

## A JOURNALIST RECOUNTS TORTURE AT THE HANDS OF THE U.S. MILITARY

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Last Saturday, Suhaib Badr al Baz, a cameraman for Al Jazeera, sat in the lobby of the Swan Lake hotel and calmly described his experience being tortured by US military personnel. The soft-spoken journalist's account of his 74 days in US custody was deeply disturbing, and his story not only supports what is now coming to light about human rights violations in Abu Ghraib, but also adds interesting new details.

Al Baz said that much of his mistreatment took place in a building at the Baghdad airport, a place where he heard the sounds of prisoners screaming for long periods of time. If his account is accurate, it means that the abuse of prisoners in Iraq is not limited to Abu Ghraib prison or a single military unit. It may well be, as military critics argue, systematic.

Like many other prisoners of Abu Ghraib, al Baz was never charged with a crime and did not have the opportunity to defend himself before any court. As soon as he was arrested, he found himself plunged into a secretive network of American detention facilities with little connection to the outside world, a zone where human and civil rights were completely ignored. As a civilian in occupied Iraq, he should have been protected by the Geneva Convention, but instead, al Baz became the victim of a war crime perpetrated by US soldiers. Article 147 of the Fourth Geneva Convention defines war crimes as: "Willful killing, torture or inhuman treatment Unlawful confinement of a protected person willfully depriving protected person of the rights

of fair and regular trial.” Al Baz, who is a single man of medium build and a slight belly, hardly presents the image of a insurgent. There is nothing threatening about him. He is not dramatic, choosing instead to make his points in a straightforward way. Al Baz never raised his voice while he was talking, and he did not seem angry about his incarceration over three days of meetings. In a country of furious people, al Baz did not make a political speech. He was uncomfortable with all the attention.

Al Baz, was not an ordinary Iraqi as far as the soldiers were concerned; he works for al Jazeera, the Arab network with few fans in the administration. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld recently excoriated al Jazeera’s coverage of Falluja, saying, “I can definitively say that what al Jazeera is doing is vicious, inaccurate and inexcusable.” These comments reflect the bitter feelings the administration has toward producers of negative news about the occupation. But this bitterness is not confined to words - the US military attacked al Jazeera buildings in both Baghdad and Kabul. As Baghdad fell to American forces on the 8th of April last year, a bomb struck the office of the network and killed Tariq Ayoub, an al Jazeera cameraman. Many journalists who have covered the war for the past year believe there is a clear pattern of intimidation toward the network by the coalition. The Bush administration has countered by accusing the channel of producing broadcasts that are biased against the United States.

Al Baz believes he was singled out because of his employer. “They knew me, they had stopped me before,” al Baz said about the soldiers from the Fourth Infantry Division. His account raises the straightforward question of whether senior officials in the US military conspired to intimidate a network they openly hated. Al Jazeera, finding itself walking on increasingly thin ice in Iraq had a crisis on its hands with an arrested cameraman. “We believe that Suhaib was not treated in accordance with his status as a journalist in a war zone. He was released from Abu Ghraib from a period of confinement

without being charged,” said Jihad Ballout, a spokesman for the network in Qatar.

Al Baz also was able to describe his abusers, and in several cases provide names for the most brutal. These names matched the independent accounts of other prisoners who had also spent time in the prison. It also appears that some of the military personnel involved in the torture used aliases to conceal their identities from the Iraqis. A man some of the former Abu Ghraib prisoners called “Joiner” was identified in one of the published photographs as Specialist Charles A. Graner in the New York Times. Al Baz also mentioned a man called “Joiner” when talking about the worst abuses he saw at Abu Ghraib.

The cameraman’s ordeal began Nov. 13 last year, when al Baz arrived at the site of a convoy attack in Samarra with his camera. US soldiers stopped him and began to search his car. Al Baz said that when they found his Al Jazeera ID badge, the soldiers asked him how he knew about the attack in advance, and then tied his hands behind his back. Al Baz says he arrived at the site four hours after the attack, and by that time, the entire city knew about it. Following his arrest, al Baz says that soldiers from the 4th Infantry Division took him to a US military base in Samarra and interrogated him for two days.

“At the base I first saw a tall heavy man who put a black hood over my head,” he recalls. “Then he forced me to stand in front of a wall for three or four hours. I was treated very roughly, then taken to a room and interrogated. When the tall man was not satisfied with my answers, he hit me in the face. They asked questions in a way that showed they were not interested in the truth.” Al Baz says at first he was not given food, water or allowed to pray. On the second day, he was given foul-smelling food. Immediately after his arrest, colleagues from the network and friends began to pressure the coalition for information but were told by General Kimmit’s staff that there

was no information available. This is a common reply for people seeking information about recently detained people. Al Baz said it took a week for the military to issue him a prison ID number.

“I asked them if I could contact my family because they would be worried about me. The tall man told me to forget it, that my destiny was in Guantanamo Bay.” Al Baz said that during his time at the base, soldiers came into his cell spitting on him and screaming in his ear to keep him awake. “I didn’t know if it was day or night. They tied my hands so tightly my wrists started bleeding, but at this stage I was still allowed to keep my clothes. This was a wonderful period compared to my time in Abu Ghraib.”

Al Baz says that he was taken from the base in Samarra to the airport in Baghdad, where his treatment took a sharp turn for the worse. “In there I heard some horrible noises, many people screaming. They told me to sit on the floor and I went numb from the cold. If I moved my head even a little bit, a soldier would grab my hood and slam my head into the wall. Sometimes they pretended to kill me by pulling the trigger of their rifles. I found out later that they were punishing other people there.” Al Baz says that he heard screams, men shouting “Good Bush, Bad Saddam!” and crying out to God for help. “But it didn’t do anything to decrease the punishment they were going through.” Officials at the Coalition Press Information Center received Baz’s prison id number late this week, but said that requests for information usually take several days to process. Captain Mark Doggett, an Australian officer, said that the office was inundated with requests.

When al Baz moved to Abu Ghraib in late November, he said he was asked to strip naked at one point but was never forced to take part in staged scenes like the others. “It didn’t happen like that to me,” he said. But he did say that he witnessed a disturbing episode involving a father and son. From his cell, al Baz said he watched through the small window and saw two men

stripped naked. "The boy was only about 16 years old, and then a soldier poured cold water over them. Their cell was directly across from mine." Al Baz says that the father and son were made to stand naked in front of other prisoners for days.

Torturers often keep careful records, this is one of the odd but persistent features of the trade. It is never enough to destroy the captive, there must also be proof of the victory over him, a souvenir. It is the prideful documentary urge that has undone the torturers of Abu Ghraib, although it is unlikely that the officers who sanctioned the abuse appear in the pictures. In any case, the Abu Ghraib prisoners were well aware that they were being photographed.

"I first knew that they were taking pictures when I saw that one of the computers had a picture of some prisoners as its desktop background. One of the prisoners had a black hood over his head and he was covered in cold water. I personally witnessed this event take place. The man was screaming, "I'm innocent!" until he got sick and his body got swollen from all the punishment," al Baz said. Cold water, solitary confinement, swollen bodies and constant psychological abuse are recurring images for the al Jazeera cameraman, who also credits his tormentors with ingenuity, "They had all different kinds of punishments and they changed them all the time. I begged them to interrogate me again so they would know that I was innocent, but they said no, that's it. All we know is that you're staying here."

The cameraman was released from Abu Ghraib in late January of this year. Since then he has returned to work for al Jazeera. On Friday afternoon, al Baz said, "I have one request, please don't concentrate so much on my story. There are still many people left in Abu Ghraib."

Last Friday, the day before I interviewed Suhaib al Baz, I drove out to Abu Ghraib prison and found a small crowd of people waiting to talk to their

relatives. A year earlier, I visited this prison with a poet named Hamid al Mokhtar who spent eight years there under Saddam. When we walked out the front gates, there were still half-buried bodies in the ground. I asked him what should be done with the place and Mokhtar replied, "They should tear it down and not leave a single brick." We returned to find that it had been reincarnated, it was a gulag again.

I saw a crowd standing outside in the furnace heat of the sun, holding slips of paper with the numbers written on them. One old man, Hardan Soud, had a slip of paper with seven numbers written on it, and he wanted to know when the Americans would release his sons. "They came to my house in Thuluaya at 2 am, pushing down the door to enter my house. They didn't speak or ask any questions, and they took away my sons. I still don't know why."

Hardan Soud was waiting by the prison to see if the soldiers would allow him to visit the men. We stood there with him for a few hours and like many others he was not allowed inside. A translator eventually came out and said there would be no visits for a week, that everyone must leave. The crowd roiled when it heard the news, because the hope was kicked out of them. Eventually, they drifted back to battered taxis and drove away.

After speaking to the relatives of the imprisoned men, we walked to the marines guarding the checkpoint for the prison and they turned us away. I asked to speak to a public affairs officer. The marines refused.

Abu Ghraib is a strange new place in its rebirth, but there is still the same feeling of dread and anguish that emanates from the walls. Even when it is empty, this is true. I remember this from the last visit a year ago, which ended in a room with a row of nooses. It was a vile place, and one condemned man had written, "Please God give me mercy because I didn't get mercy from Saddam." The US military has not been able to erase the past,

they have only made the place more modern, cleaner looking. But we know that is only an appearance. It is the same place it always was.

It was nearly a week later when I heard American soldiers talking about the pictures coming out of the prison. I had flown with an air ambulance crew to the 421st Medevac Battalion from Baghdad in one of their helicopters, a blackhawk with four stretchers inside. During the day, we flew two missions over the tan expanse north of Baghdad, which quickly turns into wide palm groves where fighters hide with their rocket launchers. When the crews weren't flying, they went back up to Taji, a base about 8 minutes north of the Green Zone by blackhawk.

The pilots and medics of the 421st were watching the news in Taji on Tuesday and the pictures everyone has seen by now were up the screen, and the crews were sickened by them. On a long couch, a row of six men watched the TV in silence until 1st Lieutenant Jerry Murphy said, "It is so sad to be betrayed like this, because when someone's fundamental dignity is taken from them, there's nothing left." Lt. Murphy meant that he felt betrayed by the soldiers involved in the abuse at the prison, that they had betrayed the good things they were trying to do in Iraq. The medevac crews are working the other side of the war, the human side, which is perfectly ok with them. The 421st flies wounded people to the Combat Support Hospital in Baghdad from wherever the accident or shooting went down. Everyone at the 421st explained their job in the same way, "It doesn't matter who they are. We don't care. The deal is that we pick up patients and take care of them." The pilots will land their blackhawks on roadsides to pick up wounded soldiers, they land in firefights. The crews take civilians and people from both sides of the war.

Insurgents shoot them down despite the red cross clearly painted on the undercarriage of the aircraft. They respond to medical emergencies at the

prison all the time because Abu Ghraib is in their territory. I wanted to know what sort of injuries they had seen, whether they had taken out patients who were the victims of abuse and possibly torture. I was right there, but I didn't get the details. Instead we watched the news reports on the Medevac TV, sullen and hypnotized, saying nothing.

As I write, Donald Rumsfeld is before Congress trying to explain US forces could do such things. Many of the journalists in Baghdad think that this will surely finish him off, that it's only a matter of time. I watched Bush gave his apology last night, but it's too late. The revelations of torture in Iraq by US soldiers has pushed the country through a bloody event horizon. There is no apology that can bring us back. ■