



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson

The Threat of Muslim-American Radicalization in U.S. Prisons

June 15, 2011 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the full Committee hearing entitled “The Threat of Muslim-American Radicalization in U.S. Prisons”:

“The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. More than 2.3 million people are locked up in America.

Approximately one-third of these prisoners claim some form of religious affiliation. Islam is the fastest growing religion among prisoners. About 80 percent of those who join a religion while imprisoned turn to Islam.

Multiple studies show that the typical inmate who converts to Islam is poor, Black, upset about racism, and not particularly interested in Middle East politics.

In preparation for this hearing, my staff spoke with representatives from the Bureau of Prisons and State prison officials from across the country. I regret that none of them are here to testify today.

The Bureau of Prisons and the State officials informed us that they routinely require religious staff, including imams, rabbis, and priests to undergo rigorous vetting, including verification of religious credentials, background checks and personal interviews.

They told us that any religious books and recorded messages used must be screened and that guards monitor the services. When we asked about radicalization by outside influences, they told us that prisoners do not have Internet access and all non-legal mail is opened, read and sometimes censored.

Judging from these accounts, it would seem that the opportunities for radicalization are few.

And the evidence bears that out. According to the Congressional Research Service (CRS), of the 43 violent attacks carried out by Muslims since 9/11, there are only two clear cases of radicalized released prisoners plotting a terrorist act.

Judging from this evidence, I think it is safe to conclude that the risk of terrorism originating from Muslim converts in U.S. prisons is small.

Limiting this Committee’s oversight of radicalization to one religion ignores threats posed by violent extremists of all stripes.

And there are other threats to be concerned about. According to the National Gang Intelligence Center, as of January 2009, approximately 147,000 documented gang members are incarcerated in Federal, state, and local jails.

Intact and operational gangs within these prisons pose a security threat not only within prison walls but also in our communities. The ability of leaders of these criminal enterprises to control and direct operations outside of prison should not be ignored.

Further, the violent right-wing ideology of many of these gangs must be discussed. Let us not forget that James Byrd was dragged to his death on a back road in Texas by right-wing gang members who were radicalized in jail.

Clearly, the willingness to use violence, undermine order, and commit mayhem is not dependent on religious belief or political ideology.

In May, the Committee held a hearing assessing the threat to the nation's security following the death of Osama Bin Laden. At that hearing, we learned about terrorists' aspirations to launch attacks in the United States.

Earlier this month, Adam Gadahn, an American-born spokesman for al Qaeda, released a video calling on Muslims to commit violent acts against America by taking advantage of the gun show loophole. Gadahn told his viewers that "in this country you can buy a fully automatic assault rifle without a background check at most local gun shows."

And he is correct. In March, the GAO reported that almost 250 people on the terror watch list were cleared to purchase firearms last year alone.

In that hearing, the expert testimony underscored that our greatest threat may be from lone wolves and solitary actors.

Gadahn's video has given these potential actors encouragement, advice and a roadmap.

Mr. Chairman, as we consider threats to this nation's security, let us focus on eliminating known security gaps. We are not endangered by people who are already locked up. In assessing risk, we must look at the evidence.

We are placed at risk by gangs who use prisons as a base of criminal operations. We are placed at risks by lone wolves exploiting the gun show loophole. I look forward to working with you on your legislation to close this known security gap.

Working together, we can reduce the risks to our nation from dangerous people roaming the streets of America."

#

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Please contact Adam Comis at (202) 225-9978

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Homeland Security
H2-117, Ford House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515
Phone: (202) 226-2616 | Fax: (202) 226-4499
<http://chsdemocrats.house.gov>