

Abu Ghraib and *Insaniyat*

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The issues that I will cover in this article and the cases I would like to describe make for uncomfortable reading. But I believe that it is important to record the torture at Abu Ghraib prison and elsewhere in Iraq and to deconstruct the culture that accommodated and legitimated it, because what happened cannot be relegated to a mere footnote in the history of the region. I feel the same about Halabja and the chemical warfare employed by Saddam Hussein with the sponsorship of the “international community,” which is why I covered it in my other writings.¹ I do not want to be misunderstood as arguing that the cultural context I will explain here is all-encompassing, that the U.S. presence in international society is singularly destructive, and that the “West” as an idea is nothing but “intoxicating.”² What I say is much more confined. I am arguing that Abu Ghraib could not have happened without a particular racist current in the United States, that the individuals who committed the atrocities against the detainees were not isolated, and that they were part of a larger constellation with its own signifying ideational attitudes toward Muslims and Arabs. Those are the general claims that I would like to qualify in the following paragraphs.

I found it characteristic that it was a novelist, namely Susan Sontag, rather than a scholar of international relations or “Middle Eastern” studies, who made the link between the torture at Abu Ghraib and the type of racist culture I am trying to explain to you.³ In one of her last essays published in the United Kingdom, Sontag compares the pictures of the tortured Iraqi inmates with the photographs of “black victims of lynching taken between the 1880s and 1930s, which show small-town Americans, no doubt most of them church-going, respectable citizens, grinning, beneath the naked mutilated body of a black man or woman hanging behind them from a tree.” For Sontag, the meaning of the pictures “is not just that these acts were performed, but that their perpetrators had no sense that there was any-

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thing wrong in what the pictures show.” She finds it even more disturbing that the “pictures were meant to be circulated and seen by many people, it was all fun. And this idea of fun,” she concludes, “is, alas, more and more...part of ‘the true nature and heart of America.’”⁴

It was Michel Foucault, of course, who chartered the disappearance of torture as a public spectacle in eighteenth-century Europe and America. “By the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century,” Foucault observes, “the gloomy festival of punishment was dying out, though here and there it flickered momentarily into life.” In France the *amende honorable* was finally abolished in 1830. Another practice of public punishment and ridicule, the pillory, was abolished in France in 1789 and in England in 1837. In most countries of Western Europe and the United States official public executions preceded by torture had almost entirely been abolished by 1830–48.⁵ “One no longer touched the body,” as Foucault wrote:

If it is still necessary for the law to reach and manipulate the body of the convict, it will be at a distance, in the proper way, according to strict rules, and with a much “higher” aim....Today a doctor must watch over those condemned to death [Foucault wrote before the death penalty was abolished in France]...thus juxtaposing himself as the agent of welfare, as the alleviator of pain, with the official whose task it is to end life....A utopia of judicial reticence: take away life, but prevent the patient from feeling it; deprive the prisoner of all rights, but do not inflict pain; impose penalties free of all pain.⁶

This rationalization of punishment was central to the system of torture at Abu Ghraib, where interrogators were very conscious “not to leave marks on the body” of the victims.⁷ Indeed, a report, by the British medical journal *The Lancet*, established in August 2004 that U.S. military doctors and medics were “complicit” in the torture of Iraqi detainees and faked death certificates to try and cover up homicides. “The medical system collaborated with designing and implementing psychologically and physically coercive interrogations,” writes the author, University of Minnesota professor Steven Miles. “Army officials stated that a physician and a psychiatrist helped design, approve, and monitor interrogations.”⁸

At Abu Ghraib and elsewhere in Iraq then, torture and science worked hand in hand. Would it not be naïve, thus, to assume that what happened was an aberration, that it was confined to the acts of a few “deranged” individuals as the trials against Charles Graner Jr.

and his girlfriend Lynndie England want us to believe? If we would concur with U.S. Army Major General Antonio M. Taguba, who investigated the Abu Ghraib case, it was not. In his report dated March 2004, Taguba found that “between October and December 2003 at the Abu Ghraib Confinement Facility (BCCF) numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses were inflicted on several detainees,” which he classifies as “systemic and illegal abuse,” perpetrated by “several members of the military police guard force.”⁹ More specifically, the abuse included:

Punching, slapping, and kicking detainees; jumping on their naked feet...Forcibly arranging detainees in various sexually explicit positions for photographing...Forcing naked male detainees to wear women’s underwear...Forcing groups of male detainees to masturbate themselves while being photographed and videotaped...Arranging naked male detainees in a pile and then jumping on them...Positioning a naked detainee on a MRE Box, with a sandbag on his head, and attaching wires to his fingers, toes, and penis to stimulate electric torture...Placing a dog chain or strap around a naked detainee’s neck and having a female soldier pose for a picture...A male MP guard having sex with a female detainee...Taking photographs of dead Iraqi detainees....¹⁰

General Taguba would say later that the United States “violated the tenets of the Geneva Convention. We violated our own principles and we violated the core of our military values...even today...those civilian and military leaders responsible should be held accountable.”¹¹ The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) came to similar conclusions. Avoiding the term “torture” it stated in a report in February 2004, that “physical and psychological *coercion* used by the interrogators appeared to be part of the standard operating procedures by military intelligence personnel to obtain confessions and extract information.”¹² Another report filed by former U.S. secretary of defense and ex-director of the CIA, James Schlesinger, was equally adamant to avoid the term “torture,” classifying the events as “brutality and purposeless sadism....The pictured *abuses*,” the report claims, “were not part of authorized interrogations nor were they even directed at intelligence targets.”¹³

A similar emphasis on the term “abuse” rather than “torture” can be discerned from the Fay-Jones Report which states that “clearly *abuses* occurred at the prison at Abu Ghraib,” which were committed by a “small group of morally corrupt soldiers and civilians.” The same report describes how detainees “were forced to crawl on their stom-

achs and were handcuffed together [and] act as though they were having sex.” It also presents the case of DETAINEE-08 who was beaten “for half an hour...with a chair until it broke, hit in the chest, kicked, and choked until he lost consciousness. On other occasions,” it is further stated, “DETAINEE-08 recalled that CPL Graner would throw his food into the toilet and say ‘go take it and eat it.’” Even the case of DETAINEE-07, who was made to “bark like a dog, being forced to crawl on his stomach while MPs spit and urinated on him, and being struck causing unconsciousness,” is classified as abuse rather than torture.¹⁴

There were, of course, very straightforward measures to rationalize and thus diminish what happened at Abu Ghraib. The Mikolashek Report submitted in July 2004 describes the different “legitimate” interrogation “approaches” that can be employed by U.S. government personnel during interrogations. These range from the Fear-Up Approach according to which the “interrogator behaves in an overpowering manner with a loud and threatening voice” to the Pride and Ego-Down Approach which is “based on the source’s sense of personal worth. Any source who shows any real or imagined inferiority or weakness about himself, loyalty to his organization, or [who was] captured under embarrassing circumstances,” it is explained, “can be easily broken with this approach technique.”¹⁵ Having set the legal boundaries between “torture,” “abuse,” and legitimate “interrogation techniques,” the report comes to the conclusion that

despite the demands of the current operating environment against an enemy who does not abide by the Geneva Conventions, our commanders have adjusted to the reality of the battlefield and, are effectively conducting detainee operations while ensuring the humane treatment of detainees.¹⁶

I am not concerned here with explaining legally why what happened in Iraq amounts to systematic torture. This is something that has been done by others more qualified to do so than I am, namely the American Bar Association in their report to their House of Delegates submitted in August 2004.¹⁷ What has not been adequately explored and what I found at least equally important is the overarching cultural environment that allowed Abu Ghraib to happen. Here, I agree with Foucault that there is no system of punishment, no judicial process, no legal institution, and no form of torture that can or has ever stood independent of the many political, socio-cultural, and historical

structures that give epochs their peculiar individuality.

The real issue of the torture at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere in Iraq is not only the photographs then, but what they reveal about contemporary U.S. culture. I am not referring here to the repeated calls for war by leading U.S. neoconservatives and their functionaries in the media.¹⁸ I am talking about the rather more subtle ways that are employed to habituate us to violence, to make it appear normal to be brutal: the computer games that stimulate war and destruction, the CNN footage of yet another “laser guided bomb” or “surgical strike” that hit the living room of innocent civilians in Afghanistan or Iraq, the staged violence celebrated in highly successful talk shows such as Jerry Springer, and the beheadings of hostages in the name of God by al-Qaeda affiliated groups for that matter (the video clips of which are readily available on the Internet). What formerly was outlawed as sadomasochism and extreme pornography is now being normalized and disseminated to the public through the World Wide Web, chat rooms, and other effective communication channels. This rather new development in human relations implies that the power to exercise and display subjugation, which since the ancient world had been the prerogative of the ruler or a defined social institution, suddenly is dispersed to the general public, including the child abuser, sadomasochist, and rapist.

There are many consequences triggered by this new kind of “anarchic liberalism.” When the modern state punishes its citizens, it does so in the name of order. Through a whole series of legitimating practices—judicial hearings, cross-examinations, police investigations, etc.—a “proportionate” punishment for the crime is found and an “equitable” sentence is proclaimed and carried out. Ultimately, the whole judicial exercise—whether in a social democracy or a dictatorship—is there to objectify the sentence, to make it appear just and right.

Conversely, when an invading army punishes, it does so in a way as to display a show not of measure or even-handedness, but of excess. In this kind of dialectic between the punisher and victim, an extreme form of “imperial realism” rules; superiority has to be displayed violently and with unadulterated physical force. It is not enough to humiliate the victim, it is not enough to physically demonstrate absolute power to the body of the subject, to break the victim; it has to be ingrained in the victim’s memory and, more importantly, in the consciousness of the occupied nation that you have been habituated to

hate. This is “licentious power”; power that is motivated by desire, power that is total in its ambition, the type of power that feminizes its object in order to violate her. As Joseph Massad wrote in the aftermath of the Abu Ghraib scandal:

While Western Orientalist accounts never tire of speaking of sexism and women’s oppression in the Arab World, including the Western horror at “honour crimes,” it might be time to address the rampant Western misogyny which disdains all that is feminine and posits women as the terrain of male conquest. It should not be forgotten that in America, not in the Muslim World, between 40 per cent and 60 per cent of women killed, are killed by their husbands and boyfriends... It is with this misogyny as background, that the US military understood well that American male sexual prowess, usually reserved for American women, should be put to military use in imperial conquests. In such a strategy, Iraqis are posited by American super-masculine fighter-bomber pilots as women and feminised men to be penetrated by the missiles and bombs ejected from American warplanes. By feminising the enemy as the object of penetration (real and imagined), American imperial military culture supermasculinises not only its own male soldiers, but also its female soldiers who can partake in the feminisation of Iraqi men.¹⁹

There is a second very pronounced difference between punishment exercised by the state over its citizens and punishment by an invading army. The judicial process implemented by most modern states, allows for a certain degree of “romantic heroism,” especially in a situation where the state cannot sustain order and its own legitimacy except by force. When the punishment cannot be objectified through the judicial process or the overall culture of the polity, society is likely to celebrate the condemned. This is what happened to the social democrats and communists who were falsely accused of burning down the Reichstag in Nazi Germany. It is also what happened to Che Guevara, Aung Sun Tsu Kyi, Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, and others who were deemed terrorists and traitors only to be celebrated by the masses. In the modern history of Iran, moreover, opposing the state almost inevitably paved the way to a cell in Evin Prison (or “Hotel Evin” according to current reformists who have been incarcerated). Ayatollah Khomeini, Ali Shariati, Ahmad Shamlu, and others who were imprisoned in the pre-revolutionary period gained legitimacy for their respective activism not at least because incarceration became a measure of their sacrifice, their willingness to be punished

for the freedom of their ideas. Indeed, when freedom of speech is criminalized, the difference between “good” and “bad” is blurred and society is unlikely to accept the “criminal intellectual” as a new category to be punished by the state. Against the arrogance of the ruler, against the rich and powerful, against the *mostakbaran* (oppressors), the “criminal intellectual” appears to be engaged in a battle with which everyone could identify; the “criminal” is transformed into the folk hero.

This opportunity was denied to the victims of Abu Ghraib. The subjects of torture are silenced and pushed into passivity, not only by the humiliating act of mental and physical punishment, but also by us, the spectators of their plight who pity them, but who do not really want to think about the consequences electroshocks on genitals will have on the psyche of the victim. Abu Ghraib was in many ways too horrific, too disgusting, and too brutal to be comprehended. It must have happened in a suspended universe, a place that was “unreal.” This is of course, how German citizens came to terms with the existence of the concentration camps. Disturbing realities are externalized, pushed away so not to disturb the order of things, which explains why Abu Ghraib has not left a mark on the collective consciousness of Americans and the West more generally.

Many will say that at the end of the process, punishment always terrorizes its subject, frightens her, and intimidates her psychologically and, in most countries of West Asia, quite legally even physically. But the type of public punishment exercised at Abu Ghraib went beyond terror. To my mind what occurred was rather more momentous. It was indicative of the increasing discrepancy between two cultures, two ways of acting, two types of humanness; it dramatically blurred the boundaries of *bashariyat* and *insaniyat*.

Let me explain. In a lecture given during the emerging revolutionary atmosphere of late 1960s Iran, Ali Shariati established the difference between those two types of humanness. “*Bashar*,” he explains, “is that particular being that contains physiological characteristics which are shared by all humans, regardless of whether they are black, white, yellow, Western, religious or non-religious.” In that sense the victims of Abu Ghraib and their torturers were both *bashar*, they were both human in a strictly biological sense. *Insan*, on the other side, has a rather more normative connotation. “*Bashar* is a ‘being’ while *insan* is a ‘becoming.’” To become *insan* we have to foster three traits: our self-consciousness, our ability to make choices, and our ability to cre-

ate things. The aim of humanity is to attain the highest form of consciousness, to become *insan*. But mind you, Shariati warns, “becoming *insan* is not a stationary event, rather, it is a perpetual process of becoming and an everlasting evolution towards infinity.”²⁰

Why does Shariati stress the procedural component of *insaniyat*? Because becoming designates emergence. Shariati stresses that we should not think of *insaniyat* as a destination, but a never-ending journey. “Thus, from among all humans, everyone is as much *bashar* as the rest, but there are some who *have attained insanyat*, and there are others who are *in the process of becoming an insan*, either little or to an exalting degree.”²¹ The emergence of a humane consciousness, which is characteristic of attaining *insaniyat*, must always be precipitated, even constituted, by some kind of force which is why Shariati focuses on the human tendency to revolt against injustice, a theme that he explores in close relation to the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, Jesus, and other religious figures.²² It is precisely these monumental epics of human history that function as the signifiers of justice versus injustice. It is here where the space dividing good and evil becomes ever more visible, and it is in this sense that we can interpret the tortures at Abu Ghraib as a monumentally atrocious event of contemporary history, an outrageous assault on the very principles that constitute us as *insan*. Ultimately, Abu Ghraib, like the public display of death celebrated by the Romans or perpetuated by the armies of Yazid, established yet another discontinuity in the advancement of humankind to the culture of *insaniyat* that Sharitai was referring to.

The torture at Abu Ghraib did not only, and rather dramatically, accentuate the fundamental difference between *bashariyat* and *insaniyat*, it also showed the perverse excesses that licentious power can generate. At the time when the scandal was reported in early 2004, Iraqi society, was defenseless. With the absence of functioning state institutions, binding legal structures, an active civil society, or effective NGOs, Iraq was in many ways in a Hobbesian “state of nature.” Within that constellation, the Leviathan exercises absolute rule. Without the existence of constraints or any counter-narratives that could challenge the status-quo, the Leviathan has the absolute power of rationalization; he assumes the status of prosecutor, jury, judge, and defense lawyer all in one. Consider this account of a U.S. soldier who was questioned by Human Rights Watch:

A few more weeks of this, and a group of us went to the colonel there and told him we were uneasy about...this type of abuse, or just the

treatment....And within a couple hours a team of two JAG officers, JAG lawyers, came and gave us a couple of hours slide show on why this is necessary, why this is legal, they're enemy combatants, they're not POWs, and so we can do all this stuff to them and so forth....Some of the slides were about the laws of war, the Geneva Convention, but it was kind of a starting-off point for them to kind of spout-off, you know: why we don't have to follow these Geneva Convention articles and so forth. Like, you know, inhumane and degrading treatment, well, this specifically relates to POWs so we don't have to do this. So basically we can do inhumane and degrading treatment.

And then they went on to the actual treatment itself, what we were doing, what we'd signed off on and those type of things: cold water and nudity, strobe lights, loud music—that's not inhumane because they're able to rebound from it. And they claim no lasting mental effects or physical marks or anything, or permanent damage of any kind, so it's not inhumane. And then there was also [discussion about] degrading [treatment]. Like what's more degrading than being thrown completely naked in the middle of a mud pile, with everybody looking at you and spraying water on you....I felt they were really kind of patronising us and blowing smoke and just treating us like children. Like "Well it's OK." [They] just came and said whatever they had to say to patch it up and continue with the war.²³

Thus, the torture at Abu Ghraib could only happen within a constellation where power was distributed in an extremely irregular fashion. This dysfunction of power relations was the direct outcome of the invasion in 2003, of course. The legitimization of the war as a part of the "war on terror" is quite central here. In effect it represented Iraq as an ally of bin Laden, which explains why U.S. soldiers marked some of their bombs with messages such as "with love from Ground Zero," or "in the name of the New York Fire Department." That the link between al-Qaeda and Iraq was invented was rather obvious to most serious observers of the Iraqi-Baathist state. Yet it took the U.S. Defense Department four years to establish what most of us knew, i.e., that Hussein's regime was not directly cooperating with al-Qaeda before the invasion. Ironically, the report's release came on the same day that Vice President Cheney, appearing on a radio program, repeated his allegation that al-Qaeda was operating inside Iraq "before we ever launched" the war, under the direction of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who was killed in June 2006. The report, in a recently declassified section, indicated that it was Douglas Feith, then U.S. undersecretary of defense, who asserted in a briefing given to Cheney's chief of staff in

September 2002, that the relationship between Iraq and al-Qaeda was “mature” and “symbiotic,” marked by shared interests, and evidenced by cooperation across ten categories, including training, financing, and logistics.²⁴ Thus, Iraqis were labeled “terrorists,” a priori in order to maximize U.S. power before, during, and after the invasion, to make it easier for U.S. soldiers “to pull the trigger.” It is within this power constellation that they were introjected with hate. Consciously, through the myth of Iraqi complicity in 9/11, and unconsciously through the constant vilification of Islamic culture in the international media, U.S. soldiers were coded to loathe their victims, the natives who were “complicit” in the attack on the American homeland, the Muslim enemy who had to be broken, the colonized people who were there to be punished.²⁵ “I think part of the problem is the blatant racism against the Arabs,” states a U.S. soldier pertinently. “When you have an enemy you kind of have to demonize them a little bit like that in order to make yourself capable of pulling a trigger.”²⁷ “Predisposition + opportunity,” General Taguba establishes later “= criminal behavior.” Taguba also concludes that

Soldiers were immersed in the Islamic culture, a culture that many were encountering for a first time. Clearly there are major differences in worship and beliefs, and there is the association of Muslims with terrorism. All these causes exaggerate differences and create misperceptions that can lead to fear or devaluation of a people.²⁷

This dialectic between the disempowered native and the “invader” is well described in Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*:

The town belonging to the colonized people, or at least the native town, the Negro village, the medina, the reservation, is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute. They are born there, it matters little where or how; they die there, it matters not where, nor how. It is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other. The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire. It is a town of niggers and dirty Arabs.²⁸

The Hobbesian culture of anarchy, imported into Iraq through the invasion and the licentious power thus unleashed, also made possible the kind of sexual humiliation the Iraqi prisoners had to endure. Ultimately, at Abu Ghraib, the ideology of anti-Semitic racism invent-

ed in Central and Western Europe, and more systematically in Germany, from the 1840s onwards, came full cycle. True, the system at Abu Ghraib was different from the ones in Dachau and Birkenau, especially in terms of the quantity of people tortured and killed. But I find it much harder to establish a strict ideological boundary between the racism intrinsic to Nazism and the kind of nihilistic racism permeating the mindset of some segments of the political elites governing the United States.

Seymour Hersh, the investigative journalist of *The New Yorker*, revealed that the attitude that “Arabs are particularly vulnerable to sexual humiliation became a talking point among pro-war Washington conservatives in the months before the March, 2003, invasion of Iraq.” Hersh argued further, that the U.S. neocons learned of such “vulnerability” from a book entitled *The Arab Mind* authored by the Israeli cultural anthropologist Raphael Patai in 1973. According to an academic quoted by Hersh, the Patai book was “the bible of the neocons on Arab behavior.” In the discussions of the neocons, two themes emerged: “one, that Arabs only understand force and, two, that the biggest weakness of Arabs is shame and humiliation.”²⁹

I found it hard not to link these attitudes to the Pride and Ego-Down Approach “legitimately” employed by U.S. interrogators in order to “break” their detainees which I have sketched above:

The government consultant said that there may have been a serious goal, in the beginning, behind the sexual humiliation and the posed photographs. It was thought that some prisoners would do anything—including spying on their associates—to avoid dissemination of the shameful photos to family and friends. The government consultant said, “I was told that the purpose of the photographs was to create an army of informants, people you could insert back in the population.” The idea was that they would be motivated by fear of exposure, and gather information about pending insurgency action, the consultant said. If so, it wasn’t effective; the insurgency continued to grow.³¹

I am conscious that one has to be very careful with sources that remain unnamed, especially when they are cited by journalists. But I have decided to use this material, because in this specific case there is enough independent evidence to support the type of racist attitude I am trying to explain. Consider this account of Brigadier General Janis L. Karpinski given during an interview conducted at Camp Doha on February 15, 2004:

It became sport....[E]ven saying this makes me feel sick to my stom-

ach, but, they were enjoying what they were doing and the MPs who saw this opportunity—seized the opportunity....I would imagine...it went something like this—in the DFAC or when they were sitting around the Internet Café. “Oh yeah, you should see what we do to the prisoners sometime.” “Can I come over and watch?” “Oh yeah. How about Thursday.” And because we had a clerk over there who was thoroughly enjoying all of this sport, and the pictures anyway, and she was the girlfriend of the guy who was one of the kingpins in this. We had a guy from the maintenance who must have been one of the invited participants and—these are bad people. That was the first time I knew that they would do such a thing as to bring a dog handler in there to use for interrogation.³²

Other insidious examples include incidents when detainees were referred to as “Jihad Jerry,” “Gus,” “Shitboy,” “one of the three wise men,” or when they were told to “curse” Islam. At Abu Ghraib, loyalty to Islam was turned into an expedient vehicle to extract “critical intelligence” from detainees through psychological torture. In a memorandum, dated November 20, 2003, a “request for exception to CJTF [Combined Joint Taskforce]-7 Interrogation and Counter Resistance Policy” was made; essentially, a measure to extend the legal “boundaries” for the interrogations. The “subject” in this particular case was a Syrian male and an “admitted foreign fighter who came to commit Jihad against Coalition Forces in Iraq” and who was “captured in an attempted IED [improvised explosive device] attack in Baghdad.” The detainee is thought to be “at the point where he is resigned to the hope that Allah will see him through this episode in his life, therefore he feels no need to speak with interrogators.” He thus has to be “put in a position where he will feel that the only option to get out of jail is to speak with interrogators.”³³ To that end,

interrogators will reinforce the fact that we have attempted to help him time and time again and that they are now putting it in Allah’s hands. Interrogators will at maximum throw tables, chairs, invade his personal space and continuously yell at the detainee. Interrogators will not physically touch or harm the detainee...If the detainee has not broken yet, interrogators will move into the segregation phase of the approach....During transportation, the Fear Up Harsh approach [see above] will be continued, highlighting the Allah factor....MP working dogs will be present and barking during this phase. Detainee will be strip searched by guards with the empty sandbag over his head for the safety of himself, prison guards, interrogators and other prisoners. Interrogators will wait outside the room while detainee is strip searched. Interrogators will watch from a distance while detainee is

placed in the segregation cell. Detainee will be put on the adjusted sleep schedule...for 72 hours. Interrogations will be conducted continuously during this 72 hour period. The approaches which will be used during this phase will include, fear up harsh, pride and ego down, silence and loud music. Stress positions will also be used in accordance with CJTF-7 IROE in order to intensify this approach.³⁴

In my opinion this passage links up with many arguments I have tried to explain thus far: the technical language provides an example for the type of “scientific torture” I have mentioned at the beginning of the article; the fact that the detainee was not to be harmed physically, while being abused psychologically, links up to the “utopia” elaborated by Foucault; the aim “to break the detainee” exemplifies the licentious character of power that can only be unleashed in a situation where an invading army willfully creates an anarchic situation; and the fact that dogs were employed and the constant reference to the “Allah factor” further elaborates on the type of racist attitudes towards Arabs and Muslims described by Seymour Hersh’s source cited above.

Yet I feel that I have to go beyond these examples in order to qualify employing the term “culture,” for skeptics may argue that what I have said thus far is confined to the combat situation in Iraq, to the abominations intrinsic to war, to its perverse powers to suspend *insaniyat*, to violate us morally. I would like to draw the attention of those readers to the writings of the best-selling columnist and author Anne Coulter. In the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, Coulter bluntly advocated that the United States should “invade [Muslim] countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity.”³⁵ She also suggested that since there “is nothing like horrendous physical pain to quell angry fanatics... a couple of well aimed nuclear weapons” can transform “Islamic fanatics” into “gentle little lambs.”³⁶ There are many other examples that we can refer to: the allusion to a nuclear war “that might end up displacing Mecca and Medina with two large radioactive craters” made by Fred Ikle, who was U.S. undersecretary of defense during the Reagan administration;³⁷ the suggestion of Louisiana Republican John Cooksey that any airline passenger wearing a “diaper on his head” should be “pulled over”; and the assertion of the late Jerry Falwell on *60 Minutes* that “Muhammad was a terrorist” and that he was “a violent man, a man of war.”³⁸

Academics and journalists function as complicit narrators of the type of racist culture I am discussing. Consider a symposium orga-

nized by the American Enterprise Institute in March 2006. At this occasion, Pierre Rehov (a French filmmaker), Nancy Kobrin (an affiliated professor to the University of Haifa), Peter Raddatz (a German “scholar” of Islamic studies and the coauthor of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*), and Gudrun Eussner (a journalist specializing in mass communication, political science, and Iranian philology), dwelled on the “Muslim rape epidemic that is sweeping Europe and over many other nations host to immigrants from the Islamic world.” In the written introduction to the symposium, the organizers stated that the “direct connection between the rapes and Islam is irrefutable, as Muslims are significantly overrepresented among convicted rapists and rape suspects. The Muslim perpetrators themselves boast that their crime is justified,” it is claimed, “since their victims were, among other things, not properly veiled.”³⁹ Of course, there is no supporting material given, no court proceedings, not even a single statement. Instead, one of the participants offered the following “explanation”:

[Islam’s] biologicistic “thinking” demands the “pure” man as the real human dominating the “impure” woman as a lower form, rather close to some animal-like existence. Therefore, sexuality cannot be sublimated and has to serve—aside from ramifications into homo-, paedo- and sodo-variants—a basic double function: fertilizing and punishing.⁴⁰

Citing a book by Temple Grandin and Catherine Johnson entitled *Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior*, another participant linked the behavior of “Arab Muslim boys” to that of dogs:

In my work on Islamic suicide terrorism, I have noted that the rage is really against the prenatal Muslim mother, misdirected to the infidels who represent her in the jihadi mind’s eye. Interestingly enough, Grandin also notes that “humans have neotenized dogs: without realizing it, humans have bred dogs to stay immature for their entire lives.” (p. 86) I would substitute the word “bred” for concepts like child-rearing practices, etc. And raise the question as can it be that Arab Muslim boys turned rapists have been “neotenized,” that is raised to stay immature for their entire lives?⁴¹

Suddenly, now that we have delved into the narratives constituting it, it is that much easier to place Abu Ghraib within the cultural current that I have tried to explain in this article. I found it also easier to explain the types of torture employed by the U.S. Army, for if film-

makers and scholars seriously discuss how the behavior of Arab-Muslim men can be linked to that of dogs, it is that much easier to interpret why U.S. soldiers can participate in sodomizing Iraqis with chemical lights, beat them, or force them to perform homosexual acts. If educated “experts,” invited by a prominent U.S. think tank that hosts influential neoconservative “strategists” such as Joshua Muravchik, Michael Ledeen, and Patrick Clawson, quite “rationally” dehumanize “Arab-Muslims,” what can we expect from U.S. soldiers, many of whom are convicted criminals who see the army as the last option to earn a living?

I fail to establish a firm boundary between the “scientific racism” displayed at conferences like the one mentioned above, and the jingoistic racism of Sergeant Smith, a MP dog handler at Abu Ghraib, who seriously stated that “the dogs came not to like Iraqi detainees. They didn’t like the Iraqi culture, smell, sound, skin tone, hair color, or anything about them.”⁴² I could go on giving more and more examples, not in order to suggest that contemporary America is a singularly violent or brutal society, not in order to substitute “their” racism, with “our” prejudices, not in order to perpetuate yet another us versus them dichotomy. The purpose of this article is not ideological mobilization. Indeed, one of the reasons why there is so much published material available on the torture at Abu Ghraib is because U.S. society has empowered itself to guarantee a certain degree of transparency in the political process of the country (in the face of the most resourceful state in the world). But the topic of this essay was not if and how U.S. civil society could affect the foreign policies of the state, a topic worth exploring systematically. Rather, I wanted to show how a particular cultural current, which has gained impetus in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, made possible the torture at Abu Ghraib and how the events there cannot be detached from a new variant of anti-Semitic reasoning that continues to have a presence in the imagined “Western consciousness.” It is in this sense that I believe that Western anti-Semitism has come full cycle: from the annihilation of the Jews to the dehumanization of the Muslims.

I am conscious that some may say that such a grand statement is “pretentious” at best, “ideological” at worst. But that, in my opinion, is characteristic of the present international political culture, in which any criticism of the atrocities committed in the name of freedom (or Allah for that matter) is marginalized and considered to be hypocritical, unpatriotic, or idealistic. Thus, I feel that it is one of the primary

duties of scholars of contemporary Western Asia to record and critique what has happened here in the past decades, to foster a new critical consciousness that can stand firm against the present dominant culture, which considers systematic intellectual criticism inappropriate and doomed from the outset. Ultimately, the purpose of this type of critique is narrowing the gap between *bashariyat* and *insaniyat*, between our humanness and humaneness, between the mere biological attributes which make us all members of the human race, and the kind of humane attributes that we need to aspire to—in the name of peace, in the name of freedom, in the name of the numerous people maimed and tortured in the dungeons of the agents of power, whose crimes we must oppose all over the world.

Notes

1. See Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf* (London: Routledge, 2006), and especially *Iran in World Politics* (London: Hurst & Co., 2007), chapter 2.
2. Here I am using the term employed by Jalal Al-e Ahmad in his best-selling *Gharbzadegi* or “Westoxification.” See his *Plagued by the West (Gharbzadegi)*, (New York: Caravan, 1982).
3. Recently, there has emerged more critical material on this. See especially, Richard Jackson, “Language, policy and the construction of a torture culture in the war on terrorism,” *Review of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (July 2007): 353–71, and Alex Belamy, “No Pain, No Gain?” *International Affairs* 82, no. 1 (2006): 121–48.
4. Susan Sontag, “What have we done?,” *The Guardian*, May 24, 2004.
5. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (London: Penguin, 1991), 8, 14.
6. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 11.
7. “No Blood, No Foul,” *Human Rights Watch* 18, no. 3 (July 2006): 30, <http://hrw.org>.
8. <http://www.thelancet.com>. See also Sandro Contenta, “US Doctors Tied to Prisoner Abuse Faked Death Certificates,” *Toronto Star*, August 20, 2004.
9. “The Taguba Report” in Karen J. Greenberg and Joshua L. Dratel, eds., *The Torture Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 416, <http://news.findlaw.com>. See also Mark Danner, *Torture and Truth* (London: Granta, 2004), and Jennifer K. Harbury, *Truth, Torture and the American Way* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005).
10. “Taguba Report,” *Torture Papers*, 416.
11. See Seymour Hersh, “The General’s Report,” *The New Yorker*, June 25, 2007, <http://www.newyorker.com>.
12. “The ICRC Report” in Greenberg and Dratel, eds., *The Torture Papers*, 393, emphasis added, <http://www.globalsecurity.org>.
13. “The Schlesinger Report” in Greenberg and Dratel, eds., *The Torture Papers*, 909, emphasis added, <http://www.globalsecurity.org>.
14. “The Fay-Jones Report: Investigation of Intelligence Activities at Abu Ghraib, August 2004,” in Greenberg and Dratel, eds., *The Torture Papers*, 989, emphasis added, <http://fl1.findlaw.com>; 1074–76.
15. “The Mikolashek Report” in Greenberg and Dratel, *The Torture Papers*, 851, 853–54.

16. "Mikolashek Report," *The Torture Papers*, 635.
17. The report is available in Greenberg and Dratel, *The Torture Papers*, 1132–64.
18. See further Adib-Moghaddam, *Iran in World Politics*, chapter three.
19. Joseph Massad, "Imperial Mementos," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, no. 691, May 20–26, 2004, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg>. On the linkage between imperialism and desire see also Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1991), especially 187 ff. or Robert C. Young, "Colonialism and the Desiring Machine" in Gregory Castle, ed., *Postcolonial Discourses* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 74–98.
20. Ali Shariati, "Humanity and Islam" in Charles Kuzman, ed., *Liberal Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 188–89.
21. Shariati, "Humanity and Islam," 188, emphasis added.
22. See Adib-Moghaddam, *Iran in World Politics*, introduction and chapter 1.
23. "No Blood, No Foul," *Human Rights Watch*, 14–15.
24. See R. Jeffrey Smith, "Hussein's Pre-war ties with al-Qaeda discounted," *The Washington Post*, April 6, 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com>. The declassified report and documents are available at <http://www.dodig.osd.mil>.
25. See also Edward Said, *Covering Islam* (London: Vintage, 1997); Emran Qureshi and Michael A. Sells, eds., *The New Crusades* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003); and Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilisations* (forthcoming).
26. "No Blood, No Foul," *Human Rights Watch*, 34.
27. "The Taguba Report" in Greenberg and Dratel, eds., *The Torture Papers*, 448–49.
28. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963) 40.
29. Seymour M. Hersh, "The Gray Zone," *The New Yorker*, May 24, 2004, <http://www.newyorker.com>.
30. Hersh, "The Gray Zone," see also Trish Schuh, "Racism and Religious Desecration as U.S. Policy," *Counterpunch*, 6/7 (May 2006), <http://www.counterpunch.org>.
32. "Taguba Report (Annex)," *Torture Papers*, 530–31.
33. "Taguba Report (Annex)," *Torture Papers*, 466, 472, 524.
34. "Taguba Report (Annex)," *Torture Papers*, 467.
35. Anne Coulter, "This is War," *National Review Online*, September 13, 2001, <http://www.nationalreview.com>. This article led to Coulter's dismissal from the *National Review*. Her commentaries continue to be published at FrontPageMagazine.com.
36. Ann Coulter, "Why We Hate Them," in Micah L. Sifry and Christopher Cerf, eds., *The Iraq War Reader* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 333. The article originally appeared at FrontPageMagazine.com on September 26, 2003.
37. Fred Ikle, "Stopping the Next Sept. 11," *Wall Street Journal*, June 2, 2002.
38. Later, Falwell apologized for the remarks. See "Jerry Falwell Apologizes for Mohammad Criticism," *Reuters*, October 12, 2002.
39. "Symposium: To Rape an Unveiled Woman," FrontPageMagazine.com, March 7, 2006.
40. "Symposium," FrontPageMagazine.com, March 7, 2006
41. "Symposium," FrontPageMagazine.com, March 7, 2006
42. "Taguba Report," *Torture Papers*, 449.