

Testimony of Mr. Tony Parker

**□ Assistant Commissioner of Prisons
Tennessee Department of Correction**

**Before the House Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and
Intelligence □**

**Terror Inmates: Countering Violent Extremism in
Prison and Beyond**

□ October 28, 2015

Chairman King, Ranking Members Thompson and Higgins, and members of this Subcommittee, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I would also like to express my appreciation to the men and women who work inside America's Jails and Prisons. It is truly an honor to testify at this hearing and share my experiences about the correctional environment as well as my prison radicalization research.

My Name is Tony Parker and I serve as the Assistant Commissioner of Prisons for the Tennessee Department of Corrections (TDOC).

Prison radicalization has been identified as a significant threat to America's homeland security. Currently, the United States has no prison deradicalization program. When considering the inmate population housed within the Federal Bureau of Prisons who have a terrorism nexus, and the fact that 95 percent of America's inmate population will return to our communities, it is evident we need to do something proactively to address prison radicalization.

In 2011, I had the opportunity to participate in a Master's Degree Program at the Naval Postgraduate School – Center for Homeland Defense and Security in Monterey California. I would like to thank Congress and FEMA for funding a program grounded in providing future homeland security leaders with the analytical tools to establish future policy.

My research examined the literature about environmental factors within prisons that promote radicalization. I also conducted a comparative analysis of

deradicalization programs used in Singapore and Saudi Arabia. That research provides the basis for my recommendations about a U.S. prison deradicalization model. A model that addresses both prison environmental factors as well as providing recommendations for a rehabilitative initiative targeted toward reentry.

Prison radicalization has left its footprint on society through the actions of individuals like Kevin James, Jose Padilla, and Michael Finton.¹ The American prison system has many of the characteristics that promote radicalization. Prisons are isolated environments. In such an environment, inmates become easy targets for radical extremists searching for individuals to join their cause.

The most effective correctional system incorporates productive rehabilitative programs with sound security policies. Correction's long-term strategy – security – is the foundation of sound correctional policy, although; that strategy may have become a "liability." We have failed to recognize the need to change the strategy to an approach that includes both security and a robust rehabilitative initiative. You cannot have one without the other.

Effective monitoring and control of prison groups, especially security threat groups, are essential to reducing the vulnerability for prison radicalization.

The radicalization message can enter the correctional environment through numerous avenues such as radicalized inmates, unvetted radical chaplains, extremist propaganda labeled as religious material, illegal cell phones, and social media sites. Rigorous vetting and monitoring of prison chaplains and religious volunteers must be a standard.

Understanding the complexities of a captive society like prison populations is complicated. My 32 years of correctional experience have helped me recognize how fragile this environment can be, but additional social science research would be beneficial in expanding the knowledge base regarding prison radicalization.

Providing adequate staff training and developing intelligence sharing networks with criminal justice partners are critical in fighting prison radicalization. The Correctional Intelligence Initiative, developed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National Joint Terrorism Task Force (NJTTF), provides a good framework that promotes intelligence gathering, related to terrorism and prisoner radicalization, from United States correctional agencies. I argue that although the framework is structurally sound, there remains a significant training element that must be accomplished.

The prison deradicalization programs of Singapore and Saudi Arabia were based on the applicable laws and cultural considerations of both countries. I recognize the profound differences of both of those countries, especially when compared to our nation's civil liberties and due process protections.

Even so, the value of learning from the successful deradicalization programs of other countries should not be minimized. Although the deradicalization programs of Singapore

¹ House Committee on Homeland Security, *Background Information on Prominent Post-9/11 U.S. Prison Radicalization Cases* (Washington, DC: Committee on Oversight and Government Affairs, 2011).

and Saudi Arabia were designed to counter radicalization within their respective borders, unique elements of these programs offer possible solutions to prison radicalization in the United States that should be evaluated through a filter that maintains the constitutional protections afforded to U.S. prisoners.

The 9/11 Commission Report identified “Failure of Imagination” as America’s most glaring failure leading to the attacks of September 11. According to the Report, we failed to understand and consider the gravity of the threat. May we never underestimate the threat of prison radicalization and the importance of reentry protocols for convicted terrorist.

Without a multidisciplinary approach that targets prison radicalization and understands the reentry issues that surround the inmate with a terrorism nexus, America will always be reacting to prison radicalization. Our policy and our strategy must be proactive. Correctional policymakers must be cognizant of the environmental factors that promote prison radicalization and promote policy to mitigate the threat. Failing to provide aggressive treatment and program options to counteract prison radicalization leaves the prison gates open to releasing potentially radicalized individuals back into our neighborhoods.

I would ask the subcommittee to support this model and support additional social science research designed to mitigate the factors contributing to prison radicalization.

Again, I thank you for allowing me to address this distinguished committee.