

**Testimony Of**

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**Committee on Homeland Security  
U.S. House of Representatives**

**Hearing On**

**The Threat of Muslim-American Radicalization in U.S. Prisons**

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Nearly seven years ago, in October 2003, the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology and Homeland Security of the Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. Senate, held hearings on the radicalization of prison inmates. Coming on the heels of 9/11, the hearings warned that Jihadist radicalization of prisoners may produce the greatest fear of all: a formidable enemy within. For example, one witness stated that radical Islamist groups “dominate Muslim prison recruitment in the U.S. and seek to create a radicalized cadre of felons who will support their anti-American efforts.” Once released, offenders would wreck havoc on the country. What have we learned about the dimension of this problem?

The dimension has been shockingly, and gratefully, small. Consider the following data points.

- U.S. prisons now confine 1.6 million offenders. Nine-five percent of them will be released; few are lifers or will suffer the death penalty. Each year, U.S. prisons release 730,000 inmates.

- The Pew Center on the States has calculated that one in every 100 American adults is in prison or jail. For African American males between the ages of 20 and 34, the figure is one in nine.
- Sociologist Charles Kurzman has identified 178 Muslim-Americans who, since 9/11, have committed acts of terrorism-related violence or were prosecuted for terrorism-related offenses. For twelve of those cases, there is some evidence for radicalization behind bars. There have been zero suicide (or attempted suicide) attacks undertaken by former prison inmates.

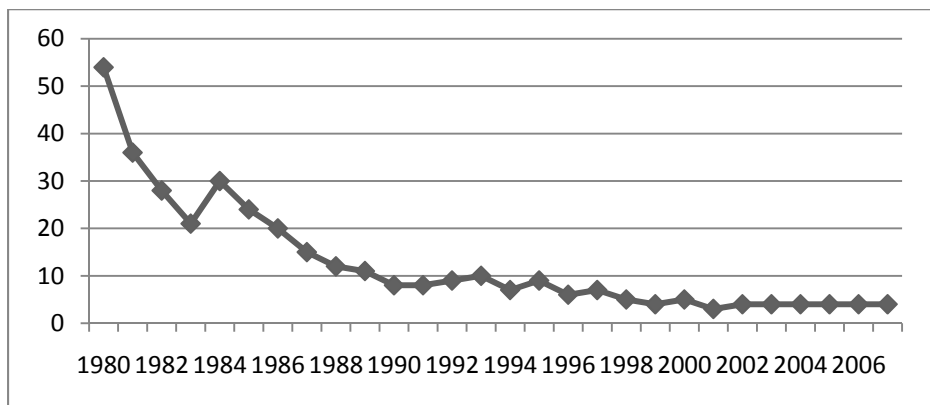
Putting these data points together, Muslim-American terrorists are not especially likely to emerge from our prisons. Why?

Working with colleague Obie Clayton, I studied this issue supported by funds from the START Center (underwritten by the Department of Homeland Security) and the National Institute of Justice (U.S. Department of Justice). We conducted interviews in 10 state correctional agencies and one jail system; visited 27 medium- and high-security prisons for men; and interviewed 210 prison officials and 270 inmates. Our analysis identified seven factors.

First, over the last 30 years, U.S. prisons have been able to restore order and improve inmate safety. For example, prison riots, once common in U.S. corrections, have nearly disappeared. The rate of prison homicides has fallen by 90%. A byproduct of this restoration of

### Prison Homicide Rate, 1980 – 2007

Homicides per 100,000 Inmates



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice.

order is that the appeal of radicalization is reduced. There are clear norms for appropriate behavior which, while always challenging to enforce, are consequential. Prisons are successful, not failed, states. Far less than in the past is the prison environment one of “anything goes.”

Second, corrections officials are aware of the threat of inmate radicalization. Correctional leadership (at both the agency and prison-level) has consciously and successfully infused the mission of observing signs of inmate radicalization into organizational practices. Rather than being sitting ducks, waiting for their facilities to be penetrated by radicalizing groups, correctional leaders have fashioned, staffed, and energized the effort to defeat radicalization.

Third, the level of effective surveillance in prisons has improved greatly over the last two decades. Security threat groups are tracked by staff dedicated to that task; closed-circuit television cameras are omnipresent; corrections personnel coordinate and share information with external law enforcement agencies. One Islamic inmate, for example, told us: “No way you’re going to have radical groups in this prison for more than five minutes, without them [correctional staff] knowing it.” While Al Qaeda has proclaimed that they seek to recruit prison inmates to their cause, the obstacles to doing so are, thankfully, very great. This point has been missed by those who predict that prisons will pour out domestic terrorists.

Fourth, inmates cannot communicate freely with potentially radicalizing groups on the outside. The internet is unavailable, and mail is inspected and censored. There is some smuggling of cell phones, but correctional leaders are aware of and working to counter this threat. The one exception is lawyer-prisoner correspondence which, under federal law, can be opened in the presence of the prisoner. This exception is given not to protect the free flow of ideas behind bars, but rather to avoid disadvantaging prisoners in asserting their legal rights.

Fifth, the educational backgrounds of male inmates help explain the finding of low levels of jihad radicalization in prisons. Education leads people to be concerned, even fervently concerned, with the issues of the day and events in distant lands, such as Iraq. Not surprisingly, a large body of evidence has shown that terrorists come from disproportionately high-education, non-disadvantaged backgrounds. In contrast, US prisoners have disproportionately low levels of education and come from poor communities. In our interviews, inmates expressed low interest in public affairs, including and most strikingly, the war in Iraq.<sup>1</sup>

Sixth, a surprising finding coming out of our inmate interviews was solidarity among inmates *against* jihadist radicalization. Inmates are distinctively hyper-concerned with their self-interest, as often reflected in the offenses that led to their imprisonment. Still, in their own limited way, inmates expressed loyalty to the country, at least to the extent that they are opposed to efforts to damage the country. One inmate told us, “even though we’re criminals, we see ourselves as Americans. Couldn’t turn against this country.”

Finally, on a less certain note, there have been significant improvements in the screening and supervision of clergy and religious volunteers. One force for change was the April 2004 report by Office of the Inspector General concerning the provision of Islamic religious services to inmates in the Federal Bureau of Prisons. The Report made 16 recommendations for change. Many state correctional agencies took these recommendations very seriously and improved in those areas as they saw appropriate. The changes have included: requiring Imams to work

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<sup>1</sup> It is important not to overstate the case. The negative correlation between education and terrorism is modest. We should anticipate exceptions.

closely with security staff to identify any potential security threats; not allowing volunteer Imams in facilities without supervision and background checks; close screening of prayer books. The uncertainty is the uniformity of these improved strategies *nationwide*. I know of no systematic work documenting the progress of these initiatives across all fifty state correctional agencies.

My core argument, then, is that U.S. prisons are not systematically generating a terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland. They are not the perfect storm. This conclusion does not imply that we should write down the probability of a prison-generated terrorist threat to zero. There *are* instances of prisoner radicalization, with potentially grave consequences. For example, a plot emerged from the California State Prison at Folsom in 2005. Inmate Kevin James formed Jam'iyat Ul-Islam Is-Saheeh ("JIS," the Authentic Assembly of God), which later planned a three-person attack on U.S. military recruitment offices, the Israeli Consulate, and synagogues in the Los Angeles area. The plan was to kill as many people as possible at each site. But the effort was thwarted by law enforcement in its early stages. The difficult judgment to make is whether Kevin James, had he been on the streets rather than behind bars, would have been equally inclined toward violence and more capable of leading a terrorist strike.

The claim that U.S. prisons will generate scores of terrorists spilling out onto the streets of our cities appears to be false or, at least, much overstated. The false positive that prisons are hotbeds of radicalization, however, could far too easily morph into a false negative: prisons are never the breeding ground for radicalization. In fact, a small number of prisoners have been radicalized behind bars and attempted terrorist activity. But as long as law enforcement continues to be alert and work collaboratively with each other, the threat of radicalized terrorist in and from prisons will continue to be diminished.