Inside the Wire at Camp Taji
A Counterinsurgent's Experience

Latham Fell

THE U.S. ARMY designed the Taji Theater Internment Facility and Reconciliation Center to be the most modern, secure, and comfortable U.S. detention facility in Iraq. Built for $107 million in the fall of 2008, it contains medical, educational, and judicial facilities, as well as a carpentry shop and a brick factory, and can hold up to 4,500 occupants. U.S. forces ran the facility for 15 months, and then transferred operations to the government of Iraq in March 2010.

During U.S. tenure, violent incidents among detainees decreased by 76 percent, even as the size of the population remained essentially unchanged (Figure 1). From a peak of one incident per day, violence declined to a rate of one incident per week. This article explores how this was accomplished.

Protecting and Controlling

The facility received its first detainees in January 2009 as they flowed in from two other U.S. detention facilities, Camp Bucca in southern Iraq and Camp Cropper at the Baghdad International Airport. Over 4,500 detainees arrived during the spring and summer of 2009.

As a contracted intelligence analyst attached to the U.S. Army 508th Military Police Battalion, out of Fort Lewis, Washington, I arrived at Taji on 1 August 2009, just as the facility reached its full population level. Although I had no experience with detainee operations, the environment at the facility was familiar to me: the 508th Military Police Battalion was engaged in counterinsurgency.

Insurgency expert David Kilcullen has said, "In counterinsurgency, the population is the prize, and protecting and controlling it is the key activity."[1] We found this to be true in the detainee facility. However, we had to redefine what population we were protecting. Every detainee in our facility was a known insurgent—but most required protection from an organized minority of ideologically extreme detainees.

A vigorous counterinsurgency campaign was necessary to prevent the spread of violent ideology, extremist recruitment, and physical "punishments." As

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PHOTO: Detainees perform their daily prayers at the U.S. detention facility at Camp Cropper in Baghdad, Iraq, 10 November 2008.

Violence in the Taji Detainee Facility, 2009

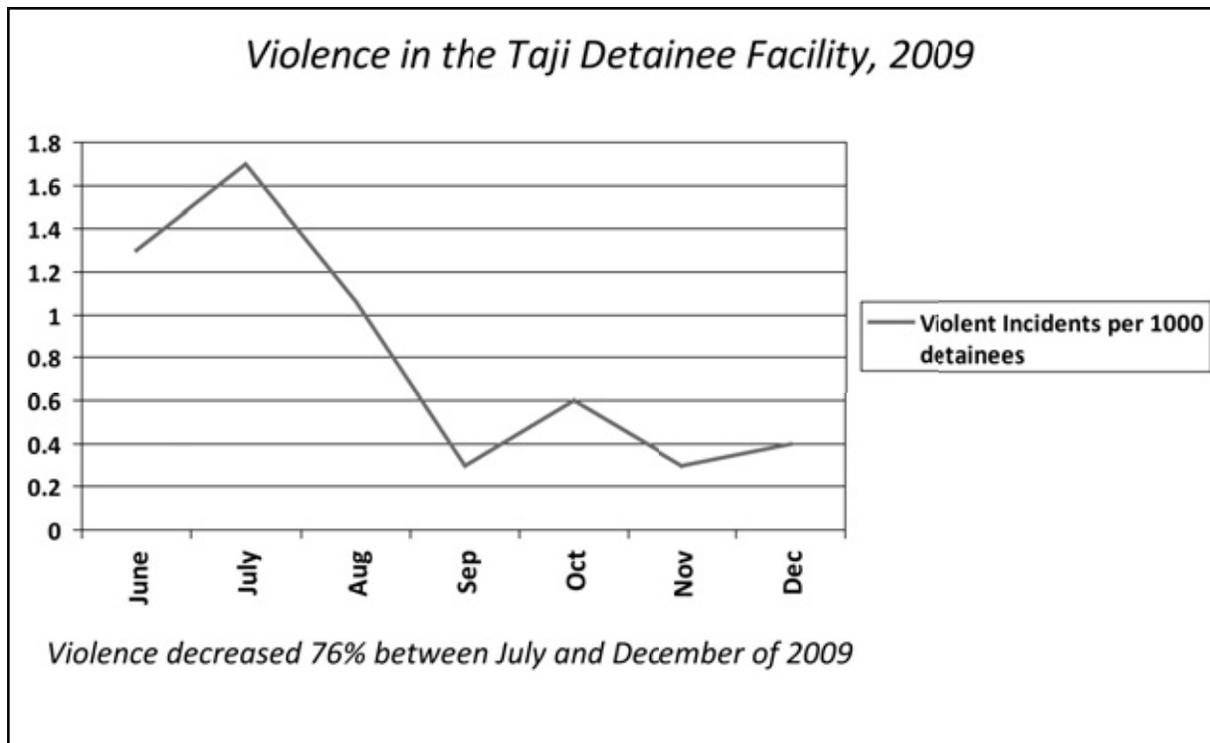Violence decreased 76% between July and December of 2009

Figure 1

in any counterinsurgency campaign, "soft" information operations and human intelligence were just as valuable as compulsory operations, such as locking doors and using non-lethal munitions and riot control tactics.

Because of the heavy influx of detainees, the 508th found it difficult to screen and segregate them properly. Each detainee arrived with only a minimal background profile. The rapid population growth and the necessarily hasty segregation plan caused high levels of violence. In August 2009, an average of six violent "detainee versus detainee" incidents took place each week, a rate of nearly one per day. We soon found that the violence was not simply the flaring of tempers, but a deliberate campaign on the part of extremist elements to intimidate the entire detainee population.

Although every detainee was an insurgent, most were, in Kilcullen's words, "accidental guerrillas."[2] They had fought against coalition forces not on behalf of an abstract ideology, but for more prosaic reasons—for money, to defend their community, or out of desperation or fear. They had no hatred of their U.S. or Iraqi guards, and simply wanted to return to their families.

This was the population we needed to protect—the "green" detainees, those with moderate political and religious views who were well behaved and cooperative and whose primary daily activities consisted of smoking, sleeping, and watching TV.

However, some detainees had an agenda. These were the "red" detainees, the extremists, the true insurgents in our counterinsurgency microcosm. They were committed warriors, aligned with various extremist groups. The Sunnis among them aligned themselves with Al-Qaeda, Jaish al-Islam, and Ansar al-Sunna, and the Shi'a sided with Jaish al-Mahdi, Asaba al-Haqq, and Kataib Hezbollah.

The uncommitted green detainees were an irresistible target for the red detainees, and the extremists aggressively promoted their ideology through persuasion and fear, operating like a paramilitary organization with a strict leadership hierarchy.

We segregated detainees based on four factors:

Religion (Sunni or Shi'a). This distinction was basic. Any combination of Sunni and Shi'a detainees

resulted in violence almost immediately. Even placing them in adjacent cells inevitably resulted in a shouting match.

Home province. There were two schools of thought regarding segregation by province. The first believed that we should separate detainees from the same province from each other to prevent collaboration on "outside the wire" attacks. The other school held that we should place detainees of the same province together to prevent cross-pollination of tactics between detainees from different provinces. In the end, we settled on concentrating detainees from the same provinces together, largely for population stability reasons. Placing detainees among familiar faces had positive effects, both for the guard force and the detainees. Detainees could easily share news of their families and hometowns, and were therefore generally happier and more cooperative.

Active membership in an insurgent group. "Active" was the key word here: if a detainee showed no signs of continuing association with a violent group, we no longer treated him as a member of that group. This was the case for the majority of our detainees. We gleaned information on their continuing associations from intelligence reporting and the observations of the guards, (the latter was usually a critical component).

For example, the extremist Sunni religious code required a very specific mode of behavior and dress: hiked-up trousers, untrimmed beards, and most important, no smoking. While some devout but benign detainees also exhibited these rigid behaviors and dress, such appearance was usually a giveaway of extremist affiliation.

Behavior during the previous year. We assigned each detainee points based on his behavior. A minor disobedience, such as refusing to submit to a search, counted as one point. A major disobedience, such as threatening a guard, counted for five points. To give detainees a chance to reform their behavior, only incidents of misbehavior less than a year old counted. Thus, after one year, we could reclassify a misbehaving detainee who reformed his

(AP Photo/Maya Alleruzzo)

A detainee performs his daily prayers at the U.S. detention facility at Camp Cropper in Baghdad, Iraq, 10 November 2008.

The Single Scale

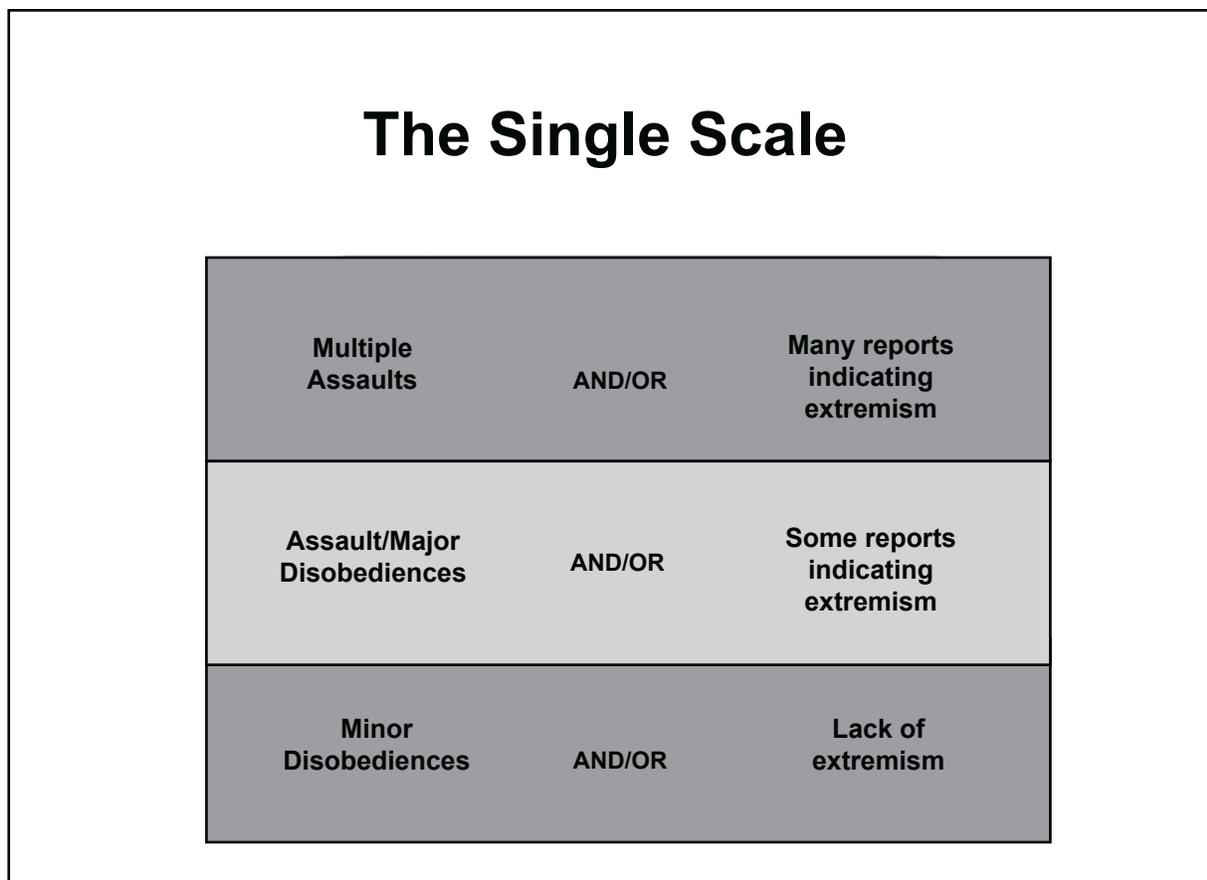|		
Multiple Assaults	AND/OR	Many reports indicating extremism
Assault/Major Disobediences	AND/OR	Some reports indicating extremism
Minor Disobediences	AND/OR	Lack of extremism

Figure 2

behavior and allow him to associate with other well-behaved detainees.

However, because of the extremists' campaign, the need to physically separate the red and green detainee populations was urgent. The battalion addressed the issue head on, despite having only a thumbnail sketch of the detainees. Its intelligence section devised a plan to properly segregate every detainee. It involved moving nearly every detainee in the facility, but it was a huge step forward. The battalion executed the plan during the first week of August 2009. Violence decreased immediately, to an average of 4.8 incidents per week, yet much remained to be done.

The Screening Process

The 508th returned home to Fort Lewis, and the 705th Military Police Battalion from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, arrived and got to work. Throughout August and September 2009, we reclassified up to 100 detainees per day and moved them to different compounds.

The single-scale system. We had inherited a screening system known as the "single-scale" system (Figure 2). It was designed at Camp Bucca in 2006, and had worked well there. It was not perfectly suited to the environment at Camp Taji, so we modified it. The system's methodology was straightforward: tally a detainee's behavioral incidents plus any intelligence reports or other indicators demonstrating extreme ideology. The more points, the higher the detainee is on the scale. He was coded green for few points, amber for several points, and red for many points. (We segregated any amber-coded detainee in a special compound until we could tell for sure whether he was a moderate or an extremist.)

However, the single-scale system was too broad a brush for the Camp Taji environment. As is evident from Figure 2, a detainee could move up the

scale from green to red either by being disobedient or for extremism. This led us to place merely misbehaving detainees with extremists. The system also failed to distinguish between extremist leaders and their followers, lumping them both together as red detainees.

The dual-scale system. To fix this problem, we created the "dual-scale" system, which separated detainee point values into two categories: behavioral and ideological. This greatly improved our ability to segregate the population. The new scale's most important feature was that it distinguished between extremist leaders and their followers: the grey category for followers and black for leaders. As we continued to screen and separate detainees under the new system, violence and extremist influence dramatically declined.

The use of two scales presented a much more accurate picture of an individual detainee. Previously, a misbehaving detainee with no insurgent affiliations appeared, on paper, identical to an extremist insurgent leader with a spotless behavioral record: both coded red. Housing these two types of detainees together, however, would predictably end with either the recruitment or beating of the non-extremist detainee.

Over the course of five months (from August to December 2009), violence among detainees fell by 70 percent, from the peak of nearly one incident per day to an average of one incident per week. Meanwhile, the size of the detainee population remained stable at roughly 4,000. A less quantifiable decline also took place in extremist activity and recruiting after we separated the moderates and extremists.

The Reactive Process

In addition to our "proactive" screening system, which sought to prevent incidents, we also had a robust "reactive" process that we used after violent incidents occurred. This process began with exhaustive background checks on all detainees involved in

Although our screening system was quantitative, we regularly incorporated qualitative judgements.

an incident. We also conducted interviews with the detainees themselves, with detainee witnesses, and with both Iraqi and American guards. Sometimes we found information that we should have picked up during the initial screening, such as previous indications of extremism. When this happened, we immediately reclassified the extremists and moved them to the proper section of the facility. We attached the results of the analysis to each detainee's profile in our online system. As our proactive screening system steadily improved, the need for the reactive analysis decreased.

Although our screening system was quantitative, we regularly incorporated qualitative judgments. For instance, a detainee might have two reports indicating that he was a member of an extremist gang court. Normally, this would suggest we should categorize him as a member of an extremist group and segregate him as such. However, if the detainee in question smoked and enjoyed racy Turkish soap operas, we might discount the reports and keep him categorized as a moderate.

Did a detainee's past segregation predict his future behavior? Nearly all of our detainees had come from Camp Bucca, where the idea to separate moderate and extremist detainees originated as a response to extremists intimidating or killing large numbers of moderates. The unit operating the facility divided the population into "Red Bucca" and "Green Bucca" and violence and recruiting declined sharply.

But how should we treat detainees arriving from Red Bucca who had no record of extremism? Some argued that any detainee arriving from Red Bucca must be an extremist. Others argued that many detainees from Red Bucca simply survived among the extremists by complying with their rules, and were not real extremists themselves. They believed these detainees might reclaim their moderate identities if we gave them a chance to do so. Ultimately, we decided to give each arriving detainee a clean slate, and used only newly documented reports of extremism as indicators of future behavior.

Each of our 11 compounds held about 400 detainees and had two full-time S2 representatives from the guard force. Known as "Compound S2s," they were our direct liaison to the detainees. Each S2 brought a different perspective to his duties. One, with a sunny disposition, believed nearly every detainee in his compound was a "good guy" at heart and requested

to move them to moderate compounds. In fact, his compound was, by design, mostly extremist. Another Compound S2, who monitored an identical detainee population, felt that everyone in his compound was a "bad guy," and resisted any attempt to move moderate detainees out of his compound. The S2s' input was critical to our success, but it was our duty to fold their input into an objective measure of each detainee's status.

Since many S2s were reservists, they brought valuable knowledge from their civilian jobs. (We even had correctional officers and crime analysts.) Some Compound S2s knew their population so well we trusted them to segregate the detainees as they saw fit, and we simply double-checked their work. Others were less adept at evaluating detainees, and in these cases, we created detention plans for them.

As we identified and separated extremists, their operations scaled down. They kept a low profile to keep us from removing them from the moderate population. The punishments they meted out to other detainees became rarer and stealthier. In desperation, some extremists even shaved their beards and took up smoking. By November 2009, the only extremists still operating in moderate areas were skilled recruiters who drew no attention to themselves whatsoever. We were only able to identify them with intensive human intelligence work and deep background checks.

Handling senior insurgent leaders. We separated senior insurgent leaders from the other detainees and kept them in their own compound. There were two schools of thought regarding this. The first group believed we should keep the leaders with the followers because it often improved detainee behavior. (Leaders tended to police disobedient behavior and in-group conflicts.) It also prevented any "profusion of leaders" problem, in which the removal of one group leader resulted in the promotion of another. The downside, of course, was that the leaders' presence in the compound greatly enhanced the capability of the group for recruiting, indoctrination, training, and coordinating outside-the-wire activities. The severity of major disturbances also increased, due to the enhanced planning and command presence

(AP Photo/Maya Alleruzzo)

Detainees are seen outside their cell block at the U.S. detention facility at Camp Cropper in Baghdad, Iraq, 10 November 2008.

of senior leaders, so we discarded this approach.

We adopted the second school of thought, which was to aggressively identify and separate extremist leaders from their followers or would-be followers. We found that as the "profusion of leaders" process proceeded to its logical conclusion, the quality of extremist leadership steadily declined. Ultimately, we separated virtually every leader with any real ability from his followers. There was another benefit, as well. The selection of a new top leader seemed to require about two weeks of consultation, debate, and even written examinations. During this period, the extremist organization was paralyzed. Each time we identified a new top leader and removed him from his followers, we gained two weeks of relative calm.

Leaders of increasingly lower rank and ability came forward until eventually there was no leader remaining who could command the loyalty of all the extremists at Taji. During the last few months, our reports indicated that the Takfiri wanted to mount major disturbances but were unable to coordinate them across the extremist population.

The increased quality in segregation both permitted and enhanced the other key aspect of our counterinsurgency strategy. The facility was divided into red, amber, and green compounds. We gave detainees in Green Taji privileges not available to those in other compounds: additional recreation time, extended TV and radio hours, more access to newspapers and other reading material, and access to vocational training. The guard force trusted them more. Green Taji quickly became the "destination of choice" for every detainee in the facility. This weakened the extremist leaders by undermining their rhetoric and unit cohesion. The extremists found it difficult to maintain an image of pure piety and strength while a good portion of their followers were jumping at any chance to enjoy the sinful indulgences of Green Taji.

The situation with the Shi'a detainees was much more difficult. Our counterinsurgency campaign was not particularly successful among them. Less than 15 percent of our detainee population was Shi'a. With only two compounds of Shi'a (compared to eight for the Sunnis), our ability to separate extremists from moderates was limited. Only our use of a "senior-leader" compound prevented complete failure. Even though we quickly identified the highest-ranking Shi'a leaders and most aggressive agitators and moved them to the senior-leader compound, Shi'a extremists held greater sway over the Shi'a population than Sunni extremists did over the Sunni population, simply because their "span of control" was so much smaller.

Fortunately, the Shi'a extremists proved much less likely to carry out violent punishments than the Sunni extremists. However, they were very interested in recruiting, and by the time we turned Taji over to the Iraqi government, Shi'a extremist groups had recruited every Shia detainee, except those deemed too uneducated or unskilled even for the extremists.

The beginning and the end of our experience with the Shi'a population illustrated the value of separating leaders from their followers. Before we separated Shi'a extremist leaders, the Shi'a population conducted two large-scale, well-organized disturbances. From June to December 2009, we separated their leaders from the rest of the detainees, and although recruitment continued, no severe disturbances occurred, and the Shi'a were generally less organized. In early 2010, the Shi'a leaders reunited with their followers. It was like watching a broken toy magically put itself back together: once again, the Shi'a population was a united block.

We were alert to political and military developments in Iraq that might affect our population. For instance, during the second half of 2009, the Iraqi government cut the number of detainee releases by 50 percent, from 1,500 a month to 750 a month. This caused frustration and anger inside the facility. Also during this period, the Shi'a extremist

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group Asaba al-Haqq began a slow but steady process of reconciliation with the government, which resulted in the release of many of the group's detainees. This raised the group's profile and helped recruiting inside the facility, a phenomenon we were essentially powerless to stop. If a detainee agreed to join Asaba al-Haqq, he immediately began receiving a monthly stipend and could look forward to a quick release from detention, sometimes within weeks. This proved to be an irresistible offer.

Recommendations

In closing, let me add that the standard military police battalion is not designed to handle the intelligence requirements of a counterinsurgency operation. Augmenting the battalion with additional intelligence analysts is a common practice in counterinsurgencies, and both the 508th and the 705th augmented their intelligence shops prior to deployment.

The 508th supplemented its S2 shop with additional personnel drawn from other units. The 705th operated an S2 shop twice as large as the standard, complete with a deputy S2 (a first lieutenant) and two civilian contractors. This was about the minimum number of personnel necessary to provide proper intelligence support for the battalion's counterinsurgency operations. *MR*

NOTES

1. David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 73.

2. Ibid., 34.