

Opening Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins
Chairman, Committee on Homeland Security and
Governmental Affairs

**“Prison Radicalization: Are Terrorist Cells
Forming in U.S. Cell Blocks?”**

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For the past five years, the federal government has attempted to prevent terrorists from entering our country from abroad. Our homeland security efforts have made it increasingly difficult for foreign terrorists to infiltrate and operate in the United States. Increased border security and screening of overseas airline passengers, while critical to help keep out foreign terrorists, do not, however, protect us from "home-grown" terrorists. The rise of domestic terrorist cells inspired by but not directly linked to Al Qaeda is an emerging threat to our nation's security.

This morning, the Committee will examine a deep pool of potential home-grown operatives: American prisons. Our corrections facilities -- federal, state, and local -- provide fertile grounds for radicalization and recruitment efforts. We have seen this problem in the formation of such prison gangs as the Mexican Mafia and the white supremacist Aryan Brotherhood. And we see it in the focus of our hearing today - - the spread in prison of extremist Islam dedicated to committing acts of terrorism.

Let me be clear. Our concern is not with prison inmates converting to Islam. For many converts, this religion brings the direction and purpose their lives previously lacked. Our concern is with those who would use prisons as places to indoctrinate inmates with a hateful ideology that incites adherents to commit violent acts.

We need to learn more about the process of radicalization. For some inmates, the conversion to Islam sets their lives on a lasting path that shuns violence and criminality. What is it, then, that leads other inmates to adopt the extremist interpretation that teaches violence against those of different beliefs? How can prison authorities identify the teachings that incite violence while respecting the right of inmates to have access to religious materials? What training and skills do corrections officers need to be able to recognize radicalization and recruitment efforts?

A current case demonstrates that these concerns are not hypothetical. Kevin James is an American citizen, incarcerated in California for armed robbery. A convert to Islam in prison, this self-styled imam founded an organization called JIS, the Arabic initials of the Assembly for Authentic Islam. Based upon his radical interpretation of Islam, James preached that it was the duty of JIS members to target his

perceived enemies of Islam, including U.S. military personnel and Jewish and non-Jewish supporters of Israel, for violent attacks.

James recruited JIS members among his fellow inmates. One of James' radicalized converts, upon being released from prison, allegedly recruited other members at a Los Angeles area mosque. His group reportedly sought to acquire automatic weapons, firearms with silencers, and explosives. They conducted surveillance on military installations, synagogues, and the Israeli consulate. Allegedly, they financed their operations by committing at least 11 armed robberies throughout Southern California. Kevin James and his accomplices now face trial on terrorism charges.

This terrorist plot was only uncovered when a JIS operative inadvertently dropped a cell phone at one of the crime scenes. The data retrieved from that phone allowed the

FBI-led investigators to trace the crimes from the gang committing the robberies, back to the prison and, ultimately, to Kevin James. It was only then that prison officials learned the true nature of JIS and the scope of the conspiracy that had developed within the prison walls. We have to wonder how many other such conspiracies are taking shape under the radar in other prisons.

During our first panel today, experts from George Washington University and the University of Virginia will release a report by their Prisoner Radicalization Task Force. The report, entitled “Out of the Shadows: Getting Ahead of Prisoner Radicalization,” is one of the first to address religious radicalization in U.S. prisons. I am pleased to have the two co-chairmen of this Task Force with us today.

We will then look at the government’s response to radicalization with a panel of federal experts, who will discuss,

among other things, “The Correctional Intelligence Initiative,” a positive program at the federal level.

We will discuss with this panel the challenges that we face. For example, how can we, while preserving civil liberties, track released inmates identified as radicalized as they move from one jurisdiction to another? How can one state’s corrections system, having identified a particular chaplain, volunteer, or inmate as a teacher who incites others to attack targets for political or religious purposes, effectively share that information with other systems should that teacher move or, if an inmate, be transferred?

This is an issue with profound national security implications that reach into every state and a great many cities throughout America. We must find a way to bring every level of government with a corrections system into a unified effort

that addresses our national security while respecting the autonomy and authority of the individual jurisdictions.

I would note that the criminal gang that sprang from Kevin James teaching violent jihad was centered in Torrance, California. Hence, the investigation that resulted was given the code name “Torrancial Rain” -- a code name that well describes the storm of terrorism that could result if the radicalization of prison inmates goes unchecked.