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The art of rehabilitating terrorists

American researcher brought Quran classes and art therapy to detention camps in Iraq

By Mavis Toh

DR AMI M. Angell, 34, has degrees in international public law, human rights law and in the theory and practice of human rights from the American University of London and the University of Essex.

In 2001, she headed for the West Bank after reading an article on human rights violations there. Intending to stay for two weeks, she eventually spent four years there, working as project lead in the children's legal department of Defence for Children International, a non-governmental organisation.

Her time in the Middle East ignited a passion to work in the area of human rights.

Some years later, she flew to Baghdad after reading about the war, and took up a post as a research analyst at a public relations firm before she became rehabilitation programme leader at Camp Bucca, one of the world's largest detention centres. She learnt to speak Arabic along the way.

Dr Angell, who is single, is now a visiting research fellow at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research in Singapore. She was also a speaker at a recent Lasalle conference on using creative arts in therapy.

The youngest of four children of a single mum, Dr Angell has also worked and lived in Lebanon, Jordan, Qatar, Italy, Switzerland and Britain.



After spending 44 months in Iraq, Dr Angell felt she needed a break. She keeps in touch with Iraqi friends and plans to go back soon to do more research. -- ST PHOTO: SAMUEL HE

DR AMI M. Angell is no fan of wearing slinky skirts and heels, but she missed having the option of glamming it up during the almost four years she spent in Iraq.

Working with detainees at Camp Bucca, once Iraq's largest detention centre for terrorists, she always had to wear drab long-sleeved shirts and khaki pants that covered even her tennis shoes.

When visiting nearby Umm Qasr, a port city in southern Iraq, the tall, tanned 34-year-old American covered herself head-to-toe in a burqa, out of respect for her host country and for her own safety.

For good reason. Some detainees had vowed they would have gouged out her eyes and slit her throat, but for a fence between them. She was even shot at one day while travelling in an Iraqi vehicle. To this day, when she hears thunder, it reminds her of gunshots and mortar fire.

For about 19 months from June 2007, home at Camp Bucca was either a tent she shared with 19 others or a trailer with six people. She was in charge of detainee rehabilitation programmes, and also helped to devise methods to counter terrorism and radicalism. A total of 150 Iraqi professionals worked as her subordinates.

In an interview with The Straits Times last week, Dr Angell, now a visiting research fellow at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research here, was quick to point out that she never supported the war.

The centre is part of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University.

'I went there because of the opportunity to engage with primarily women and children, work with them and really see first-hand the mess that the US had created,' she said. 'I felt the need to do what we can to rectify the situation.'

Dr Angell spent 2-1/2 years in Baghdad as a Middle East research analyst and human resource coordinator before being posted in mid-2007 to Camp Bucca, which was officially closed last September.

One key problem she identified was that detainees were left to their own devices after they were given uniforms, socks, a blanket and a Quran. The spare time led some to start radical religious classes so some moderate detainees were converted into extremists.

'When we came up with rehab programmes as a solution, the American military was very against it,' said Dr Angell. 'They didn't understand why we are spending money on rehab when we are going to leave the country eventually.'

The detainees were deemed to be a security threat to the United States, though some seemingly innocent people were also taken in, said Dr Angell.

'When a roadside bomb went off, every able-bodied male within half a mile circumference, regardless of whether he was shopping with his daughter or setting off the bomb, would be thrown into the detention centre,' she explained.

But the rehab programme won the support of US Marine Major-General Douglas Stone. Initial funding was enough for 'religious rehabilitation' for only 30 detainees. She brought in well-respected imams to teach them about the Quran.

'We saw a thirst for education as the other detainees all wanted to know what the 30 learnt,' said Dr Angell. 'Because many of them were uneducated, those who went for the classes were shocked to learn that what they had thought of Islam was flawed.'

'They didn't question what people told them and didn't even understand the reasons for many things, from washing hands and feet before prayers to why they pray.'

The positive response prompted them to start an art therapy programme where, for a month, 18 hours a week, detainees - many of them used to handling guns - wielded brushes and tubes of paints.

They discussed issues such as violence and Iraq's future, before expressing their feelings in art. They were guided by a psychiatrist and art instructor nicknamed Picasso - once an Al-Qaeda operative and a detainee at Camp Bucca.

The lack of proper art materials did not bother the detainees - they painted on boards and cement barricades. 'Art gave them a form of release to express their fear, frustration and anger,' said Dr Angell. 'It gave them a voice.'

Some paintings depicted hope, a rebirth of Iraq and cooperation between Iraq and the US. But others showed corpses and people with eyes dug out.

Dr Angell knows the jury is still out on the effectiveness of art therapy. However, she cites compelling evidence: Fewer than 1 per cent who did it were later caught again and thrown back into camp.

'Because we are dealing with the mind, we will never truly know who we have helped. But we have examples like Picasso to show,' she said.

She readily admits she could not crack some extremists. Some called her 'whore' and 'infidel', and threatened her with violence.

In Iraq, she worked seven days a week, up to 14 hours a day. To relax, she went running and took up boxing. 'You can't keep thinking about the violence, if not it will get to you,' she said.

There were some periods of relative comfort. For instance, she worked out of one of the late dictator Saddam Hussein's opulent palaces for a while.

Her family, she quipped, has given up worrying about her safety.

'They understand that I have to do what my heart propels me to,' she said of her mother and three siblings, who live on the US West Coast.

These days, she is co-authoring a book on the successes and challenges of rehabilitating extremists in Iraq, expected to be released in April. She will be heading back the country soon to do more research.

She keeps in touch with Iraqi friends, who tell her how Iraq has changed. Sometimes, the news is grim: Two clerics she worked with were shot dead after being 'in the wrong place, at the wrong time'.

Asked whether she will return to Iraq for long, she said: 'After 44 months, I decided I needed a break. But I also feel guilty because I have left the people I believe in.'

She added: 'The Iraqis - they are still there, they don't have a choice.'