

Human Rights Violations in Arab Prisons

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That some Iraqi prisoners were mistreated at the Abu Ghraib Prison in Baghdad is now a fact of history. Soon after these violations of human rights became known to the United States Administration, they were properly dealt with. Unfortunately, some sections of the American media keep on harping on the topic. Every now and then, the New York Times for example, drags up some “event” that had taken place at that prison, and heralds it to its shrinking readership. One cannot escape being aware of that kind of propaganda parading as news.

So it was rather interesting to discover a more honest assessment of the whole affair, in an international online Arabic daily. I have in mind the March 13, 2006 issue of *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* that published an article with this headline:

Human Rights Abuses in Arab Prisons.

I hesitate to share all the shocking information that appeared in this article. Some of the torture methods are beyond description. Nevertheless, I decided to translate the article and comment on some of its parts, not to minimize what happened at Abu Ghraib, but to underline the fact that some of our print and broadcast media have lost their balance, and therefore forfeited all credibility. So, here are excerpts from the article written by an Arab columnist for an Arab readership.

We have all been talking about the human rights violations that took place at Abu Ghraib Prison. Unquestionably, those American jailors were ugly and very repulsive by any human standards, in their treatments of the prisoners. But what about the human rights violations that have occurred in Arab prisons, and have been perpetrated by Arab hands?

*I am holding in my hands a summary of the First Yearly Report for 2005, regarding conditions at the prisons and the treatment of prisoners in nine Arab countries. It was published by the **Organization for the Reform of Criminal Law**. The main points of the Report were printed in *Al-Watan* newspaper of Saturday, 11 March 2006.*

At this point I would like to warn the reader to take a deep breath, and sit calmly as he, or she, reads the Report. I have purposely censored certain terrible descriptions that appeared in the Arabic original text.

The report highlights the fact that the Arab World has become a place of expertise in the various means of torture. Here are some of the methods used to torture prisoners: 'beating them with canes or cables in various areas of the body; placing a prisoner

inside a rubber tire so that he becomes unable to move while he is being tortured. Not to forget the use of electric shocks, and the so-called 'German chair' for torture. In this horrible method a prisoner is placed on a moving iron chair that causes unbearable pressure on his back-bone, resulting in partial and temporary paralysis, and sometimes permanent. One should not forget to mention the resort to burning prisoners with cigarettes, and torturing them in water!'

The columnist concluded his comments on the Report:

According to the report, the Organization for the Reform of Criminal Law aims at bringing about a reformation in the legislative structures and penal laws of the Arab world, protecting and defending human rights by building bridges of cooperation between the ORCL and the local branches in every Arab country. Its goal is to bring about a complete change in the concept of penal philosophy that would be in harmony with the dignity of human beings in accordance with International Law.

Taking account of the report of this young Arab organization, and accepting the veracity of its findings, we may conclude that the inhuman conditions as described in its report, would result in exacerbating the violence that grips the Arab world. Such prisons cannot but breed souls that, upon their release, are filled with feelings of hatred, victimhood, and desire to inflict vengeance upon society. Rather than becoming instruments for the reformation of their inmates, these prisons engender souls that are bent on committing more crimes.

How I wish the above article could have appeared on the pages of such dailies as the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, and the Chicago Tribune; as well as being read by the men and women at NPR and PBS in their daily accounts of world news!

What added credibility to the shocking revelations of the article about the **Human Rights Abuses in Arab Prisons** were several responses that were published in the daily. The vast majority agreed with the columnist. Here are some examples:

From Egypt came this Email. The writer related a fable to underscore his conviction that those who torture prisoners will receive a terrible punishment in the hereafter:

A woman ended up in Hell because she had imprisoned her cat. If that was the punishment of a person who had maltreated an animal, what would be the punishment of those who torture their fellow-human beings?

An Arab living in Turkey wrote:

The Arab media have been preoccupied with the beatings that took place at Abu Ghraib; but they have forgotten, or purposely neglected those tortured in Arab prisons, as well as the mass graves of Saddam Hussein, and those of other Arab regimes. The media did that to cause the Arab street to forget their real problems.

An Iraqi having found refuge in Monte Carlo wrote on the 13th of March the following:

Iraqis have experienced various means of torture. As an Iraqi, let me share my experiences for the welfare of my Arab brothers. We have experienced horrific torture in Saddam's jails. It is not even possible to compare them with conditions at Abu Ghraib. In all honesty I must say that American and British prisons [in Iraq] are more humane than those existing in Arab lands. Arab prison guards know nothing but a culture of inhuman treatment and the torture of their prisoners.

The article in ***Al-Sharq al-Awsat*** and the comments of some of its readers, revealed how necessary it is for a truly responsible media in the West to focus their attention on such subjects as the ***“Human Rights Abuses in Arab Prisons”*** rather than endlessly resurrecting those abuses that took place in Baghdad. After all, these were temporary, while those going on right now (at least in nine Arab countries) are very real and under-reported!