



**Prison Radicalization: The Environment, the
Threat, and the Response**

**Statement to Senate Homeland Security and
Governmental Affairs**

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Counterterrorism Division
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Madam Chairman, Ranking Member and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you on the issue of prison radicalization in the United States. Before I begin, I would like to emphasize that Islam itself is not the problem but rather how Islam is used by violent extremists to inspire and justify their actions. Additionally, the FBI does not investigate individuals for their religious beliefs. Rather, we investigate the activities of individuals who want to do harm to the citizens and interests of United States and those of our allies abroad. The FBI fully recognizes and is committed to protecting prisoners' civil liberties, including religious rights. These activities have led us to believe that prisons continue to present opportunities for the proselytizing of both Sunni and Shia forms of radical Islam. Moreover, domestic groups such as white supremacists recruit in prisons as well.

The US Prison Environment

FBI and the Bureau of Prisons analysis shows that radicalization and recruitment in US prisons is still an ongoing concern. Prison radicalization primarily occurs through anti-US sermons provided by contract, volunteer, or staff Imams, radicalized inmates who gain religious influence, and extremist media. Ideologies that radicalized inmates appear most often to embrace include or are influenced by the Salafi form of Sunni Islam (including revisionist versions commonly known as "prison Islam") and an extremist view of Shia Islam similar to that of the Government of Iran and Lebanese Hizballah.

There are two groups of concern involved in prison radicalization and recruitment.

The first group consists of inmates, the majority of whom are minority group members. Although most are converts to Islam, there is a smaller number who were born into the Muslim faith. These radicalized inmates either feel discriminated against in the United States or feel that the United States oppresses minorities and Muslims overseas. The feeling of perceived oppression, combined with their limited knowledge of Islam, especially for the converts, makes this a vulnerable population for extremists looking to radicalize and recruit.

Radicalized inmates are of concern for a number of reasons:

- Influential inmates could urge other prisoners to attend certain mosques or Islamic centers in the United States or overseas upon their release from prison that may present opportunities for the proselytizing of radical Islam.
- Influential inmates could also pose a risk to prison security by urging inmates under their influence to disobey prison authorities and possibly incite violence within the facility.
- Inmates who have acquired skills used in terrorism activities could pass them on to other prisoners.

The second group consists of contract, volunteer, and staff personnel, the majority of which are Imams, who enter correctional facilities with the intent to radicalize and recruit.

Particularly for Muslim converts, but also for those born into Islam, an extremist imam can strongly influence individual belief systems by speaking from a position of authority on religious issues. Extremist imams have the potential to influence vulnerable followers at various locations of opportunity; can spot and assess individuals who respond to their messages; and can potentially guide them into increasingly extremist circles.

Aside from individuals providing radical messages there is also extremist media in the form of literature and videos being circulated within the prison population that appears to be a significant factor in prison radicalization.

In some cases, these radicalization efforts expand beyond prison walls resulting in potential threats to society at large.

The Threat

The majority of cases involving prison radicalization and recruitment have not manifested themselves as a threat to national security. There have been, however, instances where charismatic elements within prison have used the call of Global Jihad as a source of inspiration to recruit others for the purpose of conducting terrorist attacks in the United States.

In July 2005, the FBI became aware of a Sunni Islamic extremist group in California operating primarily in state prisons, without apparent connections or direction from outside the United States and with no identifiable foreign power nexus. Members of this group, the Jam'iyyat Ul-Islam Is-Saheeh (JIS), or the "Authentic Assembly of Islam," were involved in almost a dozen armed gas station robberies in Los Angeles with the goal of financing terrorist operations in furtherance of JIS goals.

JIS founder Kevin Lamar James, an inmate in the California prison system, was the principal recruiter for the group. Recruitment of participants to the Los Angeles JIS cell began in prison with the recruitment of Levar Washington by James in December 2004. James allegedly instructed Washington to recruit five people to train in covert operations,

acquire firearms with silencers, and find contacts with explosives expertise or who could learn to make bombs that could be activated from a distance. Upon release from prison, Washington recruited other co-conspirators, Gregory Patterson and Hamad Samana, to begin fulfilling James' wishes.

On August 31, 2005, James, Washington, Patterson, and Samana were indicted by a federal grand jury for conspiracy to levy war against the U.S. Government through terrorism and conspiracy to possess and discharge firearms in furtherance of crimes of violence. Washington, Patterson, and Samana were also charged with conspiracy to kill members of the U.S. government uniformed services and conspiracy to kill foreign officials. Washington and Patterson were further charged with interfering with commerce by robbery and for using and carrying a firearm in connection with a crime of violence. All members are currently in custody awaiting trial.

The JIS case provides valuable insight into an increasing phenomenon in many of our terrorism cases here in the United States, as well as those around the world, and highlights the importance of cooperation at all levels of the law enforcement community in order to effectively fight terrorism.

The Response

The FBI and the Bureau of Prisons have been actively engaged in efforts to detect, deter, and disrupt efforts by extremist groups to radicalize and recruit in US prisons since February 2003, these activities have been organized through the Correctional Intelligence Initiative (CII).

The CII program focuses on:

- Improving intelligence collection.
- Detecting, deterring and disrupting efforts by terrorist, extremist or radical groups to radicalize or recruit in federal, state, local, territorial, tribal or privatized prisons.
- Providing training and support materials that can be used by Field Offices and JTTFs for training and outreach at state and local correctional institutions.

All of these elements have helped identify numerous factors responsible for the spread of radicalization and recruitment in prisons. A recent comprehensive assessment based on a survey of nearly 3,000 state and local correctional facilities identified the following trends:

- Most cases of prison radicalization and recruitment appear to be originated by domestic extremists with few or no foreign connections.
- Some radicalized Islamic inmates are current or former members of street or prison gangs, indicating an emerging "crossover" trend from gang member to

Islamist extremist.

- Radicalization activity levels appear to be higher in high population areas on the West Coast and in the northeastern United States.

Aside from trends, the assessment identified “Best Practices” for correctional institutions to follow to combat the spread of radicalization and recruitment. Some of these are:

- Establish System-wide Vetting Protocols for All Contractor and Volunteer Applicants
 - The FBI provides assistance by conducting criminal history checks against all FBI indices for contract, volunteer, and staff personnel entering correctional facilities. Relevant information is passed on to correctional officials for appropriate action.
- Create System-wide Databases of Contractors and Volunteers Providing Direct Inmate Services
- Improve Monitoring Capabilities
- Coordinate Inmate Transfers
- Share Information among all levels of law enforcement and correctional personnel. FBI Joint Terrorism Task Forces can facilitate this process.

Numerous FBI analytical products, as well as operational highlights, have been disseminated to foreign liaison partners, from classified products to unclassified assessments meant for a wide audience. The feedback from the latter has helped us better drive analytical perspectives and identify services where bi-lateral exchanges could prove beneficial on this issue.

At this time, I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to address this important issue.