

Is the US torturing Abu Zubaida?

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Two recent “terrorist alerts” in the US have raised serious questions about the type of treatment being meted out to top Al Qaeda leader, Abu Zubaida, captured in the Pakistani city of Faisalabad on March 28. Zubaida, a 31-year-old Saudi-born Palestinian, who suffered several gunshot wounds during his arrest, was handed over to American agents and has been held in an undisclosed location.

Based on intelligence provided by Zubaida, US authorities issued a broad warning on April 19 that banks on the US east coast might be subject to attacks. Four days later, a second alert, also attributed to information from Zubaida, added supermarkets or shopping malls to the list of possible targets.

The official warnings triggered a great deal of speculation in the US media over the value of the information being divulged by Zubaida and the methods being used to obtain the details. Assorted anti-terrorist experts, former intelligence officials and military figures made the obvious point that Zubaida, who is described as Osama bin Laden’s no 2, his chief recruiter and chief of operations, was unlikely to readily provide information to his interrogators.

Several implied that Zubaida was duping US authorities. Robert Blitzer, for instance, former head of the FBI’s counterterrorism division, told the *Los Angeles Times*: “You can’t believe a word this guy says. He is clearly an enemy of the country and he is going to provide disinformation, send us down the wrong path and cause us to burn untold resources.” Another theorised that Zubaida was manipulating his interrogators to send out coded messages to Al Qaeda operatives.

Others claimed that US intelligence sources were engaged in an elaborate ruse aimed at smoking out Al Qaeda operatives. “If it seems choreographed, it probably was,” one FBI agent said of the sudden burst of official statements sourced to Zubaida. “You insert

some information into a criminal investigation and see what happens.” The aim purportedly was to watch for any unusual subsequent email, phone conversations or contracts.

Apparently stung by the criticisms, unnamed American officials attempted to set the record straight. “This is a work in progress,” one anonymous official told the *New York Times*. “Some of what he says is hard to confirm or deny, but other information is proving to have some accuracy to it. Some of it is proving to be quite valuable. These people who tell you that he’s just playing us, that’s being excessively cynical.”

Another article in the *Washington Post* entitled “Interrogating Abu Zubaida: Fact? Fantasy? Manipulation?” quoted other unnamed officials who insisted that appropriate caution was being exercised and information was cross-checked against other sources. “We take nothing that people like Zubaida say at face value,” said one official, who, according to the *Post*, “expressed frustration with speculation about the Abu Zubaida warnings offered by uninformed people”.

But the obvious question arises: if the information is corroborated and accurate, how is it being obtained? All of the newspaper accounts either ignore the issue altogether or offer rather wild speculations.

Jerrold Post, for instance, a psychiatrist and expert on the psychology of terrorists who worked for the CIA for 21 years, made the obvious point in the *Washington Post*: “It doesn’t make sense. It’s unlikely he will have crumbled in the face of interrogation, having spent years in that organisation.” But then he postulated that Zubaida and his close associates had concocted detailed stories prior to their capture to later fool interrogators with consistent but false accounts.

It is not necessary, however, to invent such elaborate rationalisations. The most straightforward explanation—one that fits all the disclosed facts—is that

Zubaida has been systematically tortured ever since his capture.

An article in the *New York Times* confirmed that Zubaida's interrogation was being carried out by counterterrorism specialists from the CIA and FBI, working alongside a battery of psychologists and "other specialists". The US military openly admitted the use of "non-violent means of coercion," including sleep deprivation and "a variety of psychological techniques designed to inspire fear".

The extent of such techniques is indicated by their use on the American detainee, John Walker Lindh, who, with a bullet still lodged in his leg, was interrogated for more than week in Mazar-e-Sharif under the influence of morphine and valium. He was then flown to a makeshift prison at the US base near Kandahar, stripped naked, blindfolded and tied to a stretcher and kept in a metal shipping container for two days in freezing conditions. The bullet was only removed two weeks after his capture when he was transferred to a US warship.

It is worth noting that the prosecutors in Lindh's case, and thus the US military, insist that his brutal treatment in no way constituted torture. Moreover, if such methods were utilised on a 21-year-old American, when there was the likelihood of later scrutiny by a US court, then Zubaida's interrogators would have no compunction whatsoever in using far harsher techniques.

The *Washington Post* disclosed in March that the CIA uses a well-established technique to avoid US legal impediments and torture targetted individuals. Known as "rendition," the suspects are detained and shipped to third countries such as Egypt and Jordan where torture and extra-judicial killings are legally accepted methods. The process, which bypasses normal extradition proceedings, is overseen by the CIA and has been used both before and after September 11.

An article in *USA Today* revealed that US interrogators have been checking information provided by Zubaida against facts divulged by Ibn Al Shaykh Al Libi, another senior Al Qaeda official, who is being held in Egypt. The article noted: "The Egyptians might be using interrogation techniques on Al Libi that are unavailable to US questioners, a Defence official said. US interviewers are not allowed to use physical coercion or 'truth drugs', the official said."

It is quite possible that the "undisclosed location" where Zubaida is being held will turn out to be Egypt or another country where US interrogators or their local counterparts can freely use the full range of coercive techniques. Or, given the willingness of the Bush administration to openly flout other provisions of the Geneva Convention, it may be that the same methods are being used in a prison cell closer to home.

Whatever the location, the most likely explanation for the flow of information from Zubaida is the application of barbaric forms of torture.



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