



U.S. PRISON Recruitment for Jihad

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In May of this year, four men were arrested and charged with plotting to blow up New York synagogues and shoot down airplanes with anti-aircraft missiles. The men were arrested after planting what they believed to be explosives outside two synagogues.¹

Photo: Scott Morrison

The men had been under FBI surveillance for months and were provided simulated explosives when they tried to follow through with the act of terror.² All four were Muslims who are believed to have converted to the faith while in prison.³ This case is but one example of what has long been a growing problem of Islamic extremism in the U.S. prison system.

Extremism is not unique to Islam, nor can the faith be said to be synonymous with radicalism.⁴ However, prison converts to Islam are often exposed to a version of Islam that is militant and extreme—Wahhabi Islam. Many, after leaving prison, are already far along the path toward radicalization and can eventually, with a few more wrong turns, go on to commit acts of terrorism.⁵ What are the roots of this problem? Are there other potential threats that can be traced back? What can be done to counter the emerging fifth column arising out of prison Islamist radicalization?

PRISON CONVERSIONS

There are hundreds of thousands of Muslims in state and federal prisons.⁶ An estimated 80 percent of faith seekers turn to Islam while imprisoned, with an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 converting each year.⁷ While some ultimately leave Islam when they leave prison, for most who convert while incarcerated, the change is real.

For many inmates, the transformation is a largely positive one. Islam and

other forms of religious observance provide a way to cope with the difficult challenges of prison life.⁸ Additionally, there is considerable evidence to show that faith observance can provide viable resources for rehabilitation. It can teach self-discipline, humility, and healthy social skills. In many cases, it can act as a counterweight against extremism. These can be useful tools which, if done “right” with religious values free of “political Islam’s” societal mission and Wahhabism’s extremism, will give inmates one way to be able to lead productive lives when they return to society.⁹

In fact, many Muslim converts will go on to lead lives as productive members of American society. Unfortunately, others will not, having been influenced by Islamist teachings while behind bars.¹⁰ A distinction here is important to make between the faith of Islam and the political movement of Islamism. Islamism is a theocratic movement that attempts to create societies that implement shar’iah law (Islamic jurisprudence) through government. Wahhabi Islam is one of the more potent militant, extremist, exclusivist versions of Islam that teaches that any means necessary can be employed to establish its own extreme version of the Islamic state and impose Islamic law. Despite its relatively obscure origins within tribal Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism emerged in the twentieth century as a particularly potent influence upon global Islam because of the profound influence of the unending

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primary sources of spiritual guidance.¹⁶
¹⁷ Problematic literature fills prison libraries.¹⁸

Additionally, some Islamist organizations provide support to inmates reentering society, using this as a recruitment opportunity, leaving former inmates at risk for involvement in terrorist activities.¹⁹ Note that beneath all this are the driving commonalities of those who believe in political Islam. Many “Islamist” organizations may condemn terrorism but they do so half-heartedly with obvious apologetics for the advocacy of political Islam. Make no mistake, their Islamist ideologies and apologetics serve as a gateway for the possible future susceptibility of their constituencies to radicalization. The Islamist ideology includes a focus on “Muslim victimization and grievances” as a minority and fosters separatism. It drives converts toward an Islamic state and Islamic law (shari’a), and away from American society and Western law. The followers replace an American identity with an all-encompassing Islamic community (ummah).

Another problem lending fodder to this crisis is that many of the men come from dysfunctional backgrounds without intrinsic values and are disillusioned with the society they came from. The Center for Islamic Pluralism writes that “Islamist radical recruiters and extremist Wahhabi clerics use their demagoguery to attract the disfranchised, disgruntled and others who may feel marginalized.”²⁰ A Georgetown report notes that “Radical religious groups allow the inmates to demonize their perceived enemies and view themselves as righteous.”²¹

RADICAL RELIGIOUS LEADERS

One way Islamist teachings have crept into the prisons is through imams,²² prisoners,²³ and volunteers giving radicalized interpretations of Islam to inmates. This problem is caused

fuel of petrodollars. Petrodollars have fueled the Wahhabis’ ability to spread their message, texts, imams, and influence within Muslim institutions all over the world.

The number of inmates radicalized while in prison might be comparatively small, but elements that become militant are very dangerous.¹¹ According to a recent report, “The potential for radicalization of prison inmates in the United States poses a threat of unknown magnitude to national security. Prisons have long been places where extremist ideology and calls to violence could find a willing ear, and conditions are often conducive to radicalization.”¹² One of the primary concerns is that radicalization can be “full” or “partial.” There is a continuum of radicalization in which most Muslims may never be affected

as devotional orthodox adherents to their faith, but others will, from within that psychological absorption, and the influence of other contacts, complete a journey to radicalization. The New York Police Department reported on this very process in 2007.¹³

FACTORS LEADING TO THE RISE OF EXTREMISM IN PRISONS

Sociological and psychological factors¹⁴ in prisons as well as the need for protection from gangs have been profound elements of prison radicalization.¹⁵ Unfiltered hiring practices have allowed Islamist imams easy access to inmates, and an extreme staffing shortage has allowed radicalized prisoners and volunteers to serve as

by reasons ranging from ineffective oversight²⁴ to severe religious staffing shortages.²⁵

The pervasiveness of the radicalism of Muslim chaplains needs further study because many are not from a supremacist mindset, but the problem is certainly profound. For example, the former head Muslim chaplain for the New York State Department of Correctional Services, Imam Warith Dean Umar,²⁶ a former convict himself, oversaw the hiring of most of the 45 Muslim chaplains and clerics in the New York system, while he also lead regular Islamic religious services for inmates himself.²⁷ He indoctrinated his clerics in Wahhabism with Saudi-sponsored trips to Saudi Arabia and preached an extreme form of Islam to convicts, with the New York authorities completely oblivious.²⁸ Umar said he found that prisons “are a powder keg” and “the perfect recruitment and training ground” for his Wahhabi ideas and radicalism “under the cover of the Islamic religion.”²⁹

Shockingly, Umar was quite open about his radical beliefs. In an interview with the *The Wall Street Journal* in February 2003, Umar said that “the 9/11 hijackers were martyrs” and that America would face “warfare” that would “be carried out by prison inmates who’ve converted to radical Islam.”³⁰

As a result of his extremism, Umar was eventually barred from the prisons.³¹ But even up until August 2009, this overtly radical imam had yet to be barred from American Islamist groups in the United States who present themselves as so-called voices of moderation. The Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) invited Umar to conduct a session at its annual conference in Washington, D.C., this summer. The Investigative Project quickly revealed that his speech entitled “Jews and Salaam” was riddled with anti-Semitism and obvious Islamic extremism.³² So one can see how Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups like ISNA,

which openly claim to be nonviolent, will overlap with more radical Islamists like Imam Umar. ISNA quickly tried to dismiss their association with Imam Umar.³³

Unfortunately, other Muslims are also the target of this extremism. Salahuddin Muhammed, a prison imam hired by Umar and the chaplain of the mosque attended by the men recently arrested for plotting to blow up New York synagogues, was accused by Shiite prisoners of inciting hostility against them in his sermons, calling them “infiltrators and snitches.”³⁴

Oversights have also allowed problematic groups to play an important role in hiring. Until recently, two American Islamist organizations with Saudi Wahhabist roots and leanings were responsible for the training and certification of Muslim clerics in the prison system.³⁵ ISNA was an unindicted co-conspirator in the recent trial of the Holy Land Foundation³⁶—the largest terror-finance case in U.S. history demonstrating ISNA’s Muslim Brotherhood roots and connections.³⁷

Prisoners as well as volunteers often take on leadership roles because of the severe shortage of qualified imams. A Florida official said that most inmates, in fact, are radicalized by other inmates. The case involving the JIS (Jam’iyyat Ul-Islam As-Saheeh, or Assembly of Authentic Islam) is one of the most prominent examples of this. In that case, Kevin James, a charismatic leader imprisoned at Folsom, was able to recruit a terrorist cell that almost went operational. Among its targets were Los Angeles-area Army recruiting offices and the Israeli consulate.³⁸

ISLAMIST LITERATURE

Inadequate supervision of religious events and informational materials entering prisons has helped to reinforce the grip of fundamentalist chaplains, despite regulations that require the

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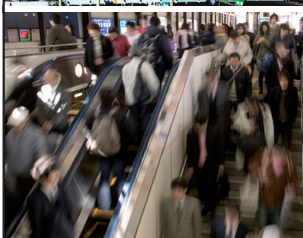
screening of such materials.³⁹ The Center for Islamic Pluralism recently reviewed the inventory of Islamic literature in prisons, and found a significant number of Wahhabi and other fundamentalist texts, including works by leading Muslim Brotherhood figures Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Sayed Qutb.⁴⁰

A particularly disturbing case is that of the Noble Quran distributed by the Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation⁴¹ and the Islamic Affairs Department of the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Washington D.C.⁴² In 2004 the U.S. Treasury Department froze the assets of Al-Haramain for funneling money to al-Qaeda and rebels in Chechnya.⁴³ This Saudi-Wahhabi printed version of the Quran, distributed to over 10,000 prisoners, contains inflammatory rhetoric attacking non-Muslims, and preaches violent jihad.

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Since 9/11, members have remained in the United States training at their encampments to avoid the scrutiny of law enforcement.

REENTERING SOCIETY

FBI director Robert Mueller said that the threat of radicalization does not end when prisoners are released. Extremists exploit "their socio-economic status and placement in the community" as another way of reaching this vulnerable group.⁴⁴

At a Senate hearing in 2006, Frank Cilluffo, director of the George Washington University Homeland

Security Policy Institute, addressed this subject further.

Former inmates are vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment because many leave prison with very little financial or social support. To the extent that radical groups may draw upon funding from well-financed, extremist backers, they can offer much more support to released prisoners than other more legitimate community programs that would facilitate genuine reintegration into society. By providing for prisoners in their time of greatest need, radical organizations can build upon the loyalty developed during the individual's time in prison. If connections are made with a radicalized community group, the recently released inmate may remain at risk for recruitment or continued involvement in terrorist networks.⁴⁵

One organization that appears to have taken advantage of this is a group called Jama'at al-Fuqra.⁴⁶

JAMA'AT AL-FUQRA/ MUSLIMS OF THE AMERICAS

Jama'at al-Fuqra (JF), or "community of the impoverished,"⁴⁷ was founded in New York by Pakistani cleric Mubarak Gilani in 1980.⁴⁸ It's an example of a potential threat that can be traced, in part, to prison radicalization. When JF was formed, Gilani targeted African American converts to Islam—primarily those with criminal backgrounds—who were living in the inner city. This, in and of itself, is not the problem. As previously stated, religious groups often provide a positive influence on inmates. In the case of JF, the problem is the kind of Islam they are turning to. One dossier on the group gives an indication of this when it writes that "Gilani used their hostility and cynicism toward Western society to aid in their adoption of his extremist beliefs."⁴⁹

Though Gilani runs JF from Pakistan,⁵⁰ it has continued to operate in North America under two front groups: Muslims of the Americas (MoA) and the International Quranic Open University.⁵¹ The group's goal is to purify Islam of Western influences through violence.⁵² They have openly supported Muslim Kashmiri separatists against India, and have declared as their enemies Israelis, Hindus, Jews, Hare Krishnas, Buddhists, and the U.S. government, among others.⁵³ The State Department listed JF as a terrorist organization until 1999,⁵⁴ and the Department of Defense handbook, *A Military Guide to Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, did the same from 2003 to 2005.⁵⁵

JF is believed to be responsible for dozens of bombings and murders across the United States and abroad, including the first World Trade Center attack in 1993.⁵⁶ JF has also been linked to "shoe bomber" Richard Reid,⁵⁷ al-Qaeda operative Ayman Faris, who was convicted for plotting attacks on the

Brooklyn Bridge and other targets,⁵⁸ and D.C. sniper John Allen Muhammad.⁵⁹

Although members have not been arrested for violent activities in several years, they continue to support Gilani financially through extensive white collar crimes, by taking advantage of a variety of social services programs, including workers' compensation, public health care, welfare, and the Food Stamp Program.⁶⁰ In one recent case, Khadijah Ghadur, a JF member in California, was convicted of bilking the state of more than a million dollars through a charter school she ran. Evidence never introduced in court indicated that the money may have gone to Gilani.⁶¹

SHEIKH GILANI

Sheikh Gilani is as controversial as JF. He espouses extremist views, telling his followers that "Zionist plotters" plan to rule the world and encouraging them to leave America's cities to avoid the "decadence of a godless society."⁶² He has militant connections to al-Qaeda

Muslim radicalization in American prisons is a deep-seated, multilayered problem that will require an overhaul of the approach to "Islam" behind bars.

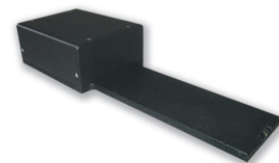
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and Osama Bin Laden,⁶³ Hamas, and Hezbollah,⁶⁴ and reportedly was a former member of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI).⁶⁵ Gilani has also trained fighters for Bosnia, Chechnya, and Kashmir.⁶⁶ American reporter Daniel Pearl was trying to interview Gilani in Pakistan when he was kidnapped and beheaded.⁶⁷ Gilani was arrested but later released by Pakistani authorities, denying any involvement in the murder. Gilani currently denies any connection to JF, as do residents of the MOA compounds, who say the “terrorist” group was created by enemies of Islam hoping to destroy their communities.⁶⁸

COMPOUNDS

The group, which has 1,000–3,000 members, maintains about 20–30 compounds across America.⁶⁹ These compounds, in rural hamlets, shelter hundreds of members, some of whom, according to intelligence sources, have been trained in the use of weapons and explosives in Pakistan. Since 9/11, members have remained in the United States training at their encampments to avoid the scrutiny of law enforcement. There are reports of gunfire and explosions coming from these compounds and anyone not affiliated with the organization, including law

enforcement, is barred from entering the encampment.⁷⁰ A blogger who posted a negative story about the town in 2007 was threatened with violence.⁷¹ Members of these enclaves submit to laws set out by Gilani, which are considered to be above local, state, and federal authority.

The MOA university has portrayed itself as a religious, charitable, and educational institution dedicated to home study and public awareness of the Koran. However, MOA has made anti-Semitic, anti-Christian, anti-American, and homophobic statements as well as statements promoting violence.⁷² Gilani’s appearance in a recruitment video shows JF’s true face. The video shows individuals being trained in the use of firearms and explosives and Gilani, wearing a camouflage jacket over traditional Pakistani dress, declaring, “We give highly specialized training in guerrilla warfare We are at present establishing training camps You can easily reach us at Koranic Open University offices in upstate New York or in Canada or in Michigan or in South Carolina or in Pakistan. Wherever we are you can reach us.”

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bars. There must be a coherent process by which we can allow prisoners the “freedom” to embrace a personal faith that they choose to help promote their rehabilitation while also protecting them and the American public against the spread of the very real threat, which is radical Islam.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Jasser is a devout practicing American Muslim and a former physician to the U.S. Congress. He is the narrator of The Clarion Fund’s documentary, “The Third Jihad” (www.TheThirdJihad.com), as well as the founder and president of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy (AIFD), www.aifdemocracy.org.

Mr. Shore is a producer of documentary films and the founder of The Clarion Fund, a nonprofit organization dedicated to educating the public about national security threats. Shore is well known for producing

the documentary “Obsession: Radical Islam’s War Against the West.” His latest documentary, “The Third Jihad” (www.TheThirdJihad.com), explores radical Islam in America.

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