

US soldier in Iraq disciplined for using Koran as target practice

David Walsh
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The US military in Iraq announced Sunday that it had disciplined and sent home a soldier found to have used the Koran for target practice. A Sunni Arab militiaman collaborating with American forces found the copy of the Muslim holy book 10 days ago in a police station shooting range west of Baghdad.

“Riddled with bullets,” according to CNN’s Michael Ware, “the rounds piercing deep into the thick volume, the pages were shredded.” Two handwritten English words were scrawled in the book, “F— yeah.”

The militiaman complained to his superiors. The report caused an uproar in Radhwaniya, “a semi-rural area long home to loyalists of the former regime of Saddam Hussein.” Sunni Arab tribal units fighting with the US threatened to quit unless the perpetrator were punished. Tribal leaders approached the American military, who have become dependent in recent months on a tactical alliance with Sunni forces opposed to Al Qaeda in Iraq.

US military officials launched an investigation and determined that a sniper section leader, an unnamed staff sergeant from the 64th Armor Regiment, had used the Koran during target practice May 9. The soldier claimed that he hadn’t known what book he was using, but investigators dismissed his story. No action was taken for a week.

On May 17 the commander of US forces in Baghdad, Maj. Gen. Jeffery Hammond, and other American military commanders arrived at a formal ceremony of apology “in heavily armored vehicles to be met by a human tempest: hundreds of chanting tribesmen lined up behind razor wire ...” (CNN) Residents of the area carried banners and chanted anti-US slogans, including, “Yes, yes, to the Koran” and “America out, out.”

Sheikh Hamadi al-Qirtani delivered a speech on behalf of all the tribal sheikhs in Radhwaniya in which he condemned the shooting as “aggression against the entire Islamic world.”

Hammond issued a formal apology, declaring, “I come before you here seeking your forgiveness. In the most humble manner, I look into your eyes today, and I say, please forgive me and my soldiers.” Another US military official kissed a copy of the Koran and offered it as a “humble gift.”

A letter said to have been written by the alleged offender was also read aloud. The message, presumably crafted by some US military press officer, said in part: “I sincerely hope that my actions have not diminished the partnership that our two nations have developed together ... My actions were shortsighted, very reckless and irresponsible, but in my heart [the actions] were not

malicious.” The local sheikhs, for their own short-term reasons, announced that they accepted the apology.

The influential Iraqi Association of Islamic Scholars denounced the incident: “This heinous crime shows the hatred that the leaders and the members of the occupying force have against the Koran and the [Muslim] people.” The vice-president of the puppet Iraqi regime, Tariq al-Hashemi, in the name of his leading Sunni party, the Iraq Islamic Party, demanded that the “US administration deal firmly with this desecration and also calls on our government to have a position in keeping with the enormity of this humiliation.”

Hammond’s public *mea culpa* is an indication of the sensitivity of the issue of US-Sunni relations and the tenuousness of whatever minimal stability has been achieved in recent months as a result of the Sunni tribal leaders’ actions and the truce declared by Shiite cleric Muqtada al Sadr. Every aspect of the situation could blow up in the Americans’ faces at any moment.

Colonel Bill Buckner, a US military spokesman, told the media that the military viewed the incident “as both serious and deeply troubling,” but he claimed it was an “isolated incident and a result of one soldier’s actions.”

This is demonstrably false. Incidents of this type are the inevitable products of the US colonial-style occupation of Iraq and its more general designs on the Middle East. In fact, in 2005 it was alleged that abuse of the Koran in front of detainees was a feature of the interrogation technique used at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, as well as prisons in Afghanistan.

While the Bush administration and the military high command, for public relations reasons in Iraq and to maintain relations with various Arab and Muslim regimes, publicly dissociate themselves, for the most part, from overt anti-Muslim propaganda, such racist and chauvinist poison is an essential lubricant of the entire US effort to conquer the Middle East and its vast energy reserves. One doesn’t have to travel too far, in any event. One of Bush’s personal advisors, Rev. Franklin Graham, the son of Billy Graham, in 2001 declared that Islam had attacked the US on September 11 and that it was “a very evil and wicked religion.”

Intensifying sharply since September 11 in particular, but beginning long before that, the demonization of the Arab and Muslim populations provides one of the necessary justifications for the American ruling elite’s new global mission. Such propaganda is as old as imperialism itself, justified in the late 19th century as the “white man’s burden” to bring civilization to the primitive Orient and Africa’s “Dark Continent.”

As part of the preparation to invade Iraq, US military forces were indoctrinated to believe that by overthrowing the Hussein government and seizing the country they would be avenging the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. Whether they initially viewed the Iraqis as terrorists deserving of punishment or an oppressed people who would hail the American forces as “liberators,” US military personnel have long since come to understand that they are a hated and unwanted presence, “the foreign occupier.”

Forced to suppress the population on a daily basis, American troops are inevitably demoralized and brutalized. This is the experience of every colonial war. Mass round-ups, terrorization of civilians, torture in the name of obtaining intelligence—all of these elements of a savage “counterinsurgency” must produce atrocities of a spectacular (Haditha, Abu Ghraib) and everyday variety (the Koran as target practice).

“Haji,” the derogatory phrase for an Iraqi, the equivalent of the Vietnam War’s “gook,” is regularly used by US officers in Iraq, according to antiwar veterans of the conflict. Racist taunts were a regular part of the abuse at Abu Ghraib prison, a program instituted from the top of the military high command. US guards wrote “camel jockey” and other insults on the hoods of detainees.

Moreover, aside from the propagation of general notions that Arabs are subhuman and “don’t value life as we do,” a quite specific war is being waged by fundamentalist Christian elements in and around the military. Encouraged by the Bush administration and the Republican right, these forces view the war in Iraq as one front of a holy crusade against Islam.

Whether the particular soldier in this episode was under the influence of such ideas or not, the latter are held and propagated by a substantial layer in the military. One of the most notorious proponents of fanatical Christianity in the military was Lt. Gen. William “Jerry” Boykin, deputy undersecretary of defense for intelligence from 2003 to 2007. (According to an article in the *Guardian* by Sidney Blumenthal in May 2004, it was Boykin who ordered Guantánamo internment camp’s Gen. Geoffrey Miller to apply the harsh methods employed there to Abu Ghraib and the US-run Iraqi prison system.)

In 2003 Boykin, who had previously worked at the CIA and as the commanding general of US Army Special Forces Command, delivered a speech to Southern Baptists in which he recounted seeing an interview with a Muslim militia leader who claimed that Allah would protect him and his forces. Said Boykin, “Well, you know what? I knew that my God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real God and his was an idol.” On another occasion, Boykin showed slides of Osama Bin Laden, Hussein and North Korea’s Kim Jong Il and told his audience, “Why do they hate us? The answer to that is because we’re a Christian nation.” In yet another appearance, he declared, “Satan wants to destroy this nation, he wants to destroy us as a nation, and he wants to destroy us as a Christian army.”

Boykin is only the tip of the iceberg. One of the most sinister outfits pushing religion on soldiers is the Military Ministry, a subsidiary of the fundamentalist Campus Crusade for Christ. At Fort Jackson, South Carolina, according to a December 2007 article by Jason Leopold on the *Truthout* web site, “For US Army

soldiers entering basic training ... accepting Jesus Christ as their personal savior appears to be as much a part of the nine-week regimen as the vigorous physical and mental exercises the troops must endure.

“That’s the message directed at Fort Jackson soldiers, some of whom appear in photographs in government issued fatigues, holding rifles in one hand, and Bibles in their other hand. [The photos were removed from the Military Ministry’s web site, but they can still be viewed online on other sites.]

“Frank Bussey, director of Military Ministry at Fort Jackson, has been telling soldiers at Fort Jackson that ‘government authorities, police and the military = God’s Ministers.’”

A six-month investigation by the Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF), which tracks such outfits, found that the Ministry successfully targeted US military personnel entering basic training at Lackland Air Force Base and Fort Sam Houston, “with the approval of the Army’s base’s top commander.” Mikey Weinstein of the MRFF, commented, “I’ve said it before and I will say it again ... we are in the process of creating a fundamentalist Christian Taliban and somebody has to do something to stop it now.”

Weinstein came across a Campus Crusade for Christ video filmed at the Air Force Academy in which cadets and academy officials in uniform discuss how the fundamentalist organization helps strengthen their bonds with Jesus Christ. The Crusade’s Scot Blom proclaims in the video, “Our purpose for Campus Crusade for Christ at the Air Force Academy is to make Jesus Christ the issue at the Air Force Academy and around the world,” Blom says in the video. “They’re government-paid missionaries when they leave here.”

Whether it takes this fundamentalist Christian form, or a more general ‘patriotic’ coloring, anti-Muslim sentiment is being encouraged by the Bush administration at home and abroad to provide a base of political support for further military aggression against Iran, Syria, and other countries.



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