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Death in Camp Delta

On the power of silence, submission to force-feeding, and the first suicides in Guantánamo.

By Mario Kaiser

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The prisoner raises his feet and pulls at his chain, slowly, cautiously. The chain rattles softly, then tightens, forming a “V” between the prisoner’s ankles and a metal ring bolted to the floor. Maybe it’s a coincidence. Maybe he consciously turns the chain into a victory sign. His eyes do not tell. The truth is hard to see in this room, where Combatant Review Status Tribunals are held. It’s a blurred sphere of maybes.

The prisoner is sitting on a white plastic chair that his captors consider the only piece of furniture in this room he won’t be able to turn into a weapon. He’s holding the manuscript of his defense in his hands, but he can’t move them—his wrists are shackled. The handcuffs are linked to a chain that wraps tightly around his belly, fixing his hands in front of his navel, forcing him into a posture of submission. He lowers his head and looks at the manuscript, moving his lips as if whispering a prayer.

Three men with shaved faces and shorn heads enter the room with fast, even steps, walking in synchrony. Holding black folders in their left hands, they line up in front of a large American flag, framed like a painting. A military guard, his voice booming across the room, orders everyone to rise. The prisoner gets up, and the “V” collapses between his feet.

The room behind door 7E is a hermetic place, built for the system operating within it. No daylight penetrates its windowless walls, no warm air, no lawyer, no judge. It is a rectangle outside the law, an American place outside America.

The prisoner smiles.

It's a rare day in Guantánamo, a strange day. The man at the end of the chain has come to talk. He is willing to speak about a man he met in Afghanistan, in the White Mountains of which Tora Bora forms a part. He does not say the man's name; he only calls him UBL. It sounds like a code, a rank. The letters are the initials of Usama bin Laden.

Theoretically, Room 7E could be a place of hope, could offer a chance at freedom. Once a year the prisoners are allowed to stand here before a military tribunal and make a case for why they are no danger to America, why America should let them go. Many of them do not appear. They think it's useless.

Yasser bin Talal al-Zahrani, Mani Shaman Turki al-Habardi al-Utaybi, and Salah Ali Abdullah Ahmed al-Salami never set foot in this room. They remained in their cells, silent. They no longer believed in life after Guantánamo. They resisted a system that kept them in the dark about their future. They refused to defend themselves against mere accusations.

They were three proud Arab men, and they despised the America they came to know in Guantánamo. They didn't smile like the man at the end of the chain. They didn't offer themselves as spies, hoping that America would let them go.

At some point during their captivity, these three men began to retreat. They no longer touched the food the guards pushed through the holes in the doors of their cells. Their bodies dwindled. Their lives hung on thin yellow tubes shoved down their nostrils each morning to let a nutrient fluid drip into their stomachs. In their minds, nothing changed. They didn't want to stay, and one night, on June 9, 2006, they decided to leave Guantánamo. They climbed on top of the sinks in their cells and hanged themselves.

In the Pentagon's view, the men hanging from the walls of their cells were assassins whose suicides were attacks on America. The Pentagon struck back.

The story of the lives and deaths of these prisoners is an odyssey of three young men who left for Afghanistan and ended up in Cuba. It is the story of a war against a terror that is difficult to define, a war that the United States government wages even in the cells of its prisoners. It is about a place, Camp Delta, that exposes the asymmetry of this war, and it leads to the front lines—and the American lawyers standing between them, struggling to defend presumed enemies of their country. It is the story of the internal and external battle over Guantánamo.

Nobody but the dead knows the whole truth. But there are places where the story can be pieced together. There are files and letters, people who distinctly remember these prisoners. There are places where the strands of this story intersect. A law firm in Washington. A mosque in London. A living room in North Carolina. A cell in Guantánamo.

* * *

Yasser bin Talal al-Zahrani is sixteen years old when he says good-bye to his father in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. It is the summer of 2001. Yasser has just completed eleventh grade in high school. He is one of the best students in his class, strong-willed and hungry for knowledge, and he's looking for a new challenge. He says he wants to go to Dubai, the city of opportunity, to study English and computer science. But several weeks after leaving Mecca, Yasser calls his father from the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. In New York the towers have fallen, and in Afghanistan the U.S. attack on the Taliban has begun. Yasser tells his father that he wants to join a charity and help the people of Afghanistan. He says he owes it to his Muslim brothers.

A few days later, Yasser calls again. He tells his mother that he is getting ready go to an area where he won't be able to make phone calls, and he wants to say good-bye. He doesn't tell her where he will be going, and his mother doesn't ask. She wishes that Allah might protect him. It is the last time she hears his voice.

Mani Shaman Turki al-Habardi al-Utaybi is born in the same country as Yasser, but their lives have little in common. He grows up in a cocoon of prosperity, enjoying parties and indulging himself in forbidden pleasures. Sometimes his way of life puts him in conflict with the enforcers of Saudi Arabia's moral code, but his family's ties to government officials shield him from punishment.

Sometime around September 11, 2001, Utaybi breaks with his spoiled life. He joins Tablighi Jamaat, a group of Muslim missionaries. It is one of the largest and most conservative Muslim

organizations, a globe-spanning network of proselytizers. From New York to Karachi, the group approaches young men at mosques and universities and tries to lead them to lives governed by Islam. Utaybi follows the call and leaves for Pakistan.

Salah Ali Abdullah Ahmad al-Salami has been following the rules of the Qur'an since childhood. He lives with his family in Ta'izz, Yemen's third-largest city, near the Red Sea. He reads the Qur'an with such devotion that, at an unusually young age, he becomes a *haafidh*, a scholar who remembers the whole book of the Prophet Muhammad. He also follows Islamic tradition in matters of love. The woman he marries is chosen by his family.

The Pentagon describes only in vague terms where and why it captured the men. There is just one sheet of paper. It reads like a final report, as though all questions have been answered.

Salami's faith is his navigation system, the point of reference for his view of the world. Sometime in 2001 he goes to Pakistan. He travels to Faisalabad, a city close to Lahore, in search of the deeper meaning of his faith. There, he lives with several other young men in a house and studies the Qur'an.

Salami, Zahrani, and Utaybi's paths do not cross in Pakistan, but it is the country where all of them stop on their way to Afghanistan, like a base camp. It's unclear if they actually cross the border and enter the land of the Taliban. Their traces end in Pakistan.

* * *

The Pentagon describes only in vague terms where and why it captured the men. There is just one sheet of paper, a press release that summarizes the lives of the prisoners in a few paragraphs. It is the only document the U.S. government publishes about the suicides, hours after the men hanged themselves. It reads like a final report, as though all questions have been answered.

The underage Zahrani is described in the press release as a "frontline fighter for the Taliban" who organized the purchase of weapons. He is accused of having been among the prisoners who began a bloody uprising in the Mazar-e-Sharif prison in northern Afghanistan, during which CIA officer Johnny Micheal Spann, who found John Walker Lindh, later known as the "American Taliban," was killed.

Of Utaybi, the press release says only that he was a member of a terrorist group, a "second-tier recruiting organization" of Al Qaeda. The organization the Pentagon is referring to is Tablighi Jamaat, the group of Muslim missionaries Utaybi joined in Saudi Arabia. Tablighi Jamaat is not banned in the United States and not listed as a terrorist organization.

Salami is described by the Pentagon as the most dangerous of the three prisoners, a “mid- to high-level Al Qaeda operative” with “close ties to Abu Zubaydah.” Zubaydah, who was later captured, is accused of being a member of Al Qaeda’s leadership and, together with Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, one of the masterminds behind the September 11 attacks. The Pentagon does not say where it captured Salami, but it inadvertently allowed another prisoner in Guantánamo to tell the story. It can be found in the transcripts of the Combatant Status Review Tribunals which decide whether a prisoner is an enemy combatant. The Pentagon did not want to publish the transcripts, but was ordered to release them through Freedom of Information Act litigation.

Many of the transcripts can be found online, some at a Department of Defense website and others in a database maintained by the *New York Times*. It is the virtual front where America defends itself early in the War on Terror. One can search for prisoners and read what they said at their tribunals. But the prisoners do not have names in the transcripts, only three-digit “internment serial numbers.” They are as faceless as the tribunal officers, whose names are blacked out.

There is no transcript of a hearing for Salami on either site. But his name appears in the transcript of the hearing of prisoner 688, who talks about meeting Salami in Faisalabad. Prisoner 688 is also from Yemen, and claims to have gone to Pakistan to sell textiles. On a street in Faisalabad, he hears Salami speak Arabic and introduces himself. He tells him that his Pakistani visa has expired, and Salami promises to help. He says he knows people with government connections who could solve the problem.

Salami offers the man a place to stay at the house where he studies the Qur’an, and the man follows him. Two weeks later, Pakistani security forces, accompanied by two Americans, raid the house and arrest all the men inside.

The Pakistanis take Salami and the other man to Lahore, where they are interrogated for a week by Americans who do not wear uniforms and do not identify themselves. From Lahore, they are moved to Islamabad and then flown, in an American military plane, to Afghanistan, first to Bagram and later to Kandahar. Eventually, Salami is led up a ramp, into the belly of another plane. It is the last stage of his long journey into death.

More details about the captures of the three men became public when, in 2010, secret Pentagon files were turned over to WikiLeaks. According to these files, the U.S. believed that the guesthouse where Salami was apprehended had links to Al Qaeda and that Salami lied about

being a religious student. Other detainees claimed they had seen him in training camps with members of Al Qaeda.

Utaybi is described in the files as having been arrested with four other men, all hiding under burqas, at a checkpoint in Pakistan. One of the men had supposedly been to a terrorist training camp, and Utaybi was said to be carrying a false Yemeni passport.

Zahrani, according to the files, admitted that he had gone to Afghanistan to be a jihadist. In Guantánamo he supposedly once shouted, laughingly, “9/11 you not forget” at a prison staff member.

Salami, Zahrani, and Utaybi are captured at different times and locations, but they end up in the same place. One day, their faces and heads are shaved. They are put into diapers and bright orange overalls. Headphones that silence the world around them are put over their ears. Their mouths are covered with sterile masks. Black cloth bags are pulled over their heads. They look like men on their way to the gallows. And then they are chained to the floor of a plane, like pieces of cargo.

They leave Afghanistan eight thousand miles behind, freezing on the metal floor. Then they walk out of the plane and into a burning heat. They are in Guantánamo.

A few reporters are allowed to watch the arrival of the first prisoners from a distance, in January 2002. They witness a performance. The prisoners are paraded out of the plane, surrounded by Marines screaming at them. Taking small steps, they stumble as the chains tighten between their feet. When they finally reach the tarmac, some fall to their knees. Maybe they are exhausted, maybe they want to pray.