



Statement of

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Hearing on

**“Terror Inmates: Countering Violent  
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## Overview

Chairman King, Ranking Member Higgins, and members of the Committee, my name is Jerry Bjelopera. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the Congressional Research Service. My testimony attempts to frame the issue of violent jihadist radicalization in U.S. prisons and briefly examines whether federal efforts to counter violent extremism extend to U.S. prisoners.

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11), the vast majority of homegrown violent jihadists have not radicalized in U.S. prisons. Far more often, the shift from law-abiding citizen to terrorist has involved other social environments and contexts—both virtual and real. Domestic prisons do not appear to create many violent extremists out of non-terrorist criminals, according to open source information.

Two important caveats temper this point and suggest that U.S. correctional institutions cannot be completely dismissed as potential radicalization arenas.

- *We do not know the actual extent of jihadist influence in U.S. prisons.* No solid estimates exist either of the number of people preaching violent jihadist messages in state and federal prisons or their followers. Non-jihadist extremist movements such as white supremacy have taken root behind bars, suggesting that it may be possible for violent jihadists to propagate their messages in the same settings.
- *Whether incarceration in U.S. prisons fosters deeper commitment to radical violence among convicted terrorists remains unclear.*<sup>1</sup> In the next two decades, scores of convicted and incarcerated homegrown violent jihadists are to be released from U.S. prisons potentially making this issue especially salient.

### Key Terms

**Radicalization**—the process of acquiring and holding radical, extremist, or jihadist beliefs. A radicalized individual becomes a terrorist when he or she commits a crime on the basis of such beliefs.

**Homegrown**—terrorist activity perpetrated within the United States or abroad by American citizens, lawful permanent residents, or visitors radicalized largely within the United States.

**Violent Jihadists**—radicalized individuals using Islam as an ideological and/or religious justification for their belief in the establishment of a caliphate—a jurisdiction governed by a Muslim civil and religious leader known as a caliph—via violent means.

**Plots**—schemes by homegrown individuals or groups to either join terrorist organizations abroad or to commit violent attacks at home or abroad.

## American Prisons Have Produced Almost No Post-9/11 Jihadist Terrorists

According to CRS analysis of homegrown violent jihadist activity since 9/11, such plots have nearly always featured people who radicalized outside of prison. Out of approximately 120 conspiracies, CRS has found one that included participants who had clearly radicalized while incarcerated in the United States.

- Kevin James, Levar Washington, Gregory Patterson, and Hammad Samana were arrested in August 2005 for plotting to attack targets in the Los Angeles, CA area, including synagogues, the Israeli Consulate, Los Angeles International Airport (LAX), U.S.

<sup>1</sup> Since 9/11, more than 250 people have been convicted for their involvement in homegrown violent jihadist plots.

military recruiting offices, and military bases. In 1997, James founded a violent jihadist movement he named Jamiyyat Ul-Islam Is-Saheeh (JIS or the “Authentic Assembly of God”) in the California state prison system. James met Washington behind bars in 2004 and recruited him into JIS. After his release, Washington enlisted Patterson, an employee at LAX, and Samana at the Jamaat-E-Masijudal mosque in Inglewood, CA, where they all worshipped.<sup>2</sup>

Most homegrown violent jihadists radicalize via virtual or in-person interactions that can depend on powerful contexts such as real or online friendship networks and family relationships. These usually do not involve the levels of scrutiny or supervision by authority figures as do interpersonal dealings in prison.

- In 2013 and 2014, Asher Abid Khan conspired with a friend to travel to Syria and join the terrorist organization known as the Islamic State (IS).<sup>3</sup> Khan, a 20-year-old Houston, TX resident, and his friend radicalized together. For example, they watched violent jihadist videos online. The duo exchanged IS-inspired messages and imagery via social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. They also used Facebook to contact an IS foreign terrorist fighter facilitator based in Turkey. Khan’s friend eventually made it to Syria and joined the Islamic State.<sup>4</sup>
- In 2014, Heather Elizabeth Coffman, a 29-year-old Glen Allen, VA resident, attempted to assist others to join the Islamic State. Coffman relied on Facebook postings as she radicalized and attempted to help a man she described as her husband travel to Syria to link up with the terrorist group.<sup>5</sup>

## Yet, Concerns about Jailhouse Jihadism Persist

The extent of violent jihadist radicalization behind bars is unknown. American prisons might offer venues for such activity, where neophytes can be radicalized or recruited, even though only a small percentage of such individuals may eventually turn to terrorism.<sup>6</sup> Also, we do not fully understand the effect of prison time on convicted terrorists who came to prison already radicalized.

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<sup>2</sup> Department of Justice, “Man Who Formed Terrorist Group that Plotted Attacks on Military and Jewish Facilities Sentenced to 16 Years in Federal Prison,” March 6, 2009, <http://losangeles.fbi.gov/dojpressrel/pressrel09/la030609ausa.htm>; Department of Justice, “Man Involved in Domestic Terrorism Plot Targeting Military and Jewish Facilities Sentenced to 22 Years,” July 23, 2008, <http://losangeles.fbi.gov/dojpressrel/pressrel08/la062308usa.htm>; Department of Justice, “Second Man Involved in Domestic Terrorism Plot Targeting Military, Jewish Facilities Sentenced to Prison,” July 21, 2008, <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2008/July/08-nsd-634.html>; Department of Justice, “Four Men Indicted on Terrorism Charges,” August 31, 2005, [http://www.dodig.mil/IGInformation/IGInformationReleases/fourmen\\_090105.pdf](http://www.dodig.mil/IGInformation/IGInformationReleases/fourmen_090105.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> The group has also been known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS), and Daesh among other names.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Goldman, “An American Family Saved Their Son from Joining the Islamic State. Now He Might Go to Prison,” Washington Post, September 6, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/an-american-family-saved-their-son-from-joining-the-islamic-state-now-he-might-go-to-prison/2015/09/06/2d3d0f48-44ef-11e5-8ab4-c73967a143d3\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/an-american-family-saved-their-son-from-joining-the-islamic-state-now-he-might-go-to-prison/2015/09/06/2d3d0f48-44ef-11e5-8ab4-c73967a143d3_story.html); United States v. Asher Abid Khan, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court for the Southern District of Texas, May 25, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Justice Press Release, “Glen Allen Woman Pleads Guilty to Making a False Statement Involving International Terrorism,” February 2, 2015; Danielle Haynes, “Virginia Woman Arrested for Allegedly Offering to Help Islamic State,” United Press International, November 17, 2014. United States v. Heather Elizabeth Coffman, Criminal Complaint, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, November 14, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> See Mark S. Hamm, *The Spectacular Few: Prisoner Radicalization and the Evolving Terrorist Threat* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), Hereafter: Hamm, *The Spectacular Few*. See also Mark S. Hamm, “Terrorist Recruitment in American Correctional Institutions: An Exploratory Study of Non-Traditional Faith Groups,” December 2007, p. 112, (continued...)

In its many peaceful mainstream forms, Islam is the fastest growing faith behind bars in the U.S. However, some disaffected prisoners adopt versions of the religion that stray far from broadly accepted sects and schools of thought, versions that may incorporate radical viewpoints and violent rhetoric. One such non-traditional jailhouse variant is commonly known as “prison Islam.” Prison Islam selectively uses the Quran and other Islamic texts in a “cut and paste” ideological approach to reinforce gang values and may encourage violence.<sup>7</sup>

### Islam and Conversion behind Bars

Islam has been described as the fastest growing religion among North American prisoners, with one estimate suggesting that “30,000 or perhaps as many as 40,000” prisoners convert every year.<sup>8</sup> Prison converts do not necessarily adopt the tenets of mainstream major religions. Some consider non-traditional, potentially radical, quasi-religious outlooks instead. At least two broad motivations influence potential converts—a search for meaning/identity (which can translate into defiance of prison authorities) and a need for physical protection from other inmates. Religious conversion plays a varied part in prison life. Cynical prisoners may use conversion to demonstrate good behavior to prison officials, thereby potentially improving their conditions. For others, religious conversion can offer a powerful alternative to harmful or destructive behavior behind bars and may reduce the likelihood that they will commit future offenses in jail or once released.<sup>9</sup>

## Other Radicals in Prison

While the scope of jihadist radicalization in U.S. correctional facilities is unclear, a number of large gangs in U.S. prisons recruit and organize around other extremist ideologies. The existence of such gangs suggests that extremist ideologies can find root in American prisons. The beliefs that some prison gangs have adopted help them to radicalize new members. However, these gangs tend not to use their ideological systems to justify terrorist acts. Rather, they focus on profitable criminal enterprises such as drug trafficking.<sup>10</sup> White supremacist prison gangs illustrate this.

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<http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/220957.pdf>. Hereafter: Hamm, “Terrorist Recruitment.” See also “U.S. Congress, House Homeland Security Committee, Subcommittee on Intelligence, Information Sharing, and Terrorism Risk Assessment, Written Statement of Janice Fedarcy, fmr. Special Agent in Charge, Counterterrorism Division, Los Angeles Field Office, Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Radicalization, Information Sharing, and Community Outreach: Protecting the Homeland from Homegrown Terror,” 110th Cong., 1st sess., April 5, 2007, p. 18; George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute (HSPI) and The University of Virginia Critical Incident Analysis Group (CIAG), “Out of the Shadows: Getting Ahead of Prisoner Radicalization,” HSPI and CIAG, Washington, D.C. September 2006, [http://www.healthsystem.virginia.edu/internet/ciag/publications/out\\_of\\_the\\_shadows.pdf](http://www.healthsystem.virginia.edu/internet/ciag/publications/out_of_the_shadows.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Hamm, *The Spectacular Few*; Peter R. Neumann, Prisons and Terrorism: Radicalisation and De-radicalisation in 15 Countries, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, London, 2010, p. 2, <http://www.icsr.info/publications/papers/1277699166PrisonsandTerrorismRadicalisationandDeradicalisationin15Countries.pdf>. Greg Hannah, Lindsay Clutterbuck, and Jennifer Rubin, Radicalization or Rehabilitation: Understanding the Challenges of Extremist and Radicalized Prisoners, RAND Europe, Cambridge, U.K., 2008, p. 10, [http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical\\_reports/2008/RAND\\_TR571.pdf](http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/2008/RAND_TR571.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Hamm, *The Spectacular Few*, pp. 43–44. According to one study, just state and federal institutions held “an estimated 1,574,700 prisoners on December 31, 2013, an increase of 4,300 prisoners from yearend 2012.” This figure peaked in 2009 at 1,615,500. When factoring in local jails as well, the number of inmates for 2012 was 2,231,400 and 2,220,300 for 2013. See E. Ann Carson, “Prisoners in 2013,” U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, (September 30, 2014); Lauren E. Glaze and Danielle Kaeble, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, “Correctional Populations in the United States, 2013” (December 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Hamm, “Terrorist Recruitment,” pp. 112, 113.

<sup>10</sup> Joshua D. Freilich, Steven M. Chermak, and David Caspi, “Critical Events in the Life Trajectories of Domestic Extremist White Supremacist Groups,” *Criminology and Public Policy*, vol. 8, no. 3 (August 2009), p. 508; David Holthouse, “Smashing the Shamrock,” *Intelligence Report*, Southern Poverty Law Center, Issue 119, (Fall 2005), <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2005/fall/smashing-the-shamrock?page=0,1>. Hereafter: Holthouse, “Smashing.” Camille Jackson, “Nazi Low Riders,” *Intelligence Report*, Southern Poverty Law Center, Issue 114, (Summer 2004), (continued...)

White supremacist beliefs form the key tenets binding several gangs in U.S. prisons. Extremists of this persuasion hold that whites 1) are superior to all other racial groups, 2) have experienced decline at the hands of other races, and 3) require extreme measures to return them to social and political preeminence.<sup>11</sup>

- The Aryan Brotherhood, a national-level prison gang with approximately 15,000 members in and out of custody, has factions within facilities managed by the California Department of Corrections and the Federal Bureau of Prisons.<sup>12</sup>
- The Nazi Low Riders, a regional-level gang with a membership estimated between 800 and 1,000, exists in correctional facilities on the West Coast and in the Southwest.<sup>13</sup>

## How Have Incarcerated Jihadists Fared in Prison?

Until recently few homegrown violent jihadists have been released from U.S. correctional facilities, offering little insight into the effect of prison time on such persons. Though, of this small pool of released convicts, none have returned to terrorist plotting, according to open sources. In the next twenty years, the U.S. is to release scores of similar individuals. It is unknown how such people will handle their exits from penal institutions. How successfully they reintegrate into life outside of prison might influence the homegrown violent jihadist threat landscape. Will a significant portion of these released jihadists foster new plots? Will any serve as role models for future terrorists? Since 9/11, more than 250 people have been convicted for their involvement in homegrown violent jihadist plots. Approximate release dates for 132 people imprisoned for such activity are publicly available and depicted in **Figure 1** below. CRS was able to find information regarding the sentences of 151 homegrown violent jihadists arrested for either their involvement in terrorist attacks for plotting such attacks. Of the 151 homegrown violent jihadists:

- 132 had identifiable release dates. (The earliest possible release date was considered, where appropriate.)
- Of the 132 with identifiable release dates, 5 were incarcerated at the state level. The rest (127) were held in federal (non-military) correctional facilities.
- 16 received life sentences.
- 3 received death sentences. Two of these individuals were tried as U.S. soldiers in military courts and await their executions in military custody.
- 11 are housed in the U.S. Bureau of Prisons Administrative Maximum Security (ADX) facility, in Florence, CO. Commonly referred to as ADX Florence, Florence ADMAX, or the Alcatraz of the Rockies, this prison is reputedly the most secure prison facility in the United States.<sup>14</sup>

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<http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2004/summer/nazi-low-riders>.

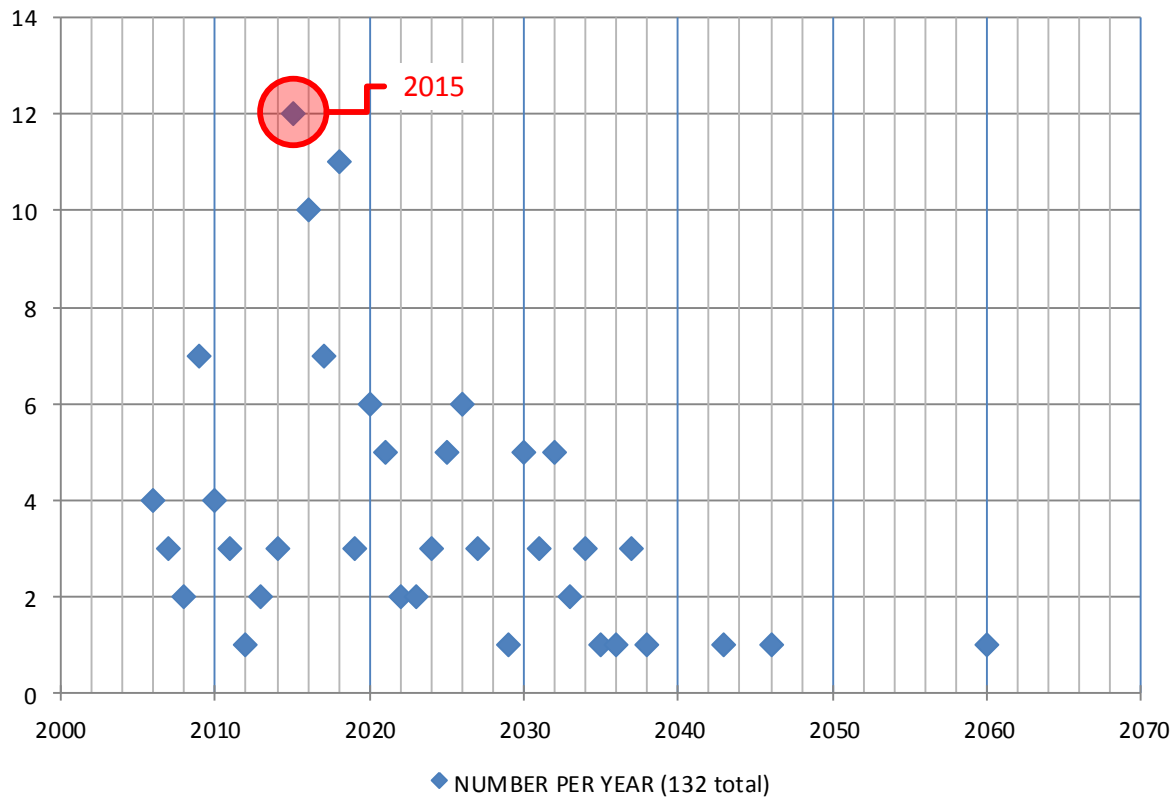
<sup>11</sup> Such views are broadly shared by domestic extremist groups such as the National Socialist Party and racist skinheads.

<sup>12</sup> Department of Justice “Prison Gangs and Photos,” May 11, 2015, <http://www.justice.gov/criminal-ocgs/gallery/prison-gangs>; “Member of Aryan Brotherhood Booked in Slidell,” Associated Press State and Local Wire, October 6, 2009; Holthouse, “Smashing.”

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. See also National Drug Intelligence Center. Attorney General's Report to Congress on the Growth of Violent Street Gangs in Suburban Areas, (April 2008), Appendix B. Pete Simi, Lowell Smith, and Ann M.S. Reeser, “From Punk Kids to Public Enemy Number One,” *Deviant Behavior*, vol. 29, no. 8 (2008), pp. pp. 753-774.

<sup>14</sup> For example, see Mark Binelli, “Inside America’s Toughest Federal Prison,” *New York Times Magazine*, March 26, 2015.

**Figure I. Post-9/11 Homegrown Violent Jihadists Released or Slated For Release**



**Source:** CRS review of open source material related to homegrown violent jihadist plots since 9/11.

**Notes:** Available information about specific plotters was washed through publicly available federal and state-level prison inmate locator databases to determine sentencing information and place of incarceration.

## To What Degree do Federal Efforts to Counter Violent Extremism Extend to U.S. Prisoners?

Based on public sources, it is difficult to determine how much of the Obama Administration’s program to thwart terrorist radicalization focuses on federal, state, or local prisons.<sup>15</sup> The plan, dubbed “countering violent extremism” (CVE), was announced in 2011. When describing existing CVE efforts in 2011, the Administration noted that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Bureau of Prisons (BOP), and the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) had collaborated to evaluate how state level prisons identified radicalization among inmates and shared such information with law enforcement partners.<sup>16</sup> The Administration’s program for further work on CVE included almost 50 “future activities and efforts” for numerous federal agencies.<sup>17</sup> One of these focused on prison radicalization, suggesting that DHS, FBI, BOP, and NCTC continue existing collaboration to:

<sup>15</sup> *Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States*, August 2011, p. 1. Hereinafter: *Empowering Local Partners*.

<sup>16</sup> *Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States*, December 2011, p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

- Improve awareness of the risk of violent extremism in correctional systems;
- Enhance screening of new inmates to detect individuals associated with violent extremist organizations;
- Improve detection of recruitment efforts within the correctional environment; and
- Increase information sharing, as appropriate, with Federal, State, and local law enforcement about inmates who may have adopted violent extremist beliefs and are being released.<sup>18</sup>

It is unclear what progress has been made in these efforts.

I thank the subcommittee again for this opportunity to testify and look forward to your questions.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 14.