

Secret World of U.S. Interrogation

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Long History of Tactics in Overseas Prisons Is Coming to Light

In Afghanistan, the CIA's secret U.S. interrogation center in Kabul is known as "The Pit," named for its despairing conditions. In Iraq, the most important prisoners are kept in a huge hangar near the runway at Baghdad International Airport, say U.S. government officials, counterterrorism experts and others. In Qatar, U.S. forces have been ferrying some Iraqi prisoners to a remote jail on the gigantic U.S. air base in the desert.

The Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, where a unit of U.S. soldiers abused prisoners, is just the largest and suddenly most notorious in a worldwide constellation of detention centers -- many of them secret and all off-limits to public scrutiny -- that the U.S. military and CIA have operated in the name of counterterrorism or counterinsurgency operations since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

These prisons and jails are sometimes as small as shipping containers and as large as the sprawling Guantanamo Bay complex in Cuba. They are part of an elaborate CIA and military infrastructure whose purpose is to hold suspected terrorists or insurgents for interrogation and safekeeping while avoiding U.S. or international court systems, where proceedings and evidence against the accused would be aired in public. Some are even held by foreign governments at the informal request of the United States.

"The number of people who have been detained in the Arab world for the sake of America is much more than in Guantanamo Bay. Really, thousands," said Najeeb Nuaimi, a former justice minister of Qatar who is representing the families of dozens of prisoners.

The largely hidden array includes three systems that only rarely overlap: the Pentagon-run network of prisons, jails and holding facilities in Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantanamo and elsewhere; small and secret CIA-run facilities where top al Qaeda and other figures are kept; and interrogation rooms of foreign intelligence services -- some with documented records of torture -- to which the U.S. government delivers or "renders" mid- or low-level terrorism suspects for questioning.

All told, more than 9,000 people are held by U.S. authorities overseas, according to Pentagon figures and estimates by intelligence experts, the vast majority under military control. The detainees have no conventional legal rights: no access to a lawyer; no chance for an impartial hearing; and, at least in the case of prisoners held in cellblock 1A at Abu Ghraib, no apparent guarantee of humane treatment accorded prisoners of war under the Geneva Conventions or civilians in U.S. jails.

Although some of those held by the military in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo have had visits by the International Committee of the Red Cross, some of the CIA's detainees have, in effect, disappeared, according to interviews with former and current national security officials and to the Army's report of abuses at Abu Ghraib.

The CIA's "ghost detainees," as they were called by members of the 800th MP Brigade, were routinely held by the soldier-guards at Abu Ghraib "without accounting for them, knowing their identities, or even the reason for their detention," the report says. These phantom captives were "moved around within the facility to hide them" from Red Cross teams, a tactic that was "deceptive, contrary to Army doctrine, and in violation of international law."

CIA employees are under investigation by the Justice Department and the CIA inspector general's office in connection with the death of three captives in the past six months, two who died while under interrogation in Iraq, and a third who was being questioned by a CIA contract interrogator in Afghanistan. A CIA spokesman said the hiding of detainees was inappropriate. He declined to comment further.

None of the arrangements that permit U.S. personnel to kidnap, transport, interrogate and hold foreigners are ad hoc or unauthorized, including the so-called renditions. "People tend to regard it as an extra-judicial kidnapping; it's not," former CIA officer Peter Probst said. "There is a long history of this. It has been done for decades. It's absolutely legal."

In fact, every aspect of this new universe -- including maintenance of covert airlines to fly prisoners from place to place, interrogation rules and the legal justification for holding foreigners without due process afforded most U.S. citizens -- has been developed by military or CIA lawyers, vetted by Justice Department's office of legal counsel and, depending on the particular issue, approved by White House general counsel's office or the president himself.

In some cases, such as determining whether a U.S. citizen should be designated an enemy combatant who can be held without charges, the president makes the final decision, said Alberto R. Gonzales, counsel to the president, in a Feb. 24 speech to the American Bar Association's Standing Committee on Law and National Security.

Critics of this kind of detention and treatment, Gonzales said, "assumed that there was little or no analysis -- legal or otherwise -- behind the decision to detain a particular person as enemy combatant."

On the contrary, the administration has applied the law of war, he said. "Under these rules, captured enemy combatants, whether soldiers or saboteurs, may be detained for the duration of hostilities."

Because most of the directives and guidelines on these issues are classified, former and current military and intelligence officials who described them to The Washington Post would do so only on the condition that they not be identified.

Along with other CIA and military efforts to disrupt terrorist plots and break up al Qaeda's financial networks, administration officials argue that the interrogations are a key component of their global counterterrorism strategy and counterinsurgency operations in Iraq. As the CIA's deputy director, John McLaughlin, recently told the commission investigating the Sept. 11 attacks: "The country, with all its capabilities, is now much more orchestrated into an offensive mix that is relentless."

Military Jails and Prisons

Abu Ghraib -- where photographs were taken that have enraged the Arab world and rocked U.S. political and military leadership -- held 6,000 to 7,000 detainees at the time of the documented abuse. Today, it and other sites in Iraq hold more than 8,000 prisoners, U.S. and coalition officials said. They range from those believed to have played key roles in the insurgency to some who are held on suspicion of petty crimes.

Until the current scandal cast some hazy light, little has been publicly known about the Iraq detention sites, their locations and who was being held there. That has been a source of continuing frustration for international monitoring groups such as New York-based Human Rights Watch, which has repeatedly sought to visit the facilities. Even the military's investigative report on abuses at Abu Ghraib remains classified, despite having become public through leaks.

Far better known has been the Defense Department's facility at Guantanamo Bay. The open-air camps there house about 600 detainees, flown in from around the world over the past two years. Secrecy there remains tight, with detainees and most of the facilities off-limits to visitors.

The U.S. Supreme Court is deciding whether detainees held there, whom the Pentagon has declared "enemy combatants" in the war against terrorism, should have access to U.S. courts.

Last week, the U.S. military acknowledged that two Guantanamo Bay guards had been disciplined in connection with use of excessive force against detainees. And U.S. defense officials confirmed the existence of a list of approved interrogation techniques, dating to April 2003, that included reversing sleep patterns, exposing prisoners to hot and cold, and "sensory assault," including use of bright lights and loud music.

The treatment of prisoners in Afghanistan has received less public attention.

The U.S. military holds 300 or so people at Bagram, north of the capital of Kabul, and in Kandahar, Jalalabad and Asadabad. Human Rights Watch estimates that at least 700 people had been released from those sites, most of them held a few weeks or less. Special Forces units also have holding centers at their firebases, including at Gardez and Khost.

In December 2002, two Afghans died in U.S. custody in Afghanistan. The U.S. military classified both as homicides. Another Afghan died in June 2003 at a detention site near Asadabad.

"Afghans detained at Bagram airbase in 2002 have described being held in detention for weeks, continuously shackled, intentionally kept awake for extended periods of time, and forced to kneel or stand in painful positions for extended periods," said a report in March by Human Rights Watch. "Some say they were kicked and beaten when arrested, or later as part of efforts to keep them awake. Some say they were doused with freezing water in the winter."

CIA Detention

Before the U.S. military was imprisoning and interrogating people in Afghanistan and Iraq, the CIA was scooping up suspected al Qaeda leaders in such far-off places as Pakistan, Yemen and Sudan. Today, the CIA probably holds two to three dozen captives around the world, according to knowledgeable current and former officials. Among them are al Qaeda leaders Khalid Sheik Mohammed and Ramzi Binalshibh in Pakistan and Abu Zubaida. The CIA is also in charge of interrogating Saddam Hussein, who is believed to be in Baghdad.

The location of CIA interrogation centers is so sensitive that even the four leaders of the House and Senate intelligence committees, who are briefed on all covert operations, do not know them, congressional sources said. These members are given periodic reports about the captives, but several members said they do not receive information about conditions under which prisoners are held, and members have not insisted on this information. The CIA has told Congress that it does not engage in torture as a tactic of interrogation.

"There's a black hole on certain information such as location, condition under which they are held," said one congressional official who asked not to be identified. "They are told it's too sensitive."

In Afghanistan, the CIA used to conduct some interrogations in a cluster of metal shipping containers at Bagram air base protected by three layers of concertina wire. It is unclear whether that center is still open, but the CIA's main interrogation center now appears to be in Kabul, at a location nicknamed "The Pit" by agency and Special Forces operators.

"Prisoner abuse is nothing new," said one military officer who has been working closely with CIA interrogators in Afghanistan. A dozen former and current national security officials interviewed by The Washington Post in 2002, including several who had witnessed interrogations, defended the use of stressful interrogation tactics and the use of violence against detainees as just and necessary.

The CIA general counsel's office developed a new set of interrogation rules of engagement after the Sept. 11 attacks. It was vetted by the Justice Department and approved by the National Security Council's general counsel, according to U.S. intelligence officials and other U.S. officials familiar with the process. "There are very specific guidelines that are thoroughly vetted," said one U.S. official who helps oversee the process. "Everyone is on board. It's legal."

The rules call for field operators to seek approval from Washington to use "enhanced measures" -- methods that could cause temporary physical or mental pain.

U.S. intelligence officials say the CIA, contrary to the glamorized view from movies and novels, had no real interrogation specialists on hand to deal with the number of valuable suspects it captured after Sept. 11. The agency relied on analysts, psychologists and profilers. "Two and a half years later," one CIA veteran said, "we have put together a very professional, controlled, deliberate and legally rationalized approach to dealing with the Abu Zubaidas of the world."

U.S. intelligence officials say their strongest suit is not harsh interrogation techniques, but time and patience.

'Renditions'

Much larger than the group of prisoners held by the CIA are those who have been captured and transported around the world by the CIA and other agencies of the U.S. government for interrogation by foreign intelligence services. This transnational transfer of people is a key tactic in U.S. counterterrorism operations on five continents, one that often raises the ire of foreign publics when individual cases come to light.

For example, on Jan. 17, 2002, a few hours before Bosnia's Human Rights Chamber was to order the release of five Algerians and a Yemeni for lack of evidence, Bosnian police handed them over to U.S. authorities, who flew them to Guantanamo Bay.

The Bosnian government, faced with public outcry, said it would compensate the families of the men, who were suspected of making threats to the U.S. and British embassies in Bosnia.

The same month, in Indonesia, Muhammad Saad Iqbal Madni, suspected of helping Richard C. Reid, the Briton charged with trying to detonate explosives in his shoe on an American Airlines flight, was detained by Indonesian intelligence agents based on information the CIA provided them. On Jan. 11, without a court hearing or a lawyer, he was hustled aboard an unmarked U.S.-registered Gulfstream V jet parked at a military airport in Jakarta and flown to Egypt.

It was no coincidence Madni ended up in Egypt. Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and Saudi Arabia are well-known destinations for suspected terrorists.

"A lot of people they [the U.S.] are taking to Jordan, third-country nationals," a senior Saudi official said. "They can do anything they want with them, and the U.S. can say, 'We don't have them.'"

In the past year, an unusual country joined that list of destinations: Syria.

Last year U.S. immigration authorities, with the approval of then-acting Attorney General Larry Thompson, authorized the expedited removal of Maher Arar to Syria, a country the U.S. government has long condemned as a chronic human rights abuser. Maher, a Syrian-born Canadian citizen, was detained at JFK International Airport in New York as he was transferring to the final leg of his flight home to Canada.

U.S. authorities say Arar has links to al Qaeda. Not wanting to return him to Canada for fear he would not be adequately followed, immigration officials took him, in chains and shackles, to a New Jersey airfield, where he was "placed on a small private jet, and flown to Washington D.C.," according to a lawsuit filed recently against the U.S. government. He was flown to Jordan, interrogated and beaten by Jordanian authorities who then turned him over to Syria, according to the lawsuit.

Arar said that for the 10 months he was in prison, he was beaten, tortured and kept in a shallow grave. After much pressure from the Canadian government and human rights activists, he was freed and has returned to Canada.

CIA Director George J. Tenet, testifying earlier this year before the commission investigating the Sept. 11 attacks, said the agency participated in more than 70 renditions in the years before the attacks. In 1999 and 2000 alone, congressional testimony shows, the CIA and FBI participated in two dozen renditions.

Christopher Kojm, a former State Department intelligence official and a staff member of the commission, explained the rendition procedure at a recent hearing: "If a terrorist suspect is outside of the United States, the CIA helps to catch and send him to the United States or a third country," he testified. "Though the FBI is often part of the process, the CIA is usually the main player, building and defining the relationships with the foreign government intelligence agencies and internal security services."

The Saudis currently are detaining and interrogating about 800 terrorism suspects, said a senior Saudi official. Their fate is largely controlled by Saudi-based joint intelligence task forces, whose members include officers from the CIA, FBI and other U.S. law enforcement agencies.

The Saudi official said his country does not participate in renditions and today holds no more than one or two people at the request of the United States. Yet much can hinge on terminology.

In some interrogations, for example, specialists from the United States and Saudi Arabia develop questions and an interrogation strategy before questioning begins, according to one person knowledgeable about the process. During interrogation, U.S. task force members watch through a two-way mirror, he said.

"Technically, the questioning is done by a Saudi citizen. But, for all practical purposes, it is done live," he said. The United States and Saudis "are not 'cooperating' anymore; we're doing it together."

He said the CIA sometimes prefers Saudi interrogation sites and other places in the Arab world because their interrogators speak a detainee's language and can exploit his religion and customs.

"As hard as it is to believe, you can't physically abuse prisoners in Saudi Arabia," the Saudi official said. "You can't beat them; you can't electrocute them."

Instead, he said, the Saudis bring radical imams to the sessions to build a rapport with detainees, who are later passed on to more moderate imams. Working in tandem with relatives of

the detainees, the clerics try to convince the subjects over days or weeks that terrorism violates tenets of the Koran and could bar them from heaven.

"According to our guys, almost all of them turn," the Saudi official said. "It's like deprogramming them. There is absolutely no need to put them through stress. It's more of a therapy."

The Saudis don't want or need to be directed by American intelligence specialists, who have difficulty understanding Arab culture and tribal relations, he said. "We know where they grew up," he said of the detainees. "We know their families. We know the furniture in their home."

Research editor Margot Williams contributed to this report.

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