



## Prisoner Radicalization: Assessing the Threat in U.S. Correctional Institutions

by Mark S. Hamm, Ph.D.

Years from now when criminologists write their textbooks on American terrorism, the name Kevin Lamar James may appear alongside such infamous figures as Timothy McVeigh, Ramzi Yousef and Osama bin Laden.

Kevin James is scheduled to be sentenced in February 2009 for conspiring to wage war against the United States. James pleaded guilty to the charge after he and three other men were indicted in 2005 for plotting to attack U.S. military facilities, Israeli government facilities and Jewish synagogues in Los Angeles.<sup>1</sup>

At the time of the indictments, the FBI described the plot as the most operationally advanced since Sept. 11.<sup>2</sup> Even more troubling is that James designed the plot while serving time in a California state prison.

Prisoners — especially those in gangs — have long recruited other inmates to act

as their collaborators upon release. James, however, was the first gang member to radicalize inmates into joining a prison gang with a terrorist agenda.

A recent study funded by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and conducted by this author took a closer look at the Kevin James case as part of a larger study on radicalization in prison. My study examined trends in prisoner radicalization — or the process by which prisoners adopt extreme views, including beliefs that violent measures must be taken for political or religious purposes — in U.S. correctional institutions.<sup>3</sup>

The two-year study included a comprehensive literature review and approximately 140 hours of interviews with 15 prison chaplains, nine gang intelligence officers and 30 inmates incarcerated for violent crimes in Florida and California. I examined the conversions of inmates to

non-Judeo-Christian religions — Islam, Buddhism, Native American faiths, Black Hebrew Israelism (a black supremacy group) and those preferred by white supremacists (i.e., Odinism/Asatru, Teutonic Wicca and Christian Identity) — and the role of prison gangs in inmates’ spiritual lives.

My research found that:

- Although only a very small percentage of converts turn radical beliefs into terrorist action, the James case is not an isolated event. Gang intelligence officers in Florida and California reported having uncovered potential terrorist plots inside prisons.
- Prisoners who convert to a non-Judeo-Christian religion are primarily searching for meaning and identity. In most cases, the conversion experience makes a meaningful contribution to prisoner rehabilitation.
- Radicalization in prisons is linked to prison gangs.
- Inmate leadership is the most important factor in prisoner radicalization.

### The Man Behind the Plot

Although looking at one man’s story is admittedly anecdotal, understanding some of James’ life may help inform our understanding of how U.S. prisoners are radicalized.

James grew up in South Central Los Angeles during the urban crack epidemic of the late 1980s.<sup>4</sup> During his teenage years, he was a member of the 76th Street Crips gang. In 1997, at the age of 21, James began serving a 10-year sentence at the California State Prison in Tehachapi for robbery.

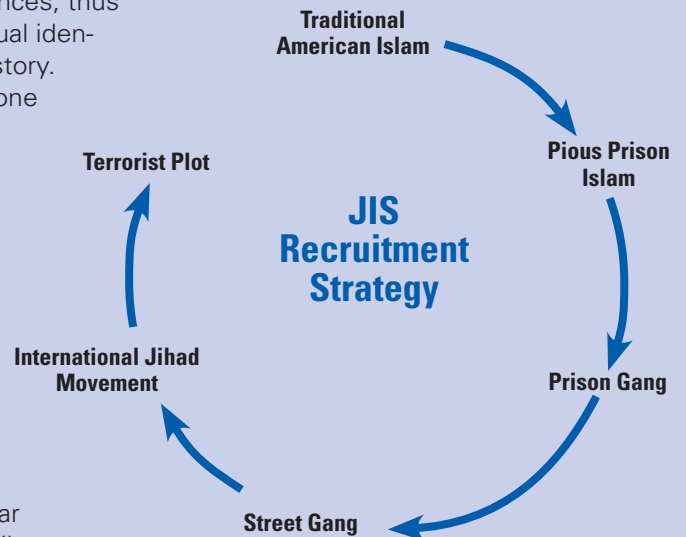
While in prison, James followed a traditional form of American Islam (Nation of Islam). However, he soon found its teachings uninteresting and drifted toward a fringe group of Sunni Muslims within the correctional institution, who were known as Jam’iyyat Ul-Islam Is-Saheed (the Assembly of Authentic Islam) or JIS.

### LINKING PRISONER RADICALIZATION AND TERRORISM: THE JIS CASE

The link between prisoner radicalization and terrorism can be seen in the JIS case, particularly in the way the group recruited and operated. JIS began with a traditional form of American Islam (Nation of Islam). This was used to create an alternative religious vision expressed in a pious but mutating form of Sunni-inspired “Prison Islam,” which encompasses gang values and fierce intra-group loyalties based on “cut-and-paste” interpretations of the Koran.<sup>5</sup> This vision provided JIS members with identity, meaning and a form of collective resistance.

So powerful was the attachment to this form of Prison Islam that two JIS devotees — members of rival gangs — were able to overcome past grievances, thus fusing JIS’s spiritual identity to its gang history.

While on parole, one of the devotees took the group’s terrorist plot to the community and turned to a street gang for firearms. Additional members were recruited from the international jihad movement inspired by the war in Iraq. All the while, the JIS plot continued to be directed by its charismatic leader, who remained incarcerated in maximum-security custody.



James brought JIS’s message to new inmates at Tehachapi, preaching that it was the duty of Muslims to violently attack enemies of Islam, including the U.S. government. He eventually took control of JIS and began distributing a handwritten document called the “JIS Protocol,” which described his personal beliefs, including his justification for killing “infidels,” and required prospective members to swear obedience to him and to keep the group’s existence confidential. James spread the “JIS Protocol” through-

out the California prison system using smuggled letters — or “kites” — and other mail and phone calls initiated by his old gang, the 76th Street Crips. In 2003, he was transferred to the maximum-security California State Prison in Sacramento — also known as New Folsom Prison — where he continued to spread his protocol.

By 2004, James had developed a following of several dozen inmates. In November of that year, he met Levar Washington, a 25-year-old African-American, also from South Central Los Angeles, who had been sentenced to three years for robbery.

Washington was a member of the Rollin’ Sixties Crips, an enemy gang of the 76th Street Crips, who had recently converted to Islam.<sup>6</sup> James directed Washington — who would be out on parole in a few weeks — to recruit five people without felony records from the community, acquire firearms and find people with explosives expertise once he was on parole.

### The Sept. 11 Plot of 2005

Six months later, in May 2005, Washington returned to South Central Los Angeles, where he recruited 21-year-old Gregory Patterson, an African-American who had recently converted to Islam, and 21-year-old Hammad Samana, a Pakistani who taught Arabic at a local mosque. Neither had criminal records.

James’ plan was to attack a target symbolic of the Iraq war: a U.S. Army recruiting office. The planned date of the attack was also symbolic: four years to the day after the Sept. 11 attacks. The men began a spree of gas station robberies to fund their efforts. The group planned its activities from an apartment in South Central Los Angeles. Yet unlike other post-Sept. 11 plots, the JIS attack was directed from prison — James was calling the shots.

Although JIS’s goal was “to die for Allah in a jihad,”<sup>7</sup> the members’ criminal skills did not match their ideological fervor. On June 5, 2005, investigators from the

Torrance (Calif.) Police Department received a tip concerning the recent robberies. In one of the heists, a robber had left his cell phone at the scene, ultimately leading to the indictment of James and the three men.

The indictments led to a combined state and federal investigation of radical Islamic prison gangs in California, which found that JIS still had a presence in the state’s correctional system.

### A Closer Look at Radicalization

In the NIJ-funded study, I asked prison chaplains, gang intelligence officers and prisoners open-ended questions about the number and types of non-Judeo-Christian faith groups within the prison systems and the conversion process, including motivations for converting.

Two-thirds of the 30 inmates in the study belonged to prison gangs, and most of them had been in street gangs before incarceration. Each had experienced some sort of prison conversion, be it to Islam (traditional and American versions), Black Hebrew Israelism, Buddhism, Native American faiths, Hinduism, Christian Identity, Odinism or Wicca. Several prisoners were affiliated with JIS at New Folsom Prison.

Here are the study’s main findings.

#### Why Prisoners Convert

Although some of the 30 prisoners converted because of the need for protection, the primary motivation I found was spiritual “searching” — seeking religious meaning to interpret and resolve discontent.<sup>8</sup>

The prisoners took on several new roles in their quest for meaning and identity. Among the prisoners I interviewed, it was not unusual for a young African-American prisoner who began his incarceration with no religious affiliation to start attending Baptist services in the chapel, convert to the Nation of Islam, and then convert to Black Hebrew Israelism and finally to Sunni Islam. Many reported that their conversions

were inspired not only by sacred texts, rituals and practices but also by literature, hip-hop music and the media.

The study confirms the important role social networks play in how people are recruited into new religious movements.<sup>9</sup> The prisoners I interviewed typically converted to non-Judeo-Christian religions upon the advice of their parents, cell mates and fellow gang members. My research revealed that although some inmates may be inspired by foreign terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda, these groups were not directly involved in the radicalization process.

### How Conversion Affects Behavior

The chaplains I interviewed maintained that for the overwhelming majority of inmates who convert to non-Judeo-Christian faiths, the experience increases self-discipline and helps them interact in a positive way with other inmates and staff, thereby making a meaningful contribution to their rehabilitation.<sup>10</sup>

“After they are here for a while, some inmates come to understand the need for a higher power,” said one of the chaplains. “Some start studying and eventually they convert to a religion. You can see the difference almost immediately. You see the difference in their comportment, in their tolerance of others.”

But the study also found the potential for ideologically inspired criminality, particularly in overcrowded maximum-security prisons where there are few rehabilitation programs, a shortage of chaplains to provide religious guidance and serious gang problems.<sup>11</sup> These prisons were more vulnerable to prisoner radicalization and terrorist groups that infiltrate, recruit and operate behind the walls.

### The Gang Problem

The gang intelligence officers I interviewed agreed that most inmates are radicalized by other radical inmates and not by outside influences.

## *Prisoner radicalization grows in the secretive underground of inmate subcultures through prison gangs and extremist interpretations of religious doctrines that inspire ideologies of intolerance, hatred and violence.*

The research found that radicalization was based on a prison gang model. Gang dynamics have become very complex in recent years, with members now crossing racial lines to increase their numbers for protection, often using religious “call-outs” — or spoken orders for prisoners to report to a service in the chapel — to meet and do gang business.

My interviews revealed that former rivals, like the Crips and the Bloods, have joined forces under Islamic banners. Some Neo-Nazis have become Sunni Muslims. Meanwhile, conflict within inmate Islam is growing as various factions of the faith compete for followers, pitting the Nation of Islam against Sunnis, Sunnis against Shiites, and Prison Islam — which encompasses gang values and fierce intra-group loyalties based on “cut-and-paste” interpretations of the Koran — against all the other forms of inmate Islam.

The men in the JIS case, in fact, acted like a prison gang. They not only had their own hierarchy, code of conduct and secret communication system, but also their own collective identity. This gave them a shared purpose and sense of camaraderie, leading to a form of collective resistance against the U.S. government. The gang intelligence officers I interviewed characterized JIS as a small, clandestine group that operated below the radar.

### The Role of Charismatic Leaders

The study found that prisoners are radicalized through a process of one-on-one proselytizing by charismatic leaders. Charismatic leaders targeted the most vulnerable — inmates who had spent or will spend much of their lives incarcerated under maximum

security and who no longer had contact with family. Angry and embittered by their circumstances, these inmates often adopted anti-authoritarian attitudes and were easily pressed into a gang, where they met an inmate leader who promised hope. Indeed, I discovered that charismatic leadership was more important than other commonly cited factors associated with prisoner radicalization.

## Radicalization and Terrorist Recruitment

The radicalization of prisoners is a problem unlike any other faced by correctional administrators today — or at any other time in history. It grows in the secretive underground of inmate subcultures through prison gangs and extremist interpretations of religious doctrines that inspire ideologies of intolerance, hatred and violence.

As discussed further in my final report, one of the veteran chaplains said, “Today’s inmates are more dissatisfied with the government than they were 10 years ago or even 20 years ago. The seeds of dissatisfaction are everywhere. Inmates display more aggressive posturing. They cluster on the yard by religion. Racism is rampant. They find a new religion in prison [that] reinforces their opposition to authority. Some of these inmates are very fertile ground for jihad.”

The fertile ground for radicalization — as the chaplain described — certainly does exist. However, my extensive literature review revealed that moving from radicalization to actual recruitment for terrorism is a rare event. Only a small percentage of converts to white supremacy groups

and to Islam — primarily, fresh converts, the newly pious, with an abundance of emotion and feeling — turn radical beliefs into terrorist action.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that it is not the sheer number of prisoners following extremist interpretations of religious doctrines that poses a threat; rather, it is the potential for small groups of radicals to form support networks for terrorist goals upon release.<sup>13</sup>

Based on my research, here are some recommendations that may help address radicalization and terrorist recruitment in prison:

**Hire chaplains.** Budgets for religious services in correctional facilities across the country have recently been slashed, thereby creating opportunities for radical prisoners to operate on their own, independent of the oversight of chaplains who might help ensure moderation.<sup>14</sup> In California, there is one chaplain for every 2,000 inmates, and in some Texas prisons the ratio is one to 2,500.<sup>15</sup> Colorado and Virginia have completely cut their state prison chaplain systems.<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that the American Correctional Chaplains Association calls for one chaplain per 500 inmates.

**Diversify corrections personnel.** Islam is currently the fastest-growing religion among prisoners in the U.S.<sup>17</sup> Prisoners participating in the study reported that when there were not many Muslims on staff, Muslim inmates felt like “outsiders” and the conditions that support the growth of Prison Islam were strengthened. Hiring Muslim American guards, counselors, chaplains and especially wardens might help reduce this perceived outsider status.

**Provide training.** Staff training on the recruitment activities of gangs and shifting power relations among prisoners should be provided.

**Increase our knowledge base.** Agencies should continue to support research on the various facets of prison culture that lead to radicalization and terrorist recruitment,

---

## About the Author

Mark Hamm is a professor of criminology at Indiana State University and a former prison administrator in the Arizona Department of Corrections. He has published widely in the areas of terrorism, hate crime and prisoner subcultures. Hamm’s most recent book, *Terrorism as Crime: From Oklahoma City to Al-Qaeda and Beyond*, is based on his 2005 NIJ report, *Crimes Committed by Terrorist Groups: Theory, Research, and Prevention*.

asking such fundamental questions as: What role will prison overcrowding play? How would the elimination of prison chaplains impact the issue? And is it possible to create "radicalization-free zones" in prison?

NCJ 224085

### For More Information

- Hamm, M.S., *Terrorist Recruitment in American Correctional Institutions: An Exploratory Study of Non-Traditional Faith Groups*, final report submitted to the National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC: December 2007 (NCJ 220957), available at <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/220957.pdf>.

### Notes

1. Reza H.G., "Man Sentenced to 22 Years in L.A.-Area Terror Plot," *Los Angeles Times*, June 23, 2008, available at <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jun/23/local/me-cell24>; and Glover, S., "2 Plead Guilty to Southland Terror Plot," *Los Angeles Times*, December 15, 2007.
2. Harris, R., "Kevin James and the JIS Conspiracy," *The Enemy Within*, FRONTLINE, October 10, 2006, available at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/enemywithin/reality/james.html>.
3. The research used the FBI's definition of prisoner radicalization. *A Review of the Federal Bureau of Prisons' Selection of Muslim Religious Service Providers*, Washington, DC: Office of the Inspector General, U.S. Department of Justice, 2004: 85.
4. Information on the James case came from interviews conducted by the author and from these sources: Harris, "Kevin James and the JIS Conspiracy"; Marquez, J., "Officials Checking Whether Alleged L.A. Plot Linked to Prison Gang," *Associated Press*, August 18, 2005; Los Angeles Times Staff, "4 Indicted in Los Angeles Terror Probe," *Los Angeles Times*, September 1, 2005; and *U.S. v. Kevin James*, No. 05-CR-214 Plea Agreement-Attachment A, filed December 14, 2007. For additional information, see Hamm, M.S., *Terrorist Recruitment in American Correctional Institutions: An Exploratory Study of Non-Traditional Faith Groups*, final report submitted to the National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC: December 2007 (NCJ 220957), available at <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/220957.pdf>.
5. Knox, G.W., "Melanics: A Gang Profile Analysis," *Journal of Gang Research* 9 (2002): 1-76.
6. Harris, "Kevin James and the JIS Conspiracy."
7. *U.S. v. Samana*, (C.D. CA.), No. 05-16662M, affidavit filed August 2, 2005.
8. See also Lofland, J., and R. Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Religious Conversion," *American Sociological Review* 30 (1965): 862-874.
9. Ibid.
10. See also Thomas, J., and B.H. Zaitzow, "Conning or Conversion? The Role of Religion in Prison Coping," *The Prison Journal* 86 (2004): 242-259.
11. Ibid.
12. See Hamm, *Terrorist Recruitment in American Correctional Institutions*, for more information on the literature review. See also Stern, J., *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*, New York: HarperCollins, 2003.
13. See also Sageman, M., *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.
14. Drum, V.L., "Professional Correctional Chaplains: Fact and Fiction," presented at the American Correctional Association 137th Annual Congress of Corrections, Kansas City, Mo., August 13, 2007.
15. Ibid.
16. De Yoanna, M., and T. Langeland, "Barred From Faith: Inmates in Colorado Prisons Face an Uphill Battle When it Comes to Practicing Their Religion," *Colorado Springs Independent*, December 9, 2004, available at <http://www.csindy.com/gyrobase/Content?oid=oid%3A13516>; and Farmer, R., "Prison Chaplains Have Big Job: They Perform a Host of Duties in Serving State's Incarcerated," *Richmond Times Dispatch*, August 2, 2008, available at <http://www.inrich.com/cva/ric/news.apx.-content-articles-RTD-2008-08-02-0012.html>.
17. Waller, M., *Terrorist Recruitment and Infiltration in the United States: Prisons and Military as an Operational Base*, Testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, October 14, 2003.