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Testimony before the House Committee on Homeland Security
“The Threat of Muslim American Radicalization
In U.S. Prisons”

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Chairman King, Ranking Member Thompson, distinguished members of the House Committee on Homeland Security, it is a privilege to appear before you today to discuss the connection between radicalizing agents, both inside and outside of the prison system, and terrorist activity, and to describe some of the long-time, under-addressed vulnerabilities in the corrections system that have made it possible for radical Islamist ideology to become embedded. I also welcome the opportunity to propose policy solutions to interdict and mitigate the results of exposure to militant ideology that has driven some convicted felons to commit deadly attacks.

The prison population is vulnerable to radicalization by the same agents responsible for radicalizing Americans outside of the prison walls. Despite appearances, prison walls are porous. It is easy for outside influences to access those on the inside, and for inmates to reach from the inside out. As the former Deputy Inspector General of the Criminal Intelligence Division in the New York State Department of Corrections, I am aware that individuals and groups that subscribe to radical, and sometimes violent, ideology have made sustained efforts over several decades to target inmates for indoctrination. Some of these groups act as the certifying bodies responsible for hiring imams into the prison system, thus affording them continuous access to the prison population. In addition, the cycle of radicalization continues through post-release programs.

The Rise of Radical Islamist Ideology in the Prison System

In 1968 a little known mosque in Brooklyn, New York, called Dawood, became home to a movement called Dar-ul Islam. The Sunni group was founded with the belief that African-Americans needed to transform every aspect of their lifestyle in order to cement them to the “real foundations of the worldwide Islamic revival.” One of its goals was to establish a mosque in every prison that would adhere to the true fundamentals of the Islamic religion.

Two of the first converts to Dar-ul Islam in the New York State Prison System were Gene Marks, now known as Warith Deen Umar, who later became the head of Ministerial Services for the New York State Department of Corrections, and H Rap Brown, now known as Jamil Al Amin, who is regarded as the spiritual leader of the Dar-ul movement, even though he is currently serving a life sentence in Supermax prison for shooting two Fulton County, Georgia police officers. In Al Qaeda's 4th edition of *Inspire* magazine, Jamil al Amin is listed as a political prisoner and faithful mujahid.

As the Dar-ul Islam ideology moved through the correctional system in the 70s & 80s it gained an increasing number of converts. Eventually, the Sunni/Salafist ideology was the dominant force in the prison mosques.

One present-day cover group of Dar-ul is "The Ummah." Its Detroit, Michigan branch was led by Luqman Abdullah, who died in an October 2009 shootout with FBI agents seeking to arrest him and several of his followers on charges of fencing stolen goods and illegal gun dealing. Luqman himself did time in prison prior to his conversion to Islam. The Ummah's stated objective is to establish an Islamic state within the borders of the United States that will be ruled according to Shariah law. Abdullah believed that succeeding in this goal would only be achieved through violent confrontation with the U.S. government, and so the Ummah's Detroit mosque was not only used for prayers but also for weapons training.ⁱ

Then, in the late 80's & 90's there was an influx of foreign-born inmates from the Middle East, some of whom were incarcerated for having committed violent acts against "non-believers." Individuals like El Sayyid Nosair, Rashid Baz, Yousef Saleh, and Abdel Zaben had either killed, bombed, or stolen money in the name of Allah. They had firebombed Jewish businesses or opened fire on a van load of Hasidic students. They had kidnapped and they had assassinated all for the cause of their brand of Islam. They had international recognition and connections with various radical terrorist organizations, such as Egyptian Islamic Jihad, al Qaeda, Hezbollah, and Hamas. After they were arrested and incarcerated they walked into the prison mosque and were hailed as heroes. They inspired deference from the Muslim inmates and the Muslim chaplains. Many were more fluent in Arabic, had true knowledge of the Koran, and had proven their commitment to their particular derivation of Islam by committing the aforementioned crimes against the "enemies of Islam." Some of them were given a position by the civil service chaplain to be their administrative clerks. This meant more freedom of movement throughout the prison as well as access to the Chaplain's phone. This gave them the ability to call anywhere in the world without the call being subject to monitoring by prison security personnel.

One of them, El Sayyid Nosair, who, while serving a sentence in the Attica Correctional Facility for charges connected to the assassination of Rabbi Meyer Kahane, conspired with others on the outside to send a truck bomb into the World Trade Center in 1993. The jihad had now come to America, and one of its architects was an inmate.

Following the arrest and prosecution of those responsible for the first World Trade Center attacks, all of the defendants, including Nosair were transferred to the Federal Bureau of Prisons,

and, as a result, the subject of inmate radicalization/terrorism dropped from the attention of criminal justice and prison administrators. But it was not dormant in the inmate general population.

In 1999, two years prior to 9/11, several law enforcement agencies received information regarding radical Islamist activity in the prison system. The first of these incidents occurred in February 1999. At that time, both the FBI and the Inspector General's Office for the New York State Department of Correctional Services received information specifically detailing recruitment efforts within prison.

The information, from confidential informants, named individuals associated with the 1993 plot to destroy New York City landmarks and the first attack on the World Trade Center, along with several members of a domestic terrorist organization already serving time for the Brinks robbery. The intelligence also implicated a Pakistani national and a Yemeni who were in prison for murder. The informant went on to say that this group had formed an alliance with a singular goal. He called the group the "Talem Circle" and stated that; "The Talem Circle was tasked with training incarcerated members to work with Middle Eastern Muslims to perform acts of Jihad."

The second incident happened approximately five months later, in July of 1999, when a detective in the Yonkers Police Department received information from a confidential informant regarding terrorist recruitment efforts in prison. The informant told authorities that, while in prison, he met a Jordanian-born inmate who identified himself as a follower of Osama bin Laden and said that "his group" was interested in recruiting inmates in the U.S. prisons. The Jordanian stated that his group intended to get the inmates trained in the Middle East after their release from prison, and then have them return to the U.S. to "participate in Jihad."

The very real threat of ex-inmates from American travelling overseas to places like Yemen to receive training was confirmed in the 2010 report from the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations entitled, "Al Qaeda in Yemen and Somalia: A Ticking Time Bomb"ⁱⁱ

During their time in Fishkill Correctional Facility in upstate New York, the Jordanian inmate told the informant about several individuals, former inmates, who were already participating in the training that he had helped facilitate overseas. Not surprisingly, the inmate's prison job assignment at the time was as the Chaplain's administrative clerk.

Both of these leads fell by the wayside and were never fully investigated at the time, until after 9/11 when a task force consisting of state and local agencies revisited the leads and the issue of prison radicalization. As a result of the investigation, it has been confirmed that radical Islam is present in the New York State prison system and also in the New York City jails. The apparatus by which this radical form of Islam was introduced into the system was identified as consisting of multiple components, including, clergy, religious volunteers, visitors, fellow inmates and Islamic organizations from around the world that sent parcels and literature into the prisons.

Exposure to Radical Islamist Ideology During the Period of Incarceration and Beyond

The task force investigation also found that although the initial exposure/conversion/indoctrination to extremist jihadi Islam may begin in prison, it often matures and deepens after release through the contacts on the outside that the inmate made while they were serving their sentences in prison. Among those contacts are transition programs, which offer former inmates assistance in finding housing or finding work. Most of the programs for Muslims transitioning out of the prison system are sponsored by mosques that are local to the prisons. Many of these mosques have extremist leanings and are known to adhere to Wahabbi ideology. In addition to the transition programs, many of the sponsoring mosques also have volunteers or formal programs to provide religious instruction inside the prisons. Thus, contact between the outreach program and the inmate has already been established by the time the prisoner is released. The prisoner is already familiar with the program's personnel and ideology, and therefore their transition to the outside is facilitated by familiar hands

The criminal's initial period of incarceration usually starts at the local or county jail following his arrest by authorities. There he or she may wait for considerable time while the case progresses through the various stages of the criminal justice system before being transferred to state or federal custody. Here the inmate may have his first encounter with religious groups that he had not previously been familiar with. This may occur through a cell mate or a volunteer organization that has a local ministry to the jail.

Often the impact lasts well beyond their period together in county. In the same manner, the problem of prison radicalization often begins at the county jail level and continues on through the state prison system, and the post release period.

One of the influences in some of the homegrown terrorism cases has been the involvement, either directly or indirectly, of radical Islamist clergy. Since 9/11, the involvement of radical Islamist imams has been mentioned as a precipitating factor in the cases of Richard Reid, Jose Padilla, and others.

In 2009 the "Newburgh Four"; James Cromitie, Laguerre Payen, David Williams, and Onta Williams, were arrested for plotting to bomb synagogues in New York City and shoot down military aircraft with stinger missiles. All had converted to a radical form of Islam while serving time for a variety of offenses. They did not know each other while they were incarcerated, but met each other after their release, while attending a local mosque connected to a prison ministry.

Many of these cited and others went into prison for low level crimes like burglary, drugs, or theft and came out committed to Jihad. Every one of them, while incarcerated, was exposed to extremist ideology through literature; visitors, volunteers, and clergy with ties to terrorist organizations or extremism; and/or a known terrorists who were also doing time in prison.

The former head of Ministerial Services for the New York State Department of Correctional Services is Warith Deen Umar, who is a convert and former New York State prison inmate himself. Umar is known for his controversial views and his statements about Jewish conspiracies around the world, and his belief that God serves punishment of homosexuals in the form of natural disasters, such as Hurricane

Katrina. In 2003, Umar gave an interview to the Wall Street Journal in which he called the 9/11 hijackers heroes. He went on to say, "Without justice, there will be warfare, and it can come to this country, too," he said. The natural candidates to help press such an attack, in his view, are "African-Americans who embraced Islam in prison." In other words, prisons were a prime place to recruit homegrown terrorists.ⁱⁱⁱ

After that interview, Umar was barred from both the Federal Bureau of Prisons and the New York Department of Correctional Services, in addition, the US Department of Justice Inspector General launched an investigation into the hiring of Islamic clergy. The final report stated among its recommendations that there was a need for a verifiable ecclesiastical body that would certify Islamic clergy prior to hiring. To this date no Islamic organization has been appointed to fulfill this role, nor has there been any formal determination as to how a vetting process would take place, or what the standards of vetting would be.

As a direct result of this inaction, one case stands out as an example of the need for verifiable certification of Islamic clergy;

New York City Department of Corrections Imam Zulqarnain Abdu Shahid, who began working for the City in 2007, was arrested in 2010 for attempting to smuggle dangerous contraband into the Manhattan House of Detention or the Tombs as it is commonly known. During a routine security check of the Chaplain's duffel bag officers found several box cutter type razor blades. Items which, if they had fallen into the hands of the convicts, could have proven deadly. In an administrative hearing in March of this year, Shahid asked for his job back.

Shahid, formerly known as Paul Pitts spent fourteen years in a New York State prison for a murder committed in 1976 while robbing a grocery store. He was released from Sing Sing in 1993. How did Mr. Pitts become a "certified" Chaplain?

New York City Corrections stated that the Department was aware of his criminal history when they did the background check and although a felony conviction would disqualify a person from becoming a corrections officer that rule does not apply to prison Chaplains. The only civil service requirement for qualifying as a chaplain was the certification or endorsement of an ecclesiastical body. The city in this case relied on the Majlis Ash Shura of New York.^{iv} The organization, also called the Islamic Leadership Council is located in Wyandanch, New York.

Its leadership consists of several Islamic clergymen with mosques in the greater New York area. Several of the leaders of this organization are also leaders in the Muslim Alliance of North America (MANA). MANA lists among their leadership Luqman Abdullah, the Detroit Imam previously mentioned in this testimony who was killed in a shootout with the FBI

MANA also continues to maintain support for Jamil al Amin as a political prisoner.

Should Shahid get his job back, this will not be the first time something like this has happened.

In 2003, Imam Osameh Al Wahaidy was indicted by the US Attorney General's Office in Syracuse NY for providing material support to a terrorist organization through a suspicious charity.^v At the time of

his arrest Al Wahaidy, a Jordanian national, was the prison chaplain at Auburn Correctional Facility in upstate New York. The New York State Department of Corrections immediately moved to have his employment terminated. However, following his plea agreement, in which he admitted guilt to a lesser charge to avoid imprisonment, Al Wahaidy went to a Public Employment Relations Board (PERB) hearing, requested his job back, and was reinstated. The Administrative judge did not seriously take into account his federal conviction and what effect it would have on prison staff or inmates. This also despite knowing that the Imam's prison clerk at the time was convicted terrorist Rashid Baz, the "Brooklyn Bridge Shooter" who opened fire on a van load of Hasidic students in 1994 wounding several and killing Ari Halberstam. The ecclesiastical body that endorsed Imam Al Wahaidy was the Majlis Ash-Shura of New York; the very same organization from Wyandanch that certified Imam Shadid.

There is certainly no vetting of volunteers who provide religious instruction, and who, although not paid, wield considerable influence in the prison Muslim communities. Many such volunteers are former convicts.

U.S. Mail and Internet

Jihadi and extremist literature finds its way in through the mail and through the Internet as well, even though it is largely prohibited. Anything can be gotten in a prison including a PDA or a Smartphone with Internet access. More commonly access is facilitated through third party cooperation. Someone on the outside may set up a Facebook page on an inmate's behalf, or get them information from a jihadi website. It would not be unthinkable or impossible for someone to provide an inmate with a copy of Al Qaeda's magazine, Inspire, even in the most secure correctional facility.

The issue of prison radicalization is not limited to Islamic fundamentalists. In the prison environment we have also found the influence of several domestic terrorists currently serving life sentences for killing law enforcement officers who are attempting to inject themselves into the current situation in the Middle East. Putting 60's domestic terrorists in the same prison as convicted Islamic terrorists is not a healthy mix and can produce an unholy alliance.

Recommendations

As I mentioned earlier in this testimony, the problem of prison radicalization often begins at the county jail level and continues on through the state prison system, and the post release period. Therefore, it is essential that any program to counter the problem be comprehensive. I would like to make a few suggestions about basic initiatives that may be effective in tackling the phenomenon more comprehensively, nationwide, not just at the state and local levels.

1. Cooperation and coordination between responsible agencies so that any potential radicalization that may have occurred in the prison system can be tracked, contained, and defeated before it can affect the rest of society. A task force comprised of representatives from responsible agencies should be formed in all states so that coordination can be systematized and facilitated. The flow of Correctional intelligence must be a two way street.

2. There should be a consistent methodology for data collection in correctional departments' nationwide, so that trends can be analyzed more quickly and effectively. Correctional departments should ensure that they are using the same variables. For example, all departments should collect data on change of religion during incarceration.
3. The system for vetting clergy and religious volunteers who have access to the prison population should conform to a set of approved standards that are applied to prison systems in every state.

Oftentimes the same individual may volunteer at the county, state, or federal correctional facilities in their area as in the case of Warith Deen Umar who was both a New York State and Federal Bureau of Prisons chaplain. Therefore national standards would be the most effective.

Thank you for the opportunity to bring the important issue of prison radicalization before this honorable committee.

ⁱ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Madeleine Gruen, "The Shooting of Luqman Abdullah," November 2009, http://www.defenddemocracy.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=11787260&Itemid=105.

ⁱⁱ <http://foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Yemen.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Paul M. Barrett, "Captive Audience: How a Chaplain Spread Extremism to an Inmate Flock," *Wall Street Journal*, February 5, 2003

^{iv} <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/05/nyregion/05chaplain.html>

^v <http://www.dodig.mil/iginformation/IGInformationReleases/Iraqi%20Sanctions.pdf>