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Abu Zubaydah and the Futility of Torture **by Andy Worthington**

Reinforcing claims made over the last few years — by FBI agents, by author Ron Suskind, and by myself — that the supposed senior al-Qaeda operative Abu Zubaydah was less significant than he was made out to be, the [Washington Post](#) ran a front-page story yesterday, in which, drawing on interviews with “former senior government officials who closely followed [his] interrogations,” Peter Finn and Joby Warrick reminded the world that Zubaydah was not actually a senior al-Qaeda operative and had no information about the inner workings of al-Qaeda.

Moreover, the sources cited by the *Post* maintained that his torture in secret CIA custody, which began shortly after his capture in March 2002 and transfer to a secret prison in Thailand, and was the first implementation of a torture program for “high-value detainees” that was endorsed at the highest levels of the Bush administration, was so worthless that “not a single significant plot was foiled” as a result of it.

Abu Zubaydah’s story

Clearly following up on the graphic descriptions of torture in Mark Danner’s recent article for the [New York Review of Books](#), analyzing a leaked Red Cross report based on interviews with the 14 “high-value detainees” (including Zubaydah and [Khalid Sheikh Mohammed](#), the self-confessed 9/11 mastermind), who were transferred to Guantánamo from secret CIA custody in September 2006, the *Post*’s article established that Zubaydah, “born in 1971 in Saudi Arabia to a Palestinian father and a Jordanian mother, according to court papers,” traveled to Afghanistan in 1991 to support the mujahideen fighting the communist government that was clinging to power in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, but was “seriously wounded by shrapnel from a mortar blast in 1992, sustaining head injuries that left him with severe memory problems, which still linger.”

In 1994, while based in Pakistan, Zubaydah began fundraising and coordinating recruits for the Khaldan training camp, in eastern Afghanistan. Although regularly described by the Bush administration as an al-Qaeda training camp, it is clear from numerous sources, including the

9/11 Commission Report, that Khaldan and another camp, Durunta, "were not al-Qaeda facilities," although there was apparently some contact with Osama bin Laden when it came to exploiting promising recruits.

After his capture, [in a house raid in Faisalabad](#), Pakistan, on March 28, 2002, Zubaydah was flown to a CIA-run "black site" in Thailand, where the FBI began interrogating him using old-school, torture-free methods, which had a proven track record. Within a matter of weeks, however, the FBI agents were shamefully discarded by the administration's most senior officials, who believed that another major attack was imminent, and that only the use of torture would persuade a significant captured terrorist — as Zubaydah was presumed to be — to talk. The job of interrogating Zubaydah was [handed over to the CIA](#), whose new repertoire of techniques consisted primarily of torture, including [waterboarding](#) (a form of controlled drowning), confinement in tiny, coffin-like boxes, extreme violence, prolonged isolation, and the use of sustained nudity and loud music and noise.

And yet, as the *Post* described it, Zubaydah "was not even an official member of al-Qaeda," and was, instead, "a "kind of travel agent" for would-be jihadists. A former Justice Department official, who knows his case, explained, "He was the above-ground support. He was the guy keeping the safe house, and that's not someone who gets to know the details of the plans. To make him the mastermind of anything is ridiculous." What happened, it transpired, was that "because his name often turned up in intelligence traffic linked to al-Qaeda transactions," some within the intelligence community presumed that he was a significant figure, whereas the truth was that, although committed to the idea of jihad, he did not share Osama bin Laden's aims, and "regarded the United States as an enemy principally because of its support of Israel." The officials explained that he "had strained and limited relations with bin Laden and only vague knowledge before the Sept. 11 attacks that something was brewing."

Despite this, officials recalled that the pressure for information "from upper levels of the government," where meetings were held daily to assess the terrorist threat, was "tremendous." "They couldn't stand the idea that there wasn't anything new," one of the *Post's* sources said. "They'd say, 'You aren't working hard enough.' There was both a disbelief in what he was saying and also a desire for retribution — a feeling that 'He's going to talk, and if he doesn't talk, we'll do whatever.'"

"Whatever" was, of course, the torture program, which "prompted a sudden torrent of names and facts," although, as the *Post's* article makes clear, nothing of value was gained through Zubaydah's torture. "Nearly all of the leads attained through the harsh measures quickly evaporated," former officials explained, "while most of the useful information from Abu Zubaida — chiefly names of al-Qaeda members and associates — was obtained before waterboarding was introduced."

The only useful lead cited — that of [Jose Padilla](#), who had reportedly planned to detonate a radioactive “dirty bomb” in New York — is itself extremely dubious, as Deputy Defense Secretary [Paul Wolfowitz admitted](#) in June 2002, shortly after Padilla was seized at Chicago’s O’Hare Airport, and before he was declared an “enemy combatant” and imprisoned and tortured for three and a half years on the U.S. mainland, that “there was not an actual plan” to set off a “dirty bomb,” and that his research had not gone much further than surfing the Internet. Summing up the results of Zubaydah’s torture, a former intelligence official stated, bluntly, “We spent millions of dollars chasing false alarms.”

Ron Suskind’s exposure of the Abu Zubaydah story

None of this was, strictly speaking, news, although the *Post* is to be congratulated for securing further evidence to back up what was already known. Abu Zubaydah’s relative insignificance and the pointlessness of his torture were first revealed in 2006, in Ron Suskind’s book [The One Percent Doctrine](#). Far from being “al-Qaeda’s chief of operations and top recruiter,” who would be able to “provide the names of terrorists around the world and which targets they planned to hit” (as [TIME](#) magazine — following the government line — described him after his capture), Zubaydah “turned out to be mentally ill and nothing like the pivotal figure they supposed him to be,” in the words of Barton Gellman, who reviewed Suskind’s book for the [Washington Post](#) in 2006. He “appeared to know nothing about terrorist operations,” and was, instead, the “go-to guy for minor logistics — travel for wives and children and the like,” reinforcing what former officials explained to the *Post* for Sunday’s article.

Suskind described how, through a close scrutiny of his diaries, in which FBI analysts found entries in the voices of three people — a boy, a young man and a middle-aged alter ego — which recorded in numbing detail, over the course of ten years, “what people ate, or wore, or trifling things they said,” Dan Coleman, the FBI’s senior expert on al-Qaeda, told his superiors, “This guy is insane, certifiable, split personality.”

Suskind also provided a colorful description of the results of Zubaydah’s torture, when he produced his “torrent” of false leads, explaining that he “confessed” to all manner of supposed plots — against shopping malls, banks, supermarkets, water systems, nuclear plants, apartment buildings, the Brooklyn Bridge, and the Statue of Liberty — and that, as a result, “thousands of uniformed men and women raced in a panic to each target.... The United States would torture a mentally disturbed man and then leap, screaming, at every word he uttered.”

In key passages, Suskind explained, how, from early on, President Bush was briefed that Zubaydah was not as significant as had been presumed, a judgment that was “echoed at the top of CIA and was, of course, briefed to the President and Vice President,” but that this did nothing to prevent Bush, just a few weeks after his capture, from portraying Zubaydah as “one of the top operatives plotting and planning death and destruction on the United States.” According to

Suskind, Bush told CIA Director George Tenet, “I said he was important. You're not going to let me lose face on this, are you?” He added that the president “was fixated on how to get Zubaydah to tell us the truth,” and asked, “Do some of these harsh methods really work?” As Suskind described it, “Interrogators did their best to find out,” introducing the torture techniques whose clinically regulated horrors were exposed so memorably by Mark Danner, and also by Jane Mayer in her book [The Dark Side](#).

The FBI’s Dan Coleman speaks out

Suskind’s book was not the only occasion when Zubaydah’s story was publicized. In December 2007, when the story first broke that the CIA had illegally destroyed videotapes of interrogations including those of Zubaydah, Dan Coleman spoke out again, revisiting the CIA’s introduction of the torture program, after the successes recorded by the FBI, and telling the [Washington Post](#) how, when CIA operatives began holding him naked in his cell, “subjecting him to extreme cold and bombarding him with loud rock music,” FBI operatives who witnessed it said, “You’ve got to be kidding me. This guy’s a Muslim. That’s not going to win his confidence. Are you trying to get information out of him or just belittle him?”

Coleman also reiterated his skepticism about Zubaydah’s supposed importance, describing him as a “safehouse keeper” with mental problems, who “claimed to know more about al-Qaeda and its inner workings than he really did,” pointing out that his diaries were “full of flowery and philosophical meanderings, and made little mention of terrorism or al-Qaeda,” and explaining how he and others at the FBI had concluded not only that he had severe mental problems — particularly because of the head injury that he had suffered in 1992 — but also that this explained why he was regarded with suspicion by the al-Qaeda leadership. “They all knew he was crazy, and they knew he was always on the damn phone,” Coleman said. “You think they’re going to tell him anything?”

Abu Zubaydah’s own testimony — and that of Guantánamo prisoner Khalid al-Hubayshi

In my book [The Guantánamo Files](#), and in an article last April, “[The Insignificance and Insanity of Abu Zubaydah](#),” I also examined Zubaydah’s story, revisiting his tribunal at Guantánamo in 2007, when he stated that he was tortured by the CIA to admit that he worked with Osama bin Laden, but insisted, as Sunday’s *Post* article confirmed, “I’m not his partner and I’m not a member of al-Qaeda.” He added that his only role was to operate a guest house used by those who were training at Khaldan, and he also confirmed senior officials’ analysis of his relationship with bin Laden, saying, “Bin Laden wanted al-Qaeda to have control of Khaldan, but we refused since we had different ideas.” Further confirming points made in the *Post*’s article, he explained that he opposed attacks on civilian targets, which brought him into conflict with bin Laden, and although he admitted that he had been an enemy of the U.S. since childhood, because

of its support for Israel, pointed out that his enmity was towards the government and the military, and not the American people.

Another source, who confirmed much of what the senior officials — and Zubaydah himself — said, was Khalid al-Hubayshi, a Saudi prisoner released from Guantánamo in 2005, who had spent some time at the Khaldan camp, and knew Zubaydah. Al-Hubayshi told his tribunal in 2004 that, far from being a mastermind, Zubaydah was responsible for “receiving people and financing the camp,” that he once bought him travel tickets, and that he was the man he went to when he needed a replacement passport. He also confirmed that Zubaydah did not have a long-standing relationship with bin Laden. When asked, “When you were with Abu Zubaydah, did you ever see Osama bin Laden?” he replied, “In 1998, Abu Zubaydah and Osama bin Laden didn’t like each other.” He added, “In 2001, I think the relationship was okay,” and explained that bin Laden put pressure on Zubaydah to close Khaldan, essentially because he wanted to run more camps himself.

It would, of course, be difficult to overestimate what a blow Zubaydah’s story is to the Bush administration’s supposed justification for turning its back on its obligations under the UN Convention Against Torture, but the *Post*’s article is of particular importance for two other reasons.

What will happen to Abu Zubaydah now?

The first of these concerns Zubaydah’s current status. He was noticeably missing from the [27 prisoners charged](#) in the military commission trial system at Guantánamo (before Barack Obama [suspended the trials](#) on his second day in office), but no previous reports have addressed what may happen to him now. The *Post* reported that some U.S. officials “are pushing to have him charged now with conspiracy,” but that others, including CIA officials, want him sent to Jordan, where he has been accused of involvement with plots to attack a hotel and Christian holy sites. The *Post* explained that these officials “fear the consequences of taking a man into court who was waterboarded on largely false assumptions, because of the prospect of interrogation methods being revealed in detail and because of the chance of an acquittal that might set a legal precedent.”

On the other hand, Zubaydah’s lawyers want him to be transferred to a country other than Jordan, perhaps Saudi Arabia, where he has relatives. Law professor Joseph Margulies, one of his attorneys, explained, “The government doesn’t retreat from who KSM [Khalid Sheikh Mohammed] is, and neither does KSM. With Zubaydah, it’s different. The government seems finally to understand he is not at all the person they thought he was. But he was tortured. And that’s just a profoundly embarrassing position for the government to be in.”

The “ghost prisoners” captured with Abu Zubaydah

The most extraordinary revelation in the *Post*'s article, however, concerns Noor al-Deen, a Syrian teenager who was captured with Zubaydah in Pakistan. According to the former officials who spoke to the *Post*, al-Deen, who, like Zubaydah, suffered gunshot wounds during his capture, “worshiped the older man as a hero.” Former CIA interrogator John Kiriakou explained that al-Deen was terrified, and feared that he was about to be executed. “He was frightened — mostly over what we were going to do with him,” Kiriakou said. “He had come to the conclusion that his life was over.”

Unlike the handful of other men seized with Zubaydah, who ended up being sent to Guantánamo (without extensive stays in secret CIA custody), al-Deen and another man, Omar Ghraresh, were subjected to “extraordinary rendition” and sent to third countries to be interrogated. Aspects of Ghraresh's story have been known about for several years, via [Abdullah Almalki](#), a joint Syrian-Canadian national, who was seized by Syrian intelligence agents in May 2002, at the request of the Canadian authorities, and imprisoned and tortured for 22 months in the notorious military prison known as the “Palestine Branch,” before being released without charge. In 2006, Almalki was interviewed by Stephen Grey for his book [Ghost Plane](#), and explained that two suspects seized with Zubaydah — Omar Ghraresh and an unnamed teenager — were rendered to the “Palestine Branch” on May 14, 2002, along with Abu Abdul Halim Dalak, a student seized in Pakistan in November 2001. Ghraresh explained that in Pakistan U.S. agents had shown him photos of Abu Zubaydah looking battered and bruised, and had told him, “If you don't talk, this is what will happen to you.”

Until now, the identity of the “unnamed teenager” was unknown, but it is now apparent that he was Noor al-Deen. The *Post* explained that U.S. officials had stated that, “perhaps because of his youth and agitated state,” al-Deen “readily answered U.S. questions,” confirming that Zubaydah “was a well-known functionary with links to al-Qaeda, but he knew little detailed information about the group's operations.” Nevertheless, his questioning “went on for months,” first in Pakistan, then in Morocco, and then in Syria.

The *Post* noted that “attempts to firmly establish his current whereabouts were unsuccessful,” but in truth the disappearance of Noor al-Deen — and of Omar Ghraresh and Abu Abdul Halim Dalak — is actually a more important story than that of Abu Zubaydah. I do not state this to play down the significance of Zubaydah's futile and counter-productive torture, because it remains, I believe, a key element in demolishing the myths that former Bush administration officials — and especially [Dick Cheney](#) — are still using in an effort to shield themselves from prosecution, but because these three men are just a few of the hundreds — or thousands — of men whose whereabouts must be accounted for if Barack Obama is to [succeed in his mission](#) “to regain America's moral stature in the world.”

Unlike the prisoners in Guantánamo, who have at least had some kind of opportunity to challenge the basis of their detention, through two significant Supreme Court rulings granting them habeas corpus rights, these men — genuinely, America’s Disappeared — have effectively vanished off the face of the earth, and are about as far from having any rights as it is possible for a human being to be.

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