

Tunisian men reveal new details of torture at CIA black sites

By Kevin Martinez
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A document issued by Human Rights Watch Report (HRW) this week contains interviews with two Tunisian men who were tortured and detained by the CIA and US military for 13 years.

The men described torture that surpassed what the 2014 Senate Intelligence Committee report on the CIA's global kidnapping program (or "extraordinary rendition") revealed, including the threatened use of an electric chair, daily beatings with rods while their arms were suspended over a metal bar above their heads, having their heads dunked into barrels of water, and other acts of savagery.

The two men, Rudha al-Najjar, 51, and Lotfi al-Arabi El Gherissi, 52, are both citizens of Tunisia and were released and repatriated to their country only last year. They had never been charged with a crime and received no compensation for their 13 years of torture and detention without charge.

Today they are penniless, unable to work, and suffer ongoing mental and physical trauma as a result of their captivity and torture. Their wives have long ago divorced them and they now rely on their families for help.

Although the two men never met one another while in CIA custody, they both described similar conditions and inhuman treatment at the hands of American authorities. Human Rights Watch was able to determine, using the heavily redacted Senate torture report as a guide, that the men were held at the notorious "Salt Pit", a converted brick factory in Kabul, Afghanistan, referred to as "Detention Site COBALT."

Laura Pitter, national security counsel at HRW told media, "These terrifying accounts of previously unreported CIA torture methods show how little the public still knows about the US torture program."

Indeed, the Senate Intelligence Committee could only release in December 2014 a heavily redacted executive summary of the still classified 6,700-page report on the CIA's torture program. The Obama Administration fought

tooth and nail to prevent even the summary from becoming public knowledge. Al-Najjar and El Gherissi were but two of the 119 men the US government officially admitted to having held in CIA detention centers, or "black sites," around the world.

The two men's statements shed light on the little-known early days of the CIA's torture program which was ostensibly modified after the death of Gul Rahman, an Afghan man, on November 20, 2002. The CIA's report of Rahman's death absolved the agency of any wrongdoing, and told how prisoners would be kept in their cell in diapers. In the agency's own words, "This is done solely to humiliate the prisoner."

When the guards ran out of diapers they would improvise with a "handcrafted diaper secured with duct tape" and "If the guards don't have any available diapers, the prisoners are rendered to their cell nude." This cruelty was personally approved by CIA director George Tenet in a 2003 memorandum.

Although the CIA promised new guidelines after the murder of Rahman, the brutality continued unabated.

The Senate Summary says the CIA believed al-Najjar to be a bodyguard of Osama Bin Laden, while El Gherissi said his torturers accused him of being involved with Al-Qaeda or having terrorist contacts. Both men deny the allegations and the US government has provided no proof to the contrary.

Al-Najjar was kidnapped by US and Pakistani forces on May 22, 2002 in Karachi, while El Gherissi was captured in the town of Peshawar, on the border with Afghanistan, on September 24, 2002. The CIA took custody and had them held in several locations in Afghanistan, including COBALT site, which al-Najjar and El Gherissi called the "Dark Prison." It was there they suffered the worst abuse. They were eventually given to the US military and languished at Bagram airbase until December 9, 2014, when they were handed over to the Afghan military, who repatriated them back to Tunisia six months later, on June 15, 2015.

During their time in American custody, the two men had

no contact with the outside world. Tina Foster, executive director of the International Justice Network, sought a federal court review on the legality of the detention, but the courts denied her request, siding with Obama's Justice Department, which argued that the Bagram airbase was beyond the jurisdiction of US courts. Foster was denied access to speak to either man and the Supreme Court rejected her appeal.

Foster told the *Guardian*, "Even after President Obama was elected and vowed not to continue the torture program, his administration continued to argue that US courts should not review our clients' cases and prevent us from speaking with them. As a result, our clients were held incommunicado and their abuse was effectively concealed for more than a decade."

The torture that al-Najjar and El Gherissi describe is enough to make one nauseous. Al-Najjar describes being waterboarded, "Until I couldn't breathe anymore." His head was repeatedly dunked to a bucket of water to get him to "talk." Al-Najjar was also submerged into a large tub of ice water strapped to a board. He said, "They would do this until I couldn't handle it anymore and I was on the verge of completely falling apart."

Even more gruesome, the two were shown a makeshift electric chair, a metal chair with electric wires attached to finger plugs attached to a wall pipe, which their captors threatened to use on them.

Both men were chained to a metal rod above their head for 24-hour periods with their toes barely touching the ground, and sometimes not all. This made it impossible to sleep as they were essentially hanged by their wrists and beaten with rods by American interrogators. For al-Najjar, this continued for roughly three months, while El Gherissi endured it for a month. Loud music was played nonstop for 24 hours and the prisoners were kept in total darkness and complete isolation, only able to hear the screams of other prisoners. Al-Najjar described it as "the worst experience in his life."

CIA agents also bent al-Najjar over and inserted an object into his anus. These "exams" had no medical purpose whatsoever and according to documents from *The Intercept* were done with "excessive force."

Perhaps most disturbing of all was the presence of an American doctor, a modern day Josef Mengele, who oversaw the torture. While al-Najjar was in custody, the doctor would periodically check on him to see if he was still alive and administered injections to reduce the swellings from the beatings. "But once the swelling went down, this doctor would give the green light for the torture to begin all over again," al-Najjar said.

The torture only stopped when the doctor told his torturers, "if he stays for another week, he will die."

Al Najjar only ate once every three days and told HRW that the food was "disgusting," with pebbles, hair, dirt, and one time a cigarette butt. One could only drink the foul water provided if they "were on the verge of death and completely dehydrated," but even that was not enough.

CIA cables described al-Najjar as "clearly a broken man... on the verge of a complete breakdown" whose torture "became the model" for countless other prisoners at the site.

In the video interview released by HRW, El Gherissi says, "The damage is on my back. I can't sleep on it. And my eyes, I can't see very well. And my feet ... I can't walk for a long distance. Sometimes I wonder what I should do?"

The Senate report on CIA torture states that records at COBALT were rudimentary and "the full nature of CIA interrogations" remains "largely unknown." The Senate investigation found that prisoners at the site were subject to "multiple periods of sleep deprivation, required standing, loud music, sensory deprivation, extended isolation, reduced quantity of food, nudity and 'rough treatment.'" However, the accounts of al-Najjar and El Gherissi are proof that prisoners were subjected to much worse.

John Brennan, a top intelligence official in 2002 who was briefed about al-Najjar's torture, is now director of the CIA. He fought viciously to try to stop the release of even the limited revelations of the Senate report's executive summary. The full Senate report on CIA torture remains classified by the Obama administration. Undoubtedly, it contains many more horrors the military-intelligence apparatus does not want the public to know about.

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