

# Actions and Reactions to the Evacuation of Guantanamo Bay Detainees to Ghana: A Content Analysis of *Daily Graphic* Online Reporting

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**Abstract:** The Guantanamo Detention Camp was a facility created by the US government to house enemy-combatant captured from war fronts in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Amid controversies surrounding the legality of their detention, the Obama administration pledged to shut down the facility. Since terrorism has become a global menace, efforts to combat it have been approached from a multilateral perspective than unilateral; the US transferred some of the detainees abroad recently to close it. Ghana is one of the countries that accepted two inmates. Through content analysis, this study examines media coverage of their evacuation to Ghana as expressed by sections of the Ghanaian public. Overall, society resented their arrival on fear and panic, insecurity and illegality grounds.

**Key words:** Terrorism, media, public, Guantanamo Bay, security, discourse, society

## Introduction

Ghana was thrown into a state of shock when the media reported that the Islamic State (ISIS) has recruited an alumnus of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science & Technology (KNUST) in Ghana and this, among other recruitments are achieved through online and offline publicity (Bilgen, 2012). This concern appeared to intensify when the media again published that two Yemenis detained in Guantanamo Bay have been evacuated to Ghana on 7 January 2016. Guantanamo Bay is a US naval base where a detention facility was built after 9/11 to detain “enemy combatants” captured in Afghanistan and Pakistan during the counterterrorism mission (Dahlstrom, 2003; Yin, 2005). In the words of the US Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, the detainees are “among the most dangerous, best-trained, vicious killers on the face of the earth and were all involved in an effort to kill thousands of Americans” (Rose 2004 cited in Howell, 2007). According to him, the facility was built to “detain extraordinarily dangerous people, to interrogate detainees in an optimal setting, and to prosecute detainees for war crimes” (Saani, 2016). By these, the Secretary announced that the detainees would not be assigned Prisoners of War (POW) status (Dahlstrom 2003, Greenhouse 2009,

Chlopak, 2002); but face trial before military commissions established by Executive Military Order of 13 November 2001 (Greenhouse, 2009). This, coupled with the release of photos of the inmate’s accommodation conditions (Dahlstrom, 2003) triggered global criticism hence the gradual withdraw of the physical and emotional backing given to US at the beginning of the War on Terror in which alliance of countries joined them on the Kabul raid on 7 October 2001 (Jamison, 2005). To them, the questioning strategies adopted, and keeping detainees’ identities and their location of detention secret is unacceptable (Jamison, 2005; Paust, 2004). In one account, Aradau (2007) referred to Butler’s argument that in Guantanamo, national and international laws were suspended leading to NGOs and European leaders joining the critical voices of analysts to condemn it. He recounted descriptions of Tony Blair of the Bay as an ‘anomaly’ which should be shut down and the director of AI who Frames it as ‘the Gulag of our times’. Assessing the situation, the UN defines the legal regime in Guantanamo as an affront to the rule of law and several human rights declarations (Aradau, 2007) such as the Geneva Convention (Dahlstrom, 2003). For instance, army investigators employed harsh counter-resistance means in a systematic order to coerce detainees to cooperate (Bloche & Marks,

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2005; Steyn, 2003; Marks, 2007; Lewis, 2004; Malinowski, 2008; Rubenstein & Annas, 2009; Chlopak, 2002 & Woodward, 2009) and might explain Marks (2007) position that three of the Guantanamo inmates took their own lives and some twenty-five of them were unsuccessful at multiple suicide attempts. To him, each passing day worsens their mental state of well-being and others being depressed clinically (see also: Howell, 2007 & Kennedy et al., 2009). These, inform Barack Obama's criticism of the Bush-led administration during the 2008 US elections on the handling of the terrorism war with special emphasis on the Guantanamo prison and questioned the mode of interrogations applied there (Yin, 2010) hence his determination to shut the facility on assumption of office. Malinowski (2008) reiterated: the incoming president should issue an executive order that prohibits torture and secret detention leading to the closure of Guantanamo. On May 2009, President Obama outlined a new approach to deal with detainees and its allies to encompass protecting American values (Padmanabhan, 2014) and pledged to close the center by 23 January 2010 (Rubenstein & Annas, 2009). Ghana got enlisted among the countries that accepted US proposal to house the detainees. However, news of this evacuation was received with mixed-reactions and generated widespread discourse among politicians, policy analysts, academia and civil society in Ghana questioning the legality of the evacuation, terms of agreement, the motive behind keeping Ghanaians in the dark and why Ghana, and not the US or their homeland Yemen. This seems to contradict the words of the Deputy Commander of Guantanamo who in October 2004 said: "the majority of them [the detainees] will either be released or transferred to their own countries" (Yin, 2005; Malinowski, 2008).

This study seeks to analysis the content of *Daily Graphic* reported online as expressed by sections of the public (lawmakers, politicians, security analysts and civil society) to depict the Ghanaian experience of how society reacted to the evacuation of the Guantanamo detainees to Ghana amid rumors of terrorists' attack in the country.

### Literature review

The Guantanamo Bay was leased to the US by the Cuban government in 1903 and it is the oldest US foreign base in a communist nation (Dahlstrom, 2003). Aradau (2007) recorded that in the early 1990s; refugees from Haiti who applied for asylum were evacuated to Guantanamo for processing and subsequently denied. "Many were held up to three years in makeshift barbed wire camps, exposed to heat and rain in spaces infested with rats and scorpions, with inadequate water supplies and sanitary facilities" (see also: Johns, 2005). Soon after the 9/11, and subsequently the evacuation of the POW to the Bay, the popularity of Guantanamo heightened in the global media space hence becoming the focus of discourse to the extent that Marks (2007) observes:

The focus on Guantánamo Bay conveniently distracts attention from other detention centers, such as Bagram in Afghanistan and numerous unidentified "black sites" operated by the CIA across the globe where interrogation practices and the role of health professionals have come under far less public scrutiny. There is a danger that Guantánamo Bay has or will become a staged detention center, while more egregious treatment of detainees is conducted elsewhere (p. 713).

This height of concentration is as a result of the horrific nature of Al-Qaeda using aircraft to collapse the twin-towers and the US determination to retaliate to prevent future strikes by invoking the Patriot Act 18 that gave the executive ample powers that even supersede civil liberties (Jamison, 2005 & Steyn, 2003). The Bay received its first batch of detainees from Afghanistan numbering twenty on Friday, January 11, 2002 (Jamison, 2005) and another thirty followed. Within a space of 10 days, the detainees, kept at 'Camp X-Ray' had risen to 158 and tallied till it hits over 600 inmates (Dahlstrom, 2003). Upon criticism, the US Military improved the conditions at Guantanamo by erecting permanent building to house the detainees [Camp Delta] (Jamison, 2005). By this quarantine, the Bush administration intended to hold the detainees indefinitely (Malinowski, 2008) and this was echoed in a 2002 speech by the government's Deputy Assistant Attorney General John Yoo that: "Does it make sense to ever release them [the Guantanamo Detainees] if you think they are going to continue to be dangerous, even though you can't convict them [detainees] of a crime" (Yin, 2005, p.151). However, to the Red Cross, "the system of keeping detainees indefinitely without allowing them to know their fates was unacceptable and would lead to mental health problems". This, Judith Butler describes as the creation of 'black hole' in the world leading to the 'Guantanamo Limbo' (Aradau, 2007) where prisoners were held "to put them beyond the rule of law, beyond the protection of any court, and at the mercy of the victors" (Steyn, 2003, p.14). Responding to concerns over suicide at the Bay, Howell (2009) relied on Foucault's 1973 'madness and civilization' theory to study along two narratives ('terrorist madness' - Bush administration) and ('psychologically impaired'-NGOs) and concludes that an understanding of those who are 'mentally ill' and 'madmen' (dangerous or pathological) should determine those to be incarcerated and others placed on coercive prescriptions to preserve security, order and liberty. However, to Jamison (2005), amid the detainees are juveniles aged (10-13) captured as enemy-combatants whose psyche may be different from the adults. On a decision continuum to 'release' or 'detain' inmates of the Guantanamo detention, Yin (2005) identified two perplexing challenges. Firstly, "continuing to detain persons who are no longer threats to the United States is undesirable and is unlikely to persuade the rest of the world of our good intentions". Secondly, "releasing persons who in fact intend to commit mass violence against the US or to rejoin the ranks of those

fighting our military is also undesirable” (p. 150). In this instance, the US appears to be safeguarding its *international reputation* as a defender of democratic ideals as Malinowski (2008) affirms that tracing the war on terror from Guantanamo to Abu Ghraib is “filled with episodes that have diminished its [the US] reputation and influence in the world” (p. 148) on one hand, and mindful of its *own security* on the other. In as much as this ‘release-detain’ stalemate makes Howell’s study a step in the right direction, it raises similar concerns in Ghana whose president has hosted two of the inmates. The question of “why Ghana and not keep the detainees in the US or send them to Yemen” appears to be rooted on two notions. Firstly, the US somewhat received global backing to fight terrorism in the context ‘we are fighting on behalf of the world’. Secondly, due to the global outcry to shut Guantanamo, it has become imperative that countries voluntarily accept the detainees to empty the facility and shut it.

#### *Terrorism and media*

Progressively, terrorism has become a global threat (Liebes & Kampf, 2007; Elu & Price, 2015) and elevated the significance of media coverage on the subject (Liebes & Kampf, 2007). Thus, global terrorism has occupied a salient position on the public agenda of many nations over the past three decades (Keinan, Sadeh & Rosen, 2003) and Ghana is no exception. Keinan et al. (2003) further hinted, “the world has come to witness a new type of terrorism characterized by a blatant orientation towards the media and designed to attract its attention. The ultimate target of this terrorism is the media consumer rather than the victim” (p. 150). In agreement with this assertion, Wilkinson (1997) described terrorist act as one “directed at a wider target than the immediate victims” (p. 51) and further espoused that whenever terrorist violence occurs, the media will always scramble to gather news to satisfy audience especially in the current study where there is high public curiosity to be informed about the victimizers and their victims (See also Liebes & Frosh, 2006; Yarchi, et al., 2013). By this, terrorists seem to capitalize on media’s insatiable thirst for the news and indirectly engaged them as their propaganda machinery to feed the public with their information. It is in line with this that progressively, terror perpetrators themselves have legitimately become information source for the media (Liebes & Kampf, 2007) creating a win-win situation for the entities involved in this relationship. Whereas terrorists want exposure on media’s primetime to publicize and legitimize their beliefs in the lens of their affiliates, mass media coverage of terrorism provides a persistent avenue to publish compelling stories to attract and maintain high audience/listenership (Wilkinson, 1997). Though the media extensively have been blamed for terrorism propagation anxieties, Nellis and Savage (2012) maintain that “even if information coming through the media causes fear, first amendment protections of press freedom should be respected and many follow the credo that the public has a right to know regardless of the outcome” (p. 764). Thus, the media functions on

the policy of *laissez faire* and should not be constrained in its coverage of terrorism irrespective of the implications of conveying violence in the news to the public (Wilkinson, 1997). These are reminiscent of the position of Cooper (1976) when he argued that “the power of the fourth estate for good or evil is unquestionable” (p. 226). This critical role of the media informs Marks’ (2007) position that without secrets documents that leaked to the media, conditions at Guantanamo and the fight shut it would hardly be uncovered and achieved; and this interface the exact situation in the Ghanaian experience of the evacuation of the two.

Putting Africa into perspective, the continent experienced significant degrees of terror attacks in 2014 (US Department of State, 2014). Between 1974 and 2008, Africa saw 4,993 incidence of terrorist activities of which 261 groups claimed responsibility (Elu & Price, 2012). In West Africa (WA) alone, terrorist groups include the al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Unity and Jihad in WA (MUJAO), Boko Haram, Seleka-anti-Balaka and Janjaweed; and their activities have drawn international concerns (Nkwi, 2015). Tracking the history of terrorism, Nkwi (2015) argued that WA is a bastion of terror activities and that the increase of terrorism after the 9/11 should not be misconstrued as the starting point of the menace as some literature appear to portray. He underscored that terrorism in the region has affected its development negatively. One of its major targets is business related so that the economic cost to governments and society become severe (Elu & Price, 2015). Clarke (2015) contends that terrorism in Africa is a bigger threat compared to Europe but receives much less coverage. He compared 17 people killed in France and the massive global condemnation it received to figures ranging from 150 to over 2000 people killed in Baga, Nigeria. This appears to defeat the multilateral approach to dealing with terrorist attacks.

#### **Theoretical underpinnings**

This study relied on the theory of moral panic (Cohen, 1972) to understand how society reacted to the evacuation of the Guantanamo detainees to Ghana based on media stories. Cohen (1972) theorized that whenever values and interests are threatened, media depict the issues, public interest awakens, officials and opinion makers respond and panic precedes social changes. Among its plethora applications, moral panic is now “used by journalists to describe a process in which politicians, commercial promoters and media habitually attempt to incite and have become the way in which daily events are brought to the attention of the public” (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995, p. 559-60). The analysis of media reports in the current study is ideal considering Cohen’s (2002) postulation that the media surfaces in all the three roles of moral panic: [i] agenda-setting [ii] transmitting the images and [iii] breaking the silence, making the claim.

#### **Method**