

Prison Radicalization: Are Terrorist Cells Forming in U.S. Cell Blocks?
Senator Joe Lieberman
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Thanks, Madam Chairman, and thank you for holding this hearing on a subject of growing interest and importance to our war against terror here at home. The idea of homegrown terrorism—terrorism that is born not deep in the Hindu Kush or in a desert cave but right here among us – is a frightening concept to most Americans. It eliminates the buffer of oceans and continents and even tightened immigration controls that have kept our neighborhoods and institutions relatively free of terrorist ideology. Home grown terrorism is now a grave enough concern that we must consider whether to focus more attention and resources toward it. I hope this hearing helps us to sort that out.

Experience tells us that we need to consider and then work together to prevent the next terrorist attack, not the last one. Since September 11, we've spent billions of dollars to improve airline security and prevent terrorists and their tools of destruction from entering the country and we need to do more. But we must also be on the lookout for ruthlessness we have not yet experienced – terrorism spawned right here among us.

The men who plotted and carried out last year's bombings of the London Underground, for example, were converted to terrorist ideology in their home country, the United Kingdom –

just as the perpetrators of deadly rail explosions in Madrid and Mumbai might have been homegrown.

We will hear from our witnesses this morning of the developing concern that American prisons are potential breeding grounds for terrorism in this country. I say “potential” because there is no evidence to suggest U.S. prisons are churning out terrorists – yet. But nor can we afford to wait until production is in full swing before we address the conditions that could lead to that occurring. The missed opportunities leading up to the 9-11 attacks have been chronicled at length. So, again, I thank the Chairman for holding this hearing today so we can hear about a potential problem that can no longer be ignored.

The study we will hear about today shows that the American prison systems—federal, state, and local— are environments that are permissive to the proliferation of radical ideologies. That permissiveness, quite naturally, is exploited by those wishing to fill out their ranks and win new recruits to the cause. The study’s authors - Mr. Cilluffo and Dr. Saathoff, together with their formidable team of experts from across the professional spectrum – have done outstanding work to identify potential loopholes that could be exploited by radical groups and to provide thoughtful, well-reasoned ways to close some of those loopholes. Our final witness on the first panel is someone who actually did exploit those loopholes. Mr. Gartenstein-Ross joined Al Haramain, a radical organization with terrorist ties. He was personally responsible for outreach to the prison populations in the United States and sent thousands of pieces of radical literature to prisoners. And although Al Haramain has been shut down, in large part due to Mr. Gartenstein-Ross’s cooperation with the FBI, there could be other similar groups still operating out there.

The fundamental questions we must ask are what would cause a person to convert to a radical ideology condoning terrorism? What is the process by which a prisoner might convert to such an ideology? What are the conditions under which a conversion might take place? And what controls can we put into place to curtail such conversions? Dr. Saathoff, with his extensive experience in psychiatric evaluations of prisoners, will offer a glimpse into the behavioral science behind radicalization, and what factors might make the prison environment conducive to the recruitment of terrorists. And Mr. Cilluffo, who has lent his tremendous expertise in Homeland Security policy to this study, will offer insights on how the government, across levels and jurisdictions, can begin to close gaps in the system.

The value of spirituality for inmates requires that a range of religious services be available. Our adherence to the principle of freedom of worship, in fact, allows for any inmate to request services in the religion of his or her choice. And since Islam is the second most widespread religion in the world, it is understandable and proper that it be represented proportionately among the chaplains employed by the prison system and among those who contract or volunteer to provide religious services to inmates.

Unfortunately, the number of qualified Islamic chaplains, or Imams, is insufficient. Although over 80 percent of religious conversions in prison are to some form of Islam, only ten of the 200 chaplains in the federal system are devoted to Islam. This staggeringly disproportionate number cannot possibly fulfill the need for expertise in cultural traditions and linguistics – not to mention offering a meaningful presence - in a system with a total population of nearly 200,000. The report states that radical prison groups have been able to use Arabic as a

code for passing secret information. A greater corps of educated and certified Muslim chaplains and expert staff, with the ability to detect dangerous materials, teachings, and communications, seems key to controlling radicalization.

As we will hear, radical Islamic literature may contain incendiary language against Jews, Christians, and others who are considered non-believers. Does that mean that extreme views, whether religious or political, naturally imply a proclivity toward violence? I don't think so. There are no restrictions on thought in this nation. Freedom of ideas, freedom of expression, and freedom of religion are among the most cherished birthrights of our democracy. The First Amendment does not stop at the prison wall.

But controls must exist to prevent the freedom of individual thought from devolving into a hateful ideology that promotes or incites violence. While it may be legal to hold such beliefs, it is decidedly illegal to act on them. Within the confines of correctional facilities, where a higher requirement for order exists, the interest of safety and security demands that these beliefs be discouraged.

I hope that our second panel of witnesses can tell us today what controls are currently in effect in federal prisons to stem the spread of hateful ideology and what additional controls should be instituted to halt recruitment and stop the radicalization process before it is manifested in terrorism. I also hope that this panel will speak to federal efforts and plans to increase information sharing - a critical element in controlling the spread of radical ideology. The task force report starkly describes the challenges to sharing information between institutions,

jurisdictions, levels of governments, and agencies in the correctional system. Dangerous religious service providers may move freely between jurisdictions, radical and charismatic inmates may be transferred untracked between prisons, and intelligence gained at the federal level lacks a sufficient means for dissemination to state and local levels. The state of California has taken admirable strides in forming its Prison Radicalization Working Group, which draws together officials from all levels of government in monthly dialogues to address the problem. I hope similar efforts take root across the nation, with federal leadership to assist in the sharing of information that is so essential in improving homeland security.

I thank both panels of witnesses for taking the time to share their wisdom and experience today and I look forward to their testimony. The topic is an important one: Our dialogue today, and even more importantly, the dialogues that I hope will ensue, can only serve to increase our awareness and active vigilance against an ever-changing enemy in the war on terror.