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Torture Is Often a Temptation and Almost Never Works

By JAMES GLANZ

T was two months before Sept. 11, 2001, in an Arab country that will remain unnamed, and the Iraqi subject of the interrogation was not talking. So the translator, a 6-foot-5, iron-jawed local man with scars from the wars he had been in, turned to the interrogator.

"Do you want me to soften him up?" the translator asked.

No one in the room had any doubt about the import of those words, said Marc Garlasco, an intelligence officer who was present. But instead of continuing with the perfect B-movie script and allowing the stonewalling Iraqi to be beaten up or humiliated, the interrogator blew up.

"Are you nuts?" he shouted.

After calling a break, he asked the translator if he had ever revealed secrets under torture when he had been captured. Never, the translator said. "Listen," the interrogator lectured him. "Torture doesn't work."

Torture can make people talk - but experienced interrogators know that they usually can't tell if what the subject says under torture or humiliation is true, because the subject will say what he or she thinks will end the torture. Novice interrogators are seldom aware of how compromised information gained under duress is likely to be.

It now seems apparent that after 9/11, scenes like the one in the Arab interrogation room became more rare. Even before the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, at least according to human rights organizations, questionable interrogation practices verging on torture were taking place at bases in Afghanistan and the American detention center at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba.

Whatever the truth of the other allegations, the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib shouts out for an explanation: how could ordinary American soldiers and civilian contractors inflict such degradation on other human beings?

One answer, say psychologists, former intelligence officers and military analysts, may lie in the nature of torture itself: Torture and humiliation is a landscape without boundaries, a terrible slope that even the most practiced interrogators can slide down once they allow themselves to apply the slightest physical or psychological pressure.

Yehezkel Lein, head of the research department at B'Tselem, an Israeli human rights organization, said that after Israel began curbing the use of physical pressure in the late 1980's, it initially limited its use only to so-called ticking time bombs - prisoners with knowledge of an imminent attack. But he said that B'Tselem research showed that even under those guidelines, roughly 80 percent of detained Palestinians ended up being subjected to physical techniques like severe sleep deprivation, sitting in painful positions for hours and worse.

"It was impossible to draw a clear line," Mr. Lein said. He cited the practice of grabbing a prisoner's shirt and shaking him. He said the shaking sometimes became so violent that several prisoners died.

"You can try to put it onto a continuum," said Dr. Rona M. Fields, a psychologist and senior researcher at the Center for Advanced Defense Studies at George Washington University's engineering school.

But, she added, "as soon as the person is intimidated, it's torture."

Dr. Fields gave another example of how torture in the wrong hands can quickly spiral out of control and waste lives. After the coup that brought Gen. Augusto Pinochet to power in Chile, military interrogators who used "grotesque and terrible" torture often killed their subjects before learning anything of value, Dr. Fields said, forcing the country to turn to the better-trained police. Employing methods she said they had learned from C.I.A. and Defense Department manuals, the police were better able to keep their subjects alive until they revealed information, which they sometimes did.

The debate over what went horribly wrong at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq has oscillated between the assertion that the soldiers and contractors who mistreated prisoners were, in a twisted way, having a good time, and the possibility that they were acting under orders.

"Maybe it's a 'Lord of the Flies'-type situation where basic social norms break down," said Mr. Garlasco, who is now a senior military analyst at Human Rights Watch, an independent rights monitor. If so, the low-level soldiers were being led by what Boaz Ganor, director of the International Policy Institute for Counterterrorism in Israel, called "their own weird satisfaction, which has nothing to do with counterterrorism." Judging by other cases of abuse, the reservists and civilian contractors at the prison were probably poorly supervised, Dr. Fields said. That, she said, could have left them "responsible for judgments and choices for behaviors that in civilian life they would never be entrusted with because they are not capable of that."
Another possibility is that they were ordered by higher-ups to "soften up" the prisoners, in the words of the iron-jawed translator. But if that was true, then those in charge were if anything even more unskilled at real interrogation than their subordinates, the experts say.

"You've got to be able to count on the quality of the information you're obtaining," said Michael Baker, a 16-year veteran of the C.I.A. who is now chief executive of Diligence Middle East, a private security company that is working in Iraq. "And once the prisoner is being tortured, how do you rely on what he's saying, because people will do anything to make the torture go away," Mr. Baker said.

In other words, torture doesn't work.

The Geneva Convention against torture prohibits "any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession."

Even that careful bureaucratese is "obviously very subjective," Mr. Garlasco said. Legal guidelines set forth by the Army Intelligence Center and Fort Huachuca in Arizona, where government interrogators are trained, are more explicit: "Soldiers cannot use any form of physical torture, including food deprivation, beating, infliction of pain through chemicals or bondage, or electric shock. Soldiers also may not use mental torture, such as mock executions, abnormal sleep deprivation or chemically induced psychosis."

But somehow, none of the guidelines worked. As the world waits for the outcome of investigations into the Abu Ghraib abuses, the message may be that only the most highly skilled and disciplined interrogators have a chance of keeping themselves on the crest of the frightful and dark slope called torture.