

Ishraqat, Part II: Torture and War: Lessons from Abu Ghraib

By Babak Rahimi

*'Let me be cruel, not unnatural:
I will speak daggers to her, but use non'
Hamlet*

In recent weeks various images of cruel and inhumane images have flashed across televisions across the world. We are all appalled as we encounter images of hooded Iraqi prisoners with arms outstretched, standing on a box; nude men put on top of each other; military dogs barking at a detainee; and a female soldier holding a leash wrapped around the neck of a naked prisoner cowering at her feet. Such sadistic photos, along with numerous other ones, have largely been identified as textbook illustration of a classic torture method.¹ These “parameters” are a chilling demonstration that torture, as a method of submission and a means of subjection to physical torment, has returned to further discredit Victor Hugo’s famous pronouncement that with the coming of modernity “torture has ceased to exist.”²

As a result of this evident methodology of torture, the Abu Ghraib scandal has now grown into a full-blown political crisis. And rightly so! With each new revelation of pain and suffering inflicted by U.S. personnel in Iraq, it is becoming clearer that the damages go far beyond the atrocious act of a few mischievous soldiers of the 372nd Military Police Company. It now seems that the prisoner torture was more widespread, more systematic

¹As Darius Rejalis explains, this kind of standing torture was used by Gestapo and by Stalin, although the wires and the electrocution were a Brazilian police innovation. Claudia Wallis, *Why Did They Do it? Time*, 5/17/2004.

² Cited in E. Peters, *Torture*, p.5.

and orchestrated according to a chain of command from the Army military intelligence to Lt. Gen. Ricardo S. Sanchez and the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld. Even the former U.S. president, Bill Clinton, admits by saying that “the more we learn about [the scandal], the more it seems that some people fairly high up, at least, thought that this was the way it ought to be done, and they have justified it by thinking that that’s the way things are done in this region and we want to find out where terrorists and killers are.”³

To be sure, these patent systematic acts of torture bring to light the administration’s direct decision to ignore domestic and international law after the events of September 11, 2001. The most recent Human Rights Watch report shows that the administration violated international law by inflicting pain and humiliation on (what it classified as) “enemy combatants”, in the case of the Al-Qaeda terrorists in Guantánamo Bay, and prisoners of war, in the case of Iraqi insurgents at the Abu Ghraib jail both in order to soften them up for interrogation.⁴ The American military borrowed heavily from a list of high-pressure interrogation tactics used at the U.S. detention center in Guantánamo Bay and transferred these tactics to the Baghdad detention facility.⁵ The problem of the Abu Ghraib scandal, along with the Guantánamo detention center, resides in the fact that the administration abandoned the Geneva Conventions by casting rules aside and advocating a “mindset” that “anything goes”. In this sense, as Seymour Hersh has put it, “Abu Ghraib had become, in effect, another Guantánamo.”⁶

³ “Interview” *Time*, 6/28/2004.

⁴ “Iraq abuse ‘came from US policy,’” BBC: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/3792957.stm>. 6/10/2004.

⁵ R. Jeffrey Smith and Josh White, “Sanchez Approved Torture Techniques,” *The Washington Post*, 6/14/2004.

⁶ Seymour M. Hersh, “Torture at Abu Ghraib,” *The New Yorker*, 5/10/2004.

The tactics applied included manipulating diet; imposing long-term isolation up to a month; use of military dogs; shock therapy; temperature extremes; sensory deprivation, mind games; sleep deprivation; and forced standing or squatting in positions for long periods of time or held in cramped spaces where the person can't sleep or lie down. Among other interrogation techniques that were approved by high U.S. officials, including Donald Rumsfeld, were water-boarding or "dipping water into a wet cloth over a suspect's face, which can feel like drowning; and threatening to bring in more brutal interrogators from other nations."⁷ All of the above "mistreatments", as some conservative commentators have called it, appear to underscore a systematic tendency in the application of torture.

While such new revelations reveal a more organized methodology behind these acts, the single most tantalizing question about the photos from Abu Ghraib prison remains unanswered. That is, what forces could have brought these American service men and women (including military-intelligence officers and civilian contract employees) to cause pain and suffering on another human being while appearing as though they were enjoy it? Were they simply an "exceptional few", as President Bush quickly put it after the photos were televised? Or do their actions indicate something more institutionally orchestrated, something more organizationally sadistic?

I will, in all due brevity, offer three possible explanations to the question of what made the Abu Ghraib guards act as torturers.

The Dispositionist Approach

⁷ Michael Hirsh, John Barry and Daniel Klaidman, "A Tortured Debate", *Newsweek*, 6/21/2004.

The first explanation is a well-known one: the torturers at the Abu Ghraib prison were demented, psychologically disturbed persons—the so-called “bad-apple theory”. The thrust of this line of reasoning suggests that the horror of torture must be matched by the unstable mental condition of the torturer him/herself. The argument, then, mainly involves the assertion that the torturer is insane and a sadist.

But this can be easily dismissed as we learn more about the personality of the guards at Abu Ghraib. With the exception of Charles A. Grander Jr, all of the accused soldiers in the prisoner-torture scandal appear “normal”. Friends, family and colleagues describe them as “kind” and “good” individuals.⁸ Sabrina Harman, the female soldier who was most famously seen giving the thumbs up next to a dead Iraqi man, has been described to be such a “good person” that once she finds a bug she picks and puts it outside of the house rather than kill it.⁹ In another case, one of the accused that participated or witnessed the acts, showed certain capacity for conscience by questioning the morality of the torture methods. This clearly suggests that some of the soldiers were aware of some act of wrongdoing and therefore it is highly doubtful that all of the people involved in these acts were mentally insane. But, of course, this still does not mark off the possible role of dispositional conditions in the conduct of torture.

Closely connected to this argument is the claim that the act of torture is in fact the manifestation of a biologically determined aggressive and death-seeking force or a destructive “instinct” that causes sadistic behavior in people, situated in a particular milieu that would encourage them to act in such ways. Organically speaking, we humans, so we are told, share an aggressive drive to act in such bizarre ways, and that such

⁸ See C Wallis, “Why did they do it?” *Time*, 5/17/2004.

⁹ *Ibid.*

internal physiological states intensify responses elicited by situational and environmental stimuli, prompting aggressive and violent behavior.¹⁰

Research, however, has revealed the inadequacies of this argument. While such an approach might correctly highlight the significance of physiological changes that may result in aggressive behavior, it nevertheless overemphasizes the internal physiological as a predetermined quality in animals, particularly among the higher vertebrates.¹¹ This approach also fails to take into account the cultural conditions and the everyday situations, in which the act of torture usually takes place. As a number of anthropological studies have demonstrated, aggression and the act of violence upon another human being can be a result of social norms. Wild behavior and aggressive acts can be controlled and are in themselves learning processes; they are a result of socially (kinship or group-oriented) sanctioned customs and rules.¹²

In an important study of the torturers of the Greek military dictatorship, Mika Haritos-Fatouros has shown that the bio-psychologist model fails to give adequate account of everyday situational conditions where individuals carry out torture against other human beings. What forces ordinary men and women to transform into torturers, Haritos-Fatouros argues is “a matter of the denial of human rights, not only for the victims but for the victimizers themselves, who are exploited by the system.”¹³ In a sense, then, the torturer’s mentality is not a reflection of a totalitarian system of governance with a brutal rule of terror, but that the person is part and parcel to socio-psychological processes, in

¹⁰ As a Washington Post reporter best articulates this view, “These [prison] photos are *us* [my italic]...these photos show us what we may become, as occupation continues, anger and resentment grows...” Cited in Diana West, “The Vietnam They so Desire,” *The Coast News*, 05/13/ 2004.

¹¹ See for example, C.H. Southwick, “An experimental study of intergroup agonistic behavior in Rhesus monkeys,” *Behavior* 28 (1967), pp. 182-209 and R. Meller, “Aggression in primate social groups,” in T. March and A. Campell (ed.s) *Aggression and Violence*, 1982.

¹² See C. Tavis, *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion*, 1982.

¹³ P. Haritos-Fatouros, M, *The Psychological Origins of Institutionalized Torture*, p. 31.

which he or she undergoes in form of training in order to become a torturer. Harritos-Fatouros's notion of "authority of violence" underlines the significance of obedience as individuals undergo methods of selection and training that shape them to become torturers at the cognitive level.

The Institutional Approach

The factor of obedience highlights an important aspect of the institutional approach. According to this theory, individuals behave in cruel ways not according to dispositional attributions, but institutional-structural settings that enhance aggressive and brutal behavior in individual members of an organization. People participate in institutions that encourage them to engage in reprehensible behaviors; and they do so since their way of thought and action is restructured based on rule-orientated and conditioned ways.

Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is the best representative of institutional analysis. According to Arendt, the Adolf Eichmann trials in the early 60s illustrate how the torturer, regardless of the one that orders or actually practices the act, is merely following rules, and the real accountability lies on an institution or a (bureaucratic) system that regards the torturer as a follower of group organization and hierarchical order. In Arendt's view, someone like Eichmann, who ordered the death of Jews as a part of the Final Solution, felt duty-bound to obey the laws of the land, which was ultimately embodied in the Führer's command. It was indeed as a result of such institutional setting that the behavior of men and women were shaped according to a set of rules. Arendt famously states that evil "in the Third Reich had lost the quality by which most people recognize it—the quality of temptation."¹⁴

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, P. 150.

We continue to hear the echoes of Arendt's argument in the U.S. prisoner-torture scandal. William Lawson, uncle of Ivan Frederick II, for example, states that his nephew was following orders when he tortured and sexually humiliated the prisoners, and that he was simply carrying out their orders, from the intelligence officers in particular. "They had, he said, been told they had been doing a 'great job'; a lot of useful information had been extracted as a result of their work."¹⁵ Shoemaker-Davis, someone who knew four of the accused soldiers, agrees with Lawson by saying, "I think they were doing what they were told."¹⁶

But do these opinions, apparently shared by a large majority of people, explain the two features of joy and cruelty in the torturers? The institutional approach ultimately fails to explain why those soldiers in the pictures (and those taking the pictures) got a kick out of what they were doing. It fails to explain, in case of another example, why white people in the postcards circulating in the U.S. in the early 20th century, showing them smiling at the lynching of black men and women, appeared so joyful in what they were doing.¹⁷ Why were the civilians in the infamous My Lai massacre scalped before being killed? Why does the Bangladeshi police apprehend, beat and sexually abuse 50,000 children living on the streets of Dhaka? How can we explain cruelty and torture?

The Culturalist Approach

According to the culturalist approach, the answer to the above question lies in norms and perceptions that determine the codes of behavior within an institution or organization, to which one belongs, which accordingly sanction and encourage individuals to act in

¹⁵ "War and the Law in Iraq: Crime and Punishment", *The Economist*, 5/8/2004.

¹⁶ C Wallis, "Why did they do it?" *Time*, 5/17/2004.

¹⁷ See Susan J. Brison, "Torture, or 'Good 'Old American Pornography'?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 6/4/2004.

certain ways. In the context of everyday situational life, violent or cruel behavior of individuals primarily reflects the person's perception of self and other relations, and the cognitive experience in classifying the world in hierarchical ways.

What the Abu Ghraib prisoner-torture demonstrates is the power of norms and accepted codes of conduct that enabled the American servicemen to carry out such acts. Since the prominent cultural norm of any kind of military organization is to subdue and ultimately destroy the enemy combatant, dehumanization as a systematic cognitive way of seeing the other as subhuman, serves as the best explanation for why the U.S. soldiers behaved in such manners. The clear show of joyful celebration with the act of torture and even the death of Iraqi prisoners reveals the way that the Abu Ghraib guards had in fact accomplished something that can be regarded as valuable or normatively praiseworthy in their particular organization, namely, the military. The praiseworthy norm, of course, is the successful realization of humiliation, domination, and the dehumanization of the captured enemy.

The feature of dehumanization has been clearly expressed in the sort of language and imageries that certain members of the U.S. military have used to identify the Iraqi prisoners. Consider the following three cases. The best evidence we have with regard to the humiliation of captured prisoners is the now infamous photo of PFC Lyndie R. England, holding a leash on the neck of an Iraqi prisoner. Here, the image of a dog in direct association with the Iraqi is dauntingly self-evident. The prisoner represents a subdued beast that has been tamed and domesticated under the hands of an (female) American soldier. In another case, on April 9th, during a military hearing in the case against Sergeant Frederick, at Camp Victory, near Baghdad, Specialist Mathew Wisdom

testified: “I saw two naked detainees, one masturbating to another kneeling with its mouth open. I thought I should just get out of there. I didn’t think it was right... I saw SSG Frederick walking towards me, and he said, ‘Look what these animals do when you leave them alone for two seconds.’”¹⁸ In another instance, Joe Turnipseed, in his memoir of the first Gulf War, recalls a Staff Sergeant describing the Iraqi prisoners as the following: “... What that means, in plain English, is “Don’t feed the animals’s and don’t put your hand in the cage”.¹⁹ Although a thorough documentation of similar sorts of testimonies about the military’s use of demeaning language goes well beyond this discussion, we repeatedly encounter the use of imageries of subhuman life form to identify the prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prisoner-torture scandal.

The key point in these accounts is the evocation and the portrayal of the enemy as an object that, having been hunted and captured, is placed in the prison; an enemy who falls short of qualifying as a human subject and therefore requires a special kind of treatment, the sort of treatment that an animal deserves. Why animals? Because they are assumed not only to lack the capacity to feel the pain and suffering inflicted upon them during captivity (since supposedly beasts act according to instinct and not intelligence), but also that they are devoid of any rights shared by humans beings. Training and the application of certain language often used to portray the enemy as subhuman best captures the military’s treatment of its enemy. This helps the course of torture, killing, and even atrocity in the minds of soldiers, to run more smoothly and easily. At times such behaviors are associated with a sense of duty to the nation and even the attainment of

¹⁸ Cited in S.M.Hersh, “Torture at Abu Ghraib,” *New Yorker*, 5/10/2004.

¹⁹ Cited in Philip Kennicott, “A wretched New Picture of America,” *Washington Post*, 5/5/2004.

higher values. In a worst-case scenario situation, this leads to genocide, as the case of the Second World War Holocaust testifies.²⁰

Torture and War

What is the relationship between torture and war? Dehumanization. This simple though significant connection explains why most of the brutal forms of torture, and by extension genocide, usually occur during periods of war. The televised pictures of Abu Ghraib prison that were first released in April (2004) should have not been the cause of too much surprise for those who have some knowledge of the brutality of war. At best, these photos highlight a common drive for cruelty that is central to the management of organized violence and the cultural technology of dehumanization. At worst, they bring to light a culture of denial that stubbornly refuses to acknowledge the undemocratic make-up of the military, which is fundamentally engaged in the business of annihilating an imagined enemy, portrayed as the subhuman other.

The Abu Ghraib guards were not born torturers, rather, they were situated in a distinct kind of institutional setting that operated according to a dehumanizing culture of enemy-friend relations. Without acknowledging a culture of humiliation in terms of a normative set of behaviors that encourages persons to view the other (i.e. the Arab) as lower than humans, the significance of the Abu Ghraib scandal cannot be fully recognized. But, most importantly, what the prisoner-torture scandal could also demonstrate is that the so-called paradigm that societies inevitably substitute physical with nonphysical punishment as

²⁰ See Richard Koenigsberg's paper on the "The Logic of the Holocaust". In it, he brings to light the Nazi use of sub-human imageries of the Jews, which helped them to implement the project of the Final Solution. R. Koenigsberg, "The Logic of the Holocaust: Why the Nazis Killed the Jews" in <http://www.libraryofsocialscience.com>

they move towards modernity, so powerfully argued by Michel Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish*, proves to be false.

The photos we have seen over the last three months, recurrently flashing on our Television screen, are the manifestation of torture in modern societies, manifested even in the institutional setting of those countries that have had the longest history of democratic rule. Why? The answer lies in what we, living in the “modern world”, share with the so-called “traditional” or pre-modern societies, that is: a culture of war. Correspondingly, as long as organized violence remains the guiding force of global politics, torture will also remain a part of global modernity.

What is to be done?

The Torture scandal continues to grow, and with it the indignation of the Arab and Muslim world. While the administration persists to blame a few bad apples that apparently were doing it for the kicks, and while the right-wing activists continue to describe the photos as “good old American pornography” or “fraternity initiation” rites, suspicion and distrust of the United States deepens, touching off a global outcry. Ironically, while the administration attempts to “clean up” its mess, weeks after leaks in the media, the Iraqi insurgency expands in reaction to the photos. Surely those images will remain vividly present in the “minds and hearts” of Iraqis for years to come, as a reminder that the military institution of a democratic state can also have a serious cruelty problem.

So, what is to be done? With the supposed transfer of sovereignty on 28th of July, we need the United States, more than ever, to exercise its power responsibly. This means, first and foremost, that the administration needs to act according to international law by

unequivocally rejecting any process of imprisonment that includes pain or suffering, whether physical or psychological, that inflicts a person for such purposes as obtaining information or confession.²¹ But this also means that, above all, (certain) Americans (especially those working in the mainstream U.S. media) will have to become more aware of the dangers of dehumanization, on which a culture of war, or an ethos of organized violence, ultimately depends. An effective approach requires less blind patriotism and more critical sensitivity, more awareness of the grotesque reality of violence and war.

However, there is another important lesson that the Abu Ghraib torture-scandal could teach us. That is, the more we become aware of the horrid reality of an (unnecessary!) war, its politics and technology, the more we are compelled to discuss, debate and challenge those that support its ideological cause.

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²¹ “For the purposes of this Convention, the term ‘torture’ means any act by which severe pain and suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions.” UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 1984. See Duncan Forrest (ed) *A Glimpse of Hell: Reports on Torture Worldwide*, p. 1.

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