

Religious Radicalization Behind Bars

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Chairman Collins, Senator Lieberman, and distinguished members of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, I would like to thank you for inviting me to testify before you today on this subject of national importance. Your collaborative leadership on homeland security issues examines national vulnerabilities. The issue of religious radicalization in U.S. prisons pertains not only to your interest in Homeland Security, but also your committee's interest in health and public safety, ethics, government management and information technology.

I would like to echo the testimony of the opening speaker on this panel, Frank Cilluffo. I am especially appreciative to have previously shared the opportunity to brief a bipartisan Congressional panel. This was very helpful in identifying the key issues that concern policy makers. It has also been a privilege to serve with Mr. Cilluffo as the co-chair on the Prisoner Radicalization Task Force. His Homeland Security Policy Institute, at The George Washington University, was a critical partner in enabling us to build the network of expertise responsible for producing the report that we have released today: ***Out of the Shadows: Getting Ahead of Prisoner Radicalization.*** We began with a strong foundation of multidisciplinary expertise and experience. This was essential through the course of our many briefings by government leadership, law enforcement officials and religious prison experts.

Throughout the last decade, I have assisted in the coordination of briefings between behavioral science experts in the FBI and an international group of religion scholars. During these yearly meetings of the American Academy of Religion, I have become convinced that the most enigmatic issues faced by law enforcement require a multidisciplinary approach. When religion is a focus of concern, insights of religion scholars are often essential.

During the last fifteen years, as a member of the faculty of the University of Virginia's School of Medicine, I have provided consultation in more than ten state prisons, federal prisons and jails. In that time I have performed more than twenty thousand separate assessments for more than 5,000 inmates. It is an opportunity for teaching of psychiatry to medical students. In their subsequent medical careers, some have gone on to provide treatment to inmates as a result of that exposure. I have been fortunate to consult to institutions with good safety records. In my experience, the vast majority of correctional employees are conscientious and professional in their approach to meeting the needs of inmates, despite the challenges of working under often difficult conditions.

Through this work, I have had an opportunity to evaluate and treat inmates for mental illness, but also to witness the importance of the media, the power of social networks, the changing role of information technology, the response to health care, the benefits of structure, the importance of family, and the often vital role that religion plays in rehabilitation, if not redemption. In my brief remarks today, I will speak to the issue of radicalization from a behavioral science perspective.

Within any system, there is the potential for corruption and abuse, and the prison system is no exception. For example, although most inmates appreciate the value of good medical care, there are some who use symptoms as tactics in order to gain special advantage in the system, using the cover of illness to obtain unnecessary medication, or evade responsibility, or to attempt escape. Access to radio and television programming is often constructive, although some are susceptible to the violent and sexual content, and react in kind. Affiliation with others on work crews and sports teams can prepare inmates for life in society. Affiliation of course can be destructive, though when inmates join violent groups and gangs that achieve identity by advocating violence and demonizing others. Volunteers in prison can provide an enormous benefit toward the rehabilitation of inmates, and this can not be overstated. As with other valuable enterprises, the volunteer system within prisons can be exploited by those who would use it to build a violent network. This is particularly true when systems within states and localities do not confirm and share information about the vast number of volunteers and visitors who daily enter our jails and prison.

In the same way that medical care, communications, affiliation and the volunteer system can be exploited within prisons, so too can be religion if it is used as a means to advocate violence or antisocial behavior. The Constitutional protections given to speech and religion provide a strong foundation for our society, as well as our prison system in the United States. In order to safeguard these rights, we must insure that religious protections are not exploited in order to radicalize and recruit inmates toward violence.

While the federal prison system has made strides in addressing the issue of religious radicalization and recruitment within prisons, our level of awareness and understanding is still quite limited, particularly at the level of state prisons, community corrections and local jails. This is significant, because the vast majority of the greater than two million incarcerated inmates are held in these state and local systems, rather than the federal system.

Indeed, in Director Mueller's 2005 testimony to the Senate Intelligence Committee, he stated that "prisons continue to be fertile ground for extremists who exploit both a prisoner's conversion to Islam while still in prison, as well as their socioeconomic status and placement in the community upon their release."¹ In addition, The FBI's Assistant Director for the Counterterrorism Division, John Pistole, testified that "Some of these terrorists seek to exploit our freedom to exercise religion, we believe, to their advantage

¹ Mueller, Robert, Testimony Before the Senate Committee on Intelligence of the United States Senate, February 16, 2005.

by using radical forms of Islam to recruit operatives. Unfortunately, U.S. correctional institutions are a viable venue for such radicalization and recruitment.”²

In order to understand issues that face current prisons and prisoners, we must be sure that we have an adequate understanding of the modern prison system. Those of us who are old enough to remember the politically motivated violence in prisons of the 1960’s and 1970’s should be aware that prison violence could again become a central point of discussion and galvanize public opinion. But unlike the politically motivated, secular upheaval of the last generation, we face a great risk of religiously motivated violence.

Since the 1990’s, religiously motivated terrorism has resulted in intense acts of violence, creating greater numbers of fatalities than the more calculated violence perpetrated by secular terrorist organizations. These differences were noted by Bruce Hoffman, Mark Juergensmeyer and other scholars even before September 11, 2001. Hoffman explained the increased level of violence through examination of religious terrorism’s “radically different value systems, mechanisms of legitimization and justification, concepts of morality, and world-view embraced by the religious terrorist, compared with his secular counterpart”³. According to Hoffman, religious terrorists see their acts as divine duties to the point that they constitute “sacramental acts.” Rather than seeking sympathizers, they are much more alienated and therefore more destructive as they engage in total war.

In addition, Juergensmeyer wrote presciently before 9/11 about the concept of “performance violence,” in which opponents are demonized and perpetrators become martyrs. In his interviews with jailed religious terrorists, he detailed an embrace of violence within various radicalized religions.⁴ The shift in society from secular to religious violence internationally has also been reflected nationally in our prison system.

U.S. Prisoners Today

In order to understand how the process of radicalization might affect prison inmates, it is important to know about the types of people that we are incarcerating in the United States. State and local correctional systems provide an ideal backdrop for radicalization of young men and women. Research on the characteristics of terrorist recruits abroad has identified youth, unemployment, alienation, a need for a sense of self-importance, and a need to belong to a group as common factors, all of which are present among U.S. prison populations.⁵ These inmates are vulnerable to extremist versions of the religion. The threat of terrorist recruiting in U.S. prisons was highlighted in October 2003 during a hearing before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology and Homeland

² Pistole, John, Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology and Homeland Security of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, October 14, 2003.

³ Hoffman, Bruce, Inside Terrorism, Columbia University Press, New York, 1998.

⁴ Juergensmeyer, Mark, Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence, University of California Press, 2000.

⁵ Hudson, R.A. 1999. The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism: Who Becomes and Terrorist and Why? Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. p. 24.

Security,⁶ which identified two major areas of concern in the U.S. federal prison system. First, a variety of socioeconomic and psychological factors make inmates vulnerable to radical ideology. Second, groups known to support terrorist causes have distributed radical literature to the prison population. Witnesses stated that serious problems with the screening of religious service providers have created an opportunity for radicalization.

For a variety of reasons, new prisons have increasingly been built in rural areas. This may decrease the opportunities for prisoners to maintain contact with family and decrease the opportunities for religious instruction. When in remote locations, it is more difficult to contract for qualified religious service providers. This is important with regard to religious radicalization, because it leaves a void that may be filled by poorly qualified religious practitioners who bring their own brand of religious radicalization within prison walls.

The social and psychological backgrounds of many prisoners reflect a vulnerability to recruitment by groups that advocate violence. While not a justification for criminal behavior, family histories of inmates include more abandonment, abuse and neglect than non-incarcerated Americans. Violence is the norm. Inmates often see themselves as victims of society and therefore seek retribution. Because structure is often lacking in their development, the prison environment can be a vehicle for new growth in that it holds and contains the individual, providing time and space for either constructive or destructive pursuits.

American prisons have seen an increase in population, largely due to the longer sentences given to drug offenders. Despite the prison building boom, some state and local facilities remain overcrowded, housing many more inmates than originally designed. Although the numbers of inmates have increased, rehabilitation programs within prisons have not always kept pace, and have arguably fallen behind.

Prisons have always been a repository for society's unsolved problems. Perhaps one of the most serious challenges to prisons has been the influx of inmates who suffer from serious mental illness. The promises of deinstitutionalization have not been kept by society. Instead, we have seen trans-institutionalization of patients. Mentally ill have been shifted from mental hospitals to the streets and then to prison. This is relevant because the necessary emphasis on mental health care has further stretched the resources of prisons, thus limiting the capabilities for investigation and intelligence collection.

Behavior is Contagious

The landscape of prison life has also changed dramatically, in that the 24-hour news cycle available within prisons acts as a force multiplier. Why is this important? Behavior is contagious, whether it occurs in exuberant fans crowding onto a sports field after victory, or angry inmates who riot within a facility. I learned this myself when I was

⁶ Terrorism: Radical Islamic Influence of Chaplaincy of the U.S. Military and Prisons, Tuesday, October 14, 2003. United States Senate, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology and Homeland Security, Committee on the Judiciary.

called to see an inmate who had set his cell on fire. It was only after I treated him that I realized that the image of a raging fire on television provoked him to torch his cell. This can also occur on a macro level. Two days after the World Trade Center attack, I consulted to a prison that I thought I knew well. Anxious inmates informed me that that the televised images of the 9-11 attack were cause for celebration among many of the inmates. In fact, they estimated that a third of the inmates praised the attacks, and their cheers could be heard in cellblock after cellblock.

Of course, access to radio and television can have a significant positive impact within prisons. Technology advances and culture follows in its wake. However, one of the byproducts of our smaller, more information connected world is the globalization of grievance. Images of distant conflicts are burned into the memories and identities of impressionable inmates. While these images make for compelling television, they also provide the opportunity for inmates to ultimately adopt and embrace a chosen trauma⁷ that will fuel future rage into succeeding generations. Television transmissions of bombings and beheadings have immense power, and their impact within the prison environment cannot be overstated.

The internet has been a boon for religious radicalization and recruitment. Training for recruits that previously occurred in terrorist training camps can now be accomplished via electronic, globally accessible correspondence courses. The web can capture and rapidly disseminate information to the world. We have not begun to fully grasp the implications of this in our society, but the internet is perhaps the most potent vehicle for training and information sharing. It is increasingly being used by individuals and groups seeking affirmation and identity through the use of violence.

Just as the internet has revolutionized the way that we look at communication in modern society, it has acted as dramatic means in prison for broadening social networks. Although I am not aware of any correctional system that currently provides direct unregulated internet access for inmates, there has been a dramatic increase in indirect use of the internet. During the past decade, pen pal correspondence between prison inmates and the public has rapidly gained acceptance on the internet. The days when inmates were limited by the time and delay of individual letters have now passed. Currently, the inmate who had access to 5 pen pals can just as easily have access to 50 or 500. Although one state passed a law banning inmates' access to the internet, this state law has been overturned in Federal Court.⁸

Radicalization: What do we know?

More than 200 years ago, Thomas Jefferson looked to France when he drew up plans for the proposed Richmond penitentiary based on a model from a prison in Lyon, France.⁹ Today, it would be wise to look to France, Great Britain, and other European countries to learn from their experience. Radicalization in prisons is a global problem and threatens

⁷ Volkan, V., *Bloodlines*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997, pp. 48-49.

⁸ *Canadian Coalition Against the Death Penalty v. Terry L. Stewart*, 2002.

⁹ Boyd, J., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Princeton, N.J., 1953.

the national security of the U.S. Information sharing between and among the U.S. and other countries is crucial. The task force report released today examines these issues from the perspective of European prisons.

Defining Terms¹⁰

For consistency, I would like to refer to the task force report, *Out of the Shadows: Getting Ahead of Prisoner Radicalization* for the following definitions of radicalization and recruitment. Our report provides the background for definition development on relevant issues related to radicalization. The following definitions are taken directly from the report.

Radicalization - refers to the process by which inmates...adopt extreme views, including beliefs that violent measures need to be taken for political or religious purposes. By “extreme views,” this report specifies beliefs that are anti-social, politically rebellious and anti-authoritarian.

Recruitment - “is used to mean the solicitation of individuals to commit terrorist acts or engage in behavior for a terrorism purpose.” Non-radicalized inmates may be persuaded to participate in actions that directly benefit the terrorist network. Therefore, a recruited individual would include anyone in the prison environment who provides support to terrorists. Many members of a terrorist network may not be fully aware of the value that their actions bring to the network, as in the case of a prisoner who is coerced through blackmail to smuggle cell phone parts into a prison.

Individual radicalization – results from exposure to a radical religious service provider or charismatic inmate espousing radical ideas. This type of individual may decide to pursue violence on his own, becoming a “lone-wolf” terrorist. He would not necessarily have the support of a network, but may seek out a network in the future, and may be at risk for recruitment at some later date.

Organized radicalization – a process supported by external groups who seek to influence vulnerable inmates. These groups coordinate the entry of radical religious service providers into prisons and jails. They provide inmates with reading materials that include non-traditional or extremist interpretations of the Qur’an. Once released, inmates are also directed to supportive groups that espouse violence, such as radical mosques. The social services offered by radical groups act as a vehicle for “top-down recruiting,” also known as “scouting”. This involves radical groups identifying released inmates with valuable skills who can be recruited to carry out specific actions in support of the group’s radical agenda. This process occurs over the long term and direct recruiting may result long after the inmate has become radicalized.

Gang radicalization - makes use of pre-existing prison gangs or networks to attract inmates. A principal reason for joining an existing gang is the belief that membership in

¹⁰ F. Cilluffo, G. Saathoff, et. al., *Out of the Shadows: Getting Ahead of Prisoner Radicalization*, HSPI/CIAG Task Force on Prisoner Radicalization. 2006.

such a group confers physical protection and psychological support. Gangs also give disillusioned youth a sense of belonging. Once these groups become radicalized, their money, communications networks and intimidation factor can be used to recruit others and support terrorist networks.

Most prisoners who join Islamic gangs for protection adopt Islam temporarily out of necessity, a phenomenon called “Prislam” by officials of the New York Police Department. In contrast, a small but influential proportion of the prisoners who adopt Prislam later become engaged in terrorist activity.

Para-radicalization - takes place when non-radicalized individuals, including inmates, correctional officers, or other prison staff, aid or abet radicalized networks. Wittingly or not, they are an important part of terrorist network operations in the prison setting. Using bribery and intimidation, radical inmates can obtain, for example, smuggled communications devices, pass messages, and cause the strategic transfer of particular inmates.

The Problem

Overview of the Process of Radicalization

As previously discussed, prison inmates in general are particularly vulnerable to radical religious ideology due to their anti-social attitudes and the need to identify with other inmates sharing the same background, beliefs, or ethnicity. When there has been little exposure to organized religion in the community, the inmates' understanding of religion is dependent upon the religious leadership and materials at their facilities. Radical rhetoric may therefore exploit the inmate's vulnerabilities and lack of grounded religious knowledge by providing validation to the inmate's disillusionment with society and by creating an outlet for their violent impulses. Psychological factors that increase vulnerability include high level of distress, cultural disillusionment, lack of intrinsic religious beliefs or values, dysfunctional family system, or dependent personality tendencies.¹¹ From an ideological standpoint, radical religious groups allow inmates to demonize their perceived enemies and view themselves as righteous. Inmates may also be drawn to radical groups out of the need for protection or to gain status among other prisoners.

Occasionally, I am asked to describe the typical radicalized inmate. While it seems a reasonable question, I would suggest that focusing only on individual inmates is not an appropriate solution. In fact, terrorism is a team sport. Social bonding is not only the magnet but also the glue that holds groups together. Hypotheses like brainwashing are simple, attractive and wrong. Thoughtful comparisons between violent radical religious groups and new religious movements, sometimes known as cults, reveal that we can best

¹¹ S. Gerwehr and S. Daly, *Al-Qaida: Terrorist Selection and Recruitment*, (McGraw-Hill Homeland Security Handbook, 2006), Chapter 5, p. 84.

understand terrorist groups through an understanding of networks.¹² The most effective terrorists are team players, who play different positions on a radicalized field. Our overcrowded prisons provide an opportunity for a deep bench. Even more importantly, para-radicalization occurs in prison. In this exploitative environment, inmates, visitors and even prison employees can be unwitting players who can be cajoled, bribed or coerced into transmitting messages and materials without being aware of their real purpose.

In order to effectively understand a business, we must appreciate the capabilities of not only its employees, but also the needs and interests of its customers. In a similar way, it is not enough to understand terrorism in prison by learning only about the inmates. One must also have an understanding of those who visit and volunteer in prisons. Although prisons may appear to be closed systems, the walls are in fact quite permeable. A state prison system with 30,000 inmates may easily host 300,000 visitors and volunteers.

Studies have suggested that terrorist recruitment methods are not always expected to yield a high number of recruits.¹³ Radical messages may be delivered to many prisoners with the understanding that most will resist radicalization. As demonstrated in the New Folsom plot, detailed in the prisoner radicalization task force report, a single radicalized inmate can be a significant threat. Even if the radical message resonates with only a few inmates, they could then be targeted for more intense one on one instruction. The New Folsom plot also demonstrates the communication that occurs between the prison and community. The impact and destructive potential of a prison-directed terrorist cell is enormous.

There is a difference between a radicalized prisoner, who holds radical religious or political beliefs, and a prisoner who has been recruited by a terrorist group and who has chosen to commit violence. A sequence from radicalization to violence occurs, beginning with the conditions of the prison setting and first exposure to radical ideas, and ending with the decision to become a terrorist. Only a few who become radicalized go on to actively pursue terrorism. An important resource for combating terrorism would be to determine which factor or factors influence some radicalized prisoners to make the specific leap from radical beliefs to violence in the name of those beliefs.

Diverse and Dispersed

Prison systems are administered at the federal, state and local levels. While there are good reasons to have a decentralized prison system, our prisons have not adapted to share information with other facilities and agencies. Currently, 3500 jails are city or county operated facilities. Some of these are huge, dwarfing many prisons in size. For example, more than 25 jails house more than 3,000 inmates. While most prison and jail systems are separate, some states combine their jail and prison systems under the state department

¹² M Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2000, pp 124-130.

¹³ S. Gerwehr and S. Daly, *Al-Qaida: Terrorist Selection and Recruitment*, (McGraw-Hill Homeland Security Handbook, 2006), Chapter 5, p. 84.

of corrections. In the era of privatization, more private companies are running prisons. State governments operate nearly a thousand facilities, private companies run more than 150 facilities.¹⁴ Coordination and collaboration between publicly and privately managed facilities has not yet been achieved, and presents a serious problem in the national struggle against radicalization and terrorism.

The Research Search

The history of research within U.S. prisons has been marked by human subject research abuse. As a result of these abuses, Congress passed special federal regulations governing research on human subjects in these facilities. Nationally recognized scholars who are interested in doing further research are often constrained, if not denied outright.

While maintaining rights of prisoners and maintaining the security of institutions is a primary obligation, we cannot forget that without the light afforded by good research, we are left with the heat of case-related investigations by government and the media. Effective policy should be driven by good research on radicalization rather than through random case reports.

We have an obligation to inmate populations, but also to those who are charged with maintaining safe prisons. Good intelligence needs to be provided not only in a top-down fashion, but also generated from the bottom-up. Just as we seek to protect our soldiers by providing them with the most up-to-date intelligence, we are also obligated to use our enhanced knowledge to safeguard the lives of our correctional officers.

As we have stated in our task force report, we currently lack the necessary data to determine both the extent and patterns of radical religious recruitment for incarcerated prisoners and released inmates. Even if a religious provider is removed from one facility, that provider can simply apply to enter into a prison in another state. No database exists to track inmates after release or to identify inmates associated with radical groups. No comprehensive database exists to track religious service providers who are known to expose inmates to radical religious rhetoric.

First Describe, Then Prescribe

A compelling case can be made for a review of our prison system, particularly at the state and local levels. In order to defeat a networked opponent, our prisons need to be “networked” through information technology systems that are truly integrated. This will facilitate much needed research into not only the “what” of religious radicalism, but also the “how” and “why.” Improved intelligence will be beneficial not only in limiting religious radicalization and recruitment within prisons, but also in assisting in better determination of how criminal gangs operate within a prison environment. This intelligence will prepare us for future threats that we encounter within our prisons. When serious symptoms present, it is tempting to try to reach for a treatment before we

¹⁴ C Bell, Correctional Psychiatry, in Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry, Eighth Edition, Kaplan and Sadock, Lippincott, Williams and Wilkins, Philadelphia, Vol 2, 2005, p 4002.

have a diagnosis. History reveals that government works best when it first shines light rather than heat upon concerns that involve religious questions and conflict.

Government must be proactive. We must base our operations on real intelligence, rather than gut reactions. Unless we understand the nature and extent of the problem of religious radicalization in prison, we are likely to first neglect it, and then over-react in a way that unnecessarily antagonizes and polarizes our prison population. In addition to being an assault on civil liberties, an aggressive over-reaction by government in the absence of good intelligence would lose hearts and minds to radicalization and recruitment, playing into the very hands of those who want to subvert our system.

Although at one point the issue may have involved “connecting the dots”, many of those dots are now widening blots, bleeding through prison walls into the community. Our briefings revealed that while the New Folsom plot was discovered in the community accidentally by virtue of a dropped cell phone, the response of the Joint Terrorism Task Force in Los Angeles was superb. Federal, state and local leadership rapidly deployed personnel in order to determine the extent of a serious operation that had grown over time. Expecting the Joint Terrorism Task Force to be the primary force for dealing with this complex problem is like expecting emergency rooms to provide all medical care. A rapidly mobilized Joint Terrorism Task Force response to a serious threat is like an emergency medical response for patients with critical symptoms. It is necessary but not sufficient. Proactive, integrated intelligence-sharing systems are critical to identify blots before they become plots.

Conclusion

In my role as a consulting psychiatrist to prisons, I also teach the medical students who accompany me. Prison can be a humbling place, where teachers once again find themselves to be students.

I will never forget one of the first challenges that faced me in prison. A suicidal inmate was to be placed in a stripped cell without any possessions. As he was led from my office, he begged me to allow him to keep just one possession – his Bible. At such a time, it appeared obvious to me that this request could easily be granted. Without hesitation, I instructed the officer to give him his Bible. Before doing so, the officer flipped through the pages, reached into the book of Revelations, and pulled out a razor blade. “Doc”, he said. “Do you want him to have this too?” The inmate smiled weakly and said “I guess I don’t need my Bible after all.”

Unfortunately, we are living in more complex times. An officer who can easily identify and remove a razor blade from a Bible will most likely not be able to identify the razors of radicalization – jihadist material that advocates violent measures against innocent civilians, gangs who are willing to masquerade their violence as religion, and radicalized individuals who are willing to take the last step towards terrorism.

In closing, I would like to recognize the Committee and their staff for their professionalism, and the School of Medicine at the University of Virginia and its resources within the Critical Incident Analysis Group. I would especially like to thank the Homeland Security Policy Institute at the George Washington University for their dedication to this process. I would like to extend to you an open offer to continue to work closely with them. Thank you and I would be pleased to try to answer any questions you may have.

The Critical Incident Analysis Group (CIAG) at the University of Virginia School of Medicine represents a collaborative, multidisciplinary “think-net” that examines critical issues through a multidisciplinary lens of crisis analysis. As a flexible network, the Critical Incident Analysis Group benefits from the intersecting perspectives of government, academe and the private sector. By volunteering their time and counsel, CIAG participants distill current knowledge, providing opportunities to identify and build productive networks and policies that enhance resilience while safeguarding our liberties.