WHERE ARE THEY NOW?
DOZENS OF PRISONERS UNACCOUNTED FOR WITH CLOSURE OF US BAGRAM PRISON

Both NBC and Reuters are reporting that the US has closed its prison at the Bagram air base that was used to house non-Afghan prisoners. After many fits and starts, the US had ceded control of (mostly?) all Afghan prisoners to Afghanistan last year. As far as I can tell, the last time we had an accounting of the foreign prisoners held at Bagram was in February, when the number sat at 49, although Adam Goldman noted that the US was busy trying to reduce that number.

There was a report of two Yemenis being transferred out of the facility back in August and Russian prisoner Irek Ilgiz Hamidullin was brought to the US for trial in November, but even as recently as earlier this week, when Latif Mehsud and two of his guards were repatriated to Pakistan, Dawn still reported that conventional wisdom put the number of foreign prisoners held at Bagram in the dozens. The Dawn report relayed a statement from the US embassy that the population was being reduced:

> The US Embassy in Kabul said the three prisoners had been held at a detention centre near Bagram airfield.

> The facility is believed to house several dozen foreign prisoners who the United States will no longer be allowed to keep in Afghanistan when the mission for the US-led force there ends later this month.

> “We’re actually just going through and returning all the third-country nationals detained in Afghanistan to
resolve that issue,” a US embassy
spokeswoman said.

Note especially that the spokeswoman said “all
the third-country nationals”. That stands out
because Hamidullin was not the only prisoner
held at Bagram who was expected to be brought to
trial. Goldman’s report in February said that
the “number of people being looked at for
prosecution is in the single digits”. Are more
of these prisoners already being held in the US
in preparation for the filing of charges? Are
they held elsewhere? Or were they repatriated
instead?

But there were also some prisoners who can’t be
tried but are still deemed “too dangerous to
release”:

And bringing some of them to the United
States for trial in a military
commission, an option being considered
by the Obama administration, could run
into political opposition or may be
stymied by a lack of court-ready
evidence.

What happened to the prisoners whom the US
deemed too dangerous to release but who lacked
“court-ready evidence”?

The US prison at Bagram and Defense Department
operated prisons throughout both Afghanistan and
Iraq have a long, checkered history of lies and
misdirection about facilities and their
population. Further, this facility at Bagram has
been used to house prisoners who were tortured.
It seems likely that most of the 49 foreign
prisoners known to be there in February have
been repatriated without public announcements,
but what about those who had been slated for
indefinite detention? We now have a number of
prisoners who were deemed dangerous and have
disappeared in the last several months. Will
their status ever be clarified? Will we be
forced to concoct more crazy theories on where
they went?

Update: It should be noted that both of the stories linked at the beginning of this post state that the last two prisoners transferred out of the US facility at Bagram were handed over to Afghan authorities. This represents a huge change in policy for Afghanistan. Under Hamid Karzai, Afghanistan was adamant that no foreign prisoners would be held in Afghan jails. With this move, it is clear that Ashraf Ghani has changed the policy. So perhaps Afghan prisons are where we will find all of the prisoners the US had slated for indefinite detention without charges?