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NEW YORK — It's Friday on Rikers Island, time for weekly worship for nearly a quarter of the city jail's 14,000 inmates.

The men, Muslims, file quietly into a classroom of white cinderblock that serves as their mosque and sit on sheets stamped "Department of Corrections" covering the linoleum floor. Imam Menelik Muhammad stands before a wall facing Mecca and preaches.

"You will not be considered a Muslim unless people are considered safe from your hands and your tongue," he tells the prisoners.

Across the United States, tens of thousands of Muslims are practicing their faith behind bars. Islam is most likely to win American converts there, according to U.S. Muslim leaders, and the religion has for decades been a regular part of prison culture.

But the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks have brought new scrutiny to Muslim inmates, many of whom are black Americans. While prison chaplains of various faiths argue that Islam offers a path to rehabilitation, others say it has the potential to turn felons into terrorists.