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ISIS Was Born In An American Detention Facility (And It Wasn't Gitmo)

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The US seems to have a knack for creating, incubating, and training its future enemies.

As the late Chalmers Johnson showed in BLOWBACK, this pattern goes back quite far and includes recent struggles with Islamist terrorists. In the 1980s, of course, the US armed and trained the Taliban as well as Osama Bin Laden as part of a proxy war with Russia. Years later, Bin Laden's criminal network, sheltered by the Taliban, attacked the US in Yemen, Kenya, New York, and more. In response to those attacks, the US invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, killing and detaining hundreds of thousands of men. At the time, many people wondered – none more forcefully than Johnson – whether the US response to blowback would engender more blowback.

It appears that it has.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the key architect behind ISIS, was an American prisoner at Camp Bucca in southern Iraq in 2004. This is not exactly breaking news – the Times and Post wrote about it a year ago, and Bucca features prominently in Will McCants's excellent essay on al-Baghdadi's rise. But I bring it up because I visited Camp Bucca in early 2008, and ever since I have been consistently struck by how little attention the facility has received.

Camp Bucca no longer exists, but it was the central detention facility for coalition forces at the height of the Iraqi occupation. You are forgiven if you've never heard of it – as you can see from a glance at Google Trends, Camp Bucca received far less attention than the detention facilities at Guantanamo Bay. (Google Trends is by no means a perfect indicator of scholarly or journalist attention, but it gives us a quick and dirty indication of overall web interest in these topics):

The difference in attention paid to these two facilities is striking, because in many ways Camp Bucca was the more significant detention facility. In 2007, the US was holding fewer than three hundred prisoners in Cuba. The same year, coalition forces were holding over twenty *thousand* prisoners in Camp Bucca, making it the largest prison in the world. During the entirety of the U.S.'s occupation of Iraq, more than 100,000 prisoners would pass through Bucca.

In early 2008, I spent a month with Major General Doug Stone, the head of Task Force 134, Detainee Operations in Iraq. (The result was this Financial Times magazine piece.) Stone had been brought in to clean things up after Abu Ghraib; at the time, he was a high-ranking marine reservist willing to take a job that many lifetime military folks wouldn't touch. Stone was shocked at what he found: not just a few bad apples torturing a few prisoners, but rather a dysfunctional detention regime, one that seemingly had no purpose and was a proving grounds for young militants.

Stone warned – to anyone who would listen – that coalition forces had created a university for jihadists. The US invaded a country where the army was the largest employer. It disbanded the army, making thousands of men suddenly unemployed. Is it any wonder that any of them were willing to place a roadside bomb for a little extra cash? And if the vast majority of detainees were motivated by money, there was an easy fix: pay them. So Stone instituted job training programs, educational certificates, and a number of other programs. Perhaps most importantly, he expedited review and release for thousands of people who had no business in a detention facility in the first place – people scooped up in the military's raids.

One of Stone's great frustrations was that he could only affect what happened in detention – not who was detained in the first place. No matter how nice American detention facilities were, or how quickly noncombatants were released, a bus showed up every day with more detainees. As Stone relayed it to me, he was in constant tension with General Raymond Odierno, then the commander of MNF-I Corps, whose aggressive tactics led to huge numbers of detentions. Odierno felt that the streets were safer with more men behind barbed wire; Stone thought this was myopic. With the benefit of hindsight, it appears that Stone was right. (Stone soon left the armed forces while Odierno was promoted twice; draw your own conclusions about what this says about merit in the military.)

Needless to say, this is not a strong causal story about detention and radicalization. We cannot know for certain if Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi would have gone on to be the father of ISIS *without* his stay at Camp Bucca. It may simply be that he was already on his path when he happened to get swept up by coalition forces and he would have had other chances to connect with future

ISIS leaders. But we know that Bucca was the place where al-Baghdadi made crucial connections to fellow radicals. As McCants notes in THE ISIS APOCALYPSE, al-Baghdadi's stay at Bucca was transformative. When he was detained, he did not appear to be involved in the insurgency; ten months later when he was released, he had the connections and influence that would enable him to launch ISIS.

What can we learn from all of this? It might be worth a few military dissertations to try to identify key lessons here. For example, what can be learned from the disconnect between attention paid to Gitmo as compared to Bucca? Is it possible that Bucca was so badly managed because it did not receive the same scrutiny as Guantanamo Bay, which became a symbol of the Bush administration's lawlessness? Separately, did we learn anything from Bucca about reducing the risk of radicalization? (Note that this is an entirely separate question from the much more controversial programs of de-radicalization of already-hardened folks.) And whether there is anything to be done about it, does the military include the costs of this sort of long-term blowback when it contemplates an occupation of the sort we saw in Iraq and Afghanistan? How successful we deem a military operation might depend on the timeframe used to evaluate it. Bush's declaration of victory in Iraq was a farce when he made it; knowing that ISIS emerged from the ashes of our occupation makes it seem even more myopic. Perhaps the rise of ISIS suggests that the true cost of military occupations can only be measured across decades, not years.

These are hard questions, and their relevance may be swamped by other, larger questions, like whether the US should have invaded Iraq in the first place. It may be the case that it's impossible to occupy a country without getting in the detention game; and it may be the case that it's impossible to detain people without creating a space for nurturing an insurgency. But even if you disagreed, as I did, with the decision to invade Iraq, it does seem there are lessons to be learned from the badly managed US occupation. And those lessons are as much about Bucca as they are about Guantanamo, which still receives the lion's share of attention in the detention debate.