

Guantanamo. “Enhanced interrogation” Techniques: British Intelligence in the Dock for CIA Torture

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Recent developments raise the prospect that British intelligence agents could finally face justice for their little-known role in the CIA’s global torture program.

Britain’s foreign and domestic intelligence apparatus is facing scrutiny by a tribunal tasked with intelligence oversight. On May 26, London’s infamously opaque Investigatory Powers Tribunal (IPT) unanimously issued a [landmark ruling](#) which means the complaints of two Saudis brutally tortured at CIA black sites and jailed for years in Guantanamo Bay can finally be heard, at least behind closed doors.

The British government insisted that the Tribunal, which explicitly examines wrongdoing by London’s security and intelligence agencies, did not have jurisdiction over the cases of Mustafa al-Hawsawi and Abd al-Rahim Nashiri. But the IPT disagreed.

Noting that “the underlying issues raised by this complaint are of the gravest possible kind,” the tribunal declared that “if the allegations are true, it is imperative that that should be established,” as “it would be in the public interest for these issues to be considered.”

The ruling means the Tribunal is likely to hear a complaint from Mustafa al-Hawsawi, who’s remained in US custody since American troops captured the man they claim is “a senior al-Qaida member” in 2003.

Al-Hawsawi bounced between CIA black sites for three years before being shipped to the US torture camp in illegally-occupied Guantanamo Bay in 2006. Along the way, he was subjected to brutal “enhanced interrogation” techniques, including rectal examinations conducted with “excessive force,” from which he was severely injured and reportedly suffers ongoing health problems to this day.

Lawyers for al-Hawsawi say they have proof that British intelligence agents illegally “aided,

abetted, encouraged, facilitated, procured and/or conspired” with the US to torture and abuse their client.

Al-Hawsawi is one of just five remaining Guantanamo detainees to have been charged over alleged involvement in the 9/11 attacks.

According to the [declassified summary](#) of the US Senate report into CIA torture, al-Hawsawi was one of several prisoners held and abused “despite doubts and questions surrounding their knowledge of terrorist threats and the location of senior al-Qaeda leadership.”

His lawyers say there’s “credible evidence” that Britain’s MI5 and MI6 provided questions for his American torturers to ask, and were passed along information obtained during the so-called ‘enhanced interrogation’ sessions.

Nashiri was detained in the United Arab Emirates in October 2002, due to his alleged involvement in an al-Qaeda attack on the USS Cole in Yemen two years earlier. The US Senate’s report concluded Nashiri was repeatedly tortured and mistreated, [despite](#) his interrogators’ assessment that he was cooperative and that any “enhanced” techniques were therefore unnecessary.

Over the course of several sessions, they used a variety of bloodcurdling and officially unauthorized techniques, including “threatening to sexually abuse the prisoner’s mother, raising a pistol to his head, and holding a cordless drill to his body,” the UK’s Rendition Project noted.

Nashiri’s lawyers argue he was of “specific interest” to British intelligence. This may be why [London reportedly encouraged](#) the CIA to refuel at Luton Airport in December 2002 while he was being rendered from Thailand to Poland.

“There is an irresistible inference that the UK agencies participated in intelligence sharing in relation to [Nashiri] and were complicit in his torture and ill-treatment.”

Intelligence Committee ‘Unable to Produce a Credible Report’

Meanwhile, the British government is attempting [to prevent](#) Abu Zubaydah, Guantanamo’s “[forever prisoner](#)”, from taking legal action against MI5 and MI6 over providing the CIA with questions for him to be asked over enhanced interrogations in six separate countries. Authorities in London argue that domestic laws are not applicable to Zubaydah, and his claim should be brought against the countries where the torture took place instead.

Zubaydah was waterboarded 83 times, locked in a tiny coffin-like box for hundreds of hours, with cockroaches – of which he had a lifelong fear – hung from hooks, denied sleep, and forced to remain in “stress positions” for extended periods. Having lost an eye as a result of this abuse, he now has [permanent brain damage](#), suffers constant seizures, virtually perpetual headaches and an “excruciating sensitivity to sounds.”

A [2018 report](#) by the UK Parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) confirmed British intelligence had “direct awareness of extreme mistreatment” of Zubaydah at the hands of the CIA, and continued providing questions for his American torturers to ask him regardless. The report concluded that not long after Zubaydah’s capture in Pakistan in 2002, MI6 officials determined the techniques carried out on the detainee were so harsh that “98 percent of US Special Forces would have broken if subject to the same conditions.”

The ISC findings showed conclusively that London was playing a key supporting role in the CIA extraordinary rendition program. Under the terms of the dark deal, British intelligence and security services provided extensive logistical support to Langley, and outsourced torture of detainees to some of the world's most brutal security and intelligence agencies.

Yet, this spectacularly barbaric chapter of recent British history has been almost entirely forgotten today. And the ISC admits its account of the scandalous arrangement is far from complete. The Committee openly stated the report it produced "is not, and must not be taken to be, a definitive account."

Due to the "terms and conditions" applied to the investigation, the ISC was "unable to conduct an authoritative inquiry and produce a credible report," it conceded.

Then-Prime Minister Theresa May imposed a number of onerous restrictions on the Committee, including denying access to officers, personnel, and key witnesses. Controls imposed on the ISC meant only four intelligence agency employees could be interviewed, and the few who were made available were blocked from commenting on specific cases.

In spite of these limitations, the ISC ultimately determined that British security services shared an "unprecedented" amount of intelligence with foreign liaison agencies "to facilitate the capture of detainees" — even when it suspected or knew the suspects would be subject to torture. In total, the report found at least 198 cases in which British spies received intelligence obtained from people "they knew or ought to have suspected" had been abused.

Between the years of 2002 - 2004, MI6 operatives actively participated in interrogations of detainees held by US authorities at locations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Guantanamo Bay, according to the report. The ISC identified 13 cases of British spies witnessing detainee torture first-hand, and 128 incidents of security and intelligence being informed by their foreign counterparts that prisoners had been mistreated.

Rather than reacting to this troubling news by ending their participation, British intelligence instead offered financial inducements to foreign spying agencies to conduct extraordinary rendition operations. On at least 28 occasions, they suggested, planned or agreed to operations proposed by liaison services overseas, per the report.

Fake Ricin Plot Justifies Iraq War

Outsourcing torture to foreign partners provided the Brits with a number of benefits. For one, MI5 and MI6 could avoid getting their hands dirty, and maintain the lie that they did not directly engage in such activity. The arrangement also meant British spies could not be held accountable if testimony acquired through torture turned out to be false — which, by design, it often did.

[In September 2002](#), police investigating an alleged terror fundraising operation in London arrested Mohammed Meguerba, an Algerian émigré. Released without charge, he returned to his home country, where he was picked up upon arrival by local security services.

Meguerba eventually told his captors that he was part of a multi-conspirator plot to poison people using ricin. This information was passed on to British intelligence, although there was a major problem: the address which he claimed as the nucleus of the effort did not exist.

After further interrogation, Meguerba supplied another location, a North London home.

In January 2003, police swooped in, making multiple arrests, conducting extensive tests, and sending seized material on to the UK's main chemical weapons research facility at Porton Down. Before those investigations were complete, senior counter-terror officials in conjunction with British health authorities [hastily issued](#) an urgent "bioterrorism alert," warning "a small amount of the material recovered...has tested positive for the presence of ricin poison." Panic erupted immediately, and doctors' surgeries across the country published advice on the symptoms of ricin poisoning.

Then-Prime Minister Tony Blair appeared for a [televised address](#) hours later, zealously stoking public fears:

"I warn people it is only a matter of time before terrorists get hold of [Weapons of Mass Destruction]...the arrests made earlier today show this danger is present and real and with us now, and its potential is huge."

A month later, then-US Secretary of State Colin Powell made a now [notorious speech](#) to the UN Security Council, to drum up support for the Iraq war. Brandishing an illustrative vial of ricin, Powell alleged Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was operating a secret global terror network and maintained a vast arsenal of chemical and biological weapons. Powell explicitly mentioned the recent raid in London, which he claimed proved the existence of Al Qaeda terror "cells" in the heart of Europe.

With the US invasion of Iraq well-underway, the purported "ricin" plot was dusted off once again on [March 31](#), 2003, when Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Gen. Richard Myers boldly announced US forces had destroyed a "poison factory", which he claimed was "probably where the ricin found in London came from."

In reality, Porton Down had determined no ricin was found at the London address within 48 hours of the initial police raid. This inconvenient judgement was nonetheless concealed until eight people arrested in connection with the case were put on trial two years later and acquitted on all charges.

The prosecution crumbled when it became clear that Meguerba had concocted the claims under pressure from investigators.

Following the verdict, even the [BBC](#) admitted that the "criminal investigations [were] shamelessly exploited for political purposes" by the UK and the US in order "to justify the invasion of Iraq or the introduction of new legislation to restrict civil liberties."

Not long after, Meguerba [appeared in court](#) in Algeria, looking emaciated, frail, and missing several teeth. His fate today is unknown.

A Very British Coverup

[In September 2005](#), then-MI5 Director General Eliza Manningham-Buller issued an extraordinary statement conceding that British intelligence officials were "often limited" in their ability to ascertain the means by which foreign partners secured intelligence. In part, Manningham-Buller claimed, this was because MI5 and MI6 "will generally not press to be told the source" of a particular piece of information, since asking too many questions might "damage future cooperation and the future flow of intelligence from the originating service."

“Where the reporting is threat-related, the desire for context will usually be subservient to the need to take action to establish the facts,” she continued. Ultimately, therefore, “no inquiries were made of [the] Algerian liaison about the precise circumstances that attended their questioning of Meguerba.”

By that point, the ricin plot had been comprehensively exposed in court as a farcical story built on false testimony secured under torture. However, Manningham-Buller insisted the entire fraudulent narrative actually proved “detainee reporting can be accurate and may enable lives to be saved.”

Did the British feed their Algerian counterparts questions deliberately designed to concoct a bogus plot which, when busted, could be used to justify the impending Iraq invasion? While a smoking gun has yet to surface, confidential documents found in the ruins of Libyan security service offices following the violent overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi strongly suggest this was the case.

[Papers recovered](#) by a Western human rights organization revealed that in March 2004, then-MI6 counter-terror chief Mark Allen was in direct contact with authorities in Tripoli about the recent capture of Abdelhakim Belhaj, a founder of the Al Qaeda-aligned Libyan Islamic Fighting Group.

“I congratulate you on the safe arrival of [Belhaj]. This was the least we could do for you and for Libya to demonstrate the remarkable relationship we have built over recent years,” Allen wrote.

“Amusingly, we got a request from the Americans to channel requests for information from [Belhaj] through [them]. I have no intention of doing any such thing. The intelligence about [Belhaj] was British... I feel I have the right to deal with you direct on this.”

Belhaj [was arrested](#) with his pregnant wife earlier that year in Malaysia, then spent seven years in Libyan prisons, where he reportedly suffered serious abuse. Libyan authorities released his wife after a brief detention, but not before torturing her as well. Barely two weeks after their abduction, the MI6’s Allen turned up in Libya, while Tony Blair met with Gaddafi.

Belhaj was ultimately freed from prison in 2008 as part of a wider amnesty for former Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) negotiated by Qatar, a key backer of the group. [Three years later](#), he was back in Tripoli, serving as a commander of armed insurgents against Gaddafi’s forces – and with no shortage of British and American assistance. With NATO aircover, Belhaj’s forces participated in the barbaric murder of Qaddafi in the leader’s hometown of Sirte.



US Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham with Libyan Islamic Fighting Group leader Abdelhakim Belhaj during NATO's regime change war on Libya. To Belhaj's left is the slain US ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens.

In a perverse irony, other LIFG fighters involved in the Western-backed regime change war were freed due to an intervention from Quilliam Foundation, a self-styled "counter-extremism" think tank [covertly constructed](#) by British intelligence.

The discovery of the incriminating 2004 correspondence between Allen and Libya's government prompted London's High Court to introduce legal proceedings against the former MI6 counter-terror chief in June 2012. Two years later, Britain's Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) inexplicably [declined to prosecute](#) him despite London's Metropolitan Police compiling 28,000 pages of evidence.

[In June 2016](#), the CPS again announced it would not prosecute Allen, a decision which reportedly angered senior investigating officers. The Service noted there was "sufficient evidence to support the contention that [Allen]...had been in communication with individuals from foreign countries responsible for the detention" of Belhaj and his wife, and "sought political authority for some of his actions."

As such, the IPT's decision to hear the complaints of al-Hawsawi and Nashiri arguably represents the best — and perhaps final — opportunity for the public to hear the truth about the role played by MI5 and MI6'm in extraordinary rendition.

For now, circumstantial evidence strongly suggests British intelligence intentionally sought false testimony, with which it could achieve particular political outcomes, and justify the domestic and international excesses of the War on Terror.

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