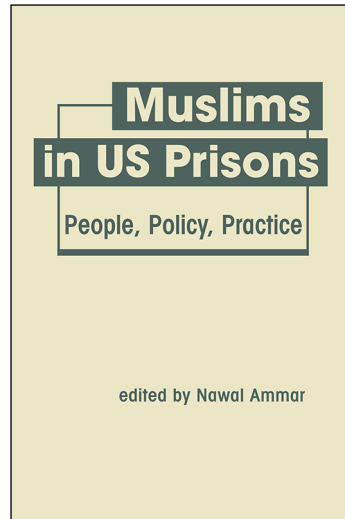


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Nawal H. Ammar

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telephone 303.444.6684
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1

Exploring Islam in US Prisons

Mark S. Hamm and Nawal H. Ammar

The discussion of Muslim inmates in prison has been dominated in the last decade by a post-September 11, 2001, framework. The urgency to understand these waves of “terrorist” acts that some Muslims perpetuated is undeniably important. However, the idea that US prisons have become hubs of Islamic extremism and violence (Colson, 2002; Malkin, 2004; Marks, 2006) has moved the study of this population of inmates from a correctional, crime, and punishment perspective to a war-on-terror approach. In 2006, FBI director Robert Mueller informed the public that “prisons are fertile ground for extremists. Inmates may be drawn to an extreme form of Islam because it may help justify their violent tendencies” (Mueller, 2006). Several years earlier, Senator Charles Schumer (D-NY) told Congress that “militant Wahhabism is the only form of Islam that is preached to the 12,000 Muslims in federal prisons. These imams flood the prisons with anti-American, pro-bin Laden videos [and] literature” (Schumer, 2003). The goal here, according to congressional testimony by the Center for Security Policy, was “to recruit convicted felons in the US prison system as cannon-fodder for the Wahhabist jihad” (Gaffney, 2005). Shortly after the attempted suicide bombing of a US jetliner bound for Detroit on Christmas Day 2009, US Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman John Kerry (D-MA) released a report indicating that the Christmas Day plot represented the vanguard of an evolving terrorist threat. According to the report, 36 Americans who had converted to Islam while incarcerated in the United States had recently traveled to Yemen, ostensibly to study Arabic, and had “dropped off the radar.” Some of them had reportedly joined al-Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the organization responsible for the

plot (US Senate, 2010). Academic researchers lent their voices to the doomsday chorus. One prominent study declared that because Islam feeds on resentment and anger all too prevalent in US prisons, it poses a threat “of unknown magnitude to the national security of the US” because “every radicalized prisoner becomes a potential terrorist threat” (Cilluffo and Saathoff, 2006). The message was clear: US prisons had become incubators for radical Islam and terrorist ideology.

None of these threats materialized, however. US prisons did not become fertile ground for Islamic extremism, nor did they become incubators for terrorism. The Senate’s 36 US converts who joined AQAP turned out to be an exaggeration; experts were unable to identify any former prisoners who moved to Yemen. Prison converts to Islam were not turned into cannon fodder for jihad, and the threat posed by Wahhabi clerics was dismissed by an FBI study showing that most cases of prisoner radicalization in the United States were instigated by domestic extremists with few or no foreign connections (Van Duyn, 2006).

The recent literature on Muslims in US prisons as it stands today is full of gaps. Research in the last decade overlooks the historical developments of prisoners’ rights, black nationalism, the civil rights movement, the Nation of Islam, and the growth of Wahhabism. It also discounts the changing role of the federal courts and the Supreme Court over the years (Herman, 1998; Smith, 2007; Smith 2011). Most existing scholarship silences the role Muslim prisoners have played in shaping the legal system’s treatment of prisoners generally, and the role of religion in prison in particular. The research disregards the diversity and complexity of this group of prisoners, lacking empirical study of either a qualitative or quantitative nature. Moreover, no analysis is available on the extralegal issues that this complex group of prisoners face outside prison—including identity crisis, social and familial dislocation, poverty, racism, and discrimination.

This academic discussion of Muslims in US prisons within an ahistoric context seems to address this group of prisoners as though they were not present or had a negligible presence prior to the tragic 9/11 attacks on US soil, or that they were not subject to the pains of imprisonment. This perspective contributes both to confusing the issues and the development of less than rigorous academic work. While the radicalization of Muslims in US prisons is a significant problem, understanding it requires a deeper look at the issues. In a 50-state survey of prison chaplains in the US conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2012), less than 41% of the chaplains interviewed said that religious extremism is “very or somewhat common”

in the prison where they work. The prison's security level tended to impact the chaplain's view of the prevalence of religious extremism. As such, while we must remain diligent in protecting the United States from violence and terrorism, using sound social scientific methods and frameworks to examine the issue of Muslims in US prisons is necessary in order to arrive at a better understanding of this group of prisoners and of the role of prisons within US society. We must include the history of Muslims in the United States inside and outside of prisons, detail the context of Muslim incarceration, explore the traits that they have in common with other prisoners and the ones particular to them, examine their experiences in the post-9/11 environment, and consider only evidence and empirical data about this group of inmates to make systematic, analytic assertions as well as policy recommendations. This approach expands our understanding of this group of inmates and the role of prison radicalization in the United States.

Islam in US prisons is not a one-dimensional phenomenon. Rather, in prison the Muslim faith is best conceptualized as a double-edged sword, capable of producing positive and negative results. As the contributors to this volume demonstrate, Islam can have a moderating effect on prisoners, playing an important role in prison security and rehabilitation. Once on the path to restricting their lives—down to the way they eat, dress, form support networks, and divide their day into periods for study, prayer, and reflection—Muslim prisoners have begun the reformation process, making them less of a recruiting target for terrorists than other prisoners, and certainly less of a target than alienated street-corner youth of the urban ghetto. Programs aimed at reversing self-destructive behavior—including basic education, “manhood” training concentrating on respect for women, information on responsible sexual behavior and drug use prevention, and life skills management—all were initiated by Black Muslims during the US prisoner rights movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Aidi, 2002). Black Muslims set up collect-calling services for inmates to telephone families, established halfway houses and employment services to help reintegrate ex-cons back into their communities, and through their activism created circumstances necessary for civil rights legislation challenging inadequate conditions of confinement (Gottschalk, 2006). Many forget that Muslim inmates played a decisive role in negotiating an end to the historic Attica prison rebellion of 1971 (Wicker, 1975).

While Islam is mainly a positive influence inside prison, research presented in this book also shows that certain forces within the Muslim prison community are aligned with the efforts of al-Qaeda and its

associates to inspire convicts in the United States to conduct terrorist attacks on their own. The number of prisoners who actually turn radical beliefs into terrorist action is remarkably few (Hamm, 2013). Yet their actions should not be glibly dismissed as “hype and hysteria,” as one scholar has described the threat (Atran, 2010). This terrorist threat is fueled primarily by the incarceration of inmates in disorderly, congested, and understaffed maximum-security prisons—by mass incarceration itself. By their very nature, prisons are intended to induce transformative experiences among inmates. However, the movement toward mass incarceration has turned prisons into hotbeds for personal transformation due to the increasingly chaotic nature of prison life that overcrowding causes. Overcrowding has amplified the social marginalization of inmates and deepened their need for bonding, group identity, spiritual guidance, and protection against predatory violence in the maximum-security mix. Islam has thrived under these conditions.

A leading theory of prisoner radicalization holds that the effects of mass incarceration are breeding a desire in inmates to defy the authorities who incarcerate them (Neumann, 2010). This creates a condition where other prisoners view “identities of resistance” favorably, representing a sort of “jihadi cool” behind bars (Sageman, 2008). Some scholars argue that Islam, or the “religion of the oppressed,” is fast becoming prisoners’ preferred ideology of resistance, playing the role that Marxism once did (Khosrokhavar, 2009). Along with protection from victimization and the search for meaning and identity, this ideology of resistance has assumed its place as a primary catalyst for inmate conversions to a range of Islamic traditions, including Islamist orientations that may espouse ideologies of intolerance and violence. Foremost among them is the amorphous social movement called Salafism—the narrow, strict, puritanical form of Sunni Islam upon which al-Qaeda is based—and “Prison Islam” groups that are known for using religious medallions and tattoos, along with selective verses from the Quran, to draw recruits from gang subcultures. Once radicalized by these extremist beliefs, prisoners become vulnerable to terrorist recruitment.

Islam—in all its forms and fashions—is now sweeping through US prisons, bringing with it both unprecedented security challenges and exceptional possibilities for progressive reform. The growth of Islam is taking place against the backdrop of a global economic meltdown and a rise in religious extremism and ethnic conflict, changes in prisoners’ class and race compositions, a declining interest among

prisoners in Christianity, new developments in youth subcultures, increased access to smuggled cellphone technology, and the shifting power dynamics of long-term maximum-security confinement—all situated within the context of lingering post-9/11 fear. Islam in US prisons is an issue of such profound sociopolitical complexity that even the wardens who run the prisons barely understand it. This book is timely and highly relevant for contemporary prison administration and counterterrorism policy.

In this volume the authors attempt to provide a snapshot of a social scientific and legal perspective on Muslims in US prisons, emerging from current scholarly work and policy developments. As a result, some terms, concepts, and concerns recur in different chapters within varying frameworks. By necessity, the authors also deal with important themes relating to corrections, crime, and punishment. While the authors come from various disciplinary backgrounds and the chapters cover disparate topics, the unifying premise is to underscore the subject's complexity and to further our systematic knowledge of it.

The book includes three parts and a conclusion. Part 1 provides the reader with a historic, theological, and research-based context about Islam and prisons. The topics of Islam in prison and Muslims in prison are scattered in a number of publications and journals, and therefore are not easily accessible, gathered, or sorted. Part 1 attempts to organize these topics to make them accessible for both the novice and more experienced audiences. A number of chapters underscore the differences among the various forms of Islam that exist in the United States. Most importantly, the difference between normative Islam (the Islam that emanated from Arabia in the 7th century C.E.) and the Nation of Islam (NOI), often referred to as Black Muslims—a nationalist/religious movement founded by Wallace (Warith) D. Fard Muhammad in the 1930s and led after his disappearance by Elijah Muhammad until his death in 1975 and since 1977 by Louis Farrakhan. This difference is often glossed over or misunderstood. The NOI's beliefs are only tenuously linked to the theology of orthodox Islam. The views of normative Islam and the NOI about "God, cosmology, Prophet Muhammad and the afterlife, traditional Islam" (Fishman and Soage, 2013, p. 62) are not only starkly different but are often at odds with each other. Colley writes, "The NOI's doctrine combined religious influences with African American history and heritage to produce a philosophy that spoke directly to African Americans' experiences with white privilege" (2014, p. 400). These differences are important to underscore, due to the liberating role that NOI

played in US prisons in the 1960s and 1970s with African American prisoners, the most famous among them being Malcolm X.

Part 2 explores the experiences of Muslim inmates in US prisons and some legal, theological, and subcultural components of their lives within prison walls. While it is difficult to remove the 9/11 impact on any matter that involves Muslims in the US generally, and Muslims in prison in particular, the writers have attempted to discuss the issues that Muslim prisoners in US correctional facilities (at the state and federal levels) encounter on a daily basis. The topics discussed are far from comprehensive, serving only as a starting point to understanding some of the facets of Muslim inmates' lives in US prisons. Chapter 4 offers a unique perspective for US scholars: lessons learned from a UK researcher.

Part 3 explores the multidimensional experiences of incarcerated Muslims: being rounded up and incarcerated immediately after 9/11, the impact of prison Islam on radicalization as well as rehabilitation, and conditions in a variety of security prisons inside and outside the United States.

The book's conclusion discusses the connection among the various chapters, assesses their contribution to the study of Muslims in US prisons, and suggests future research ideas.