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**From:** Abedin, Huma <AbedinH@state.gov>  
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**Subject:** Fw: To Track Militants, U.S. Has System That Never Forgets a Face (NYT)

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**Subject:** To Track Militants, U.S. Has System That Never Forgets a Face (NYT)

WASHINGTON — When the Taliban dug an elaborate tunnel system beneath the largest prison in southern Afghanistan this spring, they set off a scramble to catch the 475 inmates who escaped.

One thing made it easier. Just a month before the April jailbreak, Afghan officials, using technology provided by the United States, recorded eye scans, fingerprints and facial images of each militant and criminal detainee in the giant Sarposa Prison.

Within days of the breakout, about 35 escapees were recaptured at internal checkpoints and border crossings; they were returned to prison after their identities were confirmed by biometric files.

One escapee was seized during a routine traffic stop less than two miles from his home village. Another was recaptured at a local recruiting station where he was trying to infiltrate Afghan security forces.

With little notice and only occasional complaints, the American military and local authorities have been engaged in an ambitious effort to record biometric identifying information on a remarkable number of people in Afghanistan and Iraq, particularly men of fighting age.

Information about more than 1.5 million Afghans has been put in databases operated by American, NATO and local forces. While that is one of every 20 Afghan residents, it is the equivalent of roughly one of every six males of fighting age, ages 15 to 64.

In Iraq, an even larger number of people, and a larger percentage of the population, have been registered. Data have been gathered on roughly 2.2 million Iraqis, or one in every 14 citizens — and the equivalent of one in four males of fighting age.

To get the information, soldiers and police officers take digital scans of eyes, photographs of the face, and fingerprints. In Iraq and Afghanistan, all detainees and prisoners must submit to such scrutiny. But so do local residents who apply for a government job, in particular those with the security forces and the police and at American installations. A citizen in Afghanistan or Iraq would almost have to spend every minute in a home village and never seek government services to avoid ever crossing paths with a biometric system.

What is different from traditional fingerprinting is that the government can scan through millions of digital files in a matter of seconds, even at remote checkpoints, using hand-held devices distributed widely across the security forces.

While the systems are attractive to American law enforcement agencies, there is serious legal and political opposition to imposing routine collection on American citizens.

Various federal, state and local law enforcement agencies have discussed biometric scanning, and many have even spent money on hand-held devices. But the proposed uses are much more limited, with questions being raised about constitutional rights of privacy and protection from warrantless searches.

In Afghanistan and Iraq, there are some complaints — but rarely on grounds recognizable to Americans as civil liberties issues.

Afghanistan, in particular, is a nation with no legacy of birth certificates, driver's licenses or social security numbers, and where there is a thriving black market in forged national identity papers. Some Afghans are concerned that in the future the growing biometric database could be abused as a weapon of ethnic, tribal or political retaliation — a census of any particular group's adversaries. Even Afghan officials who support the program want to take it over themselves, and not have the Americans do it.

“To be sure, there must be sound and responsible policies and oversight regarding enrollment and the storage, use and sharing of private individual data,” said Brig. Gen. Mark S. Martins, commander of the military's new Rule of Law Field Force in Afghanistan.

But he stressed that biometric systems “can combat fraud and corruption, place law enforcement on a sounder evidentiary footing, and greatly improve security.”

Instant, computerized iris scans as a tool of population control used to be the monopoly of science fiction films. Even real-world use of biometric identification technologies overseas was for years reserved for the intelligence agencies and the military's elite hunter-killer commando units.

But a new generation of hand-held biometric systems has spread across the military.

“You can present a fake identification card,” said Sgt. Maj. Robert Haemmerle of the Combined Joint Interagency Task Force 435. “You can shave your beard off. But you can't change your biometrics.” The task force conducts detention, judicial and biometrics operations — responsibilities that will be turned over to the Afghan government.

Defense Department spending on biometrics programs is enormous, set at \$3.5 billion for the 2007 through 2015 fiscal years, according to the Government Accountability Office.

The concept of expanding biometrics for wholesale application on the battlefield was first tested in 2004 by Marine Corps units in Falluja, a militant stronghold in Anbar Province, Iraq. The insurgent safe haven was walled off, and only those who submitted to biometrics were allowed in and out.

In late 2004, when an Iraqi militant was allowed on to an American base in Mosul, where he detonated a suicide vest and killed 22 in a dining tent, commanders ordered a stringent identification program for Iraqi and third-country citizens entering American facilities.

Gen. David H. Petraeus, reviewing these efforts when he took command in Iraq in 2007, ordered a surge of biometric scans across the war zone to match the increase in American troops.

General Petraeus lauds the technology, not only for separating insurgents from the population in which they seek to hide, but also for cracking cells that build and plant roadside bombs, the greatest killer of American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Fingerprints and other forensic tidbits can be lifted from a defused bomb or

from remnants after a blast, and compared with the biometric files on former detainees and suspected or known militants.

“This data is virtually irrefutable and generally is very helpful in identifying who was responsible for a particular device in a particular attack, enabling subsequent targeting,” said General Petraeus, who will soon retire as commander in Afghanistan to become director of central intelligence. “Based on our experience in Iraq, I pushed this hard here in Afghanistan, too, and the Afghan authorities have recognized the value and embraced the systems.”

Military officials acknowledge that the new systems fielded by American, coalition and Afghan units do not all speak to one another. The hand-held devices fail in the awesome heat of the Afghan summer. Screens break when dropped. But a significant challenge in spreading biometric devices among an illiterate Afghan security force was resolved when the operating system was changed from English to an easy-to-teach system of color-coded commands.

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