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# Captured Foreign Fighters Provide Insight into Enemy Facing Iraq

By Samantha L. Quigley  
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, March 16, 2008 – Information gleaned from 48 foreign fighters detained in Iraq offers insight into al Qaeda's methods, a Multinational Force Iraq spokesman told reporters during a briefing today in Baghdad.

"The foreign detainees told similar stories about what happened to them once they were smuggled into Iraq," said Navy Rear Adm. Greg Smith, director of Multinational Force Iraq's communication division.

"These 48 men told us they were lured here with the promise they would be killing Americans ... but they were disappointed that most of the violence they saw was directed at the Iraqi people ... fellow Muslims," Smith said.

This reality left the foreign fighters feeling misled, he said. They were promised they would see a victorious al Qaeda, but soon realized the organization was rejected by the majority of Iraqi citizens and constantly on the run from coalition and Iraqi security forces.

"Again and again, we heard this reality bothered the recruits, this disconnect between the stories they were told as they were recruited and ... indoctrinated and the reality of a war against innocent civilians was deeply disturbing," Smith said. "They had not come here to kill Iraqi civilians."

The interrogations also revealed a profile of a foreign fighter. They're mostly single men with an average age of 22. All tend to come from large, lower or low middle class families, where they fight to be recognized and make a mark in life. Despite their desire to stand out in the family, they don't tell their parents about their plans out of fear of disapproval.

Al Qaeda recruiters are trained to prey upon this desire for acknowledgement, Smith said.

Though the detainees described their upbringing as religious, but not extremist, they were drawn in by al Qaeda recruiters after seeing what Smith described as heavily edited videos depicting Americans allegedly abusing Iraqis and al Qaeda attacks on Americans.

After harsh treatment at the hands of their al Qaeda handlers in Iraq, and learning that the truth had been shaded, most said they just wanted to go home, Smith said. However, their handlers, who had confiscated their passports and money, pressured them to become suicide bombers.

“They were told, ‘This is your duty. This is what you can do for the jihad. You will be a martyr. This is what we need you to do,’” Smith said. “Ironically they were relieved having been captured by the very Americans their recruiters said they would kill in Iraq.”

The interrogations also shed light on the logistics of the smuggling operations. Most of the 48 detainees flew into the airport in Damascus, Syria, and then moved by ground transportation into Iraq, a process that often took months, Smith said.

In mid-2007, about 120 foreign terrorists crossed into Iraq in a similar manner each month. That number is now down to 40 and 50 terrorists a month, Smith said, adding that about 41 percent of these foreign terrorists are from countries in North and East Africa, while another 40 percent are from Saudi Arabia.

“The reduction in foreign fighter flow can be attributed to a number of factors, including coalition and Iraqi security force interdiction of foreign fighter networks here in Iraq,” Smith said.

The admiral added that “the tightening of visa and immigration controls, airport and border enforcement, as well as a general increased awareness by host nations of the consequences to their own security in the human trafficking of terrorism” has also helped the situation.

Still, Smith said the fact remains that about 90 percent of foreign fighters in Iraq become suicide bombers.

The 48 detainees’ stories are not only paint a picture of foreign fighters themselves, they also reveal a great deal about the greater enemy facing Iraq, Smith said.

“Al Qaeda imports foreign fighters to do a job that few others will do ... kill fellow Muslims using large amounts of explosives and blowing themselves up,” he said. “We still have a lot of work to do and the knowledge gained in the interrogation of these 48 foreign fighters will aid us in our efforts to reduce this foreign-borne threat to Iraq.”