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U.S. military uses moderate clerics to try to change radical minds

By Walter Pincus
The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The U.S. military has introduced "religious enlightenment" and other education programs for Iraqi detainees, some of whom are as young as 11, Marine Maj. Gen. Douglas Stone, the commander of U.S. detention facilities in Iraq, said Tuesday.

Stone said such efforts, aimed mainly at Iraqis who have been held for more than a year, are intended to "bend them back to our will" and are part of waging war in what he called "the battlefield of the mind."

The religious courses are led by Muslim clerics who "teach out of a moderate doctrine," Stone said, according to the transcript of a conference call he held from Baghdad with a group of defense bloggers.

As a result of the increased U.S. troop presence in Iraq this year, the number of Iraqis in U.S. detention has swelled from about 10,000 last year to more than 25,000.

That includes more than 820 juvenile detainees, most of whom are held in a facility that the military calls the "House of Wisdom."

The schooling there "tears apart" the arguments of al-Qaida, such as "Let's kill innocents," and helps to "bring some of the edge off" the detainees, Stone said.

The effort to reshape attitudes among the growing detainee population is aimed at addressing a problem that has vexed U.S. troops in Iraq for the past four years: Military detention facilities have served as breeding grounds for extremist views, transforming some prisoners into hard-core insurgents, according to military analysts.

Stone said he wants to identify "irreconcilables" — those detainees whose views cannot be moderated — and "put them away" in permanent detention facilities. Psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors and interrogators help distinguish the extremists from others, he said.

After reassessments and interrogations, Stone said, some detainees are recommended for release. "If a detainee is an imperative security risk ... then I'm going to reduce that risk and I'm going to replace that destructive ideology," he said. "And then when he's assessed to no longer be a threat, I'm going to release the detainee ..."

Since May, Stone said, he has released about 2,000 detainees "and we've not had any coming back." He said his goal is to keep the released detainees from harming U.S. troops or anyone else. "They're not going out of here unless I can feel comfortable about that," Stone added. "I'm not doing mass releases."

Other initiatives at the facilities include vocational training and basic education programs for about 7,000 detainees. Stone said he believes his approach is "compelling because it's how you win this war, not only the one in Iraq, but the one on a greater basis."

The House of Wisdom is located at the Camp Victory military base near Baghdad's airport.

Stone said six additional young people had been sent to him just Tuesday, and that "the trend is towards the youth," including 11-, 12- and 13-year-olds. He described older juveniles — the 15-, 16- and 17-year-olds — as "harder nuts" and said that 50 to 60 of them have been removed from U.S. detention facilities and turned over to Iraqi authorities for trial.

Stone said youths grow up to become insurgents by starting out as messengers, guards and even planters of makeshift bombs.

He said his staff members include a specialist in Islamic youth programs and he has also put together "a positive program that has been proven in Islam to actually turn the kids around to sort of reject some of these other things."

Stone, who speaks Arabic and said he reads the Quran daily, noted that his facilities have 30 classrooms staffed with teachers and counselors. He has also started "four very large soccer programs" aimed at young detainees.

The new religious training, Stone said, helps U.S. forces pinpoint the hard-core extremists. "I want to know who they are," he said. "They're like rotten eggs, you know, hiding in the Easter basket."

Stone said his staff conducts polygraph tests for detainees who promise to change after undergoing the religious training program. "We were trying to figure out if they're messing with us."

But he added that they're succeeding in countering extremists in the facilities. "We're busting them down, we're making whole moderate compounds that didn't exist before."

The Washington Post's staff writers Joshua Partlow in Baghdad, Karen DeYoung and Rachel Dry contributed to this report.

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