

**Prison Radicalization: Are Terrorist Cells Forming in U.S. Cell Blocks?  
Testimony of Daveed Gartenstein-Ross**

**Senior Consultant, The Gerard Group International  
Co-Chairman, The Counterterrorism Foundation**

**Before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee,  
September 19, 2006**

Chairman Collins, Senator Lieberman and distinguished members of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify before you today. The Committee is to be commended for tackling an important issue like prison radicalization, where there is manifest reason to believe that there is a serious problem—but where there is also a dearth of available information for experts in the public sector to accurately assess the full extent of the threat. I am honored to testify alongside distinguished experts like Frank Cilluffo and Dr. Greg Saathoff. Their testimony will provide you with more of a big-picture understanding of the problem of prison radicalization. Mine will tackle the issue from a different angle: it will provide an inside look at how access to the prison system can be exploited by radical Islamic charities intent on fostering their vision of the faith. The core of this testimony is based on my experiences working for the U.S. headquarters of the Al Haramain Islamic Foundation, which was an international charity devoted to Wahhabism, the austere vision of Islam that originated in what is now Saudi Arabia. In this capacity, I helped extremist literature reach the U.S. prison system.

I will begin with some information about my background, since that provides context for the unusual perspective of my testimony. I currently work as a counterterrorism consultant; I am a senior consultant for the Gerard Group International and co-chairman of the Counterterrorism Foundation. But I entered the field in an idiosyncratic way. My introduction came as an employee of a radical Islamic charity that is now designated as a sponsor of terrorism by the Treasury Department.

I grew up in Ashland, a small town in Southern Oregon. As my name suggests, both of my parents are from Jewish backgrounds. They weren't happy with traditional Judaism, however, and they encouraged me to find my own spiritual path. I found this path in college when I converted to Islam. Impressed by a Muslim friend whose sincere religious beliefs guided his political activism, I took my *shahada*—the declaration of faith that brings one into the fold of Islam—in the fall of 1997. My first job after college was with the U.S. headquarters of the Al Haramain Islamic Foundation.

Al Haramain's U.S. headquarters were located in my hometown. In the summer of 1998, while in Ashland visiting my parents, I went to the local mosque. I had encountered the local Muslim community once before, but by the summer of 1998 the group had moved to a new venue, a mansion-sized blue building on the south end of town. The impressive size of the building and the property surrounding it made it obvious that the group had more money than ever before. This was because, shortly before my visit, the local Muslim congregation had become affiliated with Saudi Arabia's Al Haramain Islamic Foundation.

Since the local Muslim community had seen me before, the apparent leader of the congregation, Pete Seda, took an interest in me. He took me on a long tour of the property, a tour that ended up being a sales pitch encouraging me to apply for a job with Al Haramain. Pete Seda is today under federal indictment for a money-laundering scheme that federal investigators believe was used to fund the *mujahideen* of Chechnya, who were waging war against the Russians.

I worked for Al Haramain from December 1998 until August 1999. I had a number of responsibilities during this time. Most relevant to this testimony, I oversaw our prison *dawa* program (*dawa* being Islamic evangelism), which was designed to educate U.S. prisoners about what Al Haramain considered to be “true” Islam.

I left the Islamic faith for Christianity prior to 9/11. By the time the FBI’s investigation of Al Haramain kicked into high gear in February 2004, I was ready to assist the Bureau. I write about the experience of working for the Al Haramain Islamic Foundation—including the process of radicalization that I went through while at the charity—in my forthcoming book *My Year Inside Radical Islam*, which will be published on February 1, 2007. I have provided advance copies of the book to some of the Committee’s staff members.

### **The Al Haramain Islamic Foundation**

I would like to briefly examine the Al Haramain Islamic Foundation’s connections to international terrorism in order to demonstrate the charity’s ideological orientation. Ultimately, the story of Al Haramain’s *dawa* program is one of missed opportunities for the charity and its terrorist backers. The program was set up in such a way that it could have been used as a major vehicle for terrorist recruitment. The program was not used in that way. But Al Haramain’s connections to terrorism mean that it wouldn’t be unreasonable to think that the prison *dawa* program might be used in that manner.

The international Al Haramain organization was originally formed as a private charity in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in 1992. At the time I worked for the group, it had offices in more than fifty countries and an annual budget of \$40 to \$50 million. Today, however, Al Haramain no longer exists as a separate entity. It was eventually merged, along with other charities, into the Saudi National Commission for Relief and Charity Work Abroad.

Al Haramain’s terrorist connections begin with the Ashland branch, for which I worked. As I have mentioned, the Ashland branch has been designated a terrorist sponsor by the Treasury Department. Two directors, Pete Seda and Soliman al-But’he, were indicted for their roles in a complicated and somewhat bizarre money-laundering scheme in which al-But’he smuggled about \$130,000 in traveler’s checks out of the country without declaring them. Federal investigators believe that this money funded the Chechen *mujahideen*. Neither Seda nor al-But’he has been tried in U.S. court. Both men are currently fugitives from the law. Seda is reportedly in Iran. Al-But’he is living in Riyadh; he was recently promoted to assistant general manager of the parks and recreation department, and he keeps himself busy by filing lawsuits against the U.S. government.

Evidence has come to light about possible Al Haramain involvement in the 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. The U.S. Treasury has designated Al Haramain offices in Kenya and Tanzania as sponsors of terrorism for their role in the plot.<sup>1</sup> The Treasury designation lists multiple connections between Al Haramain and the embassy bombings, including the Al Haramain offices' involvement in planning the attacks, funding by a wealthy Al Haramain official, and a former Tanzanian Al Haramain director's role in making preparations for the advance party that planned the bombings. The Al Haramain branch office in the Comoros Islands was also designated because it "was used as a staging area and exfiltration route for the perpetrators of the 1998 bombings."<sup>2</sup>

Nor was this Al Haramain's only connection to terrorism. The *New York Times* reported in 2003 that Al Haramain's Indonesian office had been a conduit for funds to Jemaah Islamiyah, the terrorist group responsible for the October 2002 bombings in Bali, Indonesia that killed 202 people, primarily foreign tourists.<sup>3</sup> In designating the office a sponsor of terrorism, the Treasury Department also noted that it provided financial support to al-Qaeda, and that money donated to the Indonesian office may have been diverted to weapons procurement.<sup>4</sup>

A number of other Al Haramain branches were similarly designated by Treasury after 9/11. The Afghanistan office was designated for supporting the bin Laden-financed Makhtab al-Khidmat terrorist group prior to 9/11, and for its involvement with a group training to attack foreigners in Afghanistan after the Taliban were toppled.<sup>5</sup> The Albania office was designated because of its ties to al-Qaeda and the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, which led the Treasury Department to conclude that the office "has been used as cover for terrorist activity in Albania and in Europe." The Bangladesh office was designated after one of its officials sent an operative to conduct surveillance on U.S. consulates in India for a potential terrorist attack.<sup>6</sup> The branch in Ethiopia was designated because of its support for al-Ittihad al-Islamiya, a terrorist group that has carried out attacks on Ethiopian defense forces. And the Pakistan office was designated for supporting the Taliban and the terrorist groups Lashkar e-Taibah and Makhtab al-Khidmat. The Pakistan office also had several employees suspected of being al-Qaeda members, including one who was thought to have financed al-Qaeda operations, and another who reportedly planned to carry out terrorist attacks in the U.S.

In addition to terrorist connections, Al Haramain has also been at the center of controversies concerning the radicalization of Muslim populations throughout the world. This was an issue in Bosnia, where Saudi charities were disappointed in the kind of Islam that

---

<sup>1</sup> United States Department of the Treasury Office of Public Affairs, *Treasury Announces Joint Action with Saudi Arabia Against Four Branches of Al-Haramain in the Fight Against Terrorist Financing* [hereinafter *Treasury Announces Joint Action*], Jan. 22, 2004, <http://www.ustreas.gov/press/releases/js1108.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> United States Department of the Treasury, *Additional Background Information on Charities Designated Under Executive Order 13224*, [http://www.ustreas.gov/offices/enforcement/key-issues/protecting/charities\\_execorder\\_13224-a.shtml#ahkentan](http://www.ustreas.gov/offices/enforcement/key-issues/protecting/charities_execorder_13224-a.shtml#ahkentan).

<sup>3</sup> Jane Perlez, *Saudis Quietly Promote Strict Islam in Indonesia*, NEW YORK TIMES, July 5, 2003, at A3.

<sup>4</sup> *Treasury Announces Joint Action*, *supra* note 1.

<sup>5</sup> United States Department of the Treasury Office of Public Affairs, *Additional Al-Haramain Branches, Former Leader Designated by Treasury as Al Qaida Supporters*, June 2, 2004, <http://www.treas.gov/press/releases/js1703.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

Bosnian Muslims practiced and made it their mission to usher them toward Salafism.<sup>7</sup> It was also an issue in the Netherlands, where Dutch intelligence found “financial, organisational and personnel interconnection” between Al Haramain and the radical El Tawheed mosque in Amsterdam. El Tawheed is the mosque where Muhammad Bouyeri reportedly prayed. (Bouyeri brutally killed Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh after van Gogh directed a film called *Submission*, which dramatized the mistreatment of women born into Muslim families. He shot van Gogh six times, slit his throat with a kitchen knife, then used the knife to impale a five-page note to van Gogh’s chest.)

### **Al Haramain’s Prison *Dawa* Program**

Al Haramain had a prison *dawa* program that was ideally structured for terrorist recruitment. Although the program wasn’t used to recruit terrorists, it had enough clear potential for terrorist recruitment that federal investigators were immediately intrigued when they saw how the program was structured.

Prisoners themselves would initiate contact with the U.S. branch of Al Haramain by writing to us requesting that we send them Islamic literature. There were several ways they might learn about Al Haramain. They might learn about it from their chaplains, or through word-of-mouth from other prisoners. Also, Al Haramain’s name and contact information was stamped in all literature that we sent to prisons.

After prisoners wrote to us, they would be sent a number of pamphlets and also a questionnaire. The questionnaire asked a variety of informational questions, including the inmates’ names, prisoner numbers, release dates and address outside of prison. It also included a number of questions designed to determine the inmates’ level of Islamic knowledge. Some of these questions were basic, including “Who is Allah?” and “Who is Jesus?” Other questions were far more difficult, such as “What are the ten *sunan al-fitra*?” When the prisoners sent back the questionnaires, they were graded on a scale from zero to ten on their answers. Ten was the highest score; a three was the lowest score an inmate could get and still be considered Muslim in our book.

It is what happened next with the questionnaires that caught investigators’ interest. After we graded the questionnaires, all of the information—the inmates’ names, their prisoner numbers, the facilities where they were held, their release date, the address they would be released to—was entered into a massive database. The database contained over 15,000 names.

The contours of the database are significant because of the potential for terrorist recruitment. Knowledgeable observers have stated that the prison population is “ripe” for terrorist recruiting.<sup>8</sup> This is because, as inmates enter prison, they are disaffected. Many of them, perhaps most, feel bitterness toward the society imprisoning them. Many inmates are looking for an excuse and a purpose. They can find this in radical Islam. And it’s known that several individuals involved in past terrorist plots experienced critical developments in their movement toward radical Islam while imprisoned. The most dramatic example is the terror plot that was

---

<sup>7</sup> DORE GOLD, *HATRED’S KINGDOM: HOW SAUDI ARABIA SUPPORTS THE NEW GLOBAL TERRORISM* (2003).

<sup>8</sup> Brian Ross, *Terror Plot Hatched in California Prison*, ABC NEWS, Aug. 16, 2005, <http://abclocal.go.com/kgo/story?section=state&id=3356111> (quoting retired prison administrator Edward Cohen).

hatched in a California state prison by Kevin James, an inmate who founded the Jam'iyyat Ul-Islam Is-Saheeh, a secretive organization designed to promote his radical interpretation of Islam. On August 31, 2005, a six-count indictment charged Kevin James and his co-conspirators with plotting to attack military and Jewish targets in the Los Angeles area, including military bases and recruitment centers, synagogues, the Israeli consulate, and El Al airline facilities.

Richard Reid, who was arrested in December 2001 after attempting to blow up an airplane with explosives hidden in his shoe, experienced critical religious developments under the tutelage of a radical imam while he was in a British prison. And Jose Padilla, who is accused of plotting to set off a "dirty bomb" on U.S. soil, is believed to have either converted to Islam or else come to embrace radical Islam while in prison.

So there have already been instances of people who either converted to Islam or else experienced critical religious development while imprisoned later becoming involved in terrorist plots. Thus, a database like the one boasted by Al Haramain would surely catch the interest of investigators because it was perfectly designed to allow follow-up with prisoners—and potentially to allow for terrorist recruitment. By distributing literature and exchanging letters with prisoners, Al Haramain could have established ongoing relationships with them. And the database contained critical information to allow for follow-up after the prisoners were released. Their release dates were known, as were the addresses to which they planned to return. Al Haramain could have worked with ideologically sympathetic organizations to make sure inmates stayed in touch with radical groups after they were let out of prison. Such methods of follow-up have been used by radical groups in the past to recruit Americans for jihads overseas, and in particular have been directed at members of the U.S. armed forces.

There are two methods that Al Haramain could have used to determine which inmates were the best targets for terrorist recruitment. One method is the questionnaires themselves. Although the questionnaires were ostensibly designed to assess an inmate's Islamic knowledge, there was in fact a strong ideological component. Certain concepts that are more important to those of a Wahhabi or Salafi bent were emphasized in the questions; these forms could thus be used to gain an understanding of an inmate's theological views. A second method is assessing an inmate's attitudes through correspondence. I only heard my boss, Pete Seda, make one pun during my time at Al Haramain: he referred to inmates as a "captive audience." This is true. With all the time prisoners have on their hands, it wasn't uncommon for us to receive five- or ten-page letters which provided a great deal of insight about the prisoners' personal theological views and also the Islamic community in the prisons where they were held.

### **Al Haramain's Islamic Literature**

The cornerstone of Al Haramain's prison *dawa* program was the literature that the group distributed to inmates. There can be no doubt about the radical orientation of this literature.<sup>9</sup>

At the heart of any concerted Islamic literature program is distribution of the Qur'an. Al Haramain distributed a Wahhabi/Salafi version, known as the Noble Qur'an, that was translated

---

<sup>9</sup> I have previously written about Al Haramain's distribution of literature to the U.S. prisons in Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, *Wahhabi Prison Fellowship*, WEEKLY STANDARD, Sept. 26, 2005, at 17. Portions of this section are adapted from that article.

into English by Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan. This version was known for containing numerous interpolations not present in the original Arabic. Although ostensibly designed to explain the verses, these interpolations in fact pushed the meaning in a radical direction, one which was suffused with contempt for non-Muslims (particularly Jews and Christians), and one which was dedicated to fostering the global jihad.

One example of this occurs in an early footnote in the translation, which states:

*Al-Jihad* (holy fighting) in Allah's Cause (with full force of numbers and weaponry) is given the utmost importance in Islam and is one of its pillars (on which it stands). By *Jihad* Islam is established, Allah's Word is made superior, . . . and His Religion (Islam) is propagated. By abandoning *Jihad* (may Allah protect us from that) Islam is destroyed and the Muslims fall into an inferior position; their honour is lost, their lands are stolen, their rule and authority vanish. *Jihad* is an obligatory duty in Islam on every Muslim, and he who tries to escape from this duty, or does not in his innermost heart wish to fulfil this duty, dies with one of the qualities of a hypocrite.

This passage thus rules out nonmilitary interpretations of jihad by insisting on "full force of numbers and weaponry." It also endorses jihad as a means of propagating Islam, and specifies that it is required of "every Muslim."

But most chilling was a 22-page appendix that was included in the translation that Al Haramain distributed to prisons. This appendix, written by former Saudi Arabian chief justice Abdullah bin Muhammad bin Humaid, was entitled "The Call to *Jihad* (Holy Fighting in Allah's Cause) in the Qur'an"—and true to its title, the appendix was nothing less than an exhortation to violence.

In it, bin Humaid argues at length that Muslims are obligated to wage war against non-Muslims who have not submitted to Islamic rule. He explains,

Allah . . . commanded the Muslims to fight against all the *Mushrikun* as well as against the people of the Scriptures (Jews and Christians) if they do not embrace Islam, till they pay the *Jizyah* (a tax levied on the non-Muslims who do not embrace Islam and are under the protection of an Islamic government) with willing submission and feel themselves subdued.

*Mushrikun* refers to all nonbelievers who are not classified as people of the Scriptures; bin Humaid thus advocates war with the entire non-Muslim world.

And once again, the appendix appeals to the reader to volunteer for jihad:

*Jihad* is a great deed indeed and there is no deed whose reward or blessing is as that of it, and for this reason, it is the best thing that one can volunteer for. . . . [I]t (*Jihad*) shows one's patience, one's devotion to Islam, one's remembrance to Allah and there are other kinds of good deeds which are present in *Jihad* and are not present in any other act of worship.

Nor was the Wahhabi/Salafi translation of the Qur'an the only piece of radical literature that Al Haramain distributed to prisons. Another widely-distributed volume was Muhammad bin Jamil Zino's *Islamic Guidelines for Individual and Social Reform*.<sup>10</sup> Like the translation of the Qur'an that Al Haramain distributed, one of the themes in Zino's book was jihad. As early as page two, Zino states that Islam "commends the *Halal* [lawful] money in possession of a pious person who pays a share of it in charity and for *Jihad* (fighting in the way of Allah)."

This advocacy of jihad is reinforced by repetition. Zino instructs his readers that children should be indoctrinated in the glories of jihad from an early age:

Teach your children the love of justice and revenge from the unjust like the Jews and the tyrants. Consequently our youth would know that Palestine should be freed and Jerusalem must be of the Muslims. They have to learn about Islam and Jihad as per the Qur'an and that the holy fighting for justice is supported by Allah the Almighty.

And he further specifies the objects and means of jihad: "The *Jihad* against the disbelievers, communists and the aggressors from Jewish-Christian nations can be either by spending on *Jihad* or by participating in it in person."

Indeed, the "Jewish-Christian nations" are special objects of ire throughout the literature that Al Haramain distributed to prisons. Virulent anti-Semitism and hatred of non-Muslim governments are recurring themes. On a page headed "Act upon these *Ahadith*," the *hadith* being sayings and traditions attributed to Muhammad, Zino's very first injunction reads: "The Last Hour will not appear unless the Muslims fight the Jews and kill them." Zino also imputes conspiracies to the Jews. In a passage denouncing fortunetellers, he writes, "If they know the Unseen, let them talk about the secret schemes of the Jews so that we combat them."

More sweepingly, Zino denounces "belief in man-made destructive ideologies such as atheistic communism, Jewish masonry, Marxian socialism, secularism or nationalism" as nullifying an individual's adherence to Islam. This is in keeping with the views of another writer whose works Al Haramain sent to prisons: Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips. In *The Fundamentals of Tawheed (Islamic Monotheism)*, Philips excoriates the acceptance of non-Islamic rule in place of *sharia* law in Muslim lands. Philips describes acquiescence to non-Islamic rule as an act of idolatry and disbelief. "Un-Islamic government," he writes, "must be sincerely hated and despised for the pleasure of God."

### **Al Haramain's Reception**

Although the literature that Al Haramain distributed was unapologetically radical, it wasn't subjected to a significant degree of scrutiny by the prisons to which it was distributed. I know of only a few instances in which prisons rejected the literature we attempted to distribute—and it was never because of the literature's radicalism. In one instance, a prison chaplain refused to distribute a pamphlet that outlined the difference between the Nation of Islam and Sunni Islam. The pamphlet was vehement in tone, and the chaplain's main concern was its potential for causing conflict between various Islamic sects in the prison. There had previously been some

---

<sup>10</sup> MUHAMMAD BIN JAMIL ZINO, *ISLAMIC GUIDELINES FOR INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL REFORM* (1996).

instances of violence involving the Nation of Islam, and he didn't want to risk stoking the fires. In another case, a literature shipment was rejected because it was sent in a large manila envelope with the metal clasp still on it. The screeners wouldn't allow the package because they felt the clasp could be used as a weapon.

But very little question was raised about the message in the literature. We were able to forge relationships with a number of Muslim prison chaplains who willingly distributed Al Haramain's literature and questionnaires to inmates. Of course, the fact that they did so doesn't necessarily mean they were radical. In some cases, the chaplains may just have been happy that there was a Muslim charity willing to send literature to prisoners. Some of the chaplains may not have screened the literature, and may have been largely unaware of its contents. But I know from conversations with chaplains in which I had some involvement that at least some of the Muslim prison chaplains were on the same page as Al Haramain ideologically and were supportive of the worldview that the group fostered.

There was an even stronger reception among inmates. In some Muslim prison communities, certain inmates will serve as lay leaders. I know from a source who taught in a New York state prison that the inmates who served as lay leaders there favored the Noble Qur'an translation. Their comments on the translation echoed a common refrain that you can hear from several radical Islamic institutions in the U.S., such as the Bridgeview mosque in Chicago: they believed that the Noble Qur'an was more "accurate," and that they could "trust" that translation where they did not trust others.

Beyond these lay leaders, the inmates who tried to correspond with us obviously took what they read quite seriously. With little education and a desire to find an ideology that provided them with comprehensive answers, many inmates latched onto a legalistic interpretation of the faith. We would regularly receive letters that consisted of long strings of theological questions. Some of these questions were quite telling. In one case, an inmate asked whether he should kill a homosexual if he were to encounter one. Other inmates would send letters filled with vitriol toward Shia Muslims, Jews and Christians. In particular, there was a lot of animus directed at Catholicism.

## **Conclusion**

Fortunately for all of us, Al Haramain's database was never used for the terrorist recruitment purposes that it could have served. The reason why it was never used in this manner continues to puzzle investigators, and the answer is likely complex. One reason is that higher-ups at Al Haramain probably never realized the program's full potential. They wanted to spread their Islamic ideology in the West, and failed to understand that prisoners were more prone to embracing Islamic radicalism than others. At the time that I worked for the U.S. headquarters, the head office in Riyadh was more interested in converting rich white people to Islam than prisoners.

A second reason that Al Haramain's program was not used for terrorist recruitment was resource constraints. Although Al Haramain was a massive operation, with offices around the world and an annual budget that may have reached \$50 million, the U.S. headquarters was fairly small. There were only three full-time employees during my time there, and all of us had other

responsibilities beyond the prison projects. Moreover, Al Haramain didn't do much to work with other U.S.-based Islamic organizations to create opportunities for follow-up with the prisoners. That is one of the strategic drawbacks of having an ideology as rigid as Al Haramain's: virtually every American Islamic organization was seen as doctrinally deficient, even if they largely shared Al Haramain's radical worldview.

A final and more complex reason that the prison *dawa* program wasn't used for terrorist recruitment involves Al Haramain's motivations. The organization had jihadist views, as the bin Humaid appendix to the Noble Qur'an definitively demonstrates. Al Haramain strongly supported the Chechen *mujahideen*, and most of Al Haramain's leadership favored the Taliban in Afghanistan. As my discussion of the charity's ties to terror demonstrates, Al Haramain's branch offices had a tendency to make the world's hot spots that much hotter. But this was the pre-9/11 world, and at that time support for jihads in Bosnia, Chechnya, the Philippines or Uzbekistan wouldn't necessarily translate into a burning desire to recruit terrorists from U.S. prisons.

This should leave you with a somewhat chilling thought. When Al Haramain's prison *dawa* program was in effect, there were a number of jihads going on in various regions. Although these jihads were connected, someone sitting in Saudi Arabia and directing an Islamic charity wouldn't necessarily see the U.S. as the main enemy. In fact, it might be seen as strategically wise to *avoid* terror attacks against the U.S. because of the potential to raise funds and gain political influence in America. But now, in the post-9/11 world, the United States is the focal point of the global jihad. So the question we must ask is whether, if a radical Islamic organization wished to establish a prison *dawa* program along the lines of Al Haramain's but had a purpose more expressly devoted to terrorist recruitment, could it be stopped? Or are our prisons still vulnerable—at a time when the stakes are higher?

In closing, I would like to recognize the Committee and the staff for their professionalism. I would like to extend an open offer to continue to work closely with them. I am pleased to try to answer any questions you may have.