

## Prisons of war, furnaces of radicalism

By Paul Rogers,  
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A long-term consequence of the Iraq war is the production of a new generation of young paramilitaries with combat experience in urban environments against the world's best equipped army (see "[Afghanistan in an amorphous war](#) [0]", 19 June 2008). Even if the conflict in Iraq does ease in the coming months, the experience of combat there will serve well an al-Qaida movement that measures its aims in decades rather than years.

The battalions of paramilitaries in Afghanistan that fought against Soviet conscripts in the 1980s war operated in a largely rural environment, in a conflict very different from its successor. Indeed, in one of the many "[blowback](#) [1]" effects of the "war on terror", the methods and technologies that have been learned in Iraq have now been exported back to Afghanistan. The use of roadside-bombs, for example, has escalated alarmingly in the first half of 2008, demonstrating the skills of Taliban militias as they develop their guerrilla tactics.

### The jail blowback

If the combat experience gained in Iraq has been one aid to the paramilitary movements, another has been the unexpected effect of the [holding](#) [2] by the United States and its allies of large numbers of people without trial, sometimes for years on end. The overall figures are difficult to assess, although there were indications in 2007 that at least 120,000 people have been detained since 9/11. The great majority of these have been in Iraq and Afghanistan, but the [incarcerated](#) [3] also include some thousands of people across the middle east and south Asia, and hundreds in Europe.

Some details [surface](#) [4] from time to time. It is known, for example, that the United States forces in Afghanistan are building a new prison at Bagram capable of housing 600 long-term and up to 1,100 short-term prisoners (see "[A world beyond control](#)" [4], 22 May 2008). This is in addition to, and outside the control of, the Afghan prison system. The numbers are far higher in Iraq, where the US forces are currently detaining 21,000 Iraqis - a number exceeded by thousands more held in Iraqi prisons. The American-held number represents a decrease of 4,000 from mid-2007, though US contractors are in the process of building new prisons in the country, such as one in Taji near Baghdad (see Walter Pincus, "[U.S. Official Cites 'Hardening' Of Iraqi Detainees](#) [5]", *Washington Post*, 10 June 2008).

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In addition, there is a constant throughput of detainees as new people are imprisoned and others are released. At present, thirty people are detained and imprisoned by US forces every

day, while fifty are released. This explains the net drop in overall numbers but also means that, at current rates, about 10,000 more Iraqis experience detention in the US system each year.

US sources report that their own personnel are getting more efficient at determining which detainees are the most radical and will be kept in prison for long periods of time. They estimate that there are approximately 8,000 detainees who cannot be proved to have committed crimes under the Iraqi judicial system and cannot therefore be handed over to the Iraqi for trial. These are people, though, who are deemed to pose such serious security threats that they must be incarcerated even without judicial process.

What this means is that there are many thousands of "hard-core" detainees in the prisons who are interacting repeatedly with much greater numbers coming through the system. It has to be remembered that all of these people are being detained without trial [6] by what is seen as a foreign occupying force. The potential for radicalisation within prison, let alone the impact on their friends and families, is therefore considerable.

In a related issue, there has been recurrent concern within the British prison system that convicted Muslim prisoners will do their best to proselytise fellow Muslim convicts in prison for non-political offences (see Jamie Doward, "Extremists train young convicts for terror plots [7]", *Observer*, 15 July 2007). The chief prisons inspector, Anne Owers, drew attention to this issue in supporting the work of Muslim chaplains while highlighting a lack of training for prison officers (see Dominic Casciani, "Warning over jail radicalisation [8]", BBC News, 14 April 2008).

## The enemy effect

The worries reflected in the British reports are shared elsewhere. The most striking example comes from the most closely guarded and controversial detention centre - Guantánamo in Cuba (see David Rose, "Guantá [8]namo: America's war on human rights [8]", 23 September 2004). A remarkable report by one of the best informed of US journalists, Tom Lasseter of McClatchy Newspapers, gives some indication of the extent of the problem (see Tom Lasseter, "How Guantánamo became a terror training ground [9]", *Miami Herald*, 17 June 2008).

He starts with an example that is worth quoting in full:

"Mohammed Naim Farouq was a thug in the lawless Zormat district of eastern Afghanistan. He ran a kidnapping and extortion racket, and he controlled his turf with a band of gunmen who rode around in trucks with AK-47 rifles."

"US troops detained him in 2002, although he had no clear ties to the Taliban or al-Qaida. By the time Farouq was released from the Guantánamo Bay detention camp the following year, however - after more than twelve months of what he described as abuse and humiliation at the hands of American soldiers - he'd made connections to high-level militants."

"In fact, he had become a Taliban leader. When the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency released a stack of 20 'most wanted' playing cards in 2006 identifying militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan - with Osama bin Laden at the top - Farouq was 16 cards into the deck."

In addition to his weekly **openDemocracy** column, Paul Rogers writes an international security monthly briefing for the Oxford Research Group; for details, click [here](#) [10].

Paul Rogers's most recent book is *Why We're Losing the War on Terror* [11] (Polity, 2007) - an analysis of the strategic misjudgments of the post-9/11 era and why a new security paradigm is

## The detention

In a detailed survey by the McClatchy newspaper group [12], sixty-six former Guantánamo detainees were interviewed and gave a picture of abuse and mistreatment of prisoners that served to build up considerable anger, resentment and above all, a pervasive anti-American mood. What also became clear, both from former detainees and some informal contacts in the US defence department, was that convinced Islamists were adept at using the prison system and the feelings of ordinary detainees to build up a group of potential recruits to their cause.

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Some of the techniques were sophisticated, even if they were exploiting the kinds of structures and lines of communication that exist in most prisons. After the original Camp X-ray at Guantánamo had been replaced by Camp Delta, the detention-centre [13] was organised into a series of units that varied in the severity of treatment depending on the perceived security threats from detainees. Those considered most dangerous and difficult were assigned to the most secure units whereas others, including many prisoners with no *jihadist* connections, were assigned to easier units.

However, even middle-ranking al-Qaida supporters were sufficiently experienced to avoid drawing attention to themselves, so that they could end up in an "easy" unit where they could concentrate on proselytising other inmates. As Lasseter puts it: "An angry cab driver from Kabul... may have been more likely to attack a guard and end up in Camp Three [high security] than an al Qaeda militant was." Furthermore, senior al-Qaida leaders could order middle-level supporters to cause trouble so that they would end up in a high security unit, enabling them to deliver messages as part of an effective communications network.

Lasseter's report is primarily significant because it is describing circumstances in a particularly high-security detention centre that is very well resourced and has a substantial staff of guards and detention specialists. In Iraq, the US military are dealing with tens of thousands of detainees, the great majority of whom do not turn out to be dangerous insurgents or paramilitary radicals. If even Guantánamo, with all its security and organisation, can be a paramilitary recruiting-station, then much larger and more loosely organised prisons in Iraq and Afghanistan may well be far more potent.

What this suggests, yet once more, is that yet another part of America's "war on terror" - the detention of over 120,000 people - stands to be deeply counterproductive. The end results may not become clear for years or even decades but, once again, the United States is inadvertently doing al-Qaida's job for it.

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[2] [http://www.hrw.org/doc/?t=usa\\_detentions](http://www.hrw.org/doc/?t=usa_detentions)

[3] <http://www.gulfnews.com/world/U.S.A/10213354.html>

[4] <http://www.ghostplane.net/AboutTheBook>

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[6] [http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/us\\_law/detainees/index.htm](http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/us_law/detainees/index.htm)

[7] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2007/jul/15/ukcrime.prisonsandprobation>

[8] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7347643.stm>

[9] <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation/story/572714.html>

- [10] <http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/paulrogers.htm>  
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