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## How the CIA Torture Program Helped Give Birth to the Islamic State

<http://www.alternet.org/world/how-cia-torture-program-helped-give-birth-islamic-state?akid=12582.653927.tjOSw3&rd=1&src=newsletter>

By Loretta Napoleoni

12/16/2014



*I.S. Leader Al Baghdadi*

The recent report on the CIA's extensive use of torture in the dark years following 9/11 concedes that no valuable intelligence sprang from these gruesome interrogation techniques. But it's worse than that. In fact, the CIA ended up misleading the U.S. government on key security issues, using misinformation gained from the interrogations. Even Republican Senator John McCain, who was tortured in Vietnam, has confirmed that under extreme physical duress, people lie and admit whatever their torturers want them to say.

We now know that among the jihadists brutally tortured was Abu Zubaydah, a native Saudi, whose false revelations most likely contributed to the construction of the myth of Abu Mussad al Zarqawi, the leader of al Qaeda in Iraq. Abu Zubaydah had gone to Afghanistan in the late 1980s to join the anti-Soviet jihad but never managed to become a mujahedin. According to Khalid al Hammadi, bin Laden's personal driver, Abu Zubaydah was not even a member of al Qaeda. In the late 1980s he worked at the Arab Afghan Bureau in Peshawar as a junior helper, according to Abdullah Anas, son-in-law of Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, the founder of the Arab Afghan Bureau and bin Laden's mentor. Zubaydah worked together with Ahmed Fadel al Khalaylah, alias Abu Mos'ab al Zarqawi, a young Jordanian seeking to join the Jihad. Their tasks were to make tea and keep the place clean.

When Abu Zubaydah was captured in Pakistan in the summer of 2002, he was working in a guesthouse for injured mujahedin. But the U.S. authorities described him as a key member of al Qaeda, a recruiter and a trainer. To back this profile, they used the investigation of the foiled Millennium Plot in Jordan, which included the simultaneous bombing, during the Millennium celebration, of the Hotel Radisson SAS in Amman, one of the border crossings between Jordan and Israel, Mount Nebo in Jordan, and the site on the river Jordan where John the Baptist is believed to have baptized Jesus.

Because the attacks aimed to kill both American and Israeli tourists, Jordanian and American authorities agreed to conduct the investigation jointly. Both U.S. and Jordanian authorities portrayed Abu Zubaydah as al Qaeda's man involved in the plot. They used as proof an intercepted phone call between Abu Zubaydah and Khadr Abu Hoshar, a Palestinian militant in Jordan, which took place at the end of 1999. During the conversation, Abu Zubaydah stated that the time for training was over. On the basis of only this slight intelligence, the Millennium Plot became known as an al Qaeda operation.

In September 2000, eight of the 28 men charged in the plot were sentenced to death, four in absentia. None were members of al Qaeda. During the trial, no evidence was presented of any involvement by al Zarqawi. However, in November 2001, after the Kurdish Secret Services had alerted Washington to al Zarqawi's presence in northern Iraq, he was suddenly linked to the Millennium Plot.

### **The Myth of al Zarqawi**

The first time the American authorities heard about al Zarqawi was from the Kurdish intelligence services a few days after Sept. 11, 2001. "I believe that Ansar al Islam is an inseparable part of al Qaeda," wrote Dana Ahmad Majid, a Kurdish intelligence official, in a report about al Zarqawi broadcast on Al Jazeera a few months later. Al Zarqawi, who was in charge of the camp in Herat

near the Iranian border, and who was a Jordanian, as were the majority of the members of Ansar al Islam, was singled out as the intermediary between this group and al Qaeda.

We now know that this intelligence was false. Al Zarqawi was not even a member of al Qaeda, but the Americans, who had nothing on him—they did not even know who he was—believed the Kurds and immediately began their own investigation. Washington got in touch with Jordan to find out more about al Zarqawi, and it is at this point that his name began to be linked to the Millennium Plot. We now know why the Kurds came up with his name: they wanted to convince the United States to help them get rid of jihadist groups in their territory, and the best way to do that was to link them to al Qaeda. We also know why the Jordanians backed such false information: they were desperate to find the ringleader of a series of terror attacks, among them the killing of an Israeli citizen, Yitzhak Snir.

At the end of 2001 the Jordanian authorities were still investigating the killing of Snir, a 51-year-old diamond dealer living in Amman, which had taken place on Aug. 6, 2001. In a written message to the press, an unknown armed organization, the Honourables of Jordan (Shurafa al Urdun), had claimed responsibility for the murder and accused the victim of being an agent of Mossad. Then, on Oct. 28, 2002, another brutal assassination took place when an American diplomat, Lawrence Foley, was gunned down in front of his house in Amman. Again the same organization claimed responsibility for the murder. This time the authorities in Jordan were quick to link al Zarqawi to both crimes, most likely because of what Abu Zubaydah had said under torture in August 2002, which was what the CIA wanted him to say to back the role of al Zarqawi in those killings.

Soon after Foley's assassination, a Federal Bureau of Investigation team flew to Amman. Although Muhammad Adwane, the Jordanian minister of information, had publicly declared the killing an attack against the national security of Jordan, the FBI took over the investigation, in a move that generated widespread criticism among Jordanian citizens. "What was so embarrassing was the involvement of the American security service," says Hussein Majaalli, a Jordanian lawyer and former president of the Jordanian lawyers' union. The FBI was operating directly on this case in Jordan," "All the findings were logged and studied and presented to the judiciary after they had been approved by the FBI...which proved that they were de facto in charge, not the Jordanian authorities."

The Americans focused their investigation on al Zarqawi. Linking him to the two assassinations and the Millennium Plot seemed to reinforce the Kurdish intelligence claim that he was part of al Qaeda. Several sources claim that FBI agents conducted the interrogations in which alleged members of the Honourables of Jordan admitted to being part of Abu Mos'ab al Zarqawi's web of terror, suggesting that American coercion may have been a factor in the confession.

"Three men were arrested, a Libyan, a Palestinian, and a Jordanian," says Jarrah El Qaddah, a preacher in Amman who met al Zarqawi when he was a young man. "They were accused of collaborating with al Zarqawi. They were said to have been armed and financed by him. The Americans accused the Libyan citizen of having provided a space where al Zarqawi would meet his wife. However, all the clues to this were supplied by the FBI, in spite of the crime occurring

on Jordanian territory, where normally only the Jordanian authorities are allowed to investigate.”

It is more plausible that the Jordanians worked together with the Americans and that the Jordanians conducted some of the interrogations. Al Zarqawi was charged with the murder of Lawrence Foley and the assassination of Yitzhak Snir, and also with having planned military actions against government targets in Jordan. This was the first time he was accused of masterminding a terrorist act. According to Hussein Majaalli, a Jordanian lawyer and former president of the Jordanian lawyers’ union “There is no proof that links al Zarqawi to the organization [Honourables of Jordan] and there is no proof which links this organization to any local or international terrorist network.”

Most likely, Abu Zubaydah confirmed all these false connections while he was being interrogated under torture in 2002. And so the myth of al Zarqawi as super terrorist, as the link between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda, first began to take shape as a result of the torture interrogations.

### **The Myth of al Baghdadi**

The genesis of the Islamic State is with al Zarqawi and his actions in Iraq, just as the brutality of the Islamic State parallels the West’s extensive use of torture. Even more disturbing is the link between the construction of the myth of al Zarqawi as a super terrorist connected to Bin Laden and the mythology constructed around al Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State. The Islamic State has taken full advantage of this mythology in its rise to power.

The leadership of the Islamic State paid particular attention to the Feb. 5, 2003 U.N. Security Council speech by then-US Secretary of State Colin Powell, a speech credited with creating the myth of al Zarqawi in order to justify the invasion of Iraq. We now know that the claim that al Zarqawi was the link between Saddam and al Qaeda was based on false information—information that most likely was extracted under extreme torture. But with Powell’s speech to the U.N., this strategy to gain approval for the U.S.’ preventive strike against Iraq worked.

Thanks to an extensive and highly professional use of social media, the Islamic State has recently generated equally false mythologies, in order to proselytize, recruit and raise funds across the Muslim world. Crucial to the success of this strategy has been the web of secrecy and mythology carefully woven around its leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. In a world overloaded with information, mystery also plays a major role in stimulating the collective imagination. The more something is concealed, the more one desires it to be revealed, and the less one knows, the more one imagines. Offer viewers a few clips, and they will complete the picture as they like. Modern advertising has constructed a trillion-dollar industry upon these simple concepts. Now the Islamic State’s propaganda machine is using them to manufacture the myth of al Baghdadi and the new Caliphate. Islam is premised on the mystery of the return of the Prophet. Hence, at the same time the Islamic State terrorizes Westerners with shockingly barbarous killings, it leads Muslim supporters to believe that the Prophet has returned in the clothes of al Baghdadi. The only thing surprising about this is that we have been surprised by it.

Watching the barbarous rituals of the beheading of hostages, Americans along with the rest of the world ask themselves, how did we get to this point? The short answer is found in the confluence of two violent events: the preventive strike in Iraq, backed with false information extracted through barbaric torture, and the civil war in Syria. The first gave rise to one of modern jihad's most brilliant and enigmatic strategists, the late Abu Musab al Zarqawi, a man who openly challenged the historical leadership of al Qaeda and who reignited the ancient and bloody conflict between Sunnis and Shiites as a key tactic for the rebirth of the Caliphate. In the second, Syria provided a unique opportunity, a launch pad, for those who had assimilated al Zarqawi's message and who wished to achieve his dream, among them Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, the new Caliph, a man who had fought with al Zarqawi in Iraq.

What the Senate Intelligence Committee's report on the CIA use of torture does not say is that such barbarous practices have contributed to the birth of the Islamic State, the last of a long string of Frankensteins the West has to face.