

United States Concentration Camps in Iraq

The Ugly Truth Of America's Camp Cropper,
A Story To Shame Us All

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by Robert Fisk
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Now here's a story to shame us all. It's about America's shameful prison camps in Iraq. It's about the beating of prisoners during interrogation.

"Sources" may be a dubious word in journalism right now, but the sources for the beatings in Iraq are impeccable. This story is also about the gunning down of three prisoners in Baghdad, two of them "while trying to escape". But most of all, it's about Qais Mohamed al-Salman. Qais al-Salman is just the sort of guy the US ambassador Paul Bremer and his dead-end assistants need now. He hated Saddam, fled Iraq in 1976, then returned after the "liberation" with a briefcase literally full of plans to help in the restoration of his country's infrastructure and water purification system.

He's an engineer who has worked in Africa, Asia and Europe. He is a Danish citizen. He speaks good English. He even likes America. Or did until 6 June this year.

That day he was travelling in Abu Nawas Street when his car came under American fire. He says he never saw a checkpoint. Bullets hit the tyres and his driver and another passenger ran for their lives. Qais al-Salman stood meekly beside the vehicle. He was carrying his Danish passport, Danish driving licence and medical records.

But let him tell his own story. "A civilian car came up with American soldiers in it. Then more soldiers in military vehicles. I told them I didn't understand what had happened, that I was a scientific researcher. But they made me lie down in the street, tied my arms behind me with plastic-and-steel cuffs and tied up my feet and put me in one of their vehicles."

The next bit of his story carries implications for our own journalistic profession. "After 10 minutes in the vehicle, I was taken out again. There were journalists with cameras. The Americans untied me, then made me lie on the road again. Then, in front of the cameras, they tied my hands and feet all over again and put me back in the vehicle."

If this wasn't a common story in Baghdad today - if the gross injustices meted out to ordinary Iraqis and the equally gross mistreatment in America's prison camps here was not so common - then Qais al-Salman's story would not be so important.

Amnesty International turned up in Baghdad yesterday to investigate, as well as Saddam's monstrous crimes, the mass detention centre run by the Americans at Baghdad international airport in which up to 2,000 prisoners live in hot, airless tents. The makeshift jail is called Camp Cropper and there have already been two attempted breakouts.

Both would-be escapees, needless to say, were swiftly shot dead by their American captors. Yesterday, Amnesty was forbidden permission to visit Camp Cropper. This is where the Americans took Qais Al-Salman on 6 June.

He was put in Tent B, a vast canvas room containing up to 130 prisoners. "There were different classes of people there," Qais al-Salman says. "There were people of high culture, doctors and university people, and there were the most dirty, animal people, thieves and criminals the like of which I never saw before.

"In the morning, I was taken for interrogation before an American military intelligence officer. I showed him letters involving me in US aid projects. He pinned a label on my shirt. It read, Suspected Assassin'."

Now there probably are some assassins in Camp Cropper. The good, the bad and the ugly have been incarcerated there: old Baathists, possible Iraqi torturers, looters and just about anyone who has got in the way of the American military. Only "selected" prisoners are beaten during interrogation. Again, I repeat, the source is impeccable, and Western.

Qais Al-Salman was given no water to wash in, and after trying to explain his innocence to a second interrogator, he went on hunger strike. No formal charges were made against him. There were no rules for the American jailers.

"Some soldiers drove me back to Baghdad after 33 days in that camp," Qais al-Salman says. "They dropped me in Rashid Street and gave me back my documents and Danish passport and they said, Sorry'."

Qais al-Salman went home to his grief-stricken mother who had long believed her son was dead. No American had contacted her despite her desperate requests to the US authorities for help. Not one of the Americans had bothered to tell the Danish government they had imprisoned one of its citizens. Just as in Saddam's day, a man had simply been "disappeared" off the streets of Baghdad.

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