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Reuters

Afghan abuse video reinforces Arab suspicion of U.S

By Andrew Hammond

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DUBAI — In the Arab world, footage showing American forces urinating on dead Taliban insurgents was for many a bitter reminder of what they fear - that U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were not just about fighting Muslims, but about humiliating them.

"If they had urinated on us, it would have been better than what they did to us," said Abu Mostafa, 85, who spent six months in Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison in 2005. "The U.S. assaulted me by beating and torturing me psychologically."

"Killing combatants in battle is one thing but degrading the value of human beings like this is something else," said Archimandrite Qais Sadiq, president of the Ecumenical Studies Centre of Amman.

The video, posted on YouTube and other websites, shows four men in camouflage U.S. Marine Corps combat uniforms urinating on three corpses. One of them jokes: "Have a nice day, buddy." Another makes a lewd joke.

The images reinforced a sense in the Muslim world that U.S. military campaigns in Afghanistan from 2001 and Iraq from 2003, were - far from bringing peace and democracy - an opportunity to assert U.S. power over Muslim populations.

"Many other ugly crimes will take place in the countries that U.S. forces enter, and no one can stop them," said 37-year-old Iraqi farmer Raheem al-Zaidi, who was also held at Abu Ghraib, where U.S. soldiers were photographed abusing Iraqi detainees.

EXPLOITED BY AL QAEDA

The United States has condemned the behaviour shown in the video and promised to investigate.

"I have seen the footage, and I find the behaviour depicted in it utterly deplorable," U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said. "Those found to have engaged in such conduct will be held accountable to the fullest extent."

Yet the release of the video was expected to reinforce a view that President Barack Obama, who had promised to try to improve relations with the Muslim world, was no better than his predecessor, George W. Bush.

Zaki Bani Rushaid, a leader in Jordan's Islamic Action Front, the country's main opposition group, said: "Obama has made positive gestures to the Islamic world but in reality ... like in Guantanamo, the administration has not fulfilled its promises and failed in winning hearts and minds."

"The mistakes committed by prior U.S. administrations that have lost them support among Muslims are being repeated."

Sadiq, at Amman's Ecumenical Studies Centre, said that although Obama had promised openness toward the Islamic world, "Islamophobia and the practice of painting others as terrorists have only grown".

The video footage is likely to be exploited by al Qaeda and other Islamist militant groups whose propaganda plays up a narrative of Muslim populations oppressed first by European colonial powers and then by the United States.

Users in forums on Islamist websites said the behaviour of the U.S. soldiers would increase their resolve.

"These are the morals of depraved American soldiers. They are hateful Crusaders," wrote a user named Mu'tazz on one website. "Our martyrs are worth more than America and all those who live there."

For Abdullah al-Haj, an activist in Yemen, where democracy protesters blame Washington for protecting President Ali Abdullah Saleh, the incident added to his dislike of the U.S. policies.

"What the American soldiers have done is not surprising. They have done worse things in Iraq. Every day they prove that what we hear about the 'civilised values' is a lie," he said.

The Obama administration has tried to draw a line under the policies of the previous U.S. government that prosecuted the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, wars which Obama often said had damaged America's image around the world.

U.S. troops largely withdrew from Iraq in December, though they leave behind a country hit by worsening sectarian violence, and Washington says it will remove most combat troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014.