

Sexual Torture

Rendering, Practices, Manuals

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In May 2001, in a case that gained international attention, Egyptian police rounded up dozens of men suspected of homosexual activity. According to a Human Rights Watch report, suspects were “tortured with electroshock on the limbs, genitals, or tongue. Guards encouraged other prisoners to rape suspected homosexuals.”¹ This case was widely treated as an isolated incident until the April 2004 revelations of the sexual abuse of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib. It became apparent that a sub terra network of international state actors and security agencies that deploys sexual torture against Arab and Muslim detainees as a routine psychological technique intended to extract information or to shame prisoners in a manner that manipulates perceived notions of authentic Arab/Muslim masculine identity, undeniably exists.

The US has played a key role dating back as early as 1993 in rounding up suspected members of Islamic underground groups and “rendering” them to countries where torture is commonly practised and less scrutinized than in the US. Moreover, in 2002 the *Washington Post* alleged, “in recent years, US agents, working with Egyptian intelligence and local authorities in Africa, Central Asia, and the Balkans, have sent dozens of suspected Islamic extremists to Cairo or taken them to the United States.”² The US does not act alone. Both the US and Israel have a long history of covert third-country abduction of suspects—the Israeli practice dating back to the abduction of Nazis like Adolf Eichmann and then gaining routine momentum after its invasion of Lebanon in 1982. In the post-9/11 US-led “war on terror,” the most common destinations for “rendered” prisoners have been Egypt, Jordan, and, more surprisingly, Syria.³

Patterns of torture

Interrogators of the Israeli General Security Services, known as “Shin Bet,” have long employed sexual torture both against Palestinians detained in the Occupied Territories as well as in secret prisons like the notorious 1391 interrogation centre whose existence became known in 2003. The practice of sexual torture may even date as far back as the beginning of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967. Sexual torture was thought to be an effective method of coercing Arab prisoners into divulging information about others and creating collaborators who would be so shamed by their sexual violation that they would not reveal their torture—even to intimates. In actual fact, the use of rape has not served its primary function of extracting information and shaming the detainee. In the end, it has been the Israeli state that has been shamed and not the victims of sexual torture.

The Israeli media focus on sexual torture began in 2003 when a former Lebanese Amal leader, Mustafa Dirani, brought a civil court suit against his torturers, in particular, the especially sadistic man known only as “George.” Dirani was part of a group of Lebanese and Palestinian prisoners that Israel exchanged at the end of January 2004 for an Israeli businessman being held captive in Lebanon and the remains of three Israeli soldiers who had died in Lebanon during or after Israeli military incursions. Dirani was kidnapped in 1994 from his home in the Lebanese Beqaa Valley by a special Israeli commando force and then brought to Israel where he remained in the now notorious secret prison until the 2004 prisoner exchange. He was never charged with any crime and never brought to trial. Israeli intelligence presumed that Dirani, who was the head of Amal intelligence in 1986, knew the whereabouts of a downed Israeli pilot, Ron Arad. It was thought that Arad was captured and that Dirani had ordered his transfer to Iran. Although Israeli security sources denied that Dirani was of any intelligence value in the

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Ron Arad disappearance, he continued to be held while the Arad family launched a multi-million dollar media campaign designed to tie Dirani to the fate of their son.⁴

With the exception of the Lebanese press, hardly any international media noted the Dirani torture allegations. Yet a Tel Aviv court appearance by

Dirani on 27 January 2004 became an Israeli media sensation when the presiding judge refused to put a halt to an open hearing on the complaint as requested by the Israeli government. The Dirani sexual torture allegations gave a rare public glimpse into the internal conflicts within the Shin Bet over the use of sexual torture and provided rare description of the agents who were forced to perpetrate, witness, or record the acts of torture. With the Dirani torture allegations out in the open, the Israeli media tried to explain to its own public how Israeli soldiers could engage in humiliating acts of sexual torture.

The Dirani sexual torture case demonstrates in dramatic fashion that the ultimate responsibility for ordering torture in the first place goes straight to the highest levels of the Israeli government. Indeed Shin Bet “is accountable directly and exclusively to the office of the Israeli prime minister.”⁵ Although Israeli human rights groups have stated that the Dirani case is the first in which there are clear allegations of male rape and sodomy as specific forms of torture, the testimonies of other prisoners detained in 1391 indicate a long-standing pattern, possibly dating back several decades.

From facility 1391 to Abu Ghraib

The February 2004 Lebanese-Israeli prisoner exchange drew attention to both the pervasive and systematic use of sexual torture and sexual humiliation in Israeli prisons, and to a system of region-wide collaboration in meeting out torture. Former inmates of Israeli prisons made immediate connections to Abu Ghraib in Iraq and noted how the American torture methods were strikingly similar to Israeli methods.⁶ Besides the anecdotal stories of ex-prisoners held in Israeli detention centres, there is prima facie evidence of collaborative links between American and Israeli interrogators in Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay, and Iraq.⁷ Seymour Hersh’s disgruntled Pentagon and intelligence sources have spoken about an elaborate American-Israeli secret programme to mount a counter-insurgency campaign in Iraq that included tactics of interrogation and cultivating informants: “According to American and Israeli military and intelligence officials, Israeli commandos and intelligence units have worked closely with their American counterparts at the Special Forces training base at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and in Israel to help them prepare for operations in Iraq. Israeli commandos were expected to serve as ad hoc advisers—again, in secret—when full-field operations began.”⁸

As with the case of “George” in the Dirani torture case, Pentagon and Bush administration officials have sought to limit investigations of torture in Iraq to only one facility, Abu Ghraib, and to only implicate low-ranking soldiers in an effort to portray the evidence of torture in Abu Ghraib and elsewhere as aberrant, not systematic, and carried out by rogue untrained enlistees. The highest ranking US officer to be implicated in the Abu Ghraib scandal was Brigadier General Janis Karpinski, commander of the National Guard unit that ran the prison. Initially, rather than take the fall for higher officials, Karpinski began timidly implicating others in the torture scandal before she finally went silent. She tried to insinuate that Israelis were the lead interrogators for Iraqi high security prisoners and that Israelis were the main consultants on the ground for specific methods of torture that should be deployed to elicit useable information. After resigning her post, she told the BBC

that she had personally witnessed Israelis interrogating Iraqi prisoners at a secret US facility in Baghdad.⁹ Her allegations were widely covered in the Arab media, but not covered at all in the US.

Robert Fisk of *The Independent* has determined that some interrogators in Iraqi prisons were working for "at least one company with extensive military and commercial ties with Israel." He further asserts, "We know the Pentagon asked Israel for its 'Rules of Engagement' in the occupied West Bank and Gaza." Israeli officers briefed their US counterparts and, "in January and February of 2003, Israeli and American troops trained together in southern Israel's Negev desert."¹⁰ What distinguishes the Abu Ghraib scandal from the Dirani case is the sheer volume of documentary material and evidence that demonstrates the systematization of torture at Abu Ghraib and provides excruciating details of the fixation on sexual torture.

Sexual torture and legitimizing texts

An integral part of the public discourse on the revelations of torture at Abu Ghraib has centred on the motivations for inflicting sexual torture on the Iraqi victims. The very act of public disclosure of sexual torture generated a running Orientalist commentary on what the Abu Ghraib torture revealed about Arab male sexuality in general. The photographs of the Abu Ghraib prisoners released on the Internet depicted male prisoners forced to masturbate in a group and also a naked prisoner who appeared to have been forced into performing oral sex on another naked prisoner. Prisoners were forced to perform such acts in front of women guards and every sexually degrading act was photographed. The torturers were trained to regard homosexual acts such as sodomy and male-to-male oral sex as particularly effective forms of torture for Arabs because of the perceived essential homophobia of Arab culture. Even critics of the torture such as Seymour Hersh, found Middle East "experts" to verify that "homosexual acts are against Islamic law" and that "it is humiliating for men to be naked in front of other men."¹¹

At the centre of the US Army psych training programme at Fort Bragg, North Carolina for interrogators in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere is the quintessential Orientalist text, *The Arab Mind*, by Raphael Patai. Originally published in 1973, the book has witnessed a renaissance of mass distribution since 9/11. *The Arab Mind* was rapidly reissued by Patai's estate in 2002 with a new preface by US Army Col. Norvell B. De Atkine who trained officers for the war in Iraq at Fort Bragg, North Carolina and who remarks on the utility of the book as a kind of psychology manual. Patai purports that Arab culture has an essential homophobic character and also signifies that public exposure of Arab male masturbation will emasculate the person who is identified with the act since "masturbation is far more shameful than visiting prostitutes. Whoever masturbates, however, evinces his inability to perform the active sex act, and thus exposes himself to contempt."¹² It is not surprising that if *The Arab Mind* has been used as a basic text for US Army interrogators that prisoners in Abu Ghraib ended up being raped, forced to perform oral sex, and made to masturbate in groups.

Seymour Hersh contends that the US government policymakers in the Pentagon and the White House who advocated going to war in Iraq very literally applied the lessons of *The Arab Mind* to specific practical strategies in prosecuting the war and even in the more mundane matter of the daily torture of prisoners for, "It was thought that some prisoners would do anything—including spying on their associates—to avoid dissemination of the shameful photos to family and friends." Nevertheless, as Hersh points out, the strategy was far from effective



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as "the insurgency continued to grow." It has clearly not proven to be a reliable method of social control nor has it been effective in breaking social solidarity or yielding "serviceable intelligence." Sexual torture, far from serving as a means by which to "shame" the victims, has served as a way of exposing the transnational networks of torture that operate in gross violation of every canon of international law.

Members of Amnesty International stage a protest against mistreatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, Barcelona, 28 April 2005.

Notes

1. In a Time of Torture: The Assault on Justice in Egypt's Crackdown on Homosexual Conduct (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2003), 6.
2. Rajiv Chandrasekaran and Peter Finn, "U.S. Behind Secret Transfer of Terror Suspects," Washington Post Foreign Service, 11 March 2002, A01.
3. Jane Mayer, "Outsourcing of Torture: The Secret History of America's 'Extraordinary Rendition' Program," New Yorker, Fact, 7 Feb. 2005.
4. "Lawyer: Obeid, Dirani Not Linked to Arad," Jerusalem Post, 9 November 2003.
5. Lisa Hajjar, *Courting Conflict: The Israeli Military Court System in the West Bank and Gaza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 69.
6. Larry Johnson, "A Severe Torture, Only This Was in Lebanon: Past Prisoner Says Israelis Used Similar Techniques," Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 18 May 2004, A5.
7. See Craig Pyes and Mark Mazzetti, "U.S. Probing Alleged Abuse of Afghans," Los Angeles Times, 21 September 2004, A1, A8, A9.
8. Seymour Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2004), 279-80.
9. "Israeli Interrogators 'in Iraq,'" BBC World News, 3 July 2004.
10. Robert Fisk, "The Things Bush Didn't Mention in His Speech; The Re-Writing of Iraqi History is Now Going on at Supersonic Speed," *Independent*, 26 May 2004.
11. Hersh, 23-24.
12. *Ibid.*, 144.

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