The Path to Inmate Radicalization:
A Primary Focus on Inmate Converts to Islam

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Abstract

Religious radicalization and its potential path toward violent extremism is a major security threat, both nationally and internationally. The radicalization of inmates in prisons throughout the world has created challenges for prison administrators and national security agencies. This paper examines the underlying factors that contribute to inmate radicalization in the United States and will focus on converts to Islam within correctional institutions. Although Muslims are not predisposed to radical ideology, certain forms of prison Islam promote radical views. Islam in prison has been taught by employee and volunteer chaplains, and inmates that have limited knowledge of the faith. This has allowed mutating forms of Islam in prison to spread without scrutiny from prison management or moderate religious scholars.

The complexity of confinement creates motivators for needs that individuals may not have explored outside of prison. This paper will discuss some of the causal links associated with loss of freedom and its correlation with adopting grievances that subsequently morph into radical ideology. A qualitative review of prison chaplaincy programs allows us to understand whether or not there is a disconnect between what inmates need and what is offered in terms of appropriate non-violent faith education. This paper aims to offer possible solutions to reducing the potential for radicalization in prisons.
Introduction

From a prison cell in New Folsom Prison in Sacramento, California, Kevin Lamar James, a former Los Angeles gang member, converted to Islam, self-radicalized, and devised a terrorist plot to conduct attacks at military recruiting facilities and Jewish religious centers in the Los Angeles area. In August 2005, James became the leader of a radical prison group known as Jami’yyat Ul-Islam Is-Saheeh (JIS) defined in Arabic as (association of authentic Islam) and convinced one of his accomplices, and former cell-mate, Levar Haney Washington, to recruit two other individuals, Gregory Vernon Patterson, and Hamad Riaz Samana, to assist in conducting the attacks. The plan was thwarted by law enforcement personnel and all of those involved were convicted on terrorism charges (Hamm, 2009).

The focus of this paper is directed toward Muslim converts in United States prisons and their potential for radicalization and subsequent violent extremism. Research along with various reporting indicates that Islam in United States prisons is growing at a faster pace than any other religion (Spearlt, 2014). As incarcerated individuals seek different faith systems in prison, approximately eighty percent choose to convert to Islam. Muslim inmates account for roughly ten percent of the prison population. There are an estimated 35,000 inmate conversions to Islam in prison annually (Jones, 2014). The growth of Islam in prison is not exclusive to the United States but is a global phenomenon that researchers and analysts around the world are attempting to understand. It is crucial to clarify that conversion to Islam is not the gateway to radicalization. Conflating conversion with radicalization produces an inflated existence of the latter (Spearlt, 2014).

The examination of inmate radicalization within correctional systems has become increasingly popular since September 11, 2001 (Ammar, 2015). Although radicalization can be associated with white supremacy, gangs, or any faith practiced within the prison environment, the majority of contemporary research conducted focuses on conversion into Islam and the radicalization of Muslim inmates. The research on this topic is divided into two dichotomous schools of thought. Some researchers believe that prisons are incubators for radical Islam and terrorist inspiration, while the opposition believes that Islam plays a significant role in rehabilitation and has a tempering effect on prisoners (Hamm, 2009).

Research related to terrorism, radicalization, and violent extremism has been afflicted with ambiguities regarding concepts and definitions. There are researchers that make reference to “deradicalization” programs while others use the term “rehabilitation.” Key concepts related to the study of radicalization and extremism are not only difficult to define but also extremely challenging to measure, especially when the research is related to incarcerated individuals. Governmental institutions have often placed barriers on research efforts that require access to corrections facilitates and inmates. Prison authorities have been persuaded that fear-related national security issues impact prison security (Veldhuis, 2016).
A standard definition of radicalization that will satisfy all disciplines simply does not exist. However, the United States Department of Justice defines radicalization as “the process by which inmates adopt extreme views including beliefs that violent measures need to be taken for political or religious purposes” (Mulcahy et al, 2013). For the purpose of this research, the United States Department of Justice definition of “radicalization” will be employed to demonstrate extreme thought and behavior exercised by inmates in prison.

When determining which factors play the most significant role in the radicalization process, it is essential to understand the meaning of radicalization. The term has been used extensively and is sometimes correlated with fanaticism and terrorism. Radical ideas can sometimes be positive and can influence change when they are absent of violence and extremism. The common usage of the words “inmate radicalization” comes with a negative connotation. The term “inmate radicalization” will be used in this study to identify a process that incarcerated individuals navigate through while in search of various human needs. This study places focus on inmates in prison due to their propensity for criminal behavior and potential for radical thought which may pose an additional security threat upon their release (Ammar, 2015).

As this paper attempts to tackle different factors that contribute to the radicalization of inmates, it is critical to consider the criticism that the term “radicalization” has received. Radical ideologies do not always lead to violent behavior and not all terrorists are motivated by their convictions. Although terms such as fanaticism, extremism, radicalism and terrorism are independent concepts that are not causally linked, there tends to be lack of clarity regarding the context of their use. A common limitation regarding the study of radicalization is the belief that radical thought is directly or indirectly linked to terrorism (Schuurman and Taylor, 2018).

Exploring the dynamics of religious radicalization, and more specifically, the radicalization of Muslim inmates, allows for the recognition of how complex this phenomenon has become. A plethora of research has been conducted to identify the pathway to radicalization and violent extremism. Much of the research also offers recommendations and solutions to some of the problems that encompass extremism within the prison environment. Identifying which area of research is beneficial and applicable to answering questions regarding the radicalization puzzle has proved to be a daunting task. Fear-based perceptions of Islam and Muslims have impacted the examination of Islam in prison and has hindered the possibility of being impartial when recommending penal policy (Spearlt, 2014).

In order to determine whether or not the absence of a moderate and structured Muslim chaplaincy program throughout U.S. prisons allows inmates to gravitate toward radical ideology, the following approach is used: A qualitative method is applied to identify inmates that converted to Islam, were radicalized in prison and subsequently became involved in violent extremist activity. Contact was made with appropriate prison administration personnel at the respective prisons where the selected inmates were incarcerated to determine if Muslim chaplaincy programs existed during the time of their incarceration.
The goal of this paper is to better understand which factors play a vital role in the radicalization of inmate converts in the United States. The information collected solidifies the understanding that a simple solution to counter radicalization and extremist belief systems does not exist. After examining all the material selected, and learning about successes and failures regarding this topic, recommendations on providing options for some of the dilemmas facing prison administrators and security agencies will be presented in the conclusion of this study.

**Research Question**

Research indicates that there is a lack of correlation between inmate radicalization and violent extremism. However, there are several cases that show how some inmates were radicalized within the prison environment in the United States and subsequently became involved in acts of terrorism. This study questions whether or not the radicalization of Muslim converts in prison leads to violent extremism. This paper will discuss cases that involved converts to Islam in prison that subsequently radicalized while in prison and engaged in violent extremism.

**Background**

In Mark Hamm’s study, Terrorist Recruitment in American Correctional Institutions: An Exploratory Study of Non-Traditional Faith Groups, different faith groups are discussed including various forms of prison Islam. The lack of structured and knowledgeable religious leadership in prison allows for mutations of prison Islam to take the lead. Many Muslim inmates go through several transformations before they decide which form of Islam is suitable for them. Some converts are introduced to the Nation of Islam or the Moorish Science Temple of America, while others delve into other denominations such as Sunni and Shia Islam. The abundance of reading material allowed in most prison facilities, and limited oversight by religious authority creates confusion and opportunity for less than adequate interpretation of religious doctrine. Some of the material distributed in prison includes writings by Wahhabi (austere form of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia) clerics and other Salafi (fundamentalist and puritanical Islam) ideologues (Hamm, 2009).

The nature of prison conditions creates a void that may be filled by those willing to spend the time to inculcate vulnerable inmates and guide them through a radical path. The lack of organized and legitimate chaplaincy programs allows for various interpretations of any faith that is being proselytized to fill that void. Because the focus of this study is based on conversion to the Islamic faith, an investigation into the types of chaplaincy programs afforded to Muslim inmates needs to be assessed. An evaluation of the type of faith being practiced by Muslim inmates needs to be made by prison administrators to determine if additional oversight is needed to address any radical faith potential.
Review of the Literature

Conversion

In order to better support this discussion, it is essential to understand the type of radicalization being explored. An individual has to engage in a belief system or ideology in order to elevate those beliefs into radical views. Since the primary focus of this study is related to inmate converts to Islam, this paper will discuss the stages of the conversion process provided by Mark Hamm, professor of criminology, Indiana State University, and Lewis Rambo, professor of religion, San Francisco Theological Seminary. These two scholars provide information to identify the most common elements of conversion that may or may not be factors in the path toward radicalization.

Conversion to various forms of Islam is not a new phenomenon in U.S. prisons. “Non-traditional” faith groups such as the Moorish Science Temple, “a uniquely American form of Islam” founded by Timothy Drew, also known as Nobel Drew Ali, was based on a concept that African Americans descended from the Moors of North Africa. Another non-traditional faith group that gained popularity in U.S. prisons is the Nation of Islam, founded by Wallace Ford, also known as Wali Fard Muhammad. The Nation of Islam evolved from Moorish Science Temple ideology and became an inspiration and gateway to conversion for many African American inmates in U.S. prisons. Malcolm Little, also known as Malcolm X, converted to the Nation of Islam in prison through influence from his brother Reginald Little (Hamm, 2007). More inmates convert to a form of Islam in U.S. prisons than any other religion. The presence of Muslim inmates in America’s prisons has a long history dating back to the 1940’s. Inmate conversion to Islam and inmate radicalization are not always linked. Inmates that convert to Islam do not necessarily gravitate toward radical ideology, and religiously radical inmates are not always Muslim (Spearlt, 2016).

As inmates explore different faiths, they may gravitate toward a new faith of their choosing and engage in a conversion process. Religion can benefit inmates by creating an opportunity to break patterns of offending and provide options to find new directions in their life. Conversion to Islam creates an opportunity to belong to a larger group or “brotherhood” with clear and focused rules for admission (Jones and Narag, 2019). Some inmates convert because they need protection, others are motivated by a personal crisis. The primary reason for conversion is spiritual quest, searching for religious meaning to resolve discontent (Hamm, 2009). Conversion to non-Judeo-Christian faiths such as Islam has proved to be a positive step for the majority of inmates. Studies have shown that conversion to Islam increases self-discipline, creates positive interaction with staff, and is a significant part of rehabilitation (Hamm, 2009).

Mark Hamm identifies five factors associated with motivation for inmate conversion. He provides examples of these conversion factors as a result of conducting interviews with thirty prisoners that converted to one faith or another: The first factor is referred to as the Crisis Convert, someone experiencing a personal crisis or dealing with emotional trauma caused by
the loss of liberty. The second factor is referred to as the Protection-Seeking Convert, an individual motivated by the need for protection due to vulnerability during confinement. The third factor is the Searching Convert, someone lacking in religious knowledge but on a religious quest for a meaning in their life. The fourth factor, referred to as the Manipulating Convert, allows an inmate to acquire special privileges due to their religion. According to Hamm, none of the prisoners he interviewed had a manipulative reason to convert to another faith. The fifth factor, the Free-World Recruited Convert is someone that can be influenced by religious leadership outside of prison. Hamm explains that the fifth factor is not common and different correctional facilities have taken various steps to deal with the issue (Hamm, 2007).

The stages of conversion discussed by Lewis Rambo do not include factors related to inmate conversions but provide insight into another perspective on the conversion process. According to Rambo, there are seven stages of conversion: “Context” which covers cumulative life experiences. “Crisis” includes events that destabilize religious identity. “Quest” describes the search for helpful alternatives with faith choice. “Encounter” helps recognize a spiritual aspirer that is admired. “Interaction” explains spending time with the chosen religious community. “Commitment” describes accepting ritual obligation of membership. “Outcome” is associated with becoming engrossed and fully participating in a faith community (Harrow, 2002).

Since conversion in prison is multifarious, a key point in the conversion realm is to identify which inmates are “sincere” and genuine in their religious practices, and which ones are “insincere,” using their faith for manipulative reasons. Some inmates may convert to Islam because it provides certain advantages over other religions. For example, receiving halal meals because they may be superior quality to standard meals in prison. Muslim inmates are also allowed outside of their cells for longer periods in order to satisfy the five daily prayers required by Islam. Another advantage to becoming a Muslim in prison is creating relationships with a
chaplain or imam (prayer leader) in order to receive possible recommendations for parole (Jones and Narag, 2019).

Conversion among inmates is common, but radicalization toward violent extremism is rare, albeit potentially dangerous. A significant point to mention is that not all radicalization is negative, and that radicalization is not always the pathway to terrorism (Mulcahy et al., 2013). Many conflicting viewpoints exist regarding whether or not inmate radicalization is a threat to society. The Homeland Security Policy Institute and Critical Incident Analysis Prisoner Radicalization Task Force report concludes that there is insufficient information about inmate radicalization to gauge the threat of Islam in prison. However, the report states that Islam poses a threat of unknown degree to U.S. national security (Hamm, 2009).

**Stages of Radicalization**

There is no doubt that radicalization exists and has existed in the prison system for many decades. The elements of prison environment, especially in maximum security facilities, allow inmates to become increasingly susceptible to alternative thought and more prone to the incubation of radical ideology (Hamm, 2007). Radicalization of inmates in prison is not unique to Islam and has existed since the creation of penitentiaries. The majority of chaplains interviewed by researchers admit that religious extremism is common among inmates but does not possess the security threat that is reported by government agencies (Jones and Narag).

The studies listed herein provide a great deal of information regarding stages, phases, and mechanisms of the radicalization process. None of the information discussed includes research related to the radicalization process of incarcerated individuals. Although there may be implications that a selected process of radicalization using social and psychological mechanisms may be used to examine inmate radicalization through a process, no empirical data was discovered to solidify this assumption.

Many studies suggest that the process of radicalization can be commonly understood through a series of fixed stages. There have been a variety of studies that lay out the stages and give names to each individual phase. For example, stages of radicalization research identify as few as three stages, such as the “Quest for Significance” model described by Arie Kruglanski and his collaborators, and as many as six stages of the radicalization process, which is described by radicalization researchers, McCauley and Moskalenko. Both of these studies will be discussed in more detail. The terms used by each study to describe the stages vary but have a great deal of similarity in their focus.

Arie Kruglanski and his collaborators describe three determinants of radicalization as the evolution into violent extremism. The first determinant explains the need every individual has for personal significance. The second determinant is the narrative which directs an individual into their pursuit of significance. The third determinant is belonging to a network that validates the shared narrative of the group and provides rewards such as respect and admiration. The
research conducted by Kruglanski and his collaborators suggests that the same elements that drive violent extremism may assist in reversing the process (Kruglanski et al., 2019).

In 2007, the New York Police Department (NYPD) published a study called Radicalization in the West: The Home-grown Threat. This report establishes that “jihadist” ideology is the main driver of radicalization and introduces four stages of radicalization to explain the process in the following sequence: Pre-radicalization, Self-identification, Indoctrination, and Jihadization. The first stage, Pre-radicalization, happens when an individual is exposed to an atmosphere that allows he/she to be amenable to extremist ideology. There are several drivers within this stage that could be both intrinsic or extrinsic motivators. Intrinsic motivators could be a personal crisis, a form of trauma or discrimination. Extrinsic motivations can be external causes such as economic, religious or political factors. The second stage, Self-identification, happens when an individual aligns with a specific extremist cause and begins to change behavior or religious beliefs. The third stage, Indoctrination, occurs when an individual has accepted radical ideology and actively participates with a group of like-minded cohorts. The fourth and final stage, “Jihadization,” is direct involvement in terrorist activities. (Mulcahy et al., 2013).

Mulcahy and collaborators criticize the NYPD model for lacking “a full understanding of organizational, psychological, and social processes that direct individuals into radicalization and subsequent involvement in terrorist acts (Mulcahy et al., 2013). The NYPD report also received a great deal of criticism by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) which suggested the NYPD report was flawed and only examined acts committed by Muslims. The ACLU opined that the report was over-broad and discriminatory (German, 2013).

Another study titled Edges of Radicalization conducted by Scott Helfstein, West Point’s Combating Terrorism Center uses a four- stage process: Awareness, Interest, Acceptance, and Implementation. This study also mentions the difficulty in predicting the probability of individuals traversing through the stages of radicalization (Helfstein, 2016).

Fathali Moghaddam’s “Staircase to Terrorism” model, which uses floors as the phases of the radicalization process, begins on the “Ground Floor” and escalates to the “Fifth Floor” as the final phase. The Ground Floor explains the psychological interpretation of material conditions. Moghaddam describes a trajectory through different floors as a person escalates to the Fifth Floor and the final phase, where the individual decides to conduct a terrorist act, while avoiding prevention mechanisms (Moghaddam, 2013).

McCauley and Moskalenko derived a process they termed “Mechanisms of Radicalization” which include some of the same stages discussed in other studies. The research attempts to describe how the social psychological processes can drive average human beings into radicalization and violence. In their study, McCauley and Moskalenko use Usama bin Laden as an example of how a shy, pious youth traversed through six mechanisms of “individual radicalization” and became a terrorist. The mechanisms discussed are termed: Personal Grievance, Group Grievance, Love, Risk and Status, Slippery Slope, and Unfreezing. The study
concludes that although terrorists may follow varying ideologies, their paths to radicalization have been extremely similar (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2017).

Case Studies

Many studies have been conducted on whether the prison environment was a benefit or detriment to the inmates’ change in ideology. A study conducted in 1999 on terrorist prisoners in Belfast, Northern Ireland by Colin Crawford discovered that incarceration increased the inmates’ level of political awareness. This awareness led the majority of inmates (70%) to believe that a political settlement rather than violence was more beneficial for the conflict in Northern Ireland. This example offers possibilities of de-radicalization rather than increased radicalization in prison (Silke and Veldhuis, 2017).

Interviews conducted on terrorist inmates provide insight into many aspects of their path toward extremism. There are multiple variables that dictate how or why individuals may gravitate toward radical ideology, especially when incarcerated (Ilardi, 2013). A more recent study in the Philippines in 2016 by Arie Kruglanski and his collaborators focused on 29 prison inmates that were suspected of being associates of the Abu Sayyaf Group (U.S. Department of State designated terrorist organization). A personal data survey was conducted on the inmates along with a follow-up survey completed two years later. The study concluded that radicalization increased among the inmates after the two-year period and their score increased on three different measures of radicalization. The inmates were confined to the same compound where they were socially isolated (Silke and Veldhuis, 2017). The information gleaned from these interviews may be difficult to assess and compare to radical inmates in the United States due to varying circumstances.

The Acheson Review, “Findings of the Review of Islamic Extremism in Prison,” conducted by Ian Acheson in 2016 in England and Wales, concluded that Islamic Extremism was an issue of concern within prisons. The National Offender Management Service did not agree with the Acheson conclusion because of the low rate of recidivism associated with terrorist inmates in England and Wales. However, the Acheson Review dominated and recommended “separation centres” to segregate inmates from the remainder of the prison population. Some of the “Jihadi” inmates housed in the “centres” were interviewed and indicated that exposure to other inmates actually moderated the opinions of radical inmates (Acheson, 2016). According to John Horgan, a leading expert on radicalization, segregating radical inmates from the remainder of the prison population is not recommended. Horgan believes that segregation will increase radicalization rather than diminish it. According to Horgan, more focus should be placed on supervision, monitoring, and staff training (Silke and Veldhuis, 2017).

By examining terrorist organizations and extremist groups, one can learn about their intent and methods of operation. The Dutch based Hofstadgroup had many members that planned and conspired to conduct attacks (Silke and Veldhuis, 2017). The radicalization process of many of their members followed a path that can be examined by using some of the stages mentioned in this paper. The information provided on the Liberation Tamil Tigers Elam (LTTE) in
Sri Lanka demonstrated radicalization elements but focused on de-radicalization and reintegration of violent extremist offenders. Older examples of prison research in Northern Ireland and the Philippines explains the inconsistencies surrounding radicalization triggers. (Schuurman and Taylor, 2018). The combination of these examples emphasizes the lack of consistency in conducting research inside prison.

**Case study Analysis**

1. In 1991, at the age of seventeen, Aukai Collins, was convicted for his participation in an armed home invasion robbery and sentenced to confinement at the California Youth Authority (CYA), currently known as the California Department of Justice and Rehabilitation (CDCR), Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ). Collins grew up in a broken home with absentee parents. He was exposed to violence at a young age due to his mother’s association with outlaw motorcycle gangs. After his mother’s murder in 1982, he lived with a family friend and subsequently moved in with his grandparents. Collins began a life of crime and delinquency that escalated into armed robberies that led to his incarceration at CYA. While in custody, Collins met a Muslim inmate that invited him to a class on Islam being held at the prison chapel (Collins, 2006). Collins eventually converted to Islam while in custody at CYA. After his release from custody, Collins returned to San Diego, California and began attending a local mosque where he encountered members of a group called Tablighi Jamaat (a proselytizing missionary movement). Collins believed that the San Diego mosque’s members were pacifists and he did not agree with their ideology. He later met a veteran of the “Afghan jihad” and was convinced he needed to go to the region to fight the enemies of Islam. In 1993, Collins traveled to Chechnya and eventually Afghanistan searching for “a true jihad.” (Lempinen, 2002). Collins died from a medical condition on July 19, 2016.

2. In 1997, Kevin Lamar James, a former 76th Street Crips gang member from South Central Los Angeles was convicted for his participation in an armed robbery and sentenced to ten years in prison. James converted to Islam while serving his time at California State Prison (CSP), Tehachapi. James initially converted to a traditional form of American Islam (Nation of Islam) but found their teachings lacking inspiration and began drifting to an extreme Sunni Muslim prison group called Jami’yyat Ul-Islam Is-Saheeh (JIS). James began evangelizing the JIS message that it was incumbent upon Muslims to fight the enemies of Islam (Hamm, 2009). In 2003, James was transferred to CSP, Sacramento, also known as New Folsom Prison where he became the leader of JIS. While at New Folsom Prison, he self-radicalized and began distributing a handwritten document called “JIS Protocol,” which included a message that justified the killing of infidels. The Protocol document stated that the United States military and the State Israel are corrupting influences that Sunni Muslims must attack (Cozzens, 2017). By 2004, James increased his popularity and had a “following of several dozen inmates.” In November 2004, James met Levar Haney Washington, a twenty-five-year-old inmate and recent convert to Islam. Washington was a member of the Rollin’ Sixties Crips, a rival gang also from South Central Los Angeles. James subsequently devised a plan to conduct attacks at military recruiting facilities and Jewish temples in the Los Angeles area (Hamm, 2009).
3. In 2003, Levar Haney Washington, a former Rollin’ Sixties Crips gang member from South Central Los Angeles was convicted for his participation in a robbery and sentenced to three years in prison. Washington converted to Islam while at New Folsom Prison and subsequently met Kevin James in November 2004, while in custody (Hamm, 2009). James influenced Washington and introduced him to the JIS teachings. Washington was convinced of the JIS ideology and swore an oath of allegiance to James as his spiritual mentor. Washington was released from prison at the end of 2004 and was given directions by James to recruit like-minded individuals that would agree to conduct attacks. After his release from custody, Washington recruited two individuals to assist with a terrorist plot, Gregory Vernon Patterson, a recent convert to Islam and Hamad Riaz Samana, a Muslim immigrant of Pakistani decent, both twenty-one years old at the time of recruitment. Washington convinced Patterson and Samana to conduct gas station robberies to fund their plot. During his sentencing, Washington expressed to the court that members of JIS wanted to wage war against the United States because they opposed U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, and his stance was impacted by the tragedies effecting the Muslim world (Cozzens, 2017).

4. In 1999, Michael C. Finton, a former fry-cook at a fish restaurant, from Decatur, Illinois was convicted for committing robbery and aggravated assault where he injured a store clerk during the commission of the crime. Finton served his prison sentence at Lawrence Correctional Facility (LCF) in Sumner, Illinois from 1999-2005. Finton converted to Islam and absorbed radical ideology while in prison. Finton admired Anwar Al-Aulaiki, a known radical Muslim ideologue and John Walker Lindh, also known as the “American Taliban.” A search of his vehicle by law enforcement yielded a letter where he expressed that he had dreams of becoming a “shahid” or martyr (Johnson, 2009). In 2009, Finton traveled from Decatur to Springfield, Illinois to acquire a truck that he believed contained an explosive device. He drove the truck and parked it if front of the Paul Findley Federal Building and Courthouse in Springfield. Finton attempted to detonate the inert device with a cellular telephone that was supplied by Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) undercover agents. The device did not explode and Finton was arrested for attempted murder and attempts to use a weapon of mass destruction. Finton was convicted and sentenced to 28 years in prison. The plot was an undercover operation orchestrated by the FBI. Finton stated that he hoped the planned attack would force the United States military to pull out of Iraq and Afghanistan (Federal Bureau of Investigation, May 2011).

**Methodology**

Sufficient empirical data regarding structured and organized chaplaincy programs in United States correctional institutions does not exist. In order to gather information for this paper and test the hypothesis: *the absence of a moderate and structured Muslim chaplaincy program throughout U.S. prisons allows inmates to gravitate toward radical ideology to fill that void, descriptive data will be compiled for analysis. There are many limitations and obstacles associated with gathering the appropriate information to generate results and arrive at a reasonable conclusion related to the unanswered questions in this study.*
Public source information revealed telephone numbers and limited information regarding chaplaincy programs in United States correctional institutions. Telephone contact was made with appropriate prison staff and human resources divisions to retrieve data associated with the criteria for the hiring of paid chaplains along with volunteer chaplains. Informal interviews were conducted with chaplains and Community Resources Managers that oversee chaplain programs in certain prison facilities.

In order to determine whether or not the existence or absence of a chaplaincy program impacted the radicalization of inmates, the following methodology was applied: Identification of individuals that converted to Islam and subsequently radicalized in a prison. Contact with appropriate prison administration personnel at the respective prisons where the selected inmates were incarcerated to determine if Muslim chaplaincy programs existed during the time of their incarceration. The cases selected were related to the following four individuals: Aukai Collins, Kevin Lamar James, Levar Haney Washington, and Michael C. Finton. These cases were selected because the individuals involved met the criteria sought for this study: The individuals converted to Islam while in a United States prison and subsequently embraced radical ideology. James and Washington were prosecuted for conspiring to commit a terrorist act in Los Angeles, California (Hamm, 2008). Finton was prosecuted for attempting to commit a terrorist act in Springfield, Illinois (Federal Bureau of Investigation, May 2011). Collins did not conspire nor attempt a terrorist act but travelled to Chechnya and later Afghanistan to participate in combat against occupying Russian forces to defend Islam (Lempinen, 2002).

Telephone interviews with appropriate prison administrators and staff were conducted to determine the presence and absence of structured Muslim chaplaincy programs at selected correctional facilities. Focus was placed on certain years when the individuals related to this study were incarcerated to determine if Muslim chaplaincy programs existed at that time.

Telephone contact was made with staff members at the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) in order to obtain information regarding the existence of Muslim chaplaincy programs from 1991-1993, during the time Aukai Collins was incarcerated. Contact was made with the Staff Services Manager and information was obtained regarding chaplaincy programs.

Telephone contact was made with staff members at CDCR Headquarters, Sacramento, CA in order to obtain information regarding the existence of Muslim chaplaincy programs from 1997-2003, during the time Kevin Lamar James was incarcerated at California State Prison (CSP), Tehachapi. Staff members directed the inquiry to the Chief of Chaplains who explained the structure of the CDCR chaplain program. The Chief of Chaplains also provided information on the chaplaincy program at CSP Sacramento during the time Levar Haney Washington was incarcerated, from 2003-2005.

Telephone contact was made with the staff members at the Illinois Department of Corrections in order to obtain information regarding the existence of Muslim chaplaincy programs from 1999-2005, during the time Michael C. Finton was incarcerated at Lawrence
Correctional Facility (LCF), Sumner, Illinois. Staff members directed the inquiry to the Lead Chaplain at LCF who explained the structure of the LCF Muslim chaplain program.

**Findings**

Telephone contact with staff members at the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) resulted in the following information: The Staff Services Manager responsible for chaplaincy programs explained that DJJ employed full-time chaplains of various faiths but was unsure if Muslim chaplains were employed during the time Aukai Collins was incarcerated from 1991-1993. The DJJ representative stated they did not have volunteer Muslim chaplain positions during that time frame. No information regarding the structure of the chaplaincy program available to Muslim inmates that were housed at DJJ facilities from 1991-1993 was available.

Telephone contact with staff members and the Chief of Chaplains at CDCR Headquarters in Sacramento, CA resulted in the following information: The Chief of Chaplains explained that there was a Muslim chaplaincy program at CSP Tehachapi during the time Kevin Lamar James was incarcerated from 1997-2003. The Chief of Chaplains also provided information on the chaplaincy program at CSP Sacramento during the time Levar Haney Washington was incarcerated, from 2003-2005. The Chief of Chaplains clarified that there was a chaplaincy program during the time Washington was incarcerated and provided the name of the retired prison chaplain employed at CSP Sacramento at that time. The Chief of Chaplains stated there were thirty-two full-time Muslim chaplain positions employed by CDCR for the thirty-five prison facilities. The chaplains are hired based on the guidelines set by CDCR. He also explained that the volunteer chaplain program did not have the same criteria set by CDCR hiring guidelines for chaplains. The Chief of Chaplains added that volunteer Muslim chaplains are very limited and rarely provided assistance at state prison facilities.

Contact with the Illinois Department of Corrections, Lawrence Correctional Facility (LCF), Sumner, Illinois, resulted in the following information: The Lead Chaplain explained that LCF did not have an employed Muslim chaplain or a Muslim chaplain program at the time Michael C. Finton was incarcerated from 1999-2005. He clarified that there may have been a volunteer Muslim chaplain at LCF but was unable to confirm the information. The Lead Chaplain stated Muslim inmate volunteers facilitate the Friday (Juma) sermons and are given a religious manuscript to follow. He also stated that corrections officers are present at the chapel during prayer sermons for all faith services.

The information obtained for this paper from correctional facilities was not corroborated by other sources and is purely anecdotal. This inquiry indicates that there is lack of structure and consistency in U.S. chaplaincy programs, and absence of automated information retrieval mechanisms available to the chaplains and their staff.
Empirical Analysis

The qualitative research presented in this paper provides examples of individuals that converted to Islam in prison, subsequently traversed through a radicalization process, absent any clear guidance from a Muslim Chaplain, and became immersed in violent extremist ideology. Kevin James, the leader of a prison group named Jamiyyat Ul-Islam Is-Saheeh (JIS) converted to Islam in New Folsom Prison and indoctrinated several inmates. James designated himself as a spiritual leader in prison and was able to spread a doctrine of hate, absent of oversight or repercussions by prison authorities. The rhetoric spewed by James convinced Levar Washington, a former inmate at New Folsom prison, to plan attacks on military recruiting centers and synagogues in Los Angeles. Many other inmates in prison have followed a similar path and absorbed teachings of a spiritual leader without recognizing the extreme canon that was being spread. The lack of moderate religious authority in the prison environment will continue to exacerbate a problem that does not have many solutions (Hamm, 2009).

Consistent Muslim Chaplain hiring criteria for all correctional facilities throughout the United States does not exist. The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) has set hiring guidelines and minimum qualifications for Muslim chaplain applicants. The education requirement includes the following: Completion of at least two years of Islamic Religious studies, including knowledge of the Holy Quran, Islamic history, in any masjid (place of worship) or college. The applicant needs to complete the equivalent of one year of full-time supervised clinical or field training in the community. The training must include Islamic religious counseling and guidance, and religious education. Completion of no less than two years’ experience as an imam (prayer leader) in the Islamic religion in a public or private institution https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/careers/.

Limitations

The material compiled for this study relied on public sources and many writings from popular literature regarding prisons, radicalization, extremism, and terrorism. The focus of this study was limited to individuals that did not espouse radical ideology when they entered prison but converted to a form of Islam in a U.S. prison and subsequently embraced radical thought. There is insufficient background information about the four individuals selected for this study. Data regarding their upbringing, familial connections, education, employment history, and mental health status was not readily available in the literature. Lack of access to prison records in order to verify documented chaplain contact or lack of contact with inmates also proved to be another limitation.

Some of the obstacles to gathering the information needed for this study included difficulty in locating the appropriate staff member responsible for chaplaincy programs in certain prisons. Some of the limitations included lack of knowledgeable staff regarding prior existence of chaplaincy programs. Personnel at certain facilities were not familiar with the length of time an existing chaplaincy program had been implemented.
Mark Hamm’s book, the Spectacular Few includes a database that lists fifty-one cases involving both domestic and international cases of terrorism. The case information is based on media accounts, prisoner memoirs, open sources, government reports, and court documents. The database concentrates on offenders that radicalized in prison and subsequently attempted or executed a terrorist act while incarcerated or after their release (Hamm, 2013). Unfortunately, many of these cases are associated to individuals outside the United States. Sufficient information for some for the cases listed could not be retrieved through open source searches in order to verify and corroborate information regarding conversion and subsequent radicalization of the offenders. The limitations listed allowed for only four individuals to be examined for this study.

**Policy Implications and Recommendations**

Fear of terrorism and Muslims in general has impacted objective investigation into Islam in prison. There have been three different congressional hearings regarding the threat posed by inmates radicalizing in prison, but many questions remain unanswered. This uncorroborated fear has been detrimental to making policy decisions in the area of corrections. The alarmist position regarding Islam and Muslim in prisons has been contradictory and the research has been absent of social and scientific methods (Spearlt, 2014).

This fear of inmate radicalization has also distorted risk assessments and allowed policymakers to focus on a disproportionate presence of the problem even if alternative information states that the problem may be insignificant. The fear-related discourse affects policymakers and also impacts the scholarly debate on radicalization. Although inmate radicalization has received a great deal of academic and political attention in recent years, there is very limited empirical evidence-based knowledge on the topic to clearly understand its implications in order to generate sound and justified policies (Veldhuis, 2016). Funding for research supports “short-term policy-oriented” projects instead of long-term evidence-based theory-driven research. Ultimately, suboptimal policy will be implemented at the different stages of the policy process, driven by fear-based decisions. This discourse may also negatively impact deradicalization and rehabilitation efforts. Fear-related policy discussions are not beneficial when creating policy regarding suspected terrorists, their detention, and subsequent release into the community (Veldhuis, 2016).

A vast amount of research exists on the detention and rehabilitation of “regular” inmates but is seldom used as an empirical foundation for inmate radicalization studies. Studies related to supermax prisons and their impact on terrorist inmates are rarely used when debating terrorism detention policies. Unsubstantiated information related to high conversion rates of Muslim prisoners and security threats posed by inmates is constantly recycled through the research literature which reinforces the fear-related policy debate (Veldhuis, 2016).

Lack of funding for religious services and the lack of standardized Muslim chaplaincy programs for all state and federal prisons have allowed inmates to conduct religious services on their own, without oversight from chaplains to maintain moderation. In keeping with American
Correctional Association standards, maximum security institutions must maintain the presence of one chaplain per 500 inmates. The number of Muslims in the correctional workforce is very slim and does not correlate with the large number of Muslim inmate conversions. Hiring Muslim American corrections officers, councilors and other staff will help with the “outsider” status of Muslim inmates and feelings of marginalization. It is recommended that Muslim Americans are encouraged to join the correctional workforce to create diversity in the prison work environment. Correctional intelligence sharing with gang intelligence officers and other law enforcement personnel would help identify inmates that may be radicalizing (Hamm, 2007).

Based on the information collected for this study, much of the research regarding radicalization and its connection to terrorism is anecdotal and lacking in empirical data. A study that quantifies an accurate percentage of inmates that radicalize in prison overall is needed. It is recommended that a method is also created to identify and assess radicalization based on certain criteria that can be measured. A nationwide database regarding the structure of chaplain programs at all correctional institutions, including local, state, federal, tribal, and privately-run facilities is needed. Providing consistent non-violent faith-based education must be the standard throughout the United States. Law enforcement organizations should be able to access records related to chaplain programs, especially if they are municipal, state, or federal programs at the government funded institutions. The Association of Muslim Chaplains and the Muslim Chaplain’s Association are both non-profit organizations that have a wide range of interpretations regarding Islamic teachings. There are other Muslim chaplain organizations that vary in their teachings of Islam as well. Because of the subjectivity of faith practice, it will be challenging to direct any religious organization on how to provide faith instruction and make it consistent. Additional investigation into this topic is necessary to validate an outcome.

**Conclusion**

This study’s attempt to show a connection between the religious radicalization of Muslim inmates in U.S. prisons and their trajectory into terrorist activity proved more complex than imagined. The information available regarding radicalization and inmate radicalization has been mostly subjective and lacking in empirical data. Theories of inmate radicalization are entirely based on limited case studies of radicalization within prison. The evaluation of motivating factors for radicalization has primarily been borrowed from popular literature (Silke and Veldhuis, 2017).

As previously discussed, radicalization is not always the gateway into terrorism. Many alternative opinions could be considered radical by the opposition. Radical ideas associated with Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King have played positive roles within our communities. Although inmate radicalization does not always culminate in violence or terrorism, it is important to employ effective approaches to mitigate radically inspired inmates who have the potential for extremism and terrorism. The possibility for inmates to radicalize does not diminish upon release from prison. It is important to consider the potential for post-release radicalization. Inmates may face a variety of challenges that they cannot cope with and
become vulnerable to influences afforded by extremist groups or individuals (Mulcahy et al, 2013).

After reviewing articles and studies conducted by known experts in the field of radicalization and inmate radicalization, such as Arie Kruglanski, Tinka Veldhuis, and Mark Hamm, it is evident that there is no conclusive solution provided to eradicate radicalization and violent extremism. At best, the experts offer multiple theories on why radicalization occurs and make recommendations on solutions that vary across the board. The researchers do agree that more empirical studies need to be conducted to improve the quality of the results, and not relying on anecdotal information to substantiate research outcomes (Hamm, 2013). Studying and absorbing the vast amount of information collected for this paper, it is evident that a well-balanced approach to identifying research objectives is needed to achieve some of the goals desired. Identifying indicators of radicalization alone may not be sufficient. Attempting to understand why and how radicalization may be the pathway into violent extremism is an ongoing and arduous process.

Until a measurement is developed to clearly identify a causal link between inmate radicalization and terrorism, there is no way to predict whether or not a radicalized inmate will conduct a terrorist act. Therefore, we are faced with an enormous conundrum regarding whether or not we can make predictions regarding radicalization and its link with terrorism (Spearlt, 2014).

Studies related to inmate radicalization and violent extremism have been conducted throughout North America, Europe, Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Many of the inmate interviews conducted by researchers have occurred in countries where there are less restrictions placed on research teams by prison administrations. Because Islam is an international religion, many prison administrations across the globe dealing with the radicalization of Muslim inmates are impacted. It is important to consider building strong relationships with prison administrations on an international level in order to share research information and best practices regarding the management and rehabilitation of religiously radicalized inmates (Veldhuis, 2014).

The nature of prison conditions creates a void that may be filled by those willing to spend the time to inculcate vulnerable inmates and guide them through a radical path. The lack of organized and legitimate chaplaincy programs allows for various interpretations of any faith that is being proselytized to fill that void. Because the focus of this study is based on conversion to the Islamic faith, an investigation into the types of chaplaincy programs afforded to Muslim inmates needs to be assessed. An evaluation of the type of faith being practiced by Muslim inmates needs to be made by prison administrators to determine if additional oversight is needed to address any radical faith potential (Hamm, 2007).

The presence of a structured and moderate Muslim chaplaincy program will be successful only if Muslim inmates are actually attending chapel for Friday (Juma) prayer, and Islamic studies, or are receiving appropriate faith literature for guidance. Fringe elements may
not choose to attend services conducted by a moderate chaplain and prefer to navigate their faith without direction from institution staff. As with Kevin James and his accomplice, Levar Washington, they followed non-traditional teachings of Islam and were not impacted by the presence or absence of a Muslim chaplaincy program. The hypothesis in this paper attempted to answer a very challenging question. Many hurdles were encountered while attempting to gather information on the existence or absence of chaplaincy programs. The lack of readily accessible and validated information regarding Muslim chaplain programs introduced limitations to test the hypothesis. Nevertheless, the anecdotal information in this study indicates that structured Muslim chaplain programs will benefit correctional institutions in the United States, although it may prove to be an arduous task.

Implementing structured and consistent chaplaincy programs will be challenging due to the structure of the prison systems in the United States. Local jails, state prisons, federal prisons, tribal prisons, military prisons, and privately-run facilities all have varying rules and regulations. Given all the obstacles present to reduce the spread of radical ideology in correctional systems, an ardent effort must be made to create a comprehensive approach to mitigate the spread of religious radicalization among inmates. An evaluation of the type of faith being practiced by Muslim inmates needs to be made by prison administrators to determine if additional oversight is needed to address any radical faith potential.
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https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/careers/


