

Longtime U.S. ally Mubarak also CIA torture partner

By Nat Hentoff

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As the inflamed mass movements to topple Hosni Mubarak crested, high Obama officials pushed the autocratic ruler to hand over his authority, with the support of the Egyptian military -- to Omar Suleiman, long Mubarak's closest aide, former head of intelligence and recently elevated by him to the vice presidency. Despite the enormous coverage of this rebellion, how many Americans know of Mr. Suleiman's extensive partnership with our CIA's "renditions" of terrorism suspects to be tortured in Egypt? Many eventually disappeared.

An especially revealing introduction to Mubarak's chief torturer is Jane Mayer's "Who is Omar Suleiman?" (www.newyorker.com, Jan. 29). For years, this author of "The Dark Side" (Dick Cheney's scenario for our extrajudicial war on terror) has been a leading fact-based investigator of the Bush-Cheney torture policy as well as such other Obama suspensions of the Constitution as his drone planes' targeted killings of suspects who have never been brought before a judge. At least one American is on that list.

"Suleiman," she writes "was not squeamish. ... Each rendition was authorized at the very top levels of both governments." These classified kidnappings began during the Clinton administration.

And, as Stephen Grey reports in "Ghost Plane," Suleiman, long well-known in Washington, "understood English well, was an urbane and sophisticated man."

One particularly brutal torture session led to then Secretary of State Colin Powell's most acutely embarrassing international experience: The prisoner, Ibn Sheikh al-Libi, was captured by Pakistan and then rushed by the CIA to Egypt, where intelligence chief Suleiman was in charge of his torture.

As Mayer writes: "They locked him in a cage for 80 hours. Then they took him out, knocked him over, and punched him" and so thoroughly abused him that he gave up and lied that the Iraqis had mass weapons of destruction, thereby "documenting" the justification for the United States going to war against Iraq.

Given this false information by the CIA, Secretary of State Powell confidently repeated it in his pivotal address to the United Nations in February 2003. So it could be said that torturer Suleiman was a key factor in precipitating our invasion of Iraq.

After it appeared evident that there had been no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and Saddam Hussein had been fatally retired, al-Libi admitted that he had indeed lied. As Mayer reports:

"When the FBI later asked him why he lied, he blamed the brutality of the Egyptian intelligence service." Moreover, in Michael Isikoff and David Corn's book, "Hubris," al-Libi added to his explanation of why he had lied: "They were killing me. I had to tell them something."

It's as if al-Libi has been subject to "coercive interrogation" in a CIA black site somewhere. None of the CIA torturers in those secret prisons as well as U.S. torturers of detainees by our special forces -- let alone those way up high in our government who had ordered these savage violations of American and international law -- have been punished.

As for the absence of any Egyptian government reprimanded of Mubarak intelligence chief Suleiman, a reader of Jane Mayer's report, signed "Mirjam," posted Jan. 29, 2011, as a response on the corollary impunity of official American torturers:

"Every time I read about these renditions, the CIA and torture it literally makes my skin creep. I do not understand how Americans can keep their distance from this subject. How nobody at the top was punished? How it is possible to pretend, without even blinking an eye, that anyone which such deep moral flaws is suitable to rule any country??!!"

As I write this, our President Obama has again personally urged President Mubarak, whom he calls "a patriot," to make the right decision and leave office to allow the start of democracy in Egypt. These remarks by Obama, reports the Feb. 5 Daily News, "came amid reports that U.S. officials floated a plan to turn over power now -- not in September -- to a transitional government headed by Vice President Omar Suleiman." This has now happened, with Suleiman offering "concessions" to the opposition.

In any case, torture may still be deeply entrenched in the Mubarak-Suleiman regime, as it may still be in Obama's with CIA Director Leon Panetta continuing "renditions." The American public is still not being told who is being "rendered" and why.

For another indication of Suleiman hard at work -- with the full approval of Mubarak -- here is what happened to Australian citizen Mamdouh Habib after he was captured in Pakistan, "under U.S. pressure to be tortured" there and then rendered "by CIA operatives to Egypt."

Intelligence Director General Suleiman took personal control as "Habib was repeatedly zapped with high-voltage electricity, immersed in water up to his nostrils, beaten, his fingers were broken and he was hung from meat hooks." ("The Torture Career of Egypt's New Vice President," Stephen Soldz, Common Dreams, Jan. 30); "Egypt: Exchanging a Dictator for a Torturer" (Unsilent Generation Feb. 2).

Then, "to loosen Habib's tongue, Suleiman ordered a guard to murder a gruesomely shackled Turkistan prisoner in front of Habib -- and he did with a vicious karate kick." Habib confessed and "His 'confession' was then used as

evidence in his (American run) Guantanamo trial," after being transferred to American custody.

On Jan. 28, 2011, the "Voice of America" said of torturer Suleiman: "He earned international respect for his role as a mediator in Middle East affairs and for curbing Islamic extremism."

But not for curbing Egyptian and CIA extremism.

The Egyptians have been surging in the streets for their own liberation from dictator Mubarak and his key enforcers such as Suleiman. They have also shaken other Mideast dictators. If real-life democracy does become rooted in Egypt, at some point will torturer Suleiman be brought to trial? If he is, can that lead to some of our torturers, all the way up the chain of command, being brought before at least an independent due-process commission equipped with subpoena power?

Or is that asking too much of this constitutional republic?