

HSPI Commentary Series

CONS GONE WILD?

HSPI Commentary 09

January 28, 2010

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A Senate Foreign Relations Committee report released this month announced that up to three dozen Americans who converted to Islam in prison have traveled to Yemen, possibly to train with al-Qaida.¹ Though blockbuster news, it was largely drowned out by other headlines, including the continuing fallout from the Christmas Day airliner attack. Despite limited public appetite and attention span for more bad news, we ignore such developments at our peril.

Prisons have long served as incubators for radical ideas. Hitler, Stalin, Sayyid Qutb, and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi all nurtured their extremist ideas in jail; and in some instances recruited followers while in prison. It is a stretch to think that al Qaeda would turn down the opportunity to expand its ranks when there is a captive audience that is, at once, difficult to monitor yet susceptible to radicalization and violence. Indeed, al Qaeda has adopted a concerted strategy of targeting for recruitment individuals who hold U.S. passports and play against type.

As the Senate report illustrates, what goes on behind bars doesn't necessarily stay there. Turning Vegas rules on their head, what happens in prison can ultimately have impact beyond borders. One question therefore worth asking is, what can we do to prevent prisoner radicalization in the United States? With concerning cases already in the dozens, there are five key steps that, if taken, could pay substantial national and homeland security dividends:

Start with the basics. Prison officials are stretched thin trying to maintain order in overcrowded and underfunded facilities. Fund and structure the system so that homeland security and counterterrorism doesn't have to be an afterthought.

¹ "Al-Qaeda in Yemen and Somalia: A Ticking Time Bomb." *A Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate*. January 21, 2010, p. 4. Accessed at: <http://foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Yemen.pdf>



Make the system part of the solution. Don't let it be part of the problem. Effectively monitor materials coming in, and provide enough qualified, vetted clerics to meet inmates' spiritual needs. Clear policy and regulations should be established, and should apply to both volunteer leaders of religious services and extremist inmates within the prison system.

Focus on the back end—but don't lose sight of where they came from. Prisoners are highly vulnerable upon release. Offer them social support at that moment to help reintegrate them into the community. Don't let them be easy prey for recruiters with malicious intent. Approximately ninety percent of America's prisoner population is housed in state- and local-level facilities. Efforts to detect, monitor, and prevent terrorist plots inside U.S. prisons must remain closely connected to parallel activities on the outside. Budget shortfalls spurring early release programs and early parole only amplify the challenge, as the potential for more radicalized prisoners being paroled increases. Yet the link becomes all the more important as gangs and drug cartels consider connecting with terrorist networks.

Learn from inside and out. The variations between and among state and federal institutions are marked, but best practices exist (such as in California). Learn from success stories and also from challenges experienced abroad.

Educate, train and raise awareness. From parole officers to prison guards, we need to convey the nature of the threat and how best to deal with it. Neither hysteria nor willful blindness is the answer.

The news is not all bad, however. There may be a silver lining in the form of never-before opportunities to infiltrate and exploit al Qaeda as it seeks to recruit U.S. citizens without ties to the Middle East or South Asia. This is not to underestimate the challenge. But the possibility of sowing and growing the seeds of internal mistrust and dissent lies closer; and this is a proven technique for dismantling and defeating terrorist organizations. Think Abu Nidal.

We won't be able to go it alone, though. Cooperation among domestic law enforcement and overseas intelligence assets and partners is critical. Without it, we will be blinder than we should be in terms of our capacity to follow and track suspect individuals' radicalization and potential ties to terrorist activities. Moving forward, let's shoot for a return to Vegas-type rules, where what happens behind bars stays there.

For more of HSPI's work on radicalization, visit:

http://www.gwumc.edu/hspi/policy/HotTopics_radicalization.cfm



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