



**WMRC Article**

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**CONTENTS**

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Espionage Probe at US  
Terrorist Detention Camp in  
Cuba Widens and Deepens

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## United States: Espionage Probe at US Terrorist Detention Camp in Cuba Widens and Deepens

*An investigation into alleged spying by US military personnel serving at the terrorist detention camp in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, has become more serious as the US formally charges two of the accused soldiers with espionage, although it has resulted in more questions than answers.*

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| <b>WMRC Perspective</b> |  |
| <b>Significance</b>     | An interpreter for the US Air Force serving at the US military institution in Guantanamo Bay (Cuba), where nearly 700 suspected terrorists are being detained, has been formally charged with espionage for attempting to pass classified information about the base and its activities to a member of the Syrian government.  |
| <b>Implications</b>     | The base at Guantanamo is purported to be one of the most secure military facilities the US has, and espionage at the level reported to have been carried out there would represent a major breach of security. It would also result in a enormous level of tension between the US and Syria, if the allegations of that country's involvement are true.   |
| <b>Outlook</b>          | The charges filed yesterday come as two other members of the military that were also serving at Guantanamo have been detained by US officials for similar activities, although they have not been formally charged. Although clearly a critical breach of security has taken place, it is unlikely there was a plot to commit espionage in an effort to undermine the US or the security at the base holding the suspected terrorists. |

### 'The Al-Qaida Hilton'

The US military erected Camp X-Ray on the grounds of its military base at Guantanamo Bay (Cuba) in late 2001, following the initiation of its military campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaida in Afghanistan. The camp was a temporary holding quarters for the hundreds of suspected members of al-Qaida that were captured in Afghanistan. In April 2002, all of the detainees were moved to the more permanent facility known as Camp Delta. With nearly 700 suspected terrorists from 42 countries under their care, the US military has been extremely vigilant to ensure the security of the facility in order to prevent any escapes or attempts to forcibly free any of the suspects. The detainees are considered 'enemy combatants' under US law, which provides them with far fewer rights and privileges than criminals held in US prisons, and fewer rights under international law than if they were 'prisoners of war'. A number of human rights groups have criticised the US for the conditions at the camp and the fact that detainees are not entitled to legal counsel. Security at the facility is extremely tight, as detainees are held in individual concrete cells that are sparsely furnished and surrounded by high fences with razor wire. Armed patrols on land and sea are conducted around the clock.

### Room Service at the 'Hilton'

All of the detainees at Camp Delta undergo rigorous interrogation by US intelligence experts as the government attempts to extract as many details about al-Qaida and its activities as possible. The identities of the men held is kept confidential, in part, so as not to compromise the potential value of some of the information gathered, as well as to keep the remaining leadership of al-Qaida guessing as to who exactly is being held there. Interrogators are reported to conduct one or more sessions per day with a number of the detainees that are considered to be of high value, although most of the nearly 700 suspects are likely to be low-level foot soldiers of al-Qaida rather than ring leaders with intricate knowledge of plans and procedures or even the whereabouts of the organisation's leader, Osama Bin Laden. Gathering intelligence is an important part of the camp's purpose, but its primary function is to house the terrorists, since many of them are from countries that may not be willing or able to keep them behind bars. As many of them will be guests at the camp for the long term, a Muslim chaplain - James Yee - was provided by the US Army to help counsel the prisoners.

### Wolves in Sheep's Clothing

Media reports first revealed that US Army chaplain James Yee was detained by military police while travelling from Camp Delta back into the US with classified information including prisoner names, their cell locations, and names of their interrogators. Yee is fluent in Arabic and a Muslim convert who would counsel the prisoners and pray with them. Under military law, Yee must have been charged in order for him to be detained, although no official announcement has been made as the nature of the charges against him. However, given what has come out in the press, it is clear that he is likely being held under suspicion of espionage. The day after reports about Yee surfaced, it was revealed that another member of the military force at the camp has been detained by authorities and has been in custody since late July. Ahmad al-Halabi, a Syrian-born translator for the Air Force, has been officially charged with 30 different counts including espionage, which, if convicted, can carry a death sentence. The charges against al-Halabi are known and even more serious than the suspected charges against Yee. When al-Halabi was detained, he was attempting to send intelligence, names and serial numbers of prisoners to Syria, and carrying a laptop computer with 180 classified notes for delivery. According to an AFP report, the information in his possession included details about military flights to and from the base, copies of orders for the transfer of detainees to the base, preparations procedures for detainee transfers, names and cell numbers of detainees, and a memorandum on a command inquiry. All of the information in question is considered classified. Confidential sources from the Department of Defense are quoted by various media as saying that at least one other member of the US military serving in Cuba is being held and questioned by authorities, and that there is an ongoing investigation into whether or not there are others who were involved. Yee and al-Halabi are believed to have known each other and interacted while both were serving at Camp Delta, but it is unclear if they colluded to commit espionage.

### **James Bond or Inspector Clouseau?**

What little information that has been made available thus far has resulted in far more questions than answers, not the least of which are: what was the real intent of the passing of the information? was Syria actively soliciting the information? and, if so, why? At first glance, the classified information that was reportedly in the process of being passed to Syria has little practical value. It is probably known who is being held at the camp by process of elimination, there are pictures on the internet of Camp Delta being constructed as well as television news programmes that have broadcast tours of the facility, and someone in Cuba not actually at the base could easily track the number and frequency of military flights to and from the base. Even if all of the information in the possession of the two servicemen accused of spying made it into the hands of a government unfriendly to the US, or Osama Bin Laden himself, its value is limited. It is highly unlikely that a rescue attempt would be conducted, since the odds of success are impossibly stacked against any such effort. The camp is surrounded on three sides by water and heavily guarded. Moreover, most al-Qaida members are only too happy to be martyrs, so attempting to save them would not be out of a sense of loyalty, and an attempt to get them back so they cannot reveal secrets is probably too late, since any information interrogators will get has probably already been extracted. Besides, the men in custody are merely foot soldiers who are not high-value intelligence sources, and only a small number of the thousands estimated to have gone through the al-Qaida training camps. The burning question for Yee and al-Halabi is not how, but why?

### **Ockham's Razor**

Ockham's razor is the theory that says the simplest or most obvious explanation among several competing ones is the preferable theory until it is proved wrong. Based on the facts that are known at this point - not many - is it more probable that Yee and al-Halabi were gathering sensitive information to pass along to a foreign power intent on using it to free the detainees at Camp Delta, or that two young Muslims who happen to be in the US military came to feel sympathy for their captives and were simply attempting to help them communicate with family members who probably don't know if they are alive or dead? Both men are students of Islam and have spent time in Syria and therefore would have much in common to talk about or on which to base a friendship, which would explain any contact they may have had while both serving at Camp Delta. Communications between al-Halabi and the Syrian government could be explained by his plans to travel to the country to visit his Syrian fiancée. Is it more likely that the 180 letters found on his computer are secret codes regarding juicy bits of classified information about the US or that they are notes to family members who have not heard from them in two years?

### **Outlook and Implications**

It is abundantly clear that several serious breaches of security at Camp Delta have occurred at the hands of more than one member of the US military serving at the camp - breaches of security that reveal lapses in the base's safeguards that need to be addressed immediately. In a volatile world and such an incredibly stressful environment as a prison camp for deadly terrorists who are willing to die in furtherance of their mission, security is paramount and any lapses shake the confidence of the soldiers serving there. Even in this situation, however, the inherent weakness and empathy found in human nature can penetrate even the most hardened. As fellow Muslims speaking

the same language, spending significant amounts of time with one another over a period of months, it is not surprising for captors and captives to develop a bond. Once a bond has been established, it is a small step to then bend the rules for seemingly innocuous favours such as passing along a letter to a family member. In this case, the most likely explanation of an otherwise perplexing situation is that Yee and al-Halabi are guilty of being human rather than being spies.

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