

COMMENTARY

القياس اضيع [Likening Can Be Misleading]: Reflections on Africa and Africans in Guantánamo

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Looking back on my incarceration in Guantánamo from the relative security of my home in Nouakchott, I now realize how significant the African presence was in the illegal detention facility. While at the time, and as my *Guantánamo Diary* makes clear, our captors treated us primarily as Muslims, jihadis, Arabs, and Middle Easterners, the reality was that many of us were first and foremost African. We were born in African countries, our citizenship was that of African nations, we were handed over or surrendered by our own African governments to the U.S., and we shared the common experiences of Africans. The ASA forum held in celebration of my memoir has enabled me to reflect further on this and on what happens when we rethink Gitmo as a place of African detention, created by the collaboration of independent African governments. Fewer than one hundred detainees in Guantánamo hailed from the African continent, which is 12 percent of the total population at its peak. Algeria and Morocco had the most representation, and most detainees were North African, but sub-Saharan Africans featured prominently too. In this commentary, I want to share a little bit about my experience, with a view to making *Guantánamo Diary* more comprehensible to an Africanist audience.

African countries, to their everlasting shame, yielded to political pressure and actively participated in torture, false imprisonment, and kidnapping on behalf of the United States. It pains me to admit that I'm mostly angry with the way our corrupt governments helped facilitate the mafia-style renditions that U.S. Securitate was conducting after the tragic events of 9/11. The

African Studies Review, Volume 63, Number 2 (June 2020), pp. 403–410

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doi:10.1017/asr.2020.22

government of Mauritania—my own government—permitted my “extraordinary rendition” to Jordan, a country where I could not argue my case before an independent judge. Furthermore, as WikiLeaks data has shown, my government refused to negotiate my release in 2007 when it had an opportunity to do so. It was chilling to read the statement of my own Foreign Minister when he confided to the U.S. ambassador that “IT WAS MORE IMPORTANT FOR HIS GOVERNMENT TO BE SEEN TRYING TO HELP ITS NATIONALS IN GUANTÁNAMO THAN ACTUALLY RECEIVING THEM.”

After reading this I wanted to throw up. I didn’t know how to feel or what to say. After what I’d been through, I thought that I could no longer be surprised, but I must admit this caught me off guard. My government also helped arrest and transport at least one Libyan citizen, Saleh Di’iki.¹ Captured in Mauritania in October 2003 at the behest the U.S., Di’iki was then detained in Mauritania, Morocco, and Afghanistan. The rendition itself for a third country was bad enough, but Di’iki recounts undergoing hours of interrogation, being forced to sit naked for days, and being beaten when he was finally sent back to Libya.² Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, The Gambia, Djibouti, Somalia, Tanzania, South Africa, Egypt, and Libya also participated actively in and were vital to the illegal networks of prisons and airfields the U.S. built around the world, the goal being to evade the American judiciary system and to be able to get “down and dirty” without the technicalities of the rule of law, human rights, or any other form of accountability.

In Mauritania, we say, “He who finds a cook need not burn his hands.” The United States found a “cook” in plenty of African countries, something that leaves me filled with shame as an African. It is deeply painful when one’s own people are used to harm in the name of the oppressor, like black police in apartheid-era South Africa, or Palestinians who spy on their own people, or German collaborators who collaborated with the Nazis against their fellow Germans. As much I love and believe in the ideals of democracy as defined by Western countries, the fact is that Western “democracies” used Africa in their own undemocratic actions abroad. Africa was used and abused, much as it was during the colonial period.

The blocks in Bagram (Afghanistan) reeked of human waste. That was the first impression I had. There were no toilets, but instead detainees were crowded into the same cell, and at the end of the cell lay a two-hundred-liter metal barrel that served as a bathroom. The barrel was cut crosswise in two halves in order to facilitate access. Using the bathroom was quite an experience. The first time I used it, the barrel was half full, and the waste was a thick mixture of different colors. The different shapes and sizes swam in the water the detainees used to clean after taking care of business. Being shackled, hands and feet, didn’t make the job any easier. Just imagine sitting on a toilet that is slightly more than two feet above the ground and about two feet in diameter. Add to that the awkwardness of moving and pulling one’s clothes down with shackles on, with hundreds of other detainees watching close by.

I emerged from the time capsule in Jordan and was put in isolation, where I couldn’t see or talk to any other detainees for several days. It was

necessary for my captors to extract as much information as they could from me while I was still most scared and broken, lest I draw any consolation from being put in with the general population. And if you think that isolation might be better than the general population, think again! I had to urinate on the cell floor, where I slept.

It was a salvation-like moment, and my savior was CIA agent Michael, a young man of German descent who felt cultural affiliation with me and thus allowed me to be housed with the other detainees. He thought it would be good for me to join the group but insisted I should be shackled, unlike anyone else in my group.

I saw Omar Deghyes, a young man from Libya about my age, who was eating some MREs at the entrance to one of the cells, two or three cells away from me. In front of the cells sat a group of American soldiers, who were busy eating what looked like energy bars while preparing their own MREs non-stop. I thought it was a party, and that Omar was inviting me to join. I almost asked the guard next to me to offer me some food too. It didn't take me long to realize that Omar was being compelled to eat because he was at the verge of collapse after many days on a silent hunger strike. He looked very skinny and weak, and the guard was watching him closely and ordering him to eat. As to the guards, it was normal for them to snack all the time, with no particular reason or occasion. I was fortunate that I didn't follow my instinct and try to be cute.

The holding pens had weird names such as Dar es Salaam, Nairobi, and USS Cole, obliquely referencing historical U.S.-African encounters. I found myself automatically bearing the responsibility of some crazy demented man who decided to blow himself up in Nairobi or Dar es Salaam, killing scores of unsuspecting and innocent people. I kept to myself and refused to tell people where I was from, for fear some might have been planted by the interrogators. I was sick and tired of prison, and I was ready to go back home.

Going back home was not on the menu for me, as it turned out. A few days later, I was readied to be shipped to a place heretofore-unknown to me, along with another thirty-five detainees, twenty-one of whom were fellow Africans. It was a stark reminder of how many more Africans before us had blazed that trail and found themselves illegally kidnapped and imprisoned in a colonial Caribbean enclave they'd probably never heard of.

The only African detainee I spoke briefly with before we boarded the plane was my countryman Mohamed Lemine, known by the number ISN 706. I wasn't sure at first that he was a Mauritanian, because we only said a few words as we passed by one another in the corridor. The rules prohibited detainees from talking among themselves. Later on, on Oscar block, we would know each other even though we couldn't see each other. The cells are separated by metal sheets; Alpha block had thirty cells divided evenly on each side of the corridor.

I could hear some of the detainees, if they were close and loud enough. As I woke up the next day, I could see my Sudanese co-detainee Mustafa Ibrahim recounting his experience from the front of my cell. It was the first time we had been able to talk after so many days of familiar silent faces. We

could only guess at everyone's identities, and we naturally based our assumptions on stereotypes.

Mustafa brought energy and laughter to the otherwise sad and dark block. He told us about having almost died of hypothermia on the plane and how, when he arrived in Gitmo, they had had to resuscitate him. They put him in a room and used some kind of hose that had fire at its end. He was frightened by the sight because he thought it was a torture session. He couldn't speak to negotiate his way out of it, and he was only watching in fear at the way he'd been treated. To his relief, no one meant to harm him at that point. Actually, they saved his life and put him on the block after "processing" him. I had not been able to hear or see anything that was happening on the plane due to my blindfold and earplugs. Americans failed to appreciate the fact that African detainees come for the most part from a hot climate and are more prone to hypothermia than, let's say, the Afghani detainees. My cell was facing Mustafa, and together we read random books that were offered by the library, mostly Egyptian short novels and the biography of the Syrian writer Ghada Al Samman.

The first time I met Sami al-Hajj was in the Lima block at the end of 2002 or the beginning of 2003. We were both moved to the Mike block after that in February of 2003, the block where they put "high profile" detainees, hardly a positive designation. Sami was a cameraman for the news station Al-Jazeera; he detailed his journey in the book *Prisoner 345*, written and published after his release. Sami and I shared our stories with each other, and we laughed about ourselves and where life had led us. Sami's family already knew where he was, while I gave any phone number I could remember to detainees scheduled for release, in the hope that they could tell my family where I was. Sami brought me up to speed in news matters. So much, it seemed, had happened since my kidnapping and what was effectively a kind of "burial" of my social existence from my family and friends when I was imprisoned in Jordan's Mukhabarat jail. In exchange for news, I started to share lessons in Arabic grammar, the Qur'an, and French with other detainees. No one was interested in German but, in return, I received lessons in English, Pashtoon, and Urdu, because I really loved to hear other detainee's stories. I know so many!

There were many of us Africans in Guantánamo. Upon further reflection, it occurs to me that what united most us was language. Arabic was the *lingua franca* of the camp. The mother tongue of the majority was Arabic, and virtually everybody was of the Muslim faith, with some understanding of Arabic. *L-heja al-baydha'* (white vernacular) was the language of choice that everybody spoke and understood, no matter their origin. The differences between Arabic dialects were not as stark as, say, German dialects. A German from northern Germany would have a hard time understanding anything a person from southern Bavaria said without effort. But, with this "white vernacular" Arabic, after a few days or weeks, most of us could easily understand each other. I met two French citizens: Nizar, who was born in Lyon to a Tunisian family, and Imad, whose father was of Moroccan origin. Imad spoke perfect Arabic, but I spoke French with Nizar at the beginning because he

struggled with Arabic. Jemal from Uganda was a gifted rapper, and he used to entertain us on the block. In the beginning, he and I couldn't carry on a conversation because my English was very basic, plus he spoke very quickly and with an unfamiliar accent.

The atmosphere in the block was somber, and only few detainees dared to break the silence and talk about their experiences. Everyone viewed his neighbors with suspicions. I was the star, par excellence, and not for good reason. But, by and large, most detainees were left alone once they had arrived and had been allowed to take a break from their excruciating trip. This courtesy gesture was not extended to me. I was taken into interrogation non-stop, every day, and sometimes more than once. "Seven-Six-Zero, Reservation!" was the chorus in the block. I occupied the very last cell on the left for someone entering the block, which gave me time to see everyone on my way out and when I came back. I could partially see the skinny faces, peering through the tiny piece of tempered glass that only revealed a blurry picture. I could read suspicion and fear. I could read how everyone was happy about the fact that they had never met me in their previous life. Fear represented a seemingly vengeful state that was out to get the "Muslims" and the "oppressed."

Ironically, both ignorance and knowledge helped me to be more optimistic than the average African detainee. This knowledge was acquired during my student years in Germany, where I learned that law was the supreme leader in the country and everyone has to subscribe to it. But most of all, I recalled the first article of the German Federal Republic's constitution almost as a kind of mantra: "Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar. Sie zu achten und zu schützen ist Verpflichtung aller staatlichen Gewalt." This a shining example of Western democracy, spelling out one's rights in no uncertain terms. In English, it means something like, "Human dignity is inviolable. Respecting and protecting it is an obligation of all state institutions." It made me feel safe, knowing that I was innocent. However, my ignorance of the special American legal and penitentiary system proved costly. Back in Mauritania before my kidnapping I was never really afraid to face the U.S. justice system. The cliché that all Western countries act the same way couldn't have proved to be more wrong. A Mauritanian Hassaniyah proverb, القياس اضيع [which can be roughly translated as "Likening can be misleading"], comes to mind in this instance. For most African fellow detainees, who had never lived under a democratic regime, the type of human rights violations that took and continue to take place in Guantánamo are commonplace in Africa. As a Mauritanian, I learned that the U.S. President and his henchmen are the law, and if you wish to live in peace you should get out of their way.

The broader context of political conflict and political violence in Africa is often omitted from narratives about Guantánamo and the so-called "War on Terror." The raging civil war in Algeria (1991–2002) was a major force that inspired many young Algerians to leave the country, looking for a better life, mostly in Europe but also in Pakistan and in Afghanistan. It's worth noting that the civil war was triggered by the Algerian military canceling elections

and the subsequent victory of the Islamist party, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in the local elections of the early 1990s. The Algerian government felt threatened to the point that it canceled elections in 1992, which led to a civil war primarily between the FIS and the military-led government. The Islamists were divided, with a small Salafi minority completely rejecting participation in the elections, which they saw as a Western tool of domination. Instead, they sought to establish an Islamic state.

These North African Islamists saw in the Afghani *jihad* an example to follow, when shoeless Afghans forced the Soviet Empire to its knees in Afghanistan. It was a simplistic analysis that ignored the massive help from the United States and its Gulf allies, who channeled people and money through Afghanistan. One can hardly blame highly motivated young people, who had felt humiliated by a regime that betrayed the hopes and dreams of the Algerian revolution, disrespecting the blood shed during the anti-colonial war. Their closest model for democracy was that of France, the former colonial power that had itself oppressed and denied the same democratic representation and equality to the Algerian people that it claimed to embody in its national motto of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*.

However, the overwhelming majority of Islamists wanted to participate peacefully in the political process, which had dire consequences. As someone who followed the process with mixed feelings, I can say that the FIS did not present a mature narrative that would assure power brokers, inside and outside of the country, of their capacity to ensure good governance. As a matter of fact, there were two parallel and different narratives of Abbassi Madani and Ali Belhaj, co-founders of the FIS. It seemed as if the FIS wanted to cater to the most extremist young Algerians. The FIS, in my mind, never aspired to democratic ideals, nor did it appear open to other political actors who had opposed the military autocracy for so many years. The FIS initially succeeded in winning the votes in the local elections in 1990, but I doubt that the party could have maintained public approval over time. I must admit with a heavy heart that everything stank after the Iranian revolution. Many people feared the 1990 elections would be the last transparent elections before an Islamist dictatorship replaced the military. Because of this, foreign countries, especially France, supported the military dictatorship, as they preferred the known undemocratic authorities over the unknown Islamist parties. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't.

The anti-democratic current of the Islamists saw itself vindicated and presented the strongest evidence for recruiting reluctant young people. Americans were ambivalent about this whole thing. I remember FBI Special Agent Bill telling me that he totally understood and stood by the Algerians who were fighting the government, and that what he would also feel disenfranchised and angry if the United States government canceled or ignored his vote. Wasn't the lack of proper political representation one of the reasons why the colonies rose against the British Crown's "Taxation without representation"? However, the Algerian regime made an offer the U.S. couldn't refuse, to the detriment of legitimate political opposition and the fight for freedom and

democracy. Algeria offered its service to the U.S. in the form of convert and illegal kidnappings, renditions, and interrogations, and that was apparently enough for the U.S. to turn its back on its purportedly democratic ideals.

Let me move forward to the end of 2016 at Guantánamo, when I was approved for release along with a Moroccan detainee, Abdul Latif Nasser, and an Algerian detainee, Sufian Barhoumi. I hadn't seen them since 2003, when I was taken away from the general prison population and selected for so-called "Enhanced Interrogation," a euphemism for torture. Neither Abdul Latif nor Sufian made it to the plane that we were supposed to share to transport us close to our home countries. Abdul Latif's paperwork wasn't signed in time because the bureaucrat in charge of ensuring its processing apparently slept in, and Sufian was turned down by then-Secretary of Defense, Ashton Carter. It's so saddening to me that the decision to release a detainee can be so easily vetoed. Both Abdul Latif and Sufian had been cleared by all relevant U.S. agencies when the Periodic Review Board determined by consensus that "continued law of war detention of the detainee is no longer necessary to protect against a continuing significant threat to the security of the United States." This is not an independent court of law, but the government itself deciding with no pressure whatsoever, yet these two gentlemen still linger in prison, without any conviction or charges leveled against them. Days before I left, I was moved to Camp Six, where I could communicate with them through intermediaries and by shouting from one block to the other. We all were so excited about the rumors of our being the next in line to be transferred. We lived on hope and rumors, but mostly rumors, and we were fantasizing about our flights out of the Bay and who was going to be dropped off first in his home country; I knew it wouldn't be me, because Mauritania was the farthest away.

It's time to expose the complicity of our African leaders and the dishonest and double discourse the U.S. offers the world at large. The American Department of State (DOS) lists these African countries as human rights violators and had been urging them on many occasions to respect human rights and adhere to the rule of law, while at the same time, the DOS uses these countries to commit human rights violations themselves. This is not some inter-agency conflict, where the DOS is fighting for Human Rights while the CIA is doing its job taking down the "bad guys." When Egyptian cleric Abu Omar was kidnapped from Milan by the CIA, it was secretary of state Colin Powell who gave the green light for him to be rendered to Egypt for torture and interrogation, knowing full well that Egypt had a record of torture and violence in its prisons.³

What is going on? Is this a mockery of human rights and democracy? Do they laugh at their own accurate reports about these countries when they sit with our leaders and talk about the real stuff? I do understand and appreciate comedy, but this one is badly written and performed. I don't know exactly how one should proceed, but things need to change, and we in this part of the world need a new contract and a new *modus operandi* that puts humans first before political power and money. My story is also the story of the many other

Africans who shared my experience at Guantánamo. Many of them are still not free. It is imperative that those of us who have the freedom to speak and act should find a way to put an end to this charade.

As we say in Arabic:

القريبى ذوى وظلم

(The wrongdoing coming from your own is more bitter than the strike of an Indian sword.)

Notes

1. *CIA Torture Redacted*, <https://www.therenditionproject.org.uk/documents/RDI/190710-TRP-TBIJ-CIA-Torture-Unredacted-Full.pdf>.
2. <https://www.therenditionproject.org.uk/prisoners/diiki.html>.
3. “Former CIA officer faces extradition to Italy over Abu Omar kidnapping,” *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/apr/25/former-cia-agent-sabrina-de-sousa-extradition-italy-abu-omar-kidnapping>.