

Outsourcing Torture

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The Bush administration has called for the respect of human rights in [Burma](#), a pretty safe piece of posturing, but it remains silent as Egypt's dictator, Gen. [Hosni Mubarak](#), unleashes the largest crackdown on public opposition in over a decade. Our moral indignation over the shooting of monks masks the incestuous and growing alliance we have built in the so-called war on terror with some of the world's most venal dictatorships.

Mubarak, who has ruled Egypt for 26 years and is grooming his son, Gamal, to succeed him, can torture and "disappear" dissidents—such as the Egyptian journalist [Reda Hilal](#), who vanished four years ago—without American censure because he does the dirty work for us on those we "disappear." The extraordinary-rendition program, which sees the United States kidnap and detain terrorist suspects in secret prisons around the world, fits neatly with the Egyptian regime's contempt for due process. Those rounded up by American or Egyptian security agents are never granted legal rights. The abductors are often hooded or masked. If the captors are American the suspects are spirited onto a Gulfstream V jet registered to a series of dummy American corporations, such as Bayard Foreign Marketing of Portland, Ore., and whisked to Egypt or perhaps Morocco or Jordan. When these suspects arrive in Cairo they vanish into black holes as swiftly as dissident Egyptians. It is the same dirty and seamless process.

We have nothing to say to Mubarak. He is us. The general intelligence directorate in Lazoughli and in Mulhaq al-Mazra prison in Cairo allegedly holds many of our own detained and "disappeared." The more savage the torture techniques of the Mubarak regime the faster the prisoners we smuggle into Egypt from Afghanistan and Iraq are broken down. The screams of Egyptians, Iraqis, Pakistanis and Afghans mingle in these prison cells to condemn us all.

We know little about what goes on in the black holes the CIA has set up in Egypt. But snapshots leak out. [Ibn-al Shaykh al-Libi](#), who was captured by U.S. forces in late 2001, was an al-Qaida camp commander. He was taken to a prison in Cairo where he was repeatedly tortured by Egyptian officials. The Egyptian interrogators told the CIA that he had confirmed a relationship between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaida. The tidbit, used by then U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell in his United Nations speech, turned out to be false. Victims usually will say anything to make severe torture stop. Al-Libi was eventually returned to Afghanistan, although he has again disappeared.

Mamduh Habib, an Egyptian-born citizen of Australia, was apprehended in October 2001 in Pakistan, where, his family says, he was touring religious schools. A Pentagon spokesman claimed that Habib spent most of his time in Afghanistan and was "either supporting hostile forces or on the battlefield fighting illegally against the U.S."

Habib was released a few days after [The Washington Post](#) published an article on his case. He said he was first interrogated and brutalized for three weeks in Islamabad. His interrogators spoke English with American accents. He was then hustled into a jumpsuit, his eyes were covered with opaque goggles and he was flown on a small jet to Egypt. There he was held and interrogated for six months, according to Joseph Margulies, a lawyer affiliated with the MacArthur Justice Center at the University of Chicago Law School, which is representing Habib,.

Habib claims he was beaten frequently with blunt instruments, including an object that he likened to an “electric prod.” He was told that if he did not confess to belonging to al-Qaida he would be anally raped by specially trained dogs. Habib said he was returned to U.S. custody after his stint in an Egyptian prison and flown to Bagram air base, in Afghanistan, and then to Guantanamo Bay, where he was kept until his release.

Al-Libi and Habib are but two cases. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands more. These accounts of American-sponsored torture in Egyptian prisons are not new. They hardly make news. But the close cooperation between Egyptian and American security officials represents a frightening melding of despotisms, an international cabal of state-sponsored brutality and abuse. It does away with the concept of law and human rights. It mocks international protocols and treaties. It permits the despotic states we support, such as Egypt, to veer away from democratic structures and propagate, with our assistance, a more ruthless tyranny and brutality. It enrages and finally empowers those who oppose us to engage in the same behavior. It is dividing the world into competing spheres of intolerance. In this new world order there is nothing left to appeal to other than the mercy of someone standing over you with an electric prod.

Mubarak has in the past few weeks decided to shut down the last remnants of opposition. He has sent in riot police to arrest dozens of striking labor leaders, rounded up more than a thousand members of the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest opposition group, and tossed seven journalists into prison. The charges against the journalists range from misquoting Egypt’s justice minister to spreading rumors about the health of Mubarak to defaming his designated heir, Gamal. The detainees, as usual, complain of torture and beatings. And persistent rumors of death squads, bolstered by the “disappearance” of some of the regime’s most outspoken critics, have turned Egypt into a state that has mastered the art of internal and external extraordinary rendition.

The few lonely Egyptian voices and institutions that dared to speak out against the mounting repression have been silenced, including the [Association for Human Rights and Legal Aid](#), which was shut down by the government last month. The government also recently arrested two political activists—Mohammed al-Dereini and Ahmed Mohammed Sobh, both members of Egypt’s tiny Shiite minority—after the men publicized testimonies from prisoners detailing torture in the Egyptian prison system. Egypt’s most prominent dissident, the sociologist [Saad Edin Ibrahim](#), is in exile, too frightened to go home and repeat his own brutal experience in an Egyptian prison.

The Egyptian Organization for Human Rights has confirmed more than 500 cases of police abuse since 1993, including 167 deaths—three of which took place this year—that the group “strongly suspects were the result of torture and mistreatment.” There are now 80,000 political prisoners held in Egyptian prisons. The annual budget for internal security was \$1.5 billion in 2006, more than the entire national budget for health care, and the security police forces comprise 1.4 million members, nearly four times the number of the Egyptian army.

The United States has subsidized Egypt's armed forces with over \$38 billion in aid. Egypt receives about \$2 billion annually—\$1.3 billion in foreign military financing and about \$815 million in economic and support fund assistance—making it the second largest regular recipient of conventional U.S. military and economic aid, after Israel.

We have nothing left to say to the Mubarak regime. The torture practiced in Egypt is the torture we employ for our own ends. The cries that rise up from these fetid cells in Egypt condemn not only the Mubarak dictatorship but the moral rot that has beset the American state.

We are losing the war in Iraq. We are an isolated and reviled nation. We are pitiless to others weaker than ourselves. We have lost sight of our democratic ideals. Thucydides wrote of Athens' expanding empire and how this empire led it to become a tyrant abroad and then a tyrant at home. The tyranny Athens imposed on others, it finally imposed on itself. If we do not confront our hubris and the lies we tell to justify the killing and mask the destruction carried out in our name in Iraq, if we do not grasp the moral corrosiveness of empire and occupation, if we continue to allow force and violence to be our primary form of communication, if we do not remove from power our flag-waving, cross-bearing versions of the Taliban, the despotism we empower abroad will become the despotism we soon experience at home.

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