

## *Islamic State*



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*Rewriting History*

Michael Griffin



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## *The Great Escape*

Camp Bucca was still being built in the desert as the pictures from Abu Ghraib tumbled out: the pyramid of naked men; a prisoner forced to masturbate in front of a female American jailer; the hooded scarecrow, wires attached for mock, electro-shock torture, in a stance not unlike crucifixion.

These primitive selfies of routine abuse redefined the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, swelling the mounting grievances of its large Sunni minority. Stripped of power after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, himself a Sunni, they were denied any role in the new Iraq after being summarily dismissed from their jobs in the armed forces, intelligence agencies and broad sectors of the civilian administration. As many as half a million Sunnis, many trained for combat, were suddenly out of work and poor.

Camp Bucca was intended as a model detention facility along American lines, equally mindful of the needs of its prisoners and the future of penal detention in Iraq. ‘We want the prisoners to say, “The Americans treated me alright and they’re good-hearted people”’, Col. Jim Brown told US journalists on a tour in mid-January 2005.<sup>1</sup>

Sprawling across two square miles of sand and rock near the port of Umm Qasr, Camp Bucca blazed in the summer and froze in winter as fog blankets rolled in from the Persian Gulf. But it was a marked improvement on Abu Ghraib and also Camp Cropper, the facility at Baghdad International Airport reserved for the 52 regime leaders – identified on President George Bush’s notorious ‘deck of cards’.



Built to house 16,000 men, the camp offered medical, dental and eye care, psychiatric services, physiotherapy and more. Detainees could train in tiling, masonry, carpentry and construction; study for a high school certificate; or take courses in English, literacy and Islam. Family visits were possible. Footballs, ping-pong, Jackie Chan films, Agatha Christie mysteries and cigarettes rained down on Camp Bucca, as if from a shattered piñata.

Prisoners were streamed into two categories: enemy prisoners of war (EPW), including members of the banned Baath Party and paramilitary Fedayeen; and ‘unlawful combatants’, which covered everybody else from hard-core militants to innocent bystanders rounded up in the vicinity of any terrorist attack. EPWs were kept separate from non-military detainees, and Sunnis from Shia, but no more thorough documentation was possible due to the shortage of trained Arabic speakers.<sup>2</sup>

Other categories emerged after detainees had spent more time in the facility, and were defined by the colour of jumpsuit they wore. ‘If I remember correctly,’ a fighter told *The Guardian*, ‘red was for people who had done things wrong while in prison, white was a prison chief, green was for a long sentence, and yellow and orange were normal.’<sup>3</sup>

‘Even if they turn the place into a paradise,’ said one detainee, ‘it is still a prison full of innocent men.’<sup>4</sup> A Red Cross report in May 2004 stipulated that 90 per cent of detainees had been mistakenly arrested while, even in the thick of the civil war in 2007, the camp held less than 2,000 hardened insurgents, according to a survey by the camp commander, Maj. Gen. Douglas Stone. Most of its 26,000 detainees, he said, had joined the insurgency through lack of work or because of low-paying jobs.<sup>5</sup>

Within two weeks of Col. Brown’s pep-talk to journalists, US military police had shot to death four detainees and wounded

six more after a search for contraband started a riot in which 10,000 men attacked them with rocks, water bottles filled with sand and javelins made of tent poles. Two months later, they uncovered a 357-foot tunnel hours before prisoners planned to escape under cover of the fog.

The riots set the tone. Realising they could control the perimeter but not what went on inside, the authorities relinquished control to an elite of elected ‘mayors’, whose job it was to keep order and inform guards of planned escapes or riots. Radicals moved into the vacuum, where as *emirs* or ‘princes’ they ruled over compounds of up to 1,000 men, enforcing their diktat through an extreme version of Sharia law, known as *takfiri*. Improvised courts could order the slitting of tongues and gouging of eyes for those judged ‘apostate’, notably the more moderate prisoners.<sup>6</sup>

The camp authorities overlooked such incidents for the sake of tranquillity, but also sent prisoners to the ‘*takfiri* camp’ as punishment. Imad Manhal Sultan lost his sight and part of his tongue after a four-minute assault during his three-month detention. ‘The Americans send those they want dead to extremist camps [...] they passed information that I was a lawyer working for the court in Baghdad. That would make me [the detainees’] enemy since the court issues unjust verdicts against detainees.’<sup>7</sup>

With tacit US approval, the *emirs* transformed Camp Bucca into a vast centre of indoctrination and training – a ‘jihadi university’ – for the 100,000 detainees forced to live there between 2004 and 2009. Doubly imprisoned by the *takfiri*, moderate Iraqis were subjected to a reign of terror and rigorous courses of Islamist study, with no possible means of escape. ‘Extremists had freedom to educate the young detainees,’ said a former prisoner. ‘I saw them giving courses using classroom

boards on how to use explosives, weapons and how to become suicide bombers.<sup>8</sup>

Most of those interned when Maj. Gen. Stone was in command were married with children, irregular mosque-goers and many admitted to drinking alcohol. After spending the average 330 days in Camp Bucca, they returned to their homes deeply traumatised men.<sup>9</sup>

‘We could never have all got together like this in Baghdad, or anywhere else,’ recalled Abu Ahmed, who was detained in 2004. ‘It would have been impossibly dangerous. Here, we were not only safe, but we were only a few hundred metres away from the entire Al Qaeda leadership.’<sup>10</sup>

\* \* \*

The future caliph of the Islamic State, Ibrahim ibn Awwad al-Badri al-Samarrai – Abu Bakr was only a *nom de guerre* – entered the proselytising furnace of Camp Bucca in its early days, though whether he was radicalised there, or before he arrived in, is open to question. Allegedly arrested in Fallujah in February 2004, he was released in December as a person of low risk, according to a Pentagon official, who said: ‘He was a street thug when we picked him up.’<sup>11</sup>

The only contemporary photo, circulated after Abu Bakr announced his caliphate in Mosul 10 years later, is a prison shot of a jowly, unshaved man taken after in-processing or interrogation. The Pentagon description of his activities does not match those by his friends and associates in Baghdad, where Abu Bakr moved in 1989 to study Islamic law and education at the Islamic University. Polite, short-sighted, erudite, a keen footballer, they recalled.<sup>12</sup>

Colonel Kenneth King, who commanded Camp Bucca from 2008 till its closure a year later, said Abu Bakr was ‘a bad dude,

but he wasn't one of the worst.' He remembered his parting comment before flying out of Camp Bucca to Baghdad after his release – 'see you in New York' – which gave one newspaper an excuse for a most hair-raising headline.<sup>13</sup> That was in summer 2009, according to King: Abu Bakr was in Camp Bucca for five years, not 10 months, as the Pentagon official claimed and the caliph's public relations machine also suggested.

The discrepancy is intriguing, given the military's reputation for paperwork, as is the lack of more detailed information, despite the rigours of interrogation. This could be partly explained by the ensuing political embarrassment were Abu Bakr's release to have been approved during the Obama administration or – as was the case – under a 2008 agreement with the Iraqi government on the transfer of US-held prisoners, when President George Bush was still in office.

But partly, also, by the light more revelations would shine on the sadistic symbiosis that existed in Camp Bucca between Al Qaeda's *emirs* and US military police. 'He was respected very much by the US army,' said Abu Ahmed, an admirer of the caliph's charisma and aloofness when they were together in Camp Bucca. 'If he wanted to visit other people in the camp, he could, but we couldn't.'<sup>14</sup>

Hisham al-Hashimi, an Iraqi military analyst and expert on the Islamic State, insists that Abu Bakr remained for five years in US custody, saying: 'The Americans never knew who they had.'<sup>15</sup> If that were true, Abu Bakr had plenty of time to qualify as a trusted *emir* and build the network of Iraqi army and intelligence officers similarly interned in Camp Bucca, who planned and executed the campaigns that shot the Islamic State to power. But not to accomplish the many other tasks that the caliph's official biographer claims for him in an all-too-brief synopsis, titled *Moments from the Life Journey of our Master, the Emir of the Believers*.<sup>16</sup>

The unknown author mentions Baghdadi's eight-and-a-half years' experience as a jihadi, his service on the Sharia Committees of Jaysh Ahl al-Sinnah wal Jama'a (JASW), a Sunni group he reportedly founded, and on the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC), which the JASW joined in January 2006. The MSC would mutate into the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) later in the year. As for Camp Bucca, the biographer deals with it briskly: 'He incited for fighting and roamed and fought. He was captured and escaped.'

*Moments from the Life Journey* was published in mid-2013, shortly after the forerunner organisation to the Islamic State broke with Al Qaeda. It was a defensive document, seeking to rebuff those who 'slander with tongues of iron', but also to construct a pedigree for a prince who would take the momentous step a year later of declaring himself head of a caliphate, the legal and territorial manifestation of God's rule on earth.

Abu Bakr, accordingly, is described as being of the Bu Badri tribe from Samarra, descended from the Quraysh tribe of the Prophet Mohammed, which gave birth to the Umayyad, Abbasid and Fatimid Caliphates. His brothers, uncles and grandfather are all Salafist preachers or teachers of eloquence and logic; his mother supports the promotion of virtue and the prohibition of vice.

Abu Bakr's name also undergoes multiple transformations. The biographer refers to him as Dr Abu Du'a, or Ibrahim bin 'Awad bin Ibrahim al-Badri al-Radhwi al-Husseini al-Samarra'i,<sup>17</sup> while his spokesman, a Syrian veteran of Camp Bucca, adds 'al-Qurayshi' as a signifier of Abu Bakr's right to assume the title and status originated by the Prophet Mohammed.<sup>18</sup> The name – or connotation – 'al-Baghdadi' is dropped from his new title.

Abu Bakr's more intimate detractors – and there were two in his circle who broke away to rejoin Al Qaeda after the divorce – regarded this spiritual king-making as pure humbug. @Wikibaghdady, who began tweeting his insider account in December 2013, was more worried by the Baathist officers who dictated Abu Bakr's every move, but conceded that he 'has a fake nickname and title [...] there isn't a member of al-Baghdadi's inner circle with a real name.'<sup>19</sup>

Abu Sulayman al-Utaybi, a Sharia scholar and former head of the Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) legal department, shredded Abu Bakr's resume in a measured diatribe in April 2014 that ran out of numbers after paragraph 173. He was not from Baghdad, not a doctor of Sharia, not a member of the Bu Badri tribe, and certainly not a descendant of the Quraysh. 'He ran away from Iraq at the start of the American invasion, lived in Damascus in Sayyida Zaynab [a Shia area], and stayed there for three years until 2006 [...] These three years were the years of recruiting informers.'<sup>20</sup>

At the time of his detention, al-Utaybi continued, Abu Bakr was responsible for an AQI dead-letter drop that US forces uncovered during the hunt for Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, AQI's first caliph, and his Egyptian military commander, Abu Ayyub al-Masri, both killed in a US air raid in April 2010. 'After leaving prison (of course, it was not a long period because [Abu Bakr] knows no one and no one knows him), he joined the [Islamic] State again.'

These different accounts demonstrate how little confidence can be placed in any description of Abu Bakr's origins, biography and gifts. But whether he is a fraud, a dupe or a military genius, the one point all agree on is that he is, at least, an Iraqi: that was a breakthrough for AQI which, in spite of its name, had always been controlled by foreigners.

## 2

# *Zarqawi's War*

In January 2004 – around the time Abu Bakr was detained in Fallujah – intelligence agents from the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan intercepted a letter allegedly sent by Musab al-Zarqawi to Osama bin Laden. Al-Zarqawi had been looked after by a Kurdish Salafist group, Ansar al-Islam, after crossing from Iran into northern Iraq in mid-2002, and regarded his contacts there as reliable intermediaries.

The letter is written with the chilling clarity of a psychopath. He expresses fear of a Shia state, stretching across Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, and mocks the commitment of local fighters: ‘Jihad here unfortunately [takes the form of] mines planted, rockets launched and mortar shelling from afar. The Iraqi brothers still prefer safety and returning to the arms of their wives where nothing frightens them.’<sup>1</sup>

Under ‘Work Plan’, he lists – and dismisses – the danger posed by the USA, the Kurds and the New Iraq Army in 2004, and then rounds on the Shia: ‘The insurmountable obstacle, the lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion, the spying enemy and the penetrating venom.’<sup>2</sup>

‘Targeting and striking their religious, political and military symbols will make them show their rage against the Sunnis and bear their inner vengeance. If we succeed in dragging them into a sectarian war, this will awaken the sleepy Sunnis.’<sup>3</sup> The Coalition Provisional Authority’s programme of de-Baathification had converted Iraq’s army, police and intelligence forces into Shia institutions: al-Zarqawi was effectively proposing that

Iraqi Sunnis should rediscover their religious purity through a campaign of collective suicide.

A few months before the letter was found, al-Zarqawi had launched his insurgency with a string of super-charged attacks that transformed the US narrative of a liberated, Saddam Hussein-free Iraq on the path to reinvention, while shoving the country sharply in the direction of civil war. The first car bomb since the US invasion exploded outside the Jordanian Embassy in Baghdad on 7 August 2003, killing or wounding 75 Iraqis who were queuing for consular services. Twelve days later, on 19 August 2003, a truck bomb struck the United Nations building, killing the special representative and 21 others. Ten days after that, two car bombs were detonated outside the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf, 160km south of Baghdad, killing 124 worshippers and Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim, the spiritual leader of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq.

Each bomb was more powerful than the last, and each was directed against a specific constituency: the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and other US allies in the Middle East; non-government agencies and their employees seeking to alleviate post-war conditions; and the majority Shia, rapidly replacing Sunnis in key government and military positions.

Al-Zarqawi developed his visceral hatred of the Shia under the influence of a Salafist ideologue, Muhammad al-Maqdisi, with whom he founded Bayat al-Imam in 1992, but it hardened while al-Zarqawi was in Amman's al-Sawaqa prison, whose inmate elite, as in Camp Bucca, was made up of *takfiri*. Amnestied in 1999, al-Zarqawi returned to Afghanistan where he had first encountered Osama bin Laden a decade earlier.

The sheikh and the convict had little in common: bin Laden's overarching priority was the 'far enemy' – the United States, which protected corrupt, apostate regimes from Morocco to



Saudi Arabia – while al-Zarqawi argued that the ‘near enemy’ – the Arab regimes themselves – was a more pressing and vulnerable target. At the urging of Saif al-Adel, his Egyptian security chief, bin Laden nevertheless agreed to fund a training camp near Herat, where al-Zarqawi drilled volunteers from Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine, who crossed into western Afghanistan from Iran.<sup>4</sup> Bayat al-Imam, the group al-Zarqawi had founded with al-Maqdisi in the 1990s, now morphed into Jund al-Sham (‘Soldiers of the Levant’), before crystallising as Al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (‘Monotheism and Jihad’) on his arrival in Iraq in 2002.

Little is clear-cut with al-Zarqawi. There is no evidence that he ever had real combat experience prior to moving to Iraq in 2002 and, though his name was linked to many plots before, every project he became associated with was doomed to fail – except for the assassination of a USAID civilian in 2002, which he had subcontracted to Ansar al-Islam.<sup>5</sup> A vociferous foe of Shiism, he nevertheless took refuge in Iran for 14 months after the US invasion as a guest of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard – whose objectives in US-occupied Iraq would ultimately, and opaquely, mesh with his own.<sup>6</sup>

In fact al-Zarqawi spent more time in prison than fighting in Iraq, and yet from 2003–06 he built from scratch a vast network of combat cells, spying units, safe houses, weapons caches, factories making improvised explosive devices (IEDs), suicide bombers, vest fabricators, media professionals, drivers, mechanics and a logistical system that furnished food, arms, munitions, wages, spiritual guidance, medical care and pensions for martyrs’ dependants. With nothing more advanced than a mobile phone, a contacts book and word of mouth, we are led to believe, al-Zarqawi created the template for organising an urban guerrilla struggle that will be replicated and studied for years to come.