



OUR VOICES

The U.S. Has a Torture Problem Too



by Nadine Naber

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Living in Chicagoland while originally from the Middle East and North African (MENA) region, I am compelled to view police violence in Chicago through a global lens. This past week, the [Chicago Alliance against Racist and Police Repression](#) (CAARPR) released its report about the more than 600 individuals incarcerated through police torture and frameups, many serving life sentences. Chicago's torture survivors have names and faces. [Antonio Porter](#), [Frank Ornelas](#), [Nick Escamila](#), [Tamon Russell](#), [Matthew](#)

Eschevarria (who caught long-term COVID-19 in prison), and **Rosendo** (suffering from a life threatening heart disease) and **Juan Hernandez** are among them.

Reading the report's data about the cruel forms of mental or physical torture each survivor endured led me to think of our beloved family friend, **Alaa Abdel Fattah**, the Egyptian blogger and activist who was one of the key voices of the Egyptian revolution of 2011 for bread, dignity, and social justice. Since 2011 (except for a few short months), Alaa has been **held** in a high security prison and **tortured** on false charges as part of a **U.S.-backed** Egyptian government strategy to crush dissent. In October, 2021, he faced yet another charge of spreading "fake news." Alaa is not alone. He is among **thousands of Egyptian** activists who are languishing in **Egypt's prison industrial complex**.

One of the differences, though, between torture in Chicago and Egypt, is that U.S. presidential administrations and the corporate media have been condemning the latter, while remaining silent on the former. A quick google search pulls up thousands of sensationalist articles—"Syria's torture prisons," "**Chilling Torture in Iraq**," or "**Horrific Torture in Yemen**—about torture in the MENA region. The repetition in these stories helps affirm the great racist stereotype that while the U.S. is a free country, Arab and Muslim societies are the most oppressive in the world.

It is no coincidence that government and media rhetoric also cover up the **role of the U.S.** in backing regimes like Israel and Egypt whose police and military systematic torture people in MENA. Deceitfully, the Biden administration, while publicly condemning torture in Egypt, promised **1.2 billion** to Egypt's President Sisi in military aid and named Sisi a "vital partner" in its November "**Strategic Dialogue**."

As a child, my family used to watch elected U.S. officials criticize authoritarian repression in the Middle East on TV while they supported violent military and economic interventions that devastated entire communities in the same breath. We watched the U.S.-back Iraq's dictator Saddam Hussein in order to thwart Iran in the 1980's only to later destroy Iraq, and Saddam, in the name of "**democracy and human rights**." Living between two worlds, we understood the U.S.' **call** for "human rights" in MENA more as a justification for military and economic intervention than as an expression of genuine support for the freedom of our people.

The devastation the U.S. caused in the lives of our Iraqi kin broke our hearts. In addition to the destruction of Iraq and the half million people who have died, **Professor Mozhgan Savabieasfahani**, an environmental toxicologist at the University of Michigan, reminds us of the continued effects of the Iraq war. The U.S., for instance, left without cleaning up the **military pollutants** that remain in U.S. military junkyards. They continue to poison Iraqis long after the bombs.

George and Laura Bush justified the war through the rhetoric of helping Iraqis, **especially women**. Yet on the **ground**, pregnant women continue to birth babies with disabilities at alarming rates, baby teeth and bone

marrow are now full of depleted uranium, cancer is skyrocketing, and the uranium released in the air continues to contaminate food, air, and water—all of which disproportionately burden women.

I work with a collective of mothers of police torture survivors in Chicago who call themselves **Mothers of the Kidnapped** (MOK). Their stories further convince me of the deceitful nature of U.S. rhetoric about defending human rights. Beyond justifying global wars, this rhetoric turns public concern towards stereotypical places like “the Middle East” and away from the ongoing denial of human rights and democracy, especially for working class people of color, here in the United States.

Despite the conviction of infamous torture cop Jon Burge in 2010, many Chicago police officers are still engaging in the torture of suspects for the purpose of obtaining confessions. This continues now, with state law requiring the video recording of all interrogations. Some of these cops are trained in these violent **interrogation techniques** by an **Israeli** military that hypocritically spreads **propaganda** about “violent” “abusive” Arabs and Muslims while violating **Palestinian human rights**.

In Chicago, the police seemed to have moved from physical torture alone to a pattern of psychological torture, following the **Reid Technique** developed by CPD Detective John Reid. It was used most notoriously in the case of the **Central Park Five in New York City** but also to wring a “confession” from the son of April Ward, a member of MOK. April’s son **Mickiael Ward** was charged with the 2013 murder of high school athletic cheerleader Hadiya Pendleton in Chicago. In many, perhaps most cases, forced confessions are the only evidence used to convict people.

Like Laila Souief in Egypt, the mothers of Chicago’s torture survivors have been fighting a cruel justice system that obstructs due process every step of the way. CAARPR, with **MOK**, turned **their database** over to the Cook County State’s Attorney Kim Foxx with **the demand** that she vacate the convictions and dismiss the charges. They also demanded that **Governor J. B. Pritzker** pardon torture survivors.

Waiting endlessly to be reunited is the most egregious human rights abuse Chicago’s torture survivors and their loved ones seem to endure. MOK members report that once their children finally get their cases back into court for review, they face a pattern of more delays caused by alleged illnesses of prosecutors, police witnesses, and judges; incomplete paperwork; or unexplained court cancellations. Survivors consistently face officers who simply don’t show up to court, lose paperwork, and repeatedly postpone court dates.

Illinois is the only state with a commission created by state law to examine cases of police torture, although it is known that such cases are common throughout the country. Yet even after the **Illinois Torture Inquiry and Relief Commission** refers a case to court for review, torture survivors and their loved ones endure an average of five years before it is resolved. Some mothers have spent decades waiting for judges to abide by court decisions ordering new trials for their children. Torture survivors face the suppression of tortured confessions

and judges regularly send subjects back to prison for life, as in the cases of Gerald Reed and Clayborn Smith.

This is why the voices of prison abolitionists in the MENA region and in the US have been echoing one another in their analysis that policing and prisons were never meant to be just. I hope these voices will continue to grow in unison until, as scholar-activist Angela Davis puts it, prisons, police, torture, and all forms of violence are obsolete.

Dr. Naber has served as an editorial board member of the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP).



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