

Policy Brief

Managing the Release of American ISIS Arrestees

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About this paper

206 Americans have been arrested for offenses related to ISIS since 2012, nearly half of whom have been released from prison or are scheduled to be released in the coming 3-5 years. Six of those released have already been arrested on new charges, highlighting the lack of disengagement, rehabilitation, or reintegration programming for extremists in the US penal system. This brief will outline those six cases to highlight the need for such programming before discussing the state of deradicalization efforts and providing policy recommendations.



Powering solutions
to extremism, hate
and disinformation

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Introduction

209 Americans have been arrested for offenses related to ISIS since 2012, nearly half of whom have been released from prison or are scheduled to be released in the coming 3-5 years. Six of those released have already been arrested on new charges, highlighting the lack of disengagement, rehabilitation, or reintegration programming for extremists in the US penal system. This brief will outline those six cases to highlight the need for such programming before discussing the state of deradicalization efforts and providing policy recommendations.

In January 2021 Yousef Ramadan was released after serving three and a half years in federal prison. Ramadan, a self-admitted ISIS supporter, had been arrested in 2017 attempting to board a plane to Jordan with body armor, rifle scopes, tactical knives, and other combat gear. By February 2024 he was back in prison after violating the conditions of his supervised release by obtaining weapons, communicating with known felons, and refusing a search of his electronic devices. Subsequent investigation showed that Ramadan was in communication with ISIS media officials, had downloaded bomb-making manuals, and was researching instructions to manufacture 3D-printed firearms. Not only had he reoffended, but prosecutors argued that Ramadan was actually a greater danger to the public than he was at the time of his 2017 arrest.

Ramadan was not the first ISIS-linked convict to be sent back to prison after release and it is unlikely that he will be the last. While it is possible that many of those arrested will have seen the error of their ways, evidence shows that incarceration alone is unlikely to encourage ISIS adherents to disassociate with the group and disavow the violent worldview it propagates.

The US lacks pre- or post-release rehabilitation and reintegration programming to confront the extreme degree of ideological commitment expressed by many ISIS adherents. Experts in the field preach that this programming is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the deradicalization of violent extremists, arguing that the extremists must first be willing to disengage from the ideology of their own free will. Several programs exist, such as New York City's DEEP Initiative and the U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services Minnesota's initiative, but even federal judges have bemoaned the lack of programming. During the 2016 sentencing of Islam

Natsheh Judge Richard Seeborg presided over an extended discussion of the lack of “deradicalization programming” and said “I still wish we had better programs that would assist.”

This disengagement can be a drawn-out process littered with setbacks. The penal system poses challenges for deradicalization efforts but provides an opportunity to restrict inmates’ access to extremist material while exposing them to alternate sources of religious and social community, setting the conditions for disengagement and subsequent deradicalization. Furthermore, disengagement is only the first step. As noted in a 2021 Canadian Practitioners Network for the Prevention of Radicalization and Extremist Violence (CPN-PREV) report, vocational support and civic engagement are critical enablers to not only support the reintegration of extremists into society, but also to encourage their initial disengagement from extremist ideology in line with the public health model of violence prevention.

To mitigate the risk of recidivism and enable the healthy reintegration of these convicts into society, swift action is needed. According to data from the George Washington University (GWU) Program on Extremism, 72 of the 209 Americans arrested on ISIS-related charges have already been released from custody, although much of this population could be deemed lower risk having been convicted of lesser charges such as making false statements or providing small amounts of money or other material support to friends or family that themselves supported ISIS. Six of these 72 have already been re-arrested or re-incarcerated for violating their parole.

The GWU data indicates it is likely that at least 73 more ISIS arrestees will be released in the next ten years, most of whom will have served a decade or more in prison and are likely to be more ideologically committed as the initial wave of arrestees included a number of individuals convicted for less serious crimes such as providing money to family members traveling to join ISIS.¹

Even once developed and implemented, a programmatic framework to support the disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration of these convicts could require years of effort to be effective. Policymakers should consider and fund programming inside federal and state penal systems for high-risk terrorist offenders, enable collaboration between law enforcement and civil society actors in the TVTP space, and provide post-release support outside of the scope of the Probation and Pretrial Services System.

1. Case Studies

As of March 2024, ISD has identified six released American ISIS convicts who have been re-arrested or re-incarcerated for violating their parole. While this sample represents less than 10% of the released population, this recidivism rate is highly concerning given the short period of time and the severity of the offenses.

Four of the recidivists were re-incarcerated for activities that resembled their original offenses. Yousef Mohammad Ramadan and Ali Shukri Amin were found to be in communication with known terrorists upon release; Sebastian Gregory was charged after obtaining firearms and fragmentation grenades; and Charlton LaChase, who has a documented history of mental illness, threatened to carry out a terrorist attack just hours after his release. Mohammed Hamzah Khan was sent back to prison for using electronic devices in violation of his parole, albeit with no indication that he re-engaged with jihadi groups or content, and Islam Natsheh's parole was violated for his involvement in non-terroristic criminal activity.

These cases have not been widely publicized and a more careful examination of these individuals is merited to understand the challenges of managing the population of ISIS convicts upon release. While this examination is intended to be instructive, the small sample size and bias toward those who were released early or given short sentences means they should not be taken as representative.

Yousef Mohammad Ramadan

"His support of ISIS has never waned." A federal prosecutor provided this succinct description of Yousef Ramadan's ideological affinity during a detention hearing after Ramadan was detained in October 2023 for violating his probation. Originally arrested on a gun charge in 2017, Ramadan openly [admitted](#) his support for ISIS but has claimed to not support their violent methods despite [downloading](#) ISIS manuals on explosives and poisons.

While never [charged](#) with a terrorism offense, federal prosecutors have consistently shown that Yousef Ramadan is an ISIS adherent who has consumed ISIS propaganda and downloaded ISIS manuals [before](#) his 2017 arrest and [after](#) his 2022 release. Even in prison, reports

indicate that Ramadan [scrawled](#) a pro-ISIS message in Arabic on the wall of his cell.

Ramadan was arrested in 2017 while [attempting](#) to board a flight to Amman with his family with body armor and tactical equipment in his luggage. While there is no evidence that he was planning to use that equipment in an illegal manner, authorities soon located two firearms with defaced serial numbers in a storage unit belonging to Ramadan. The subsequent investigation [revealed](#) that Ramadan possessed a large number of firearms, had taken pictures with them while displaying ISIS insignia and hand gestures, and had photos of a homemade pipe bomb.

While in prison awaiting his trial, Ramadan likely maintained his pro-ISIS beliefs as evidenced by the aforementioned graffiti and a search of his prison cell also [revealed](#) "escape paraphernalia" including a ski mask and a duffel bag intended to cover barbed wire. After his conviction in 2022, Ramadan was sentenced to time served and two years of probation, which he violated in October 2023 after [buying](#) a pellet gun, an item he had been repeatedly warned was illegal for him to possess. Prosecutors also [alleged](#) that he was in contact with ISIS media wing members; had downloaded ISIS manuals for making bombs, explosives, and poisons; and exhibited an "unending urge to obtain dangerous weapons." At his detention hearing, prosecutors [bemoaned](#) "he's still, in the government's opinion (...) even a greater danger than he posed before" after presenting evidence that Ramadan had set his screensaver to an image of the ISIS flag and began researching how to manufacture 3D firearms.

Ramadan's five years of incarceration clearly did little to encourage his disengagement from ISIS ideology. Given that he was not arrested or charged with terrorism offenses it is unclear if prison authorities were adequately notified of Ramadan's ideological proclivities. There is also no information to suggest that Ramadan was provided any disengagement or rehabilitation programming during his sentence, which may have been complicated by the fact that his entire period of incarceration occurred prior to his conviction.

Ali Shukri Amin

27-year-old Virginia resident Ali Shukri Amin has vocally supported ISIS ideology for nearly a decade, using his technical expertise and connections to known ISIS supporters to actively distribute pro-ISIS content both before his arrest and after his release. In addition, Amin continued to establish relationships with and between ISIS convicts and was given a one-year sentence after the discovery of his parole violations.

His online content targeted several thousand followers on X, Ask.fm and the blog 'al-Khilafah Aridat', with articles detailing how to avoid online law enforcement detection and methods of transmitting funds to jihadi groups using Bitcoin. Apprehended in 2015 Amin was charged with providing material support to ISIS, accused of radicalizing three young men and facilitating their travel to Syria. Initially sentenced to 136 months in prison, his sentence was reduced to 72 months, and he was ultimately released after 60 months in May 2020 under the conditions that he agree to computer monitoring, be restricted from viewing terrorist or extremist material, or associating with known extremists. None of which he abided by.

Following his release, he completed over a dozen technical certificates, graduated from Northern Virginia Community College, and almost completed a master's degree in information technology. He was employed as a digital solutions architect and volunteered at a local mosque. Although these actions depict Amin as setting off on the right path, court documents indicate that Amin had already violated his parole conditions within a month of his release.

Despite his subsequent exposure and incorporation into a positive academic, professional, and religious environment, repeated violations over three years suggest that Amin remained dedicated to ISIS ideology. During this period, Amin contacted the convicted terrorist John Walker Lindh;² continued to spread ISIS propaganda on online messaging platforms Telegram, WhatsApp, and Signal; preached the "need to 'exterminate' all non-believers"; used his technical expertise to teach others how to securely share ISIS propaganda; and offered to connect Lindh to Ahmad Musa Jebri³, who was released in 2012 and whom Amin knew to be an ISIS supporter and former convict. It is unclear whether the contact with Jebri had been established prior to Amin's initial arrest, during his time in prison or after his initial release.

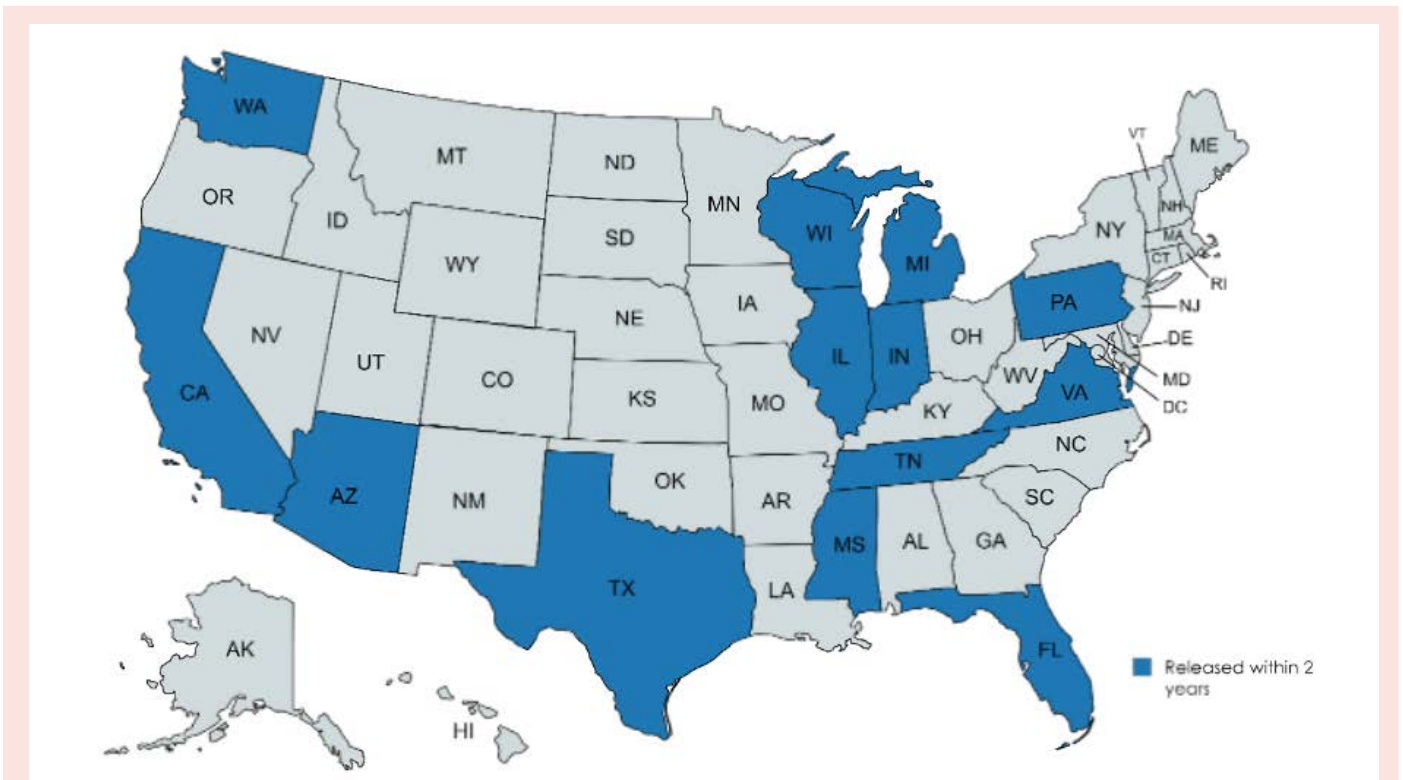


Figure 1: Locations where ISIS convicts will be released between 2024 and 2026.

Following the release violation, Amin was sentenced to an additional one-year imprisonment in 2023 and a reimposed lifetime supervised release under the same conditions as his original arrest. Whether Amin has maintained contact with Lindh or Jebril following his secondary arrest is thus far undetermined.

Unlike the case of Yousef Ramadan, Amin was charged with a terrorism offense and appeared to have availed himself of educational and social opportunities upon his release; however, that did little to dissuade him from reoffending. Obtaining degrees and gainful employment can be an important part of reintegration post-release, but Amin's case clearly displays the futility of pursuing those steps without disengagement from the group and ideology.

Sebastian Gregerson

Known [online](#) as Abdurrahman Bin Mikaayl, Sebastian Gregerson is yet another ISIS adherent who not only [reoffended](#) after his release, but repeated nearly the exact same conduct that resulted in his original arrest. A [convert](#) to Islam with a wife and twin sons, Gregerson was [arrested](#) in 2016 after purchasing five grenades from an undercover FBI agent. He was also [charged](#) with a straw purchase of a Glock handgun in Virginia and federal prosecutors alleged that Gregerson wanted to [move](#) his family to ISIS-held territory. Authorities did not claim that Gregerson planned to carry out any specific plot, nor was he charged with material support to terrorism, which likely contributed to the relatively light sentence of 60 months.

Gregerson was released from prison in October 2019 after serving 45 months, but in June 2022, Gregerson was [ordered](#) back to prison for 18 months after being caught repeating his earlier conduct; namely stockpiling weapons, accessing Salafi-jihadi propaganda, and lying to probation officers. Filings [indicate](#) that Gregerson had purchased knives and road spikes, accessed electronic devices without permission, and was once again listening to Anwar al-Awlaki lectures.

Once released, Gregerson took [steps](#) to conceal his misconduct, using the Tor browser to mask his identity and not only using the alias "Sven Gunnardsen," but also

masquerading as a Swede. During a search of his home, they also recovered a "burner" cellphone and a Faraday bag that could block electronic signals.

At trial, Gregerson's attorney refuted the claim that Gregerson was an ISIS supporter, claiming that he was simply a Muslim with an interest in world affairs and "prepping" who was exercising his First Amendment rights. However, the government argued against that claim and produced evidence that his Facebook pages [featured](#) ISIS flags and postings claiming that the Bataclan theater attack was legitimate. Charging documents also indicated that he not only downloaded every issue of Dabiq that was published up until the time of his arrest but also disseminated that magazine to other ISIS supporters including the former Maryland Imam [Suleiman Bengharsa](#). He also emailed news stories about terrorist attacks from the Long War Journal with the subject line "Allahu Akbar, God is Great" indicating his approval of the attacks. Gregerson also [told](#) the FBI undercover agent that he was an avowed follower of Anwar al-Awlaki and the FBI recovered 97 Awlaki CDs from his residence.

It was also noted that Gregerson's prepping behavior – which included [amassing](#) a substantial number of firearms, ammunition, and tactical equipment – aligned with messaging in ISIS propaganda. In 2015 when ISIS magazines promoted knife attacks, Gregerson [spent](#) nearly half of his income on tactical knives. In 2016 he also purchased three firearms after [receiving](#) a \$1,200 charitable contribution from Bengharsa, whom Gregerson had met while living in Maryland.

Given his short sentence, it is unlikely Gregerson received any sort of programmatic assistance while incarcerated, although the judge did [order](#) a mental health evaluation, and Gregerson requested to participate in a work program. While Gregerson was sentenced to 60 months, he had already served nearly 18 months by the time proceedings had concluded, ultimately only serving 45 months due to good behavior.

Gregerson was sent back to prison roughly two and a half years after his initial release, however, his lawyer revealed that the FBI began [investigating](#) him nearly immediately

after he left FCI Milan and violations of his parole were quickly apparent.

On paper, Gregerson displays the characteristics of a productive member of society. He was married with two children and had the [support](#) of both his parents and his father-in-law throughout the trial. While modest, he was able to support his family through his [work](#) at Walmart and Target and he was [taking](#) courses at Henry Ford Community College.

However, the record shows that he was a committed adherent to ISIS ideology, and this prison sentence was unsuccessful in disengaging him from that ideology. At his original sentence hearing, the Assistant US Attorney described just this while arguing for a longer sentence. She stated “he considers himself a POW. Like any professional soldier he is unlikely to relinquish that view of himself as a soldier while he’s in prison. He hasn’t changed since his arrest. He hasn’t concluded that he’s on the wrong path. If he hasn’t concluded he’s on the wrong path, he’s not likely to change his behavior. He’s not on the road to doing something different once he’s released from prison.”

Gregerson’s short sentence emphasizes the need for post-release programming. As noted above, Gregerson likely did not receive any sort of programmatic assistance while incarcerated. However, authorities could have used both his incarceration and his probationary period to provide him with opportunities and support in disengagement.

Charlton LaChase

The arrest of Charlton LaChase, a 27-year-old deaf, mute, partially blind, and mentally ill Florida resident, shows a dramatically different profile to the case studies above.

According to charging documents, in early 2018 LaChase – who a court-appointed doctor [determined](#) suffers from bipolar disorder with psychotic symptoms – sent text messages to an unspecified family member (likely his sister) advertising his support for ISIS, stating that he was preparing to carry out a ramming attack on a crowded event, and referencing both the Las Vegas and Pulse Nightclub shootings. In these messages, LaChase

indicated that he had “been planning to be the first deaf ISIS.”

A subsequent review of LaChase’s Facebook account indicated an interest in ISIS propaganda, although it is unclear whether he was consuming this material when it was originally released or only once it was covered by mainstream media outlets. On unknown dates he [posted](#) a link to a news clip discussing an ISIS video⁴ that featured deaf fighters, a video showing the alleged abuse of a deaf Brazilian ISIS fighter by Kurdish militiamen, and a video of himself at a local mosque signing a message about the Pulse Nightclub shooting. A search warrant for his Facebook account [revealed](#) several attempts to purchase firearms, additional threats (including against politicians), and statements supporting ISIS. There is no indication that LaChase was in direct contact with ISIS recruiters or any ISIS members.

Based on the threatening messages, LaChase was arrested for violating 18 USC § 875 – interstate transmission of threat to injure the person of another. In a subsequent superseding indictment, he was charged with two additional counts of 18 USC § 875 as well as making false statements and obstruction of justice. The latter two counts are related to LaChase’s efforts to stymie the investigation by lying about his phone being stolen and attempting to conceal the phone. On January 29, 2019, Judge Robin Rosenberg sentenced LaChase to 18 months in prison for the terroristic threats.

Little is known about the mental health or rehabilitation services available to LaChase while he was incarcerated, although his sentence did [require](#) that he undergo treatment and his mother [claimed](#) that he did not have reliable access to sign language interpreters or assistive technology. She also [claimed](#) that he was “often isolated” and placed in solitary confinement. However, one day after his release LaChase became the first ISIS-related convict⁵ to be rearrested upon release from prison for [threatening](#) to carry out an attack on the I-95 highway in Vero Beach, Florida, which the FBI characterized as an “[ISIS-related terrorist threat](#).” The arrest occurred one day after his release from custody, however, media sources indicate that the threat was [transmitted](#) while LaChase was still incarcerated in Georgia.

It is unclear whether LaChase was mentally stable enough to take advantage of disengagement or rehabilitation opportunities should they have been presented. While the intersection of mental health and extremist ideologies is a complex topic well beyond the scope of this paper, LaChase provides a clear example of a pressing need that must be resolved before effective disengagement and deradicalization can occur. In his mental illness appears to have been a major factor in his actions and treatment is likely necessary before he can fully reintegrate into society, however, in many cases, the confounding factor can be something less complex such as lack of education, traumatic exposure, or the need for vocational support.

Mohammed Hamzah Khan

Mohammad Hamza Khan was an [active](#) member of his community as well as a fervent young ISIS supporter. First [arrested](#) in 2014 for attempting to join ISIS, he was then [rearrested](#) in 2018 for violating his release conditions. The violations were unrelated to ISIS activity and Khan deemed this a reflection of his exposure to different people in a university setting, having adult responsibilities and starting counselling. Nevertheless, due to his observed ability to initially hide his extreme beliefs, the seemingly successful reintegration into society presents a strong indication rather than an unquestionable confirmation that his ideology has changed.

In notable surprise to his community, Khan was [arrested](#) in 2014 in Chicago for attempting to travel to Syria and join ISIS along with his minor siblings. Having freshly [graduated](#) from an Islamic high school, where he had played basketball with friends and, taught at his local mosque, Khan was a found to [possess](#) maps, [drawings](#) and a letter to his parents confessing his determination to join the Islamic State. In [cooperation](#) with the government, Khan provided information on his recruitment conducted through social media, information on ISIS supporters known to him, and a promise of continued future cooperation. Ultimately, Khan was sentenced to 40 months' imprisonment in 2016 with time served since 2014. He was released in 2017 under the conditions of 20 years of "intensive"

supervised release, participation in an unspecific mental health treatment program, attendance of violent extremism counseling; and compliance with a computer monitoring program.

Following his initial release, Khan was [noted](#) by his own attorney as having a "tough guy attitude" and an appearance resembling "Jihadi Joe". This attitude was said to have changed with his pursuit of a computer science and engineering honors degree at Benedictine University in Lisle, Illinois, where he maintained a 4.0 GPA and volunteered at his local mosque. In a [statement](#) to the court, Khan detailed his reentry into society as successful, citing his 4.0 GPA, volunteer work at a park, working to pay off debts, and attending counseling which adjusted his mindset to be "more accepting and appreciative of others." Whether these 'counseling sessions' are the same as the violent extremism counseling required by his original release conditions, is unspecified. The impact of Khan's time incarcerated and the subsequent mental health treatment was not remarked on in his statement

Nevertheless, within 10 months, he [violated](#) his parole conditions, by possessing an unauthorized device and communication tool. ISD analysts observed that his parole violations did not involve ISIS or illegal activity, suggesting there may have been some level of rehabilitation with a decrease in or possible rejection of ISIS ideology. Due to Khan's high academic performance, and the assessment that his violations were unrelated to ISIS, Khan was sentenced in 2018 to 60 days imprisonment and an additional year of supervised release to his original 20 years. He was also given a further 120 hours of community service on top of his original requirement of 100 hours per year for the first five years, and required to undergo polygraph testing as well as a probation assessment of his residence.

There is insufficient information to assess what measures may have prevented Khan from violating his parole, but his case does provide an opportunity to discuss the importance of tailoring release/probation conditions to the individual. Overly restrictive conditions can impinge on the ability of the individual to reintegrate into society, so care should be taken to ensure that this is balanced with risk mitigation.

Islam Natsheh

Islam Natsheh is the youngest convict examined in this study and the only reoffender whose conduct was not related to ISIS or terrorism. 18-years-old when radicalized and only twenty when arrested for attempting to travel to join ISIS in Syria, Natsheh was even described by the court as being on the less concerning “end of the spectrum” of terrorism cases acknowledging that Natsheh did not attempt to recruit others, did not fund ISIS, and did not commit acts of violence. His defense attorney described him as “a 21-year-old who acts like a 21-year-old” and “not so radicalized,” statements that were not contested by the prosecutors.

While in a post-arrest statement Natsheh admitted that a year prior to his arrest he considered carrying out an attack in the US, but he was not charged with any related offenses and there is no indication that he actually planned any type of attack. He did however share violent propaganda including horrific footage of the execution of Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kaseasbeh.

Prior to his arrest, Islam engaged in some anti-social behaviors such as smoking marijuana, but most notably was repeatedly described by other as exhibiting signs of depression including spending a full week alone in his room without eating or drinking. During this period his parents connected him to some family friends to whom he said “I’m so depressed and I can’t figure out what to do with my life.”

While the statements of offenders at sentencing hearings should be assessed skeptically, Natsheh displayed significant contrition and recognized the impact of his actions on his family and future. At one point he stated:

“The context of my crime required me to abandon my family without the possibility of ever seeing them again, and it was really an act of selfishness, and I didn’t realize how much my family needed me. It was a desperate attempt to try to do something to make myself feel good by trying to help others. So I know that I have a problem, and I understand that I do have the problem. And I don’t know the way the

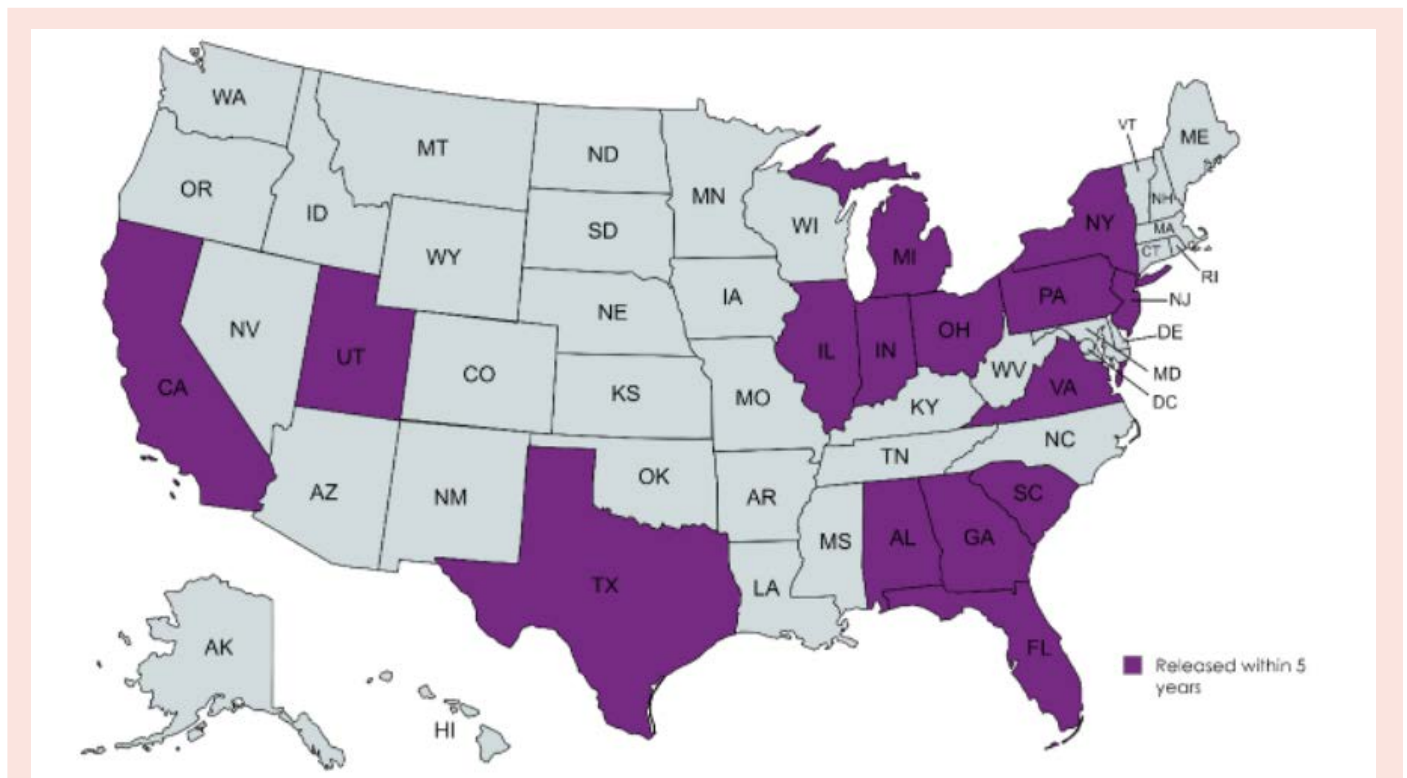


Figure 2: Locations where ISIS convicts will be released between 2026 and 2029.

drug programs do it, but the first thing is that you acknowledge that you have a problem and then you try to see how it happened.”

He went on to describe a future that seems plucked directly from de-radicalization best practices:

“And I lost direction. And I’m going to better myself, and I have the support of my family, my friends. I love them. They’ve really helped me in this process to transition from my old way of thinking. So that’s what I’ve been focusing on in the past 11 months, focusing on restructuring myself mentally, psychologically, and I’ve realigned my focus on finishing my education, building a strong bond with family and ambitions of opening my own business. The family and friends who are here today, they continue to stand by me and they know that I have the character to keep on going and to succeed in this life, and I just hope that you see that, too, and that you feel strong and confident that I have more to offer my country, my community by being a productive citizen again. And I have a good heart. I’m a good person and I just -- I strayed off the path and getting arrested is probably the most fortunate thing to happen. And I just need help.”

Natsheh’s original sentencing hearing included an extended discussion of potential rehabilitation programs he could be enrolled in, an effort that appears to have come to naught. At that hearing, the government [stated](#) “hopefully there will be a more focused approach to rehabilitation both within the Bureau of Prisons and upon release.” They referenced programs in other areas of the country but when questioned, the probation officer stated any rehabilitative programming would be part of a larger mental health program just “more focused.” The probation officer suggested that they contact other districts to implement a program, however, there is no indication that such programming ever materialized. During that exchange, the defense attorney pointed out that extant programming in the US is specifically for individuals on pretrial release and that it had not been rolled out nationwide. Unfortunately, the defense sentencing memorandum [rejected](#) the need for any sort of programming, stating “no such assessment or

intervention was sought for Mr. Natsheh. It’s simply not needed.”

Upon his release from custody, Natsheh was ordered to – among other things – live in a residential facility, submit to drug testing, and participate in a computer monitoring program. He violated all of those conditions. In February 2021, he was arrested for driving under the influence and possession of a controlled substance. In May 2021, he was cited for possession of unauthorized phones/computers, possession of cocaine, and testing positive for cocaine and marijuana. In July 2021, he was arrested for aggravated assault with a knife, a charge that was later reduced to battery. In August 2022, his supervised release was finally revoked, however, he was sentenced to time served. Two months later the court was notified that Natsheh had again tested positive for marijuana, failed to attend mental health treatment, and failed to appear for drug testing. There is no indication that Islam Natsheh continues to engage with ISIS members or ideology, although the court is likely ill-equipped to determine if that is the case. It appears that Natsheh’s continued violations resemble those of ordinary criminal offenders rather than those of an extremist.

2. Deradicalization Frameworks

The commonly used term “deradicalization” is an oversimplification for a complex process. Deradicalization at best can be considered a desired end-state, although most experts agree that formerly radicalized persons are at risk of slipping back into prior behaviors and associations. While more detailed breakdowns are discussed and evaluated in the literature, this paper will largely consider three efforts or steps generally considered essential to deradicalizing those who have been indoctrinated into extremist thought.

The first step, and often the most difficult, is disengagement. Involvement in extremist groups can [inflict](#) a significant amount of damage on both the individual and their community including anxiety, trauma, paranoia, disrupted education, limited professional opportunities, felony records, and loss of relationships. In a 2014 [study](#) of extremists who had disengaged from their terrorist associations, 83% indicated that while they were involved with extremist groups, their sense of self was almost totally merged or very highly merged with the group. The remaining 17% said their sense of self was 70-80% merged.

Before it is possible to rehabilitate an extremist and mitigate the damage done by hateful ideologies, that individual must of their own free will make the decision to disengage from their previous associations and to reject the use of violence. This is the primary goal of most prison programming and it [does not require](#) that the extremist reject the underlying ideology. Disengagement can take many forms [ranging](#) from a full break from the organization, its value system, and social network to a more subtle disengagement that involves the retention of some relationships. This process can be assisted by restrictive measures such as monitoring or blocking of mail, segregation from other radicalized prisoners, and disallowing radical reading material. However, these merely eliminate the “pull factors” and the influence of peers without providing an alternative for individual or addressing the “push factors” that originally led to their radicalization. Thus, to enable effective and lasting disengagement, extremists must be presented with alternative narratives that show a viable path to self-

actualization outside of radical or extreme ideologies. This can be done via literature, guidance from religious leaders or other ideological influencers, engagement with family and community members where appropriate, or any other method that will resonate with the extremist.

While often controversial, the use of other former extremists can be extremely effective at this stage, particularly if the radicalized individual shows signs of disillusionment with the group leadership or group members. The same 2014 study cited above noted that participants in their sample largely joined extremist movements for personal and social reasons rather than out of ideological commitment. The author notes that a significant portion of their subject cited disillusionment as their primary motivation for disengagement, which aligns with the social factors that originally led them to join. Former extremists are able to provide a more authentic message, particularly when discussing specific individuals. However, it should be noted that establishing credibility with both the radicalized individual and their community is critical and simply being a former extremist is no guarantee of credibility. In a [study](#) of UK post-conviction mentoring programs, “more than one mentor mentioned that (...) being a former extremist did little to add to their intrinsic trustworthiness.”

Once a radicalized individual has made the decision to disengage (i.e. reject violence and cease association with other radical groups or people), it is possible to embark on rehabilitation. This stage of the process is the most individualized and must be tailored to their specific needs. It often includes psychological counseling to address the trauma that either led to the original radicalization or was inflicted as part of their experiences as an extremist. However, while addressing trauma is necessary, it is not sufficient for rehabilitation. It is outside the scope of this study to delve deeply into the details of extremist rehabilitation, but the goal of this step is to undo a degree of the emotional, psychological, and social damage done by the extremist ideology. Similar to disengagement, this involves presenting positive narratives and often includes the participation of religious or other prominent community leaders that can credibly present alternative

paths. While tempting, it is generally considered unproductive to generate debate or attempt to discredit extremist ideology at this stage, as this feeds into the dichotomy created by extremist ideologies. The goal is for the extremist to be able to process their experiences and independently reject the underlying ideology that once dominated their worldview.

Finally, a radicalized individual must have the opportunity to reintegrate into society. While some extremists may have the trappings of a successful life – family, money, friends – the process of disengagement and deradicalization will almost certainly cause their worldview and interpersonal ties to deteriorate. In many cases, it will cause dislocation and a significant fall in perceived societal status. Reintegration programming is mostly focused on combating the “push factors”

of radicalization such as low social status, lack of interpersonal ties, or lack of dignity. The now-former extremist must regain a positive self-image separate from their previous beliefs and they need to be able to sustain a lifestyle that makes them resilient to those “push factors” that resulted in their original radicalization. Like the rehabilitation stage, this can include psychological counseling and it may also be necessary to provide remedial education or job training that will enable successful reintegration into society.

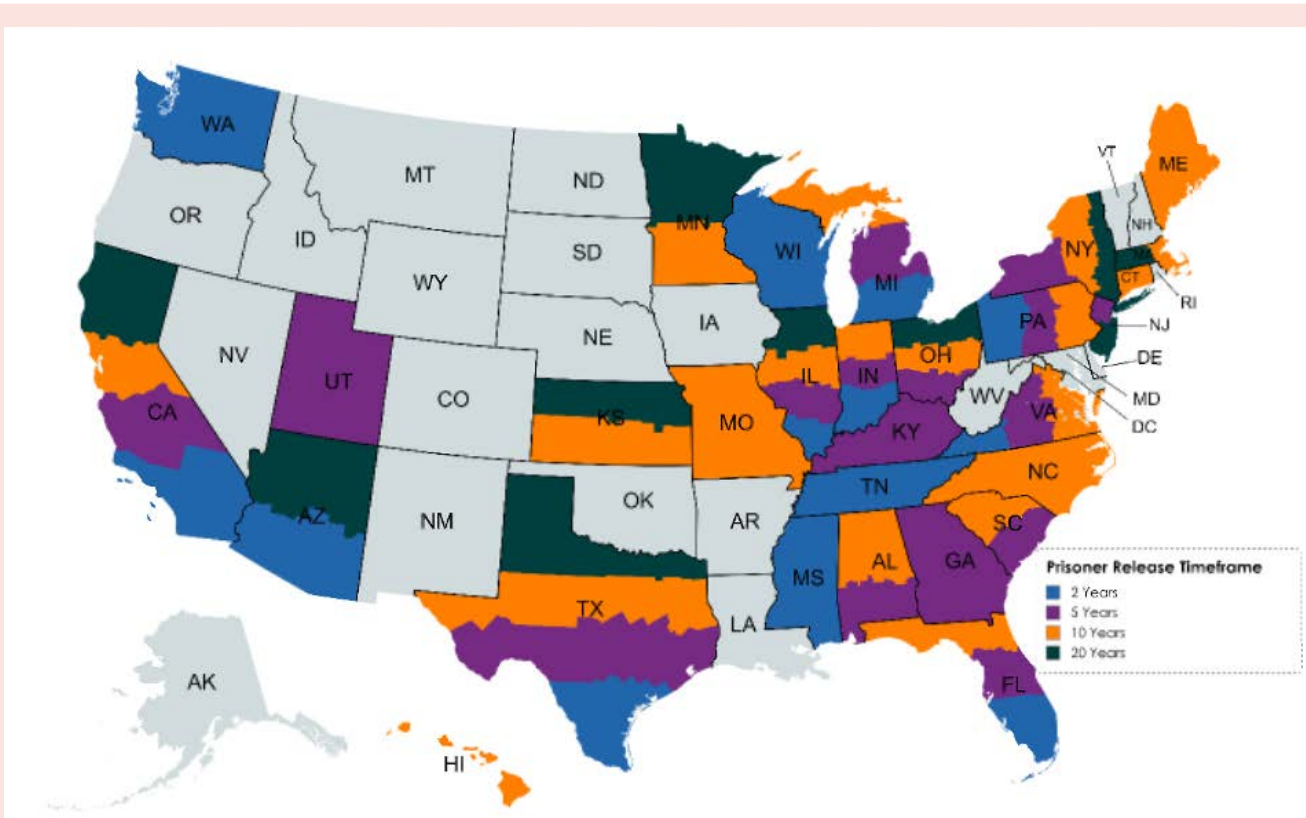


Figure 3: Locations where ISIS convicts will be released between 2024 and 2044.

3. Existing Programs

In the absence of a nationwide framework, local projects have been established to address the disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration of Americans arrested for terrorist offenses. The most prominent of these are the Disruption and Early Engagement Program (DEEP) and a Minnesota-based initiative within the U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services Office (henceforth the Minnesota initiative). In addition to only covering small geographic areas, neither of these programs provides the full suite of needed services from the time of incarceration.

DEEP, originally hosted by the Eastern District of New York (EDNY) and now operated by the Citizens Crime Commission (CCC), is designed to intervene with individuals on the path to committing extremist violence. The program integrates many of the best practices recommended by experts including a fully voluntary program, the use of formers wherever possible, and a focus on disengagement and demobilization prior to rehabilitation and reintegration. While law enforcement can refer convicted ISIS supporters to DEEP, the model is intended for individuals who have not yet mobilized and do not pose an imminent security threat. A 2020 DHS [grant application](#) specifically identified a low-to-medium risk of referrals being deemed inappropriate for the initiative and described an eligibility and intake process that would screen out participants that are “at a risk level that DEEP (...) is equipped to handle.”

Despite its strengths, DEEP is simply not intended to provide comprehensive services to many convicted ISIS supporters. Experts would likely recommend that any such program mirror DEEP’s voluntary nature, however, it is probable that most ISIS-related convicts would fall outside of the program’s criteria as they have already been mobilized to violence.

In contrast to DEEP’s focus on early intervention and voluntary participation, the Minnesota initiative operated by the U.S. Probation Office for the District of Minnesota provides court-ordered programming exclusively to those convicted of terrorist offenses. The program was created in 2016 following a [ruling](#) from U.S. District Judge Michael Davis which allowed certain

non-violent defendants to avoid jail time by undergoing evaluation and engagement that would support their disengagement from extremist ideology.

From 2016-2019, nearly half of those tried in Minnesota for “extremist” offenses were deemed suitable for release and participation in the program. Of those 30 defendants who participated during that period, only two failed to complete the program or were subsequently charged with a crime, a notably high success rate even when considering the selection bias of those deemed suitable for participation.

The Minnesota initiative addresses some of the gaps of the DEEP initiative, integrating itself more explicitly into the judicial process, however, it still only addresses a subset of the radicalized population and provides minimal post-release reintegration support.

4. Policy Recommendations

The case studies make it clear that incarceration is an insufficient mechanism for disengagement from extremist groups. Gregerson, Ali, Ramadan, and LaChase not only reoffended, but also maintained their support for ISIS throughout their incarceration and upon their release. It is unclear whether Natsheh and Khan did so, but their cases still show the need to consider the wider risks of reoffending and the inability of current programming to support the reintegration of extremist arrestees into society

Consider extremist ideology and disengagement when implementing prison regulations regarding media and housing

As noted in the previous sections, incarceration can offer an opportunity for disengagement. Regulations exist for authorities to control the type of media inmates can access and separate certain types of inmates from each other. However, in most facilities these regulations

primarily target gang affiliation and are designed for violence prevention. Limiting exposure to extremist ideas, although insufficient for disengagement, is absolutely necessary. Prison authorities should be aware of extremists incarcerated in their facilities and have access to resources to inform media restrictions. Care must be taken not to infringe on religious liberties during this process. Restricting access to non-extremist religious texts would not only be a violation of civil liberties but could also be counterproductive for disengagement.

Implement targeted disengagement and rehabilitation programming through a national program

Disengagement is not a passive process, it should be guided and enabled by professionals with experience in extremism and radicalization. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve deeply into the details of the programming, in order to mitigate the threat of terrorist

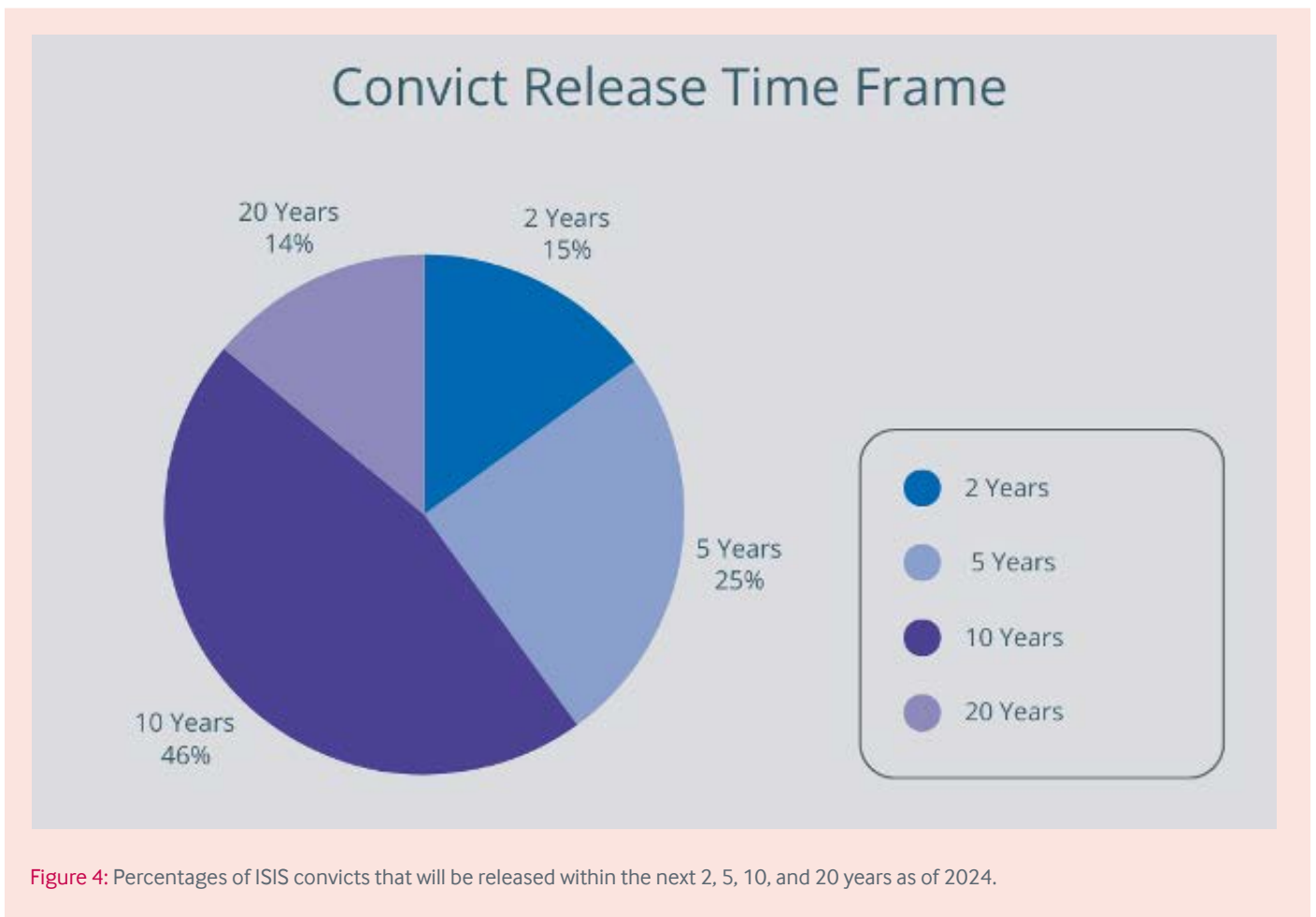


Figure 4: Percentages of ISIS convicts that will be released within the next 2, 5, 10, and 20 years as of 2024.

recidivism, it is necessary to establish a national program to support the disengagement and rehabilitation of those incarcerated for terrorist offenses. The remarks made by the judge at the Natsheh's sentencing hearing were particularly enlightening; a federal judge saw an opportunity for reforming a vulnerable young man but simply did not have the resources. A national program should be established under the Department of Justice or Department of Homeland Security to offer this programming where appropriate. DEEP and the Minnesota initiative are excellent programs, but they are extremely limited in scope. A national program is needed to address all extremist arrestees, whether incarcerated or paroled, not solely those who are eligible for a diversionary program.

Inform inmates of post-release support

Disengagement and rehabilitation are only the first steps. Not only is follow-on assistance necessary to sustain any progress made, but the transition from prison to society is a particularly vulnerable period. Any programming in prison should be linked to post-release support and follow-on reintegration programming. Radicalization is almost always fueled by dislocation from society and a sense of hopelessness. Inmates need to know that there is hope for their future and a support network outside of extremism.

Provide post-release reintegration and psycho-social support

As noted above, the transition from prison to society is jarring and could result in the reversal of any gains. To prevent this and to continue addressing any trauma and mental health issues, those released should have access to continued psycho-social support. They should also have access to programming to smooth their reintegration. These programs will vary from person-to-person, but they may include supplementary education, job training, or other types of assistance.

Coordinate to ensure that prison authorities and state, local, tribal, and territorial law enforcement are aware of extremists incarcerated or released in their jurisdictions.

As shown in the case studies, not all extremists are incarcerated on terrorism charges, and the extent to which their status is known by all relevant authorities remains unclear. Federal authorities should collaborate with all necessary parties to ensure that appropriate steps are taken with respect to these individuals, regardless of the charges that were originally leveled.

Endnotes

1. *ISD reviewed the expected release date of each prisoner, but the actual release date is determined by the Bureau of Prisons and may vary based on a number of factors that remain unknown to the public. Absent other mitigating factors, federal inmates generally serve 70-80% of their initial sentence.*
2. *John Walker Lindh, known as the “American Taliban”, was convicted of terror-related crimes, served 17 years of a 20-year sentence and was subsequently released in 2019. Mainstream media reported Lindh to have maintained his extremist ideology during his prison sentence and was under supervision by the same probation officer as Amin at the same time as Amin.*
3. *Ahmad Musa Jebril is an Islamist preacher praising violent jihadists, whose followers have notably joined al-Qaeda –affiliated groups, conducted lone wolf attack and joined ISIS. He was arrested in 2004 on Fraud charges and released in 2012, keeping a low – but still active – online presence in 2021 through student-run telegram channels.*
4. *The video is most likely the 2015 release entitled “From Who Excused To Those Note Excused”.*
5. *Mohammed Hamzah Khan was not rearrested, but rather re-incarcerated after he violated the terms of his parole.*

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