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3 Suspects Talk After Iraqi Soldiers Do Dirty Work

By ALISSA J. RUBIN

BAGHDAD, April 21 — Out here in what the soldiers call Baghdad's wild west, sometimes the choices are all bad.

In one of the new joint American-Iraqi security stations in the capital this month, in the volatile Ghazaliya neighborhood, Capt. Darren Fowler was heaping praise on his Iraqi counterparts for helping capture three insurgent suspects who had provided information he believed would save American lives.

"The detainee gave us names from the highest to the lowest," Captain Fowler told the Iraqi soldiers. "He showed us their safe houses, where they store weapons and I.E.D.'s and where they keep kidnap victims, how they get weapons, where weapons come from, how they place I.E.D.'s, attack us and go away. Because you detained this guy this is the first intelligence linking everything together. Good job. Very good job."

The Iraqi officers beamed. What the Americans did not know and what the Iraqis had not told them was that before handing over the detainees to the Americans, the Iraqi soldiers had beaten one of them in front of the other two, the Iraqis said. The stripes on the detainee's back, which appeared to be the product of a whipping with electrical cables, were later shown briefly to a photographer, who was not allowed to take a picture.

To the Iraqi soldiers, the treatment was normal and necessary. They were proud of their technique and proud to have helped the Americans.

"I prepared him for the Americans and let them take his confession," Capt. Bassim Hassan said through an interpreter. "We know how to make them talk. We know their back streets. We beat them. I don't beat them that much, but enough so he feels the pain and it makes him desperate."

As American and Iraqi troops set up these outposts in dangerous neighborhoods to take on the insurgents block by block, they find themselves continually facing lethal attacks. In practice, the Americans and Iraqis seem to have different answers about what tactics are acceptable in response.

Beatings like this, which are usually hard to verify but appear to be widespread given the fears about the Iraqi security forces frequently expressed by ordinary Iraqis, present the Americans with a largely undiscussed dilemma.

The beaten detainee, according to Captain Fowler, not only led the Americans to safe houses believed to be used by Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia but also confessed to laying and detonating roadside bombs along a section of road heavily traveled by American patrols. Just a month ago, four soldiers from Captain Fowler's regiment died on that road after the explosion of a large, deeply buried bomb, possibly made in the bomb factory that the Americans were able to dismantle because of the detainee's information, Captain Fowler said.

But beating is strictly forbidden by the United States Army's Field Manual, as well as American and Iraqi laws. When the Americans learned about the

beating, they were quick to condemn it.

The use of torture by American soldiers and contractors at Abu Ghraib only compounded Iraqi hatred of Americans and further undermined American moral claims in [Iraq](#). It also produced little valuable information. Most experts, including in the military, say they believe that coerced confessions are an unreliable way to learn about enemy operations because people being tortured will often say whatever they think it will take to stop the pain.

This joint security station in Ghazaliya opened on March 15, about a month after the latest increase in American troops began. The station, inhabited by about 70 soldiers of Company D of the Second Battalion, 12th Cavalry, and their Iraqi counterparts, is named for Specialist Robert Thrasher, a member of the unit killed by sniper fire on Feb. 11 when the company was scouting for a station site.

Thrasher, as the station is known, sits in the southern part of Ghazaliya, one of the roughest areas of western Baghdad. In the northern part, Shiite militias, led by the Mahdi Army, have been driving out Sunni Arabs through raids and assassinations. Sunnis have pushed Shiites out of the southern part.

Sewage pools in the streets. Water and electricity are almost nonexistent, and fewer than half the houses are occupied. The neighborhood graffiti broadcasts the presence of an active insurgency: “Long live Abu Hamza al-Muhajar,” reads one scrawl, referring to a local insurgent leader.

The outpost’s location, along one of the main arms smuggling routes from Falluja, was chosen because it was next to a litter-filled lot that was a dumping ground for bodies. When they first arrived, the American soldiers found 30 bodies there, among them women and children.

Now it is rare to find more than one or two, said Captain Fowler, who keeps photos of every one on his computer as a reminder of how much worse it was before his company took up residence. He can also point to other signs of progress: children have begun to play outside again, and women walk to the market.

But the area remains far from calm. The radio in the joint operations room crackles all day long with reports of bomb explosions or newly sighted explosive devices that must be scouted by the soldiers. The distance to the next security station is barely half a mile, but it is so dangerous that the soldiers cannot walk there and do not like to drive more often than necessary.

Although one tenet of the Baghdad security plan is that soldiers should patrol on foot to get to know local residents, it was on just such a patrol that Specialist Thrasher died. Now, said Sgt. Trevis Good, 34, “foot patrols don’t exist; they are not something we do.” The company’s partner is the Third Battalion, Fourth Brigade, of the Iraqi Army’s 10th Division. The soldiers come from Amara, the largest town in rural Maysan Province in the far south, a mostly peaceful area where in a year of active duty they never had an injury, much less a fatality.

In just three weeks in Ghazaliya, the battalion has lost two officers and a soldier; 16 troops have been wounded. A few hundred Iraqi soldiers live in three attached houses just over a brick wall from the Americans. The houses, beefed up only by sandbags, lie outside the station’s fortified area. Visiting their quarters means crouching down and running behind vehicles until entering one of the houses.

The Iraqi soldiers have their own network of informants, and they picked up the detainee who was later beaten, Mustafa Subhi Jassam, after seeing him loitering around a main patrol route twice in the same day. The other two insurgent suspects were picked up separately.

After interrogating Mr. Jassam, a thin young man wearing a blue and red warm-up outfit, for much of the night, the Americans took him to point out one of the houses where the Qaeda militants made bombs. When the Americans arrived, a half-eaten lunch was on the table next to a couple of detonators and some blasting wire. The insurgents appeared to have been gnawing on chicken and flat bread while making fuses for I.E.D.'s, improvised explosive devices, the military's term for the roadside bombs found here.

On the table and in bags on the floor were mountains of soap, which can be used in homemade explosives. Blasting wire lay in coils. Buried in the garden were two large antiaircraft guns known as Duskas, three propane tanks, and an oxygen tank that was partly cut in preparation for being turned into a huge bomb, probably similar to the one that killed the four soldiers. On the roof a large pile of homemade explosives was drying in the sun.

The Iraqi soldiers were ecstatic. They had delivered. They snapped photos of each other in front of the cache with the blasting cords in their mouths, grinning. The Americans were nervous. "One spark will blow this place up," said First Lt. Michael Obal as an Iraqi soldier flicked a lighted cigarette butt within inches of one cache of explosives. "It's highly unstable TNT."

Later, the Americans plotted into their computers the location of each of the Qaeda safe houses that Mr. Jassam had pointed out. "He was singing like a songbird," said First Lt. Sean Henley, 24.

After the prisoner was returned to the Iraqis, Captain Fowler was asked whether the Americans realized that the information was given only after the Iraqis had beaten Mr. Jassam. "They are not supposed to do that," he said. "What I don't see, I don't know, and I can't stop. The detainees are deathly afraid of being sent to the Iraqi justice system, because this is the kind of thing they do. But this is their culture."

Later, Captain Fowler said that he thought Mr. Jassam had talked because he hoped to be released. The captain wanted him let go so that he could act as an informant. The Iraqi soldiers vetoed the idea.

Mr. Jassam is now being held in an Iraqi government detention center, widely rumored to be places where suspected insurgents are abused.

Lieutenant Obal, the captain's deputy, was distraught at the thought that the detainee had been beaten. "I don't think that's right," he said. "We have intelligence teams, they have techniques for getting information, they don't do things like that. It's not civilization."

About 30 yards away, on the other side of the wall, the Iraqi soldiers suggested that the Americans were being naïve. The insurgents are playing for keeps, they say, and force must be answered with force.

"If the Americans used this way, the way we use, nobody would shoot the Americans at all," Captain Hassan said. "But they are easy with them, and they have made it easy for the terrorists."

"I didn't beat them all, I beat Mustafa in front of the others. We tell him we're going to string him up." He demonstrated, his arms spread wide. "And, I made the others see him," he said.

Captain Hassan and his colleagues said they knew the Iraqi Army had rules against beatings, but "they tell us to do what we have to do," he said.

“For me it’s a matter of conscience, not rules,” he said.

Captain Fowler’s proposal to release Mr. Jassam in the hope he would become an informant struck Captain Hassan as useless and quite possibly dangerous.

“It’s kind of not a good idea,” he said carefully, as if explaining something to a child. “He’ll never become an informant. Al Qaeda will know he’s been captured. He’ll go back to them and say, ‘The Americans wanted me to be an informer, but I will be loyal to you.’ He will be more afraid of Al Qaeda guys than of the Americans.”

But some detainees may have a simpler motivation: survival. The Iraqi soldiers say many of the insurgents are paid for their attacks, and they gain respect and protection from other militants.

Another officer in the Iraqi unit, Major Hussain, who would not give his full name, said the only way to lure such militants out of the insurgent life would be to offer them a comparable standard of living.

“Ziad, over there, wanted to come work with us,” Major Hussain said, indicating one of the insurgent suspects, Ziad Sabah Jasim, who became cooperative after witnessing the beating of Mr. Jassam. “He said, ‘Just let me join you,’ ”

“Most of them don’t believe in this insurgency,” he said. “They are young people. They are having to stay home without employment. They want food. They want money. They want to be able to marry. But there are no jobs. If you offered them jobs, most of them would not be working with Al Qaeda.”

The American soldiers would agree, but they also are clear that the only way to bring jobs is first to make the neighborhood secure. “You need a J.S.S. every kilometer or so,” Captain Fowler said. For now, there are nowhere near that many security stations on Baghdad’s west side.

Ashley Gilbertson contributed reporting.

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