

Oklahoma Beheading Raises Questions About Prison Conversions and American Muslim Leadership: an Interview with Dr. Michael Welner

by Jerry Gordon (October 2014)



Facebook picture of Alton Alexander Nolen outside Islamic Center of Greater Oklahoma City

On Tuesday, September 30, 2014, Alton Alexander Nolen, a paroled former felon and Muslim convert aka Jah'Keem Yisrael was [charged](#) in Cleveland County, Oklahoma, Court with a first degree murder in the alleged beheading of 54 year old Colleen Hufford. He was also charged with the attempted murder of Traci Johnson, both on Thursday, September 25th on the premises of Vaughan Foods in Moore, Oklahoma. Earlier on Thursday Nolen had been suspended by the Vaughan Foods Human Resources Department because of arguments with Johnson and others, allegedly involving, possible racial and religious matters. Nolen, according to a [report](#) from his home town newspaper in Oklahoma, may have been fired for misogynist arguments with female workers about stoning women under Islamic Sharia law. Nolen was overheard invoking alleged "Arabic expressions" in his barbaric attacks that took the life of Hufford and stabbing of Johnson. If not for the shooting of Nolen by Vaughan Foods' Chief Operating Officer, Mark Vaughan, a county reserve police officer, Nolen's attack could have resulted in a possible mass killing episode. Police and FBI Investigation of Nolen's social media revealed grisly beheading videos of American and British captives by the Islamic State, formerly ISIS. There were expressions of hatred towards unbelievers invoked by Qur'anic verses cited by Nolen.



Jacob Mugami Muriithi, Oklahoma City Nursing home worker

Source: *The Oklahoman*

Nolen's act was not an isolated event in Oklahoma. On Friday, September 26th, Jacob Mugami Muriithi, a Kenyan Muslim immigrant, was arrested for threatening with beheading a fellow Oklahoma City nursing home worker on September 19th. Muriithi was arrested with bail set at \$1 million on a terrorism compliant and currently is being investigated. According to an *Oklahoman* news [report](#) the unidentified woman:

said Muriithi identified himself as a Muslim and ...he "represented ISIS and that ISIS kills Christians," the detective told a judge in the affidavit. The two had not worked together before. The woman said she asked him why they kill Christians and he replied, "This is just what we do."

Nolen attended Friday services at the same mosque as convicted 9/11 perpetrator, [Zacarias Moussaoui](#), the [Islamic Society of Greater Oklahoma City](#) (ISGOC). Saad Mohammed, Oklahoma CAIR chapter Board Chairman indicated that Nolen began regular attendance in May 2014. While Mohammed found Nolen fairly quiet, he said, "He was a little odd, a little strange in the way he carried himself. But we [at the mosque] never made anything of it." The current Imam at the ISGOC [Imad Enchassi](#), is a Palestinian immigrant who lived through the Sabra and Shatila Refugee Camp massacre in Lebanon. *Breitbart* [reported](#): "both [Oklahoma] [Imam](#) Enchassi claimed just days prior to the beheading that Muslims and their children had been receiving death threats from Oklahoma residents; going as far as to say that Muslims and their children were under threat of being beheaded and were no longer safe in Oklahoma."

The former Imam at the ISGOC who encountered Moussaoui in 2001 was [Suhaib Webb](#), a Caucasian Oklahoma prison convert to Islam. Two days prior to 9/11, Webb [participated](#) in a fundraiser for Atlanta radical H. Rap Brown with late Al Qaeda operative, Anwar Al- Awlaki two days before 9/11, September 9, 2001. Webb ultimately moved to Boston to become Imam at the [Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center \(ISBCC\)](#) controlled by Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, Muslim American Society. The ISBCC had as trustees, [Yusuf al Qaradawi](#), notorious Anti-American and Anti-Israel Muslim Brotherhood preacher living in exile in Qatar and convicted terror financier [Abdulrahman Alamoudi](#) serving a 23 year term in a federal prison for funneling money for the assassination of a Saudi prince. Boston Marathon bombers, the late Tamerlan and surviving brother Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the latter awaiting trial in Boston, [attended](#) the Cambridge mosque of the ISBCC. Webb has returned frequently to the ISGOC to give sermons. According to a *Daily Caller* report, Webb [published](#) an apology for demonizing ISIS following the beheading by Nolen. Dr. Charles Jacobs of Americans for Peace and Tolerance [characterized](#) Webb in a *Boston Jewish Advocate* article in 2013 as someone who, "teaches vicious hatred and calls for young Muslims to engage in Jihad against non-Muslims in order to

establish a global Islamic state.”

Given this background we interviewed noted forensic psychiatrist Dr. Michael Welner, a forensic psychiatrist, who is renowned within legal circles for his work on many of the most sensitive and complex cases in America and beyond. Because his oeuvre includes eight mass killing or attempted mass killing cases, defendants implicated in terrorism, risk assessment, and engagement of cross cultural issues, we decided to reach out to him on the Oklahoma beheadings of this week. He is known to readers of the *New English Review* for the [obliterated fraudulent claims](#) of US torture of a teenage detainee and coercion of his confession; his testimony on www.depravitystandard.org. He is a key contributor to crisis mental health reform legislation before Congress, HR 3717 sponsored by Rep. Tim Murphy, and inspired a recently passed landmark law in Illinois requiring transparency and videotaping of competency examinations.



Jerry Gordon: Dr. Welner, thank you for consenting to this timely interview.



Dr. Michael Welner: Thank you for inviting me.

Gordon: Alton Alexander Nolen is a former convicted felon and Muslim convert aka Jah'Keem Yisrael. He is suspect in perpetrating an alleged beheading and attempted murder of co-workers at Vaughan Foods in Moore, Oklahoma. The Imam of the Oklahoma City Islamic Center who encountered him during his parole suggested that he was a “little weird.” How might Nolen’s criminal past and alleged instability coupled with his Muslim conversion make him a recruit to

commit such barbarity in sympathy with ISIS?

Welner: In my professional experience, murder that reflects an ideological influence, which is what I would call this, is committed far more frequently by recent converts or recruits. It is an expression of bonafides by someone seeking greater prestige among the admired group. And it may be someone who is nominally affiliated or unaffiliated altogether. Leaders and more hard core adherents are content to rely upon such individuals as cannon fodder to set an example for others.

As for the depiction of him as “a little weird,” that is a non-specific finding. Were he not to have been “a little weird,” he would not have gotten himself fired from Vaughan Foods. It’s not investment banking.

I am reluctant to yet call him a recruit to ISIS. I think it is more accurate to say that at this point, there is clearly an unspecified segment of the American Muslim population that deeply identifies with ISIS. Some identify enough to travel overseas and to fight for ISIS when they would not do so for the United States military. Others would send their children to do the same. Still others admire them and support their missions and actions. To the end that ISIS has encouraged export of sectarian attacks on non-believers here, there are and will continue to be those who answer that call as a spiritual imperative.

This was an attempted mass killing. Mass killers are premeditated killers. Mass killers identify with being violent and destructive. That typically precedes their adopting any number of self-righteous causes.

The variant for each mass killer is the point at which they decide that the day has come for them to undertake a fantasized mass killing. In this case, Jah’Keem Israel was fired. That is a commonly identified trigger to mass killing in a person harboring deep identification with destructiveness as an expression of manhood.

In cases such as this, his spiritual journey is an ingredient in his justification of killing a complete stranger who had nothing to do with his firing. He beheaded the poor victim – we call that a “signature.” Amping one’s self up on righteous justification with one ideology or another is no different from the self-serving contempt of [Elliot Rodger](#) with which he intoxicated himself before decimating [Isla Vista, California](#) in May 2014.

Gordon: Jacob Mugami Muriithi, a Kenyan immigrant and self-identified Muslim had independently and prior to Nolen’s action at Vaughan Foods, threatened a fellow nursing home worker in Oklahoma City with beheading allegedly saying that “ISIS kills Christians.” Why in

your view should both of these events concern Americans?

Welner: I am not yet concerned about this particular story as an American problem, so much as it is now an American Muslim problem. Belligerents and co-workers who feel an entitlement to being homicidal have been a problem in workplaces for decades. Non-violence policies in workplaces correctly involve police when such incidents happen, and those who make serious threats are appropriately held accountable.

What ISIS has demonstrated is that it has tapped into a tremendous reservoir of spiritual bloodlust among Muslims worldwide. Death by beheading is no more death than by an automatic weapon. However, beheading as trophy collection is a relish for dehumanizing others that the Depravity Standard research (www.depravitystandard.org) has demonstrated to be reflective of depravity in crime. Beheading is disseminated and celebrated among populations that now dominate the landscape of many Muslim countries illustrates in these populations, how Islam defines its ideals. If that is not the case, then it is up to the Islamic leaders of those countries to fight ISIS and to disown it for religious sacrilege – rather than merely to oppose it for political threat. That is not an American problem; that is a choice of the Muslim world to either choose the 7th century or choose another era which can accommodate their Muslim beliefs and statecraft.

Since pockets of the American Muslim community – the numbers of which are not identified for public awareness – do identify with this barbarity, the challenge will be to American Muslims: How do you define yourselves? Are you here for pluralistic coexistence or to foment Sharia and a Sharia society as you have in an inexorably decaying France, for example? Vehement opposition to the subversives must come from the American Muslim community first and foremost.

The dominance of the influence of American Muslims seeking pluralistic coexistence over the voice of rejectionist Muslims must be supported as a matter of Department of Homeland Security policy. If that does not happen, the belligerence and intensity of American Muslims who are rejectionist of separation of church and state will come define the identity of American Islam as it has elsewhere.

I am not as impressed with the ISIS threat to America as a practical matter. The Islamist students at American universities, as was suspect Boston Marathon bomber [Dzhokhar Tsarnaev](#), are far more capable threats right now. The infrastructure exists within the United States to prevent malevolents from carrying out large scale terrorist attacks. The bigger threat to America is not from these combatants, but from America's unwillingness to deploy simple public safety maneuvers.

It is difficult, for example, to defend a policy of allowing ISIS combatants to return to the United States when the very nature of their militancy is to destroy others around them who do not believe. The policy that shut down the infrastructure for detecting and intervening in violent planned activity in those specifically poisonous mosques that exploit freedoms is a greater threat than those who identify with sectarian murder. Dismantling fundamental public safety measures in order to pander to those who provide cover for subversive Islam is a problem that is far greater than ISIS is or will be.

Prisons are a useful bell weather of ISIS influence. Nidal Hassan, of course, [recently pledged](#) to ISIS from prison. I believe Muslim violence against non-Muslims will increase in American prisons *if* ISIS is influencing relations between the religions in a meaningful way.

Gordon: Nolen had allegedly become a Muslim convert while incarcerated in a State of Oklahoma Department of Corrections facility. How might Nolen's exposure to theocratic radicalization materials during conversion contribute to his criminal acts?

Welner: If Nolen acted in the name of Islam, his evolution in prison is only part of the story. Malevolent and dominant alpha-inmates with their own Jihadist dreams can be all the more poisonous than even radical clerics and their materials, especially if they have access to the inmate or set an example that others admire. Any assessment of Nolen should probe the origins of his influence to Islam beyond mere investigation of a cleric.

Similarly, even if he did not access reading materials, this does not mean there was no external influence. It only signifies that he preferred being preached to rather than to read.

Gordon: As witnessed by the Oklahoma case of suspect Nolen, Islam is the fastest growing faith in US prison populations. The 2010 Census found upwards 15% of US prison populations (approximately 350,000) were Muslims. That is in contrast to 2.6 million Muslims nationally, according to the 2010 US Census. What in your view contributes to the high rate of Muslim prison conversions?

Welner: Religion is an altogether therapeutic contributor in prison. For people whose rejection of rules and order, or whose alienation, is tied to their arrests and antisocial history, attachment to a higher power is constructive. If prisons were to be the most religion-dominated communities in America, there would be a decline of prison violence and of criminal recidivism.

Islam has been very aggressive about spreading itself in prisons in America and really, all over the world. There are many reasons promoting its spread in American facilities. For many

with substance abuse histories, the rigorous abstinence disciplines one from habits that otherwise handicap. For others with no paternal role models and fragmented social supports, the submission and order organizes and grounds one as a first step to functioning in a manner transferrable from confinement to the community. These are good things to even support and reinforce, in my opinion. If someone chooses prayer, it is a safer world.

Prison also distinguishes itself with a disproportionate population of black Americans. The disenfranchisement of many black Americans from Americana is cemented by incarceration and its lifelong consequences. [The Nation of Islam](#) fed off that alienation and provided black liberation/black nationalism as the antidote to many prisoners. Islam appeals to the same black alienation from Americana today, which is weaker in some segments and even stronger in others.

Because many clerics ministering in prison are not merely alienated from America themselves, but militantly so, those on a path of religious discovery are as vulnerable to being misguided as teenagers in a madrassa.

It is no secret that radicalization after conversion to Islam is a huge problem in prisons in the West, including the United States. Part of the problem is the willingness of jails and prisons to employ and to provide access to clerics who are radicalized. Allowing access of radicalized rejectionists to people who are disaffected, vulnerable, and under control of the state is a dereliction of the “corrections” and “rehabilitation” role of incarceration. See also:

<http://fullcomment.nationalpost.com/2011/02/19/michael-welner-omar-khadr-and-the-jihadism-that-lurks-in-our-prisons/>

This is only part of the problem, however. In some facilities, the reverse occurs – imams who are invested in America are forced out by senior and dominant prisoners who prefer their Islam with a heavy dose of rage.

But Islam is also a sanctuary against native pressures of prison to enlist in gangs. The gangs are organized around predatory and criminal goals, and pressure others to choose allegiances. Muslims in prison, however, have achieved enough of a critical mass, and a willingness to be violent if bothered, that even the worst of gangs do not mess with them. A person might be advantaged with this protection as a lesser sacrifice than to opt for gang membership.

Still others may identify themselves as Muslim to avoid certain responsibilities, target their housing, to secure certain schedules, or even to get access to a preferred diet. Folks inside are just trying to work the angles, and if that meant identifying themselves as Baha’i, they

understandably would.

Christianity is still the dominant religion in prison custody. It does not forcefully engage the criminal mindset in a way that organizes behavior in a pro-social way. Nor does it have the intimidating bearing that Islam can muster in prisons. So it loses ground. For some people, Jesus loves you and Jesus forgives is not enough, especially to those who have no conscience to care to be forgiven.

There is tremendous potential for prison ministries of all faith in prison. But charismatic influence is particularly vital to penetrate the mindset of criminal deviance. Why? Because a person who answers to no one and knows no greater power than himself and no greater need than his own will only grow from respect for a higher power. Charismatic ministry, whatever the faith, can penetrate that self-absorption.

In that regard, religion can be the opiate of the prison masses. Like any drug, however, it can be misused by the dealer and by the user. That is the nexus of the Islam-prison dilemma in America and indeed prisons around the world today.

Gordon: There have been several cases by Oklahoma Correctional system Muslim plaintiffs requesting access to halal foods brought under the Federal Religious Land Use and Incarcerated Persons Act of 2000 that were generally found in favor of prisoners. Do you consider those legal victories at both lower and appellate court levels empowering radical Muslim prison conversions in Oklahoma and elsewhere?

Welner: I don't consider these lawsuits relevant to conversions at all. Prisoners bring suits for all kinds of reasons and other prisoners know this. Some prisoners bring lawsuits to keep themselves mentally occupied, others to be as much of an annoyance to the state as can be. Anyone incarcerated would understandably bring a lawsuit to secure halal foods in prison, simply to curry favor with other Muslim prisoners.

It is true that being devout has been demonstrated in Danish psychologist [Nicolai Sennels' research](#) to be associated with [rejectionist alienation and criminal recidivism](#) among young Danish Muslim prisoners. However, there is no evidence that availability of halal food engenders radicalism, any more than lack of availability.

Gordon: You have provided prosecution testimony in a GITMO military tribunal regarding Canadian Afghan, former al Qaeda teen age fighter, Omar Khadr. What were your evaluation of terrorists like Khadr and the likelihood of their recidivism following so-called re-education programs and release from incarceration?

Welner: Success is dependent upon the quality of the re-educating imam. He has to be forceful enough and has to have street credibility. In this regard, former radicals hold potential, so long as they are not essentially double agents.

Aside from that, a personal support system that rejects radicalism is helpful. So do probation conditions that allow for re-incarceration in order to disincentivize radical activity. Becoming materially invested in integration into general and secular society, such as vocationally, is helpful. So is developing one's own family with all the responsibilities of a parent, among other things.

Not surprisingly, these elements often contribute to decline in criminal recidivism in general.

Gordon: What were the attitudes towards Western host countries that you found based on third party research of incarcerated Muslim criminals?

Welner: Research of the Guantanamo detainees demonstrated that those with greater exposure to the West, including those educated at Western universities, are more hostile to the West.

This speaks to how American universities fail to take responsibility to an active allegiance to the American brand that subsidizes public and private institutions. Freedom is not free, and freedom that is not defended by more than just the United States military is destined to be eroded.

Gordon: Why have the social media messages of ISIS resonated with foreign Muslim recruits to its cause both here and elsewhere in the West?

Welner: Because they are designed to. Social media has no purpose for any organization other than promotional. Social media is the vector to the young, by the young, and that is exactly the space that ISIS is occupying right now.

ISIS knows its audience, knows its constituency, knows what they want to see and knows what they will be responsive to. Most importantly, what ISIS wants (crash-test dummies, support staff, stage props, and those to defend the cause until the United Nations defends them more formally) is responsive to agitprop, which resonates with the young and the restless. Whereas professors on American campuses can fill idealistic minds with propagandist drivel, social media likewise captures the same vulnerable demographic on their down time.

When young Muslims from the United States join ISIS, it represents a failure on the part of our government to convey the extent, breadth, and depth of America's contributions to the

Muslim world. That message was marginalized by the short-sighted and self-interested political class because it means more to them to demonize George Bush than it does to aid the United States to defeat Islamism and tyranny of Arab leaders toward their own people. This is an utter failure of the State Department and Department of Education to represent our overseas interests domestically. It is also a tragic failure of the Obama Administration to use the public relations monolith they created, with far more effective social media tentacles than ISIS could ever have, to advance the global appreciation of America's goodness.

What would be credible and appropriate would be to underscore how many American lives under both Bush and Obama, be they soldiers or contractors, have sacrificed to free the Arab world and create opportunity and institutions. Then, the young and restless Arabs and Muslims would be enlisting in the U.S. Military to defend those advances from being rolled back by ISIS attack. Consider the attitude of Europeans who fondly recall America for the war we fought on their soil, in thousands of graves in cemeteries across the pond marking those sacrificed to rid them of tyranny that crushed their freedoms as well.

Our nation did an exceptional job of making this message clear with Gulf War I and the war in Kuwait. No Kuwaiti-American, for example, would ever think to fight for Saddam Hussein in Gulf War II, given that legacy. Why, then, when the United States has rebuilt Iraq and stabilized it for a long period, lavished resources on Jordan, politically opposed the regime of Bashar Assad, lavished foreign aid on Lebanon, the Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt and Gaza, and propped up the Palestinian Authority, is the legacy of the United States reduced to our apology after apology? Until this changes, seditious anti-American elements here will only gain motivation and momentum.

Defeating ISIS' influence on American minds comes from making it clear how much the United States has done for the Muslim world. Conveying the message the other way around only reinforces the sense of entitlement nurtured by ISIS to destroy America and the West.

If the Obama media-promotional complex could deploy every single American superstar of film and sport to sell Obamacare, they could figure out a way to bring rightful national loyalty among Somalis and Syrians alike to the American brand that elected Obama in the first place.

Gordon: What can correctional systems do to screen materials to prevent radicalization of federal and state inmates?

Welner: Correctional institutions have the necessary apparatus to screen communications and contraband. The risk, however, does not derive from materials. It derives from inmates who identify with violence and who are deeply alienated, who are then further alienated by the

influences they encounter in prison, including religious figures they look up to. Imams do not have to direct them to go out and kill. Those who are implicated in violence against innocent people who gave them no provocation are inspired to destructiveness and adopt Muslim grievances as a pretext to ghoulish murder and enslavement.

If correctional officials work collaboratively with a clear-eyed Department of Homeland Security, they can collaboratively stifle the seeding of radicalism in the same way that gangs are regulated behind bars. Obviously, there has to be a zero tolerance policy for imams who reinforce alienation from America and our pluralistic way of life. They can and should be fired in the same way that drug toting corrections officers are kept out of prison. Surely there are enough moderate elements to staff our prison with imams who provide pacifist and pluralistic guidance. And if American Islam does not have such talent, cultivating institutions that produce such talent should be where federal grants and Qatari money are going, rather than to meaningless conferences in which sycophants congratulate each other for sitting down for dinner together. The problem is not with America – it is already a nation of exemplary tolerance and as it relates to Islamists in America, forbearance.

It is easy enough to identify the most pernicious influences behind bars. They can be isolated from influence in the same way that gang leaders are. Correctional policy in America has to engage Islamist radicalization in the same way it successfully deals with gang infrastructure, especially that which has one foot behind bars and a support system outside.

Feckless leadership in European prisons has demonstrated what happens when these challenges are not handled proactively. In numerous Western countries, Great Britain being an example, [radical Muslim inmates run](#) the prisons. There is no will to influence the creeping sepsis into the submissive England, which is reduced to becoming a police state with cameras on every corner, haplessly watching its slow but defiant transformation in plain sight. Europe teaches us how life in our prisons, and how we handle homeland security inside prisons, are a window to the direction in which public safety is headed.

Gordon: Thank you Dr. Welner for highly informative interview.

Welner: My pleasure.

Also see Jerry Gordon's collection of interviews,