmates are paroled or released. Former inmates are vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment because many leave prison with very little financial or social support. To the extent that radical groups may draw upon funding from well-financed, extremist backers, they can offer much more support to released prisoners than other more legitimate community programs that would facilitate genuine reintegration into society. By providing for prisoners in their time of greatest need, radical organizations can build upon the loyalty developed during the individual's time in prison. If connections are made with a radicalized community group, the recently released inmate may remain at risk for recruitment or continued involvement in terrorist networks.

Moving forward, the most fundamental imperative, in my view as well as that of the task force, is for Congress to establish a Commission to investigate this issue in depth. An objective risk assessment is urgently needed in order to better understand the nature of the threat, and to formulate and calibrate proactive prevention and response efforts accordingly.¹³

For a proper appreciation of the proposed Commission and its course of work, two additional caveats are essential. First, all relevant perspectives must feed into the process – as emphasized above, solutions in this context must be reflective of the complexity of the problem and, therefore, no one profession alone is equipped to analyze and

¹¹ Khaleel Mohammed, "Assessing English Translations of the Qur'an," *Middle East Quarterly*, Volume 12, Number 2 (Spring 2005).

¹² *Department of Justice Anti-Terrorism Efforts Since Sept. 11, 2001*. Department of Justice Fact Sheet, 5 September 2006 <http://www.usdoj.gov/opa/pr/2006/September/06_opa_590.html>.

¹³ It should be noted that the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security are also conducting their own strategic assessments regarding the scope of radicalization and recruitment in US prisons from a law enforcement-centric point of view.

recommend change. Law enforcement must come together with a range of non-traditional partners in order to get us to where we need to be on this issue. Second, it is crucial that balance be injected into this exercise, specifically, that the practice of religious freedom be given fulsome consideration and weight while means of preventing the spread of radical ideology in a religious context are studied.

While the task force would not presume to instruct the Commission on how to go about doing its work, we would urge that the following core issues be accorded priority status:

As a corollary to assessing the risk posed by the influence of radical groups within the prison system, there should be a companion assessment of current levels of information sharing between and among agencies at all levels of government involved in managing inmates and monitoring radical groups.

Equally crucial is the identification of steps to ensure the legitimacy of Islamic endorsing agencies so as to ensure a reliable and effective process of providing religious services to Muslim inmates.

Steps to effectively reintegrate former inmates into the larger society should also be identified, with an eye to diminishing the likelihood that former prisoners will be recruited by radical groups posing as social service providers, or act upon radical tendencies learned behind bars.

Fortunately, we are not building entirely from scratch: lessons can and should be learned and adapted from present and past efforts to combat gangs and right-wing extremists in prisons. Existing prison programs designed to prevent radicalization and recruitment or to disrupt radical groups – whether at the local, state, federal, or international level – should be evaluated to determine a set of best practices that can be used to develop a comprehensive strategy to counter radicalization. Knowledge must be translated into action across the board. Awareness, education, and training programs must be developed for personnel who work in prison, probation, and parole settings.

Finally, broader avenues of dialogue with the Muslim community should be identified and pursued to foster mutual respect and understanding, and ultimately trust. Prison radicalization is but one subset of the battle of ideas, and it is only by challenging ideas with ideas – both within and beyond prison walls – that hearts and minds may ultimately be changed, and radical ideas moderated. Just as we cannot win the global war on terrorism abroad by military means alone, we will not win the battle against extremism domestically through law enforcement alone.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I would also like to recognize the Committee and their staff for their professionalism. Please note that I am submitting for the record the HSPI-CIAG Prisoner Radicalization Task Force Report entitled *Out of the Shadows: Getting Ahead of Prisoner Radicalization*. I would be pleased to try to answer any questions that you may have.

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