

By Andy Worthington

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This is the second article in “[Bagram Week](#)” here at Andy Worthington, with seven articles in total exploring what is happening at the main US prison in Afghanistan through reports, analyses of review boards, and the voices of the prisoners themselves, and ongoing updates to [the definitive annotated Bagram prisoner list](#)

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So what’s happening at Bagram, the main US prison in Afghanistan, which has been wracked by scandals, [including a number of murders](#), and allegations of torture and abuse since it opened in December 2001?

Unrecognizable since those early days, the prison at Bagram — once housed in a Soviet-era machine shop — is now in an entirely new building, known as the Detention Facility in Parwan. This, [according to the Pentagon](#), is part of a larger Afghan Justice Center in Parwan, which “will become Afghanistan’s central location for the pre-trial detention, prosecution and post-trial incarceration of national security suspects.”

Bagram only occasionally attracts media attention, but in February the prison — in its new location — was officially relaunched as part of America’s revised approach to detention in the Afghan warzone, with more focus on rehabilitation, and less on punishment and isolation. At the time, I was too busy to write about or to cross-post reports by journalists who visited the facility for this relaunch — whose reports were published in the Huffington Post, Stars and Stripes and McClatchy Newspapers — so I thought I’d gather them together here, for anyone else who missed them, as part of my special coverage of Bagram this week. This coverage includes [an update to the definitive Bagram prisoner list](#)

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[the updated prisoner list is here](#)

), and “Voices from Bagram,” a three-part series drawing on the Detainee Review Boards at Bagram, and featuring rare examples of the testimony of prisoners.

I was planning to do a clever edit of these three articles, but instead I'm going to content myself with cross-posting them in their entirety, as they all have something to offer. First up is [an article in the Huffington Post on February 13 by Daphne Eviatar of Human Rights First](#), looking primarily at the problems with clearing foreign prisoners for release, but then continuing to hold them (something that also has [echoes at Guantánamo](#)

). This is based on a useful analysis of the work of the Detainee Review Boards, introduced by President Obama in September 2009, which are used to formalize detention at Parwan/Bagram, in a form that is an improvement on the Bush years, but is still problematical, not only because they are not leading to the release of foreign prisoners, thereby undermining their credibility, as Daphne explains, but also because they still bear no resemblance to the Geneva Conventions, which were thoroughly sidelined by the Bush administration, and are still, it seems, missing in action under President Obama.

This article is followed by [a McClatchy Newspapers article from February 25](#), looking primarily at the success of the new, more humane regime at Parwan, but also touching on problems with abuse at the point of capture, and the prisoners' difficulties when it comes to mounting meaningful challenges to the evidence against them in their Detainee Review Boards, where they do not have access to lawyers, or, in any adequate sense, to the outside world as a whole, where witnesses might be located who would be able to help them.

[The concluding article, published in Stars and Stripes on February 21](#), examines the difficulties of establishing the guilt or innocence of prisoners, again revisiting important questions that need to be raised about the Detainee Review Boards, and about the type of screening that needs to take place in wartime, by focusing on one particular story — that of former Bagram prisoner Ghulam Sarwar Jamili. This is an excellent case study, juggling the many different elements of detention in Afghanistan — in particular, how the Afghans' hopes of "build[ing] a law-based state, where due process in a courtroom is the basis for incarceration," clashes with the US approach.

Defending their use of open-ended detention and review boards — despite the fact that they constitute a unilateral abrogation from the Geneva Conventions — US officials appear to be unconcerned that Afghan prosecutors are complaining that they receive nothing more than "vague case files" from intelligence officials at Bagram, provoking doubts that "the right people are landing behind bars" because "the detentions are based more on confidential intelligence than on releasable evidence."

US officials also appear unconcerned by complaints from “human rights groups, along with the Bagram detainees themselves,” who say that “their inability to adequately refute the claims against them breeds bitter contempt against the Americans.”

As the articles reveal, the physical conditions at Bagram may have improved for the majority of the prisoners held, but complaints remain that America is still operating under an assumption that it can make up rules as it goes along, and that no one is listening when critics — either Afghan officials, or the prisoners, or human rights groups — complain that these innovations have not led to fairness, and to success in the crucial arena of winning Afghan hearts and minds, but have, instead, often led to more confusion, resentment and bitterness, and a belief that Bagram and justice are incompatible.

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