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3. Secret World of U.S. Interrogation

Long History of Tactics in Overseas Prisons Is Coming to Light

Dana Priest and Joe Stephens, Washington Post, 11 May 2004, Page A01

Last of three articles

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 safe-keeping 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.

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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.

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Until the current scandal cast some hazy light, little has been publicly known about the Iraqi 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.

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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.

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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.

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

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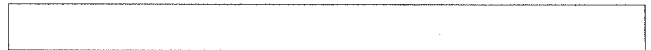
U.S. authorities say Arar has links to al Qaeda. Not wanting to return him to Canada for fear he would not be adequately followed, immigration officials took him, in chains and shackles, to a New Jersey airfield, where he was "placed on a small private jet, and flown to Washington D.C.," according to 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.

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