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Detainees Fared Worse in Iraqi Hands, Logs Say

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The public image of detainees in Iraq was defined by the photographs, now infamous, of American abuse at Abu Ghraib, like the hooded prisoner and the snarling attack dog. While the documents disclosed by WikiLeaks offer few glimpses of what was happening inside American detention facilities, they do contain indelible details of abuse carried out by Iraq's army and police.

The six years of reports include references to the deaths of at least six prisoners in Iraqi custody, most of them in recent years. Beatings, burnings and lashings surfaced in hundreds of reports, giving the impression that such treatment was not an exception. In one case, Americans suspected Iraqi Army officers of cutting off a detainee's fingers and burning him with acid. Two other cases produced accounts of the executions of bound detainees.

And while some abuse cases were investigated by the Americans, most noted in the archive seemed to have been ignored, with the equivalent of an institutional shrug: soldiers told their officers and asked the Iraqis to investigate.

A Pentagon spokesman said American policy on detainee abuse "is and has always been consistent with law and customary international practice." Current rules, he said, require forces to immediately report abuse; if it was perpetrated by Iraqis, then Iraqi authorities are responsible for investigating.

That policy was made official in a report dated May 16, 2005, saying that if "if US forces were not involved in the detainee abuse, no further investigation will be conducted until directed by HHQ." In many cases, the order appeared to allow American soldiers to turn a blind eye to abuse of Iraqis on Iraqis.

Even when Americans found abuse and reported it, Iraqis often did not act. One report said a police chief refused to file charges "as long as the abuse produced no marks." Another police chief told military inspectors that his officers engaged in abuse "and supported it as a method of conducting investigations."

It is a frightening portrait of violence by any standards, but particularly disturbing because Iraq's army and police are central to [President Obama's](#) plan to draw down American troops in

Iraq. Iraqi forces are already the backbone of security in Iraq, now that American combat troops are officially gone, and are also in charge of running its prisons.

The archive contains extensive, often rambling accounts of American abuse from Iraqi prisoners, but few were substantiated. The most serious came during arrests, which were often violent when people resisted. In those cases, investigations were opened. In a case reminiscent of Abu Ghraib, in which guards photographed themselves with Iraqis whom they had posed in humiliating positions, a soldier was censured for writing a mocking slur with a marker on the forehead of a crying detainee.

The United States took steps to improve its detention system after the scandal at the Abu Ghraib prison erupted in 2004, tightening rules governing the treatment of prisoners and separating the hardened radicals of [Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia](#) from other prisoners.

But the documents show that Americans did sometimes use the threat of abuse by Iraqi authorities to get information out of prisoners. One report said an American threatened to send a detainee to the notorious Wolf Brigade, a particularly violent Iraqi police unit, if he did not supply information.

Some of the worst examples of Iraqi abuse came later in the war. In August 2009, an Iraqi police commando unit reported that a detainee committed suicide in its custody, but an autopsy conducted in the presence of an American “found bruises and burns on the detainee’s body as well as visible injuries to the head, arm, torso, legs, and neck.” The report stated that the police “have reportedly begun an investigation.”

Then in December, 12 Iraqi soldiers, including an intelligence officer, were caught on video in Tal Afar shooting to death a prisoner whose hands were tied. The document on the episode says that the reporting is preliminary; it is unclear whether there was a follow-up.

Years of abuse under [Saddam Hussein](#) produced an exceptionally violent society. Iraqis used cables, metal rods, wooden poles and live electrical wires to hurt prisoners. One report on a detainee cited “bruises in a roughly boot shape from upper to lower back.” In another, a detainee is said to have bruises from beatings with a board. Another detainee suffered blurred vision, bleeding in his ears and nose, bruises on his back, arms and legs and hemorrhaging in his eyes. Americans told the local Iraqi Army commander but did not open an inquiry because no American was involved.

American soldiers, however, often intervened. During a visit to a police unit in Ramadi, an American soldier entered a cell after hearing screams and found two badly dehydrated detainees with bruises on their bodies. He had them transferred out of Iraqi custody.

In August 2006, an American sergeant in Ramadi heard whipping noises in a military police station and walked in on an Iraqi lieutenant using an electrical cable to slash the bottom of a

detainee's feet. The American stopped him, but later he found the same Iraqi officer whipping a detainee's back. [Read the Document »](#)

One beaten detainee said in 2005 that "when the [Marines](#) finally took him, he was treated very well, and he was thankful and happy to see them." [Read the Document »](#)

Early on, space for detainees was limited, and Iraqis would stuff them into makeshift jails, increasing the chances for abuse. In November 2005, American soldiers found 95 blindfolded detainees with sores and broken bones crammed into a police internment center. [Read the Document »](#)

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