

Arabic Words Go Free in Jails

The federal Bureau of Prisons is holding 119 persons with “specific ties” to international Islamist terrorist groups, yet has no full-time Arabic translators or a system to monitor their communications, The Washington Times has learned.

A congressional aide said Bureau of Prisons officials maintain an informal list of 17 employees who are proficient in Arabic. The prison officials acknowledge, however, that none of the workers had been tested to determine Arabic fluency or undergone a special screening or background check, the aide said.

Capitol Hill is starting to notice.

“It’s ludicrous to think that the Bureau of Prisons doesn’t have a single full-time translator to monitor their communications,” said Sen. Charles E. Grassley, Iowa Republican, in a statement given to The Washington Times before Thursday’s multiple terror bombings in London.

Mr. Grassley called the current system “a recipe for disaster.”

“There is no question that the number of Arabic translators should be beefed up as quickly as possible — the very last thing that prisoners should be able to do from behind bars is write a letter to encourage, recruit or aid terrorists in their plans to attack here or around the world,” Sen. Charles E. Schumer, New York Democrat, said in a separate statement to The Times.

After inquiries from members of Congress and The Times, prison officials said last week that they had hired one designated, full-time Arabic translator and plan to hire one more. But the employee had not begun work as of today and there was no indication of any fluency test or special background check.

Since the September 11 attacks, authorities have identified prisons as security threats because of recruitment efforts by al Qaeda and other terror groups. But convicted terrorists in federal penitentiaries, including those behind the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, retain communication privileges and have had direct contact with other terrorists.

The 119 inmates linked to terror groups include 40 thought to be members of al Qaeda and 23 who are “identified as linked to 9/11,” according to a document prepared by the Bureau of Prisons. It is not clear from the document how many fall under both categories.

Although the agency limits the use of Arabic in some communications within prison walls, the lack of full-time translators makes it difficult for the bureau to learn efficiently and promptly the contents of phone calls or letters, which are monitored and can be in Arabic.

“There are several known instances in U.S. prisons of known or suspected terrorists communicating with terrorists overseas, or with their followers or other networks that share their ideologies and goals,” counterterrorism consultant Daveed Gartenstein-Ross said.

“Probably the best example is the 14 letters that were exchanged between the convicted World Trade Center bombers and a Spanish terror cell.”

A February 2003 letter from convicted bomber Mohammed Salameh to the Spanish terror cell

read in part: "Oh God! Make us live with happiness, make us die as martyrs, may we be united on the Day of Judgment."

Bureau of Prisons spokesman Michael Truman said all inmate phone calls are recorded and all incoming and outgoing letters are scanned or copied. He was not able to say what portion of correspondence of the 119 prisoners tied to Islamic terrorists is monitored promptly.

Although the agency does not employ full-time Arabic translators, Mr. Truman said, it uses outside contractors as needed. He did not provide specifics.

The congressional aide said the prison officials acknowledge not having a formal procedure for using translation services of other agencies.