The War Crimes Act: Current Issues

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Summary

The War Crimes Act of 1996, as amended, makes it a criminal offense to commit certain violations of the laws of war when such offenses are committed by or against U.S. nationals or Armed Service members. Among other things, the act prohibits certain violations of Common Article 3 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, which sets out minimum standards for the treatment of detainees in armed conflicts of a non-international character. Common Article 3 prohibits protected persons from being subjected to violence, outrages upon personal dignity, torture, and cruel, humiliating, or degrading treatment. In the 2006 case of *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld*, the Supreme Court rejected the Bush Administration’s long-standing position that Common Article 3 was inapplicable to the present armed conflict with Al Qaeda. As a result, questions have arisen regarding the scope of the War Crimes Act as it relates to violations of Common Article 3 and the possibility that U.S. personnel may be prosecuted for the pre-*Hamdan* treatment of Al Qaeda detainees.

As amended by the Military Commissions Act of 2006 (MCA, P.L. 109-366), the War Crimes Act now criminalizes only specified Common Article 3 violations labeled as “grave breaches.” Previously, any violation of Common Article 3 constituted a criminal offense. This report discusses current issues related to the War Crimes Act. This report also briefly describes legislation introduced in the first session of the 110th Congress that would amend the War Crimes Act.
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The 1949 Geneva Conventions proscribe certain conduct by High Contracting Parties toward specified categories of vulnerable persons during armed conflict. High Contracting Parties are also required to provide effective penal sanctions against any person who commits (or orders the commission of) a “grave breach” of one of the Conventions, which is defined to include the wilful killing, torture or inhuman treatment, and the causing of great suffering or serious injury to body or health of protected persons. Congress approved the War Crimes Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-192) specifically to implement the Conventions’ penal requirements.

The War Crimes Act (18 U.S.C. § 2441)

The War Crimes Act imposes criminal penalties against persons who commit certain offenses under the laws of war, when those offenses are either committed by or against a U.S. national or member of the U.S. Armed Forces. The act applies regardless of whether the offense occurs inside or outside the United States. Offenders are subject to imprisonment for life or any term of years and may receive the death penalty if their offense results in death to the victim.

At the time of enactment, the War Crimes Act only covered grave breaches of the 1949 Geneva Conventions. During congressional deliberations, the Departments of State and Defense suggested the act be crafted to cover additional war crimes, but...
these recommendations were not immediately followed. However, Congress amended the War Crimes Act the following year to cover additional war crimes that had been suggested by the State and Defense Departments, including violations under Article 3 of any of the 1949 Geneva Conventions (Common Article 3). Common Article 3 is applicable to armed conflicts “not of an international character” and covers persons taking no active part in hostilities, including those who have laid down their arms or been incapacitated by capture or injury. Such persons are to be treated humanely and protected from certain treatment, including “violence to life and person,” “cruel treatment and torture,” and “outrages upon personal dignity, in particular, humiliating and degrading treatment.”

Implications of Hamdan v. Rumsfeld

There has been controversy concerning whether activities by military and intelligence personnel relating to captured Al Qaeda suspects might give rise to prosecution under the War Crimes Act, particularly in light of the Supreme Court’s ruling in the 2006 case of Hamdan v. Rumsfeld. The following sections provide relevant background and briefly discuss possible implications that the Court’s ruling may have on issues relating to the War Crimes Act.

Application of Common Article 3 to Al Qaeda. At least since early 2002 and lasting until the Court’s ruling in Hamdan, the Bush Administration had taken the position that the Geneva Conventions did not apply to members of Al Qaeda captured in the global “war on terror.” Specifically, the Administration argued that the Conventions were applicable to international armed conflicts between High Contracting Parties and States that complied with Convention provisions, and therefore do not cover non-State actors such as Al Qaeda. The Administration further claimed that the conflict with Al Qaeda is international in scope, and Common Article 3 accordingly was inapplicable to the conflict because it only covers armed conflicts “not of an international nature.”

The issue in Hamdan primarily concerned military tribunals convened by Presidential order to try detainees for violations of the laws of war. The Court held that such tribunals did not comply with the Uniform Code of Military Justice or the laws of war, including the Geneva Conventions. However, the Court’s interpretation of Common Article 3 had broader implications for U.S. policy towards captured Al Qaeda suspects. The Court rejected the Administration’s interpretation of Common Article 3 as not covering Al Qaeda members, concluding that the provision affords “some minimal protection, falling short of full protection under the Conventions, to [any] individuals ... who are involved in a conflict in the territory of a signatory.”

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4 Id. at 12-16.
7 Hamdan, 126 S.Ct. at 2796 (internal quotations omitted). In interpreting Common Article (continued...)
In the aftermath of the Court’s ruling, the Department of Defense issued new treatment guidelines concerning military detainees (including Al Qaeda members) that required, at minimum, application of the standards articulated by Common Article 3. Subsequently, fourteen high-level Al Qaeda operatives who had been held abroad by the CIA and subjected to aggressive interrogation techniques were transferred to DOD custody in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Scope of Prohibited Conduct under the War Crimes Act Relating to Common Article 3 Violations. The United States has apparently never prosecuted a person under the War Crimes Act. Perhaps as a result, there is some question concerning the act’s scope. In the aftermath of the Court’s ruling in Hamdan, some suggested that the War Crimes Act be amended to specify whether certain forms of treatment or interrogation constitute a punishable offense. They argued that the scope of the War Crimes Act was ambiguous, particularly as it related to offenses concerning violations of Common Article 3. In a September 2006 address, President Bush suggested that some provisions of Common Article 3 provided U.S. personnel with inadequate notice as to what interrogation methods could permissibly be used against detained Al Qaeda suspects, and requested legislation listing “specific, recognizable offenses that would be considered crimes under the War Crimes Act.” On the other hand, some argued that amending the War Crimes Act to cover specific acts would overly restrict the act’s scope, making certain unspecified conduct legally permissible even though it was as severe as conduct that was expressly prohibited.

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7 (...continued)
3 as ensuring *de minimis* protections of Al Qaeda members captured by the United States in Afghanistan, the Court noted that the official commentaries accompanying Common Article 3 made clear that “the scope of the Article must be as wide as possible.” *Id. (quoting Commentary: Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War 36 (1960)).* In dissent, Justice Thomas (joined by Justice Scalia) disputed this reading, arguing that the relevant commentary indicated that the purpose of Common Article 3 was principally to furnish protections to persons involved in a civil war, rather than entities of international scope such as Al Qaeda. *Id.* at 2846 (Thomas, J., dissenting). However, the Court appeared to leave unresolved whether the Geneva Conventions apply with respect to Al Qaeda suspects captured in places where no armed conflict is occurring. For background on the Hamdan decision, see CRS Report RS22466, *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld: Military Commissions in the ‘Global War on Terrorism’*, by Jennifer Elsea.


Prior to the enactment of the Military Commissions Act of 2006 (P.L. 109-366), it was arguably unclear whether a reviewing court would have interpreted this defense to apply retroactively to conduct occurring before the DTA’s enactment in December 2005. The Military Commissions Act specified that this defense was available to U.S. persons charged with an offense under the War Crimes Act on account of conduct committed between  

Although some types of conduct prohibited by Common Article 3 are easily recognizable (e.g., murder, mutilation, the taking of hostages), it might not always be obvious whether conduct constitutes impermissible “torture,” “cruel treatment,” or “outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment.” For discussion of U.S. and international jurisprudence and agency interpretations concerning the scope of these terms, particularly as they relate to interrogation techniques, see CRS Report RL32567, Lawfulness of Interrogation Techniques under the Geneva Conventions, by Jennifer Elsea; CRS Report RL33655, Interrogation of Detainees: Overview of the McCain Amendment, by Michael John Garcia; and CRS Report RL32438, U.N. Convention Against Torture (CAT): Overview and Application to Interrogation Techniques, by Michael John Garcia.

**Liability under the War Crimes Act for U.S. Personnel on Account of Pre-Hamdan Activities.** Prior to the Court’s ruling in *Hamdan*, the Bush Administration did not apply Common Article 3 protections to captured Al Qaeda agents. In some cases, such persons were allegedly subject to harsh treatment, especially in the context of interrogation, that might not have complied with Common Article 3 requirements. As a result, some have raised questions as to whether U.S. personnel might be criminally liable under the War Crimes Act for the pre-*Hamdan* treatment of some Al Qaeda detainees.

Although not immune from prosecution, U.S. personnel who could be charged with violating the War Crimes Act would have several possible defenses to criminal liability, so long as their activities were conducted with the authorization of the Administration and under the reasonable (though mistaken) belief that their actions were lawful. Section 1004(a) of the Detainee Treatment Act of 2005 (DTA, P.L. 109-148), enacted several months prior to the *Hamdan* decision, provides that

In any civil action or criminal prosecution against an officer, employee, member of the Armed Forces, or other agent of the United States Government who is a United States person, arising out of the officer, employee, member of the Armed Forces, or other agent’s engaging in specific operational practices, that involve detention and interrogation of aliens who the President or his designees have determined are believed to be engaged in or associated with international terrorist activity that poses a serious, continuing threat to the United States ... and that were officially authorized and determined to be lawful at the time that they were conducted, it shall be a defense that ... [the] agent did not know that the practices were unlawful and a person of ordinary sense and understanding would not know the practices were unlawful. Good faith reliance on advice of counsel should be an important factor, among others, to consider in assessing whether a person of ordinary sense and understanding would have known the practices to be unlawful. Nothing in this section shall be construed to limit or extinguish any defense or protection otherwise available ... or to provide immunity from prosecution for any criminal offense by the proper authorities.12

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12 Prior to the enactment of the Military Commissions Act of 2006 (P.L. 109-366), it was arguably unclear whether a reviewing court would have interpreted this defense to apply retroactively to conduct occurring before the DTA’s enactment in December 2005. The Military Commissions Act specified that this defense was available to U.S. persons charged with an offense under the War Crimes Act on account of conduct committed between (continued...)
In addition to this statutory defense, a number of other legal defenses could be raised by U.S. personnel charged with War Crimes Act offenses based on conduct that had been authorized, assuming the defendants acted with government sanction and/or had been erroneously informed by responsible authorities that their conduct was legal. Similar defenses may exist for military personnel in courts martial proceedings.

Amendments made by the Military Commissions Act

In response to the Court’s ruling in Hamdan, Congress passed the Military Commissions Act of 2006 (P.L. 109-366), which was enacted into law on October 17, 2006. Among other things, the Military Commissions Act (MCA) made several amendments to the War Crimes Act.

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13 Although “mistake of law” defenses are generally rejected, such defenses have been recognized by courts in certain cases where defendants have acted with government sanction or after being erroneously informed by responsible authorities that their conduct was legal. These defenses can be divided into three overlapping categories: (1) defense of entrapment by estoppel, available when a defendant is informed by a government official that certain conduct is legal, and thereafter commits what would otherwise constitute a criminal offense in reasonable reliance of this representation; (2) defense of public authority, available when a defendant reasonably relies on the authority of a government official to authorize otherwise illegal conduct, and the official has actual authority to sanction the defendant to perform such conduct; and (3) defense of apparent public authority, which is recognized by some (but not all) federal circuits, and is similar to the defense of public authority, except that the official only needs to have apparent authority to sanction the defendant’s conduct. United States v. Baptista-Rodriguez, 17 F.3d 1354, 1368 n. 18 (11th Cir. 1994). Unlike the other defenses, the defense of entrapment by estoppel stems from the due process notions of fairness, rather than from common law concerning contract, equity, or agency. United States v. Austin, 915 F.2d 363, 366 (8th Cir. 1990).

14 While ignorance or mistake of law, including general orders or regulations, is not generally available as a defense, “mistake of law may be a defense when the mistake results from reliance on the decision or pronouncement of an authorized public official or agency.” Manual for Courts Martial, Rules for Courts-Martial rule 916(l) (discussion). In the case of war crimes, a defense based on superior orders is available only with respect to direct and specific orders to commit an act constituting a war crime, and the defendant must demonstrate both the existence of the order and his sincere and reasonable belief that the order was lawful. See DAVID A. SCHLEUTER, MILITARY CRIMINAL JUSTICE § 2-4(F) (5th ed. 1999)(citing United States v. Huet-Vaughn, 43 M.J. 105 (1995)).

15 A number of bills were introduced in the 109th Congress in response to the Hamdan decision, particularly as the decision related to the establishment of military tribunals to try detainees for violations of the laws of war. Some of these bills contained provisions amending the War Crimes Act to more fully protect U.S. personnel from criminal liability. On September 6, 2006, the Bush Administration submitted draft legislation to Congress authorizing military commissions to try detainees, amending the War Crimes Act, and specifying conduct complying with Common Article 3. White House Press Release, Fact Sheet: The Administration’s Legislation to Create Military Commissions (September 6, 2006), available at [http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/09/20060906-6.html]; Draft Legislation, Military Commissions Act of 2006, available at (continued...
The MCA amended the War Crimes Act provisions concerning Common Article 3 so that only specified violations would be punishable (as opposed to any Common Article 3 violation, as was previously the case), including committing, or attempting or conspiring to commit

- torture (defined in a manner similar to that used by the Federal Torture Statute, 18 U.S.C. §§ 2340-2340A, in criminalizing torture);
- cruel treatment;
- the performing of biological experiments;
- murder;
- mutilation or maiming;
- intentionally causing serious bodily injury;
- rape;
- sexual assault or abuse; and
- the taking of hostages.

Prior to the enactment of the MCA, there was some debate concerning the scope of cruel treatment that should be subject to criminal penalty under the War Crimes Act. The MCA defined “cruel treatment” prohibited by the War Crimes Act in a similar manner to the definition of “torture” contained in the Federal Torture Statute. However, whereas a person is criminally liable for torture only if he specifically
Specific intent is “the intent to accomplish the precise criminal act that one is later charged with.” General intent usually “takes the form of recklessness (involving actual awareness of a risk and the culpable taking of that risk) or negligence (involving blameworthy inadvertence).” BLACK’S LAW DICTIONARY 813-814 (7th ed. 1999)

E.g., Al-Saher v. I.N.S., 268 F.3d 1143 (9th Cir. 2001) (finding that regular, severe (continued...)

intends to cause severe mental or physical pain and suffering, pursuant to the amendments made the MCA, a person is criminally liable for inflections of cruel treatment if he generally intended\textsuperscript{17} to cause serious mental or physical pain and suffering to a person protected under Common Article 3.

The MCA further defined “serious mental pain and suffering” and “serious physical pain and suffering” rising to the level of cruel treatment punishable under the War Crimes Act. “Serious mental pain and suffering” is defined by reference to the Federal Torture Statute’s definition of “severe mental pain and suffering” rising to the level of torture. Serious mental pain and suffering constituting cruel treatment refers to pain and suffering arising from

- the intentional infliction or threatened infliction of severe physical pain or suffering;
- the administration, application, or threatened administration or application of mind-altering substances or other procedures calculated to disrupt profoundly the senses or the personality;
- the threat of imminent death; or
- the threat that another person will imminently be subjected to death, severe physical pain or suffering, or the administration or application of mind-altering substances or other procedures calculated to disrupt profoundly the senses or personality.

The type of mental pain and suffering constituting cruel treatment generally differs from the type rising to the level of torture, in that it only needs to be of a serious and non-transitory nature which need not be prolonged, as opposed to being of a severe and prolonged nature. However, the War Crimes Act, as amended, provides that with respect to conduct occurring before enactment of the MCA, such pain and suffering must be of a prolonged nature.

As amended by the MCA, the War Crimes Act defines “serious physical pain or suffering” constituting cruel treatment as actual bodily injury involving

- a substantial risk of death;
- extreme physical pain;
- a burn or physical disfigurement of a serious nature (other than cuts, abrasions, or bruises); or
- significant loss or impairment of the function of a bodily member, organ, or mental faculty.

Under U.S. jurisprudence, most or all of these activities are likely considered to be of such severity as to constitute torture,\textsuperscript{18} at least in certain contexts, and could give

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\textsuperscript{18} E.g., Al-Saher v. I.N.S., 268 F.3d 1143 (9th Cir. 2001) (finding that regular, severe (continued...)
beatings and cigarette burns inflicted upon an Iraqi alien by Iraqi prison guards constituted “torture,” qualifying the alien for relief from removal under immigration regulations implementing U.N. Convention against Torture requirements); Mehinovic v. Vuckovic, 198 F. Supp. 2d 1322 (N.D. Ga. 2002) (finding that Bosnian-Serb soldier had committed “torture” against non-Serbian plaintiffs who brought suit under the Torture Victims Protection Act, 28 U.S.C. § 1350 note, as he had subjected them to acts of brutality including tooth-pulling and severe beatings resulting in broken bones and disfigurement).

In a 2002 memorandum interpreting the Federal Torture Statute, the Department of Justice suggested that physical pain amounting to torture must be “equivalent in intensity to the pain accompanying serious physical injury, such as organ failure, impairment of bodily function, or even death.” Memorandum from the Office of Legal Counsel, Department of Justice, to Alberto R. Gonzales, Counsel to the President, Re: Standards of Conduct for Interrogation under 18 U.S.C. §§ 2340-2340A (August 1, 2002), available at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/documents/dojinterrogationmemo20020801.pdf], at 1. This memorandum was superseded by another DOJ memo in 2004. The 2004 DOJ memorandum rejected the earlier memo’s findings to the extent that it treated severe physical suffering as identical to severe physical pain, and concluded that “severe physical suffering” may constitute torture under the federal torture statute even if such suffering does not involve “severe physical pain.” Memorandum from the Office of Legal Counsel, Department of Justice, to James B. Comey, Deputy Attorney General, Re: Legal Standards Applicable Under 18 U.S.C. §§ 2340-2340A (December 30, 2004), available at [http://www.usdoj.gov/olc/18usc23402340a2.htm], at 10.

18 (...continued)

19 See supra, note 17.

20 P.L. 109-366, § 6(b).

21 Id., § 8(b).

22 Id., § 8(a).

23 Id., § 6(b).
or international sources to serve as the basis for interpreting the provisions of the War Crimes Act, as amended, defining “grave breaches” of Common Article 3.24

Additionally, the MCA prevents persons from invoking the Geneva Conventions as a source of rights in certain judicial proceedings. The Conventions are prohibited from being invoked in habeas or civil proceedings to which the United States or a current or former agent of the United States is a party.25

**Post-MCA Developments Regarding the Treatment of Detainees**

The MCA authorizes the President, acting pursuant to an Executive Order published in the Federal Register, to more restrictively interpret the meaning and application of Common Article 3 of the Geneva Convention, and promulgate administrative regulations implementing this interpretation,26 so long as these rules do not authorize conduct subject to criminal penalty under the War Crimes Act.

On July 20, 2007, President Bush signed an Executive Order interpreting Common Article 3, as applied to the detention and interrogation of certain alien detainees by the CIA, when those aliens (1) are determined to be members or supporters of Al Qaeda, the Taliban, or associated organizations; and (2) likely possess information that could assist in detecting or deterring a terrorist attack against the United States and its allies, or could provide help in locating senior leadership within Al Qaeda or the Taliban.27 The Executive Order does not specifically authorize the use of any particular interrogation techniques with respect to detainees, but instead bars any CIA detention and interrogation program from employing certain practices. Specifically, the Order prohibits the use of

- torture, as defined under the Federal Torture Statute (18 U.S.C. § 2340);
- cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment, as defined under the McCain Amendment and the MCA;
- any activities subject to criminal penalties under the War Crimes Act (e.g., murder, rape, mutilation);
- other acts of violence serious enough to be considered comparable to the kind expressly prohibited under the War Crimes Act;

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24 *Id.*, § 6(a)(2).

25 *Id.*, § 5(a). The Military Commission Act also revoked U.S. courts’ jurisdiction to hear habeas corpus petitions by aliens in U.S. custody as enemy combatants. *Id.*, § 7. The constitutionality of the MCA’s provisions limiting habeas jurisdiction and prohibiting the Geneva Conventions from being invoked as a source of rights in judicial proceedings has been subject to legal challenge. For background and development of recent litigation, see generally CRS Report RL33180, *Enemy Combatant Detainees: Habeas Corpus Challenges in Federal Court*, by Jennifer K. Elsea and Kenneth Thomas.


willful and outrageous acts of personal abuse done for the purpose
of humiliating or degrading the individual in a manner so serious
that any reasonable person, considering the circumstances, would
deeem the acts to be beyond the bounds of human decency, such as
sexual or sexually indecent acts undertaken for the purpose of
humiliation, forcing the individual to perform sexual acts or to pose
sexually, threatening the individual with sexual mutilation, or using
the individual as a human shield; or
acts intended to denigrate the religion, religious practices, or
religious objects of the individual.

The scope of activity prohibited by the Order is not immediately apparent.
Although some types of conduct barred by the Order are easily recognizable (e.g.,
murder, rape, the performance of sexual acts), it is not readily apparent as to what
interrogation techniques would fall under the Order’s prohibition against acts deemed
to be “cruel, inhuman, and degrading” or “beyond the bounds of human decency.”
Certain interrogation techniques that have been the subject of controversy and are
expressly prohibited from being used by the military under the most recent version
of the Army Field Manual — waterboarding, hooding, sleep deprivation, or forced
standing for prolonged periods, for example — are not specifically addressed by the
Order. Whether or not such conduct is deemed by the Executive to be barred under
the more general restrictive language of the Order, such as the restriction on
treatment comparable to the kind expressly prohibited by the War Crimes Act,
remains unclear. In a public address on September 7, 2007, CIA Director Michael
Hayden stated that “no one ever claimed that the Army Field Manual exhausted all
the lawful tools that America could have to protect itself,” and suggested that
additional interrogation techniques may be employed by the CIA than are permitted
to be used by DOD personnel.

Recent Legislative Developments

Legislation was introduced in the first session of the 110th Congress to amend
the scope of the War Crimes Act. S. 576, introduced by Senator Dodd on February
13, 2007, and a companion bill, H.R. 1415, introduced by Representative Nadler on
March 8, 2007, would modify MCA and the War Crimes Act provisions concerning
the interrogation of detainees. Among other things, both bills would amend the War
Crimes Act to criminalize treatment of protected persons which violated McCain
Amendment standards, or which denied such persons the right to be tried for war
crimes before a regularly constituted court. The bills would also amend the War
Crimes Act to make it an offense for any person not subject to the Uniform Code of
Military Justice (USMJ) to commit any offense of Common Article 3, if such an
offense is listed under the USMJ as punishable by death or at least one year’s
confinement. The two bills would also amend the MCA by requiring the President
to notify Geneva Convention parties that the United States expects U.S. persons
detained in a conflict not of an international character to be treated in a manner
consistent with U.S. interpretation and application of Common Article 3.

28 Transcript of Remarks by Central Intelligence Agency Director Gen. Michael V. Hayden
news-information/speeches-testimony/general-haydens-remarks-at-the-council-on-foreign-
relations.html] (rush transcript).