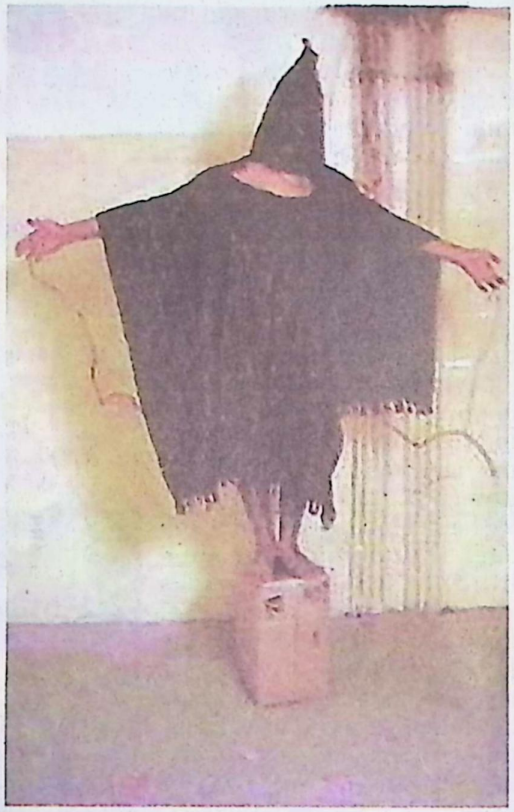


From Bagram to Abu Ghraib

For nearly three years, U.S. military authorities have been investigating evidence of torture at American prisons in Afghanistan. But instead of disciplining those involved, the Pentagon sent them to Iraq.

EMILY BAZELON

HUSSAIN YOUSSOUF MUSTAFA stepped off the bus outside a law office on a busy street in Amman, Jordan, on a bright day in November. The 51-year-old wore a white kaffiyeh and a white robe with square-rimmed glasses and a salt-and-pepper beard. Inside, he sat down at a table that faced a map of the Middle East, and over eight hours and two days answered questions about his two years in American captivity.

Mustafa, who is Palestinian, said he earned a master's degree in Islamic law in Saudi Arabia, but as a young teacher he had trouble making a living in the West Bank. In 1985, he heard that Pakistan was setting up schools for Afghans who were fleeing the Soviet occupation. Mustafa and his wife moved to Peshawar, a city of 1 million near the Pakistani-Afghan border, and for 17 years they lived there and raised eight children, with Mustafa teaching Arabic and the tenets of Islam at a government-run school.

After the American invasion of Afghanistan in the winter of 2001, Mustafa said, Peshawar became tense, with periodic police roundups of suspected militants, although he had no run-ins with the authorities and felt no threat from them. Then, on May 25, 2002, at about 8 p.m., their doorbell rang. Mustafa asked Ibrahim, his youngest son, to answer the door. The boy yelled, "Police!" and ran back into the house, several Pakistani police officers behind him with guns drawn. They took Mustafa in for questioning along with two of his sons, 18-year-old Mohammed and 23-year-old Abdullah. The young men were released later that night. But their father was blindfolded, tightly shackled, and flown to Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan.

Built in 1976 for Soviet troops, Bagram is now a heavily guarded U.S. military compound an hour's drive from Kabul, on a desert plain beneath the snow-peaked Panjshir mountains. When he arrived, Mustafa was publicly stripped naked, a humiliation for a devout Muslim and put into a crowded pen with more than a dozen others. A barrel in a corner served as a toilet. Mustafa stayed in the cell for about two months. From time to time, American soldiers would take one of the detainees away for interrogations. Mostly, Mustafa said, his questioners wanted to know about Al Qaeda. He told them he didn't know anything about the group.

As he told his story, Mustafa refused to be led by Clive Stafford Smith, the human rights lawyer who interviewed him. Had he been beaten when he arrived at Bagram, Stafford Smith asked through a translator; had he been threatened with guns? Mustafa firmly answered no. It was only on the second day of the interview, after Stafford Smith had stopped pressing, that his account turned grim. "Perhaps the worst thing that has ever happened to me took place at Bagram," he began.

During his imprisonment at the compound, Mustafa estimated that he was interrogated about 25 times. Sometimes, he said, the soldiers forced him to kneel on a concrete floor with a bag over his head. Other times they woke him from sleep or interrupted him in prayer. He said he occasionally heard detainees screaming and concluded that they were being beaten. Then one day, he recalled, "an American soldier took me blindfolded. My hands were tightly cuffed, with my ears plugged so I could not hear properly, and my mouth covered so I could only make a muffled scream. Two soldiers, one on each side, forced me to bend down, and a third pressed my face down over a table. A fourth soldier then pulled down my trousers. They rammed a stick up my rectum."

Mustafa said that he was not told why he was brutalised. "The Americans never said anything about why they were doing it to me, so I had to think for many hours and days later, to try to work out what was going through their minds," he told Stafford Smith, pressing the tips of his broad fingers together. "I think maybe they wanted to make me so embarrassed