

Norway: “anti-terror” investigation exposes US-backed torture in northern Iraq

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18 August 2004

Norwegian authorities have dropped terrorist charges against exiled Iraqi cleric Mullah Krekar after investigators discovered that the main evidence against him, provided by the US, was obtained through torture.

Krekar, an Iraqi Kurd who has been living as a political refugee in Norway since 1991, had been the subject of a seven-month investigation by Norwegian police. He had previously been acquitted of terrorism charges by Norway’s highest court in April 2003, but was charged again in January after US authorities passed on supposed new evidence of his association with suicide bombings that had been planned in northern Iraq in 2003 by the Islamic militant group Ansar al-Islam.

Norwegian police travelled to Iraq to re-interrogate the key witness who had testified against Krekar to US agents while being held by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The PUK is closely allied with US forces, and its leader Jalal Talabani serves on the US-appointed Iraqi Governing Council. However, it turned out that the new “evidence” had been extracted using torture on prisoners held by the PUK.

According to Brynjar Meling, Krekar’s attorney, one of the main witnesses against his client said that he had been a PUK prisoner last year when he was interrogated by US agents. The witness, Didar Khalan, said that after being tortured over a weeklong period by the PUK he had told his tormentors what they wanted. He claimed that, among other abuse, his arm was broken during one beating, and that he was made to stand in a freezing room without clothing and sit on blocks of ice.

During his subsequent questioning by Norwegian police this year, Khalan took the opportunity to refute his previous “confession” to having worked with Krekar in planning the suicide bombing, telling them

that he had, in fact, never met Krekar.

According to human rights charities, including Human Rights Watch, the PUK has a record of subjecting its prisoners to mistreatment and torture. Despite this the US authorities have continued to treat the “evidence” handed over by the PUK as good coin. A US State Department official told a June 15 press briefing: “We have no independent confirmation of his allegation of abuse while under detention by Patriotic Union of Kurdistan forces. Any credible allegations of mistreatment by US authorities would, of course, be investigated, and if evidence of criminal behaviour were to be found, the responsible individuals would be held accountable.”

On July 15, a Norwegian state prosecutor announced that all charges had been dropped against Krekar for lack of evidence and fears that witness testimony in Iraq was coerced. Krekar had been detained in custody for seven weeks prior to his acquittal.

The US has pursued Krekar, one of the main religious and ideological figures of Ansar al-Islam, since mid-2002. Prior to this Ansar al-Islam had been in talks with their long-time rivals the PUK, talks that seem to have broken down due to Ansar’s unwillingness to support a US invasion of Iraq.

Following this failure to recruit Ansar to its campaign to conquer Iraq, Washington swung into action against Krekar and his organisation. The cleric was detained in Holland for three months from September 2003, during which time Krekar claims he was questioned by US agents. At this time Jordanian authorities also demanded his extradition on drug-smuggling charges.

Meanwhile Ansar al-Islam was presented by the Bush administration as the “missing-link” between the Saddam Hussein regime and Al Qaeda. The New York Times conveniently uncovered evidence of Ansar being

linked to Osama bin Laden during an investigation by the newspaper into Al Qaeda in Afghanistan in January 2003. The PUK provided the other end of the “link”, claiming that it knew of Ansar al-Islam’s connections with the secular Baathist regime. The following month Ansar was placed on the United Nations list of terrorist organisations.

Returning to Norway after his detention in Holland, Krekar was arrested following an intervention by US Secretary of State Colin Powell in January 2003.

After meeting with Norway’s Foreign Minister Jan Petersen, Powell proclaimed that the US did not want people suspected of terrorist activities “going out and taking part in new actions”. The Norwegian government then moved against Krekar, with the cleric being investigated by police and Norway’s special Economic Crime Unit (Oekokrim) and charged with terrorist offences, while government ministers, including Prime Minister Bondevik and Immigration Minister Erna Solberg, issued statements against him.

Following Krekar’s acquittal by the Norwegian Supreme Court in April 2003 the US continued its pursuit. During a visit to Norway in September, US Attorney General John Ashcroft reiterated that the Bush administration was concerned that Krekar be dealt with.

After an initial reluctance to support the US invasion of Iraq without a UN mandate, the Norwegian government moved quickly to re-establish itself as a US ally in the so-called “war on terror”. As well as its willingness to hound Krekar at the behest of Washington, the Bondevik government sent 150 Norwegian troops to aid the occupation of Iraq. Although the deployment in southern Iraq has come to an end, Peterson has indicated the government’s willingness to continue Norwegian co-operation with the US in Iraq and has refused to rule out future deployment.

The Norwegian authorities continued to pursue Krekar until July 2004, when his legal team discovered that key witnesses against Krekar had been tortured into giving evidence against him.

According to Krekar’s lawyers, Norwegian investigators failed to reveal any evidence linking Krekar to Al Qaeda—the central claim of the US for the past 18 months. They have described the case as “a political trial”, with the Norwegian police under pressure from the US. Meling has gone on record as

saying that the US persecution of his client was not based on any verifiable evidence, and that claims that Krekar and Ansar al-Islam represented a “missing link” between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda had been “created” with the help of the PUK in order to justify the war.

Meanwhile, in Denmark allegations of prisoner abuse by members of the 500-plus deployment of Danish soldiers in Iraq have led to the recall of all top officers including the battalion commander, the head of military police, the head of military intelligence and the chief legal officer.

The Danish army is investigating complaints from several of its own soldiers about the use of stress positions and water deprivation against Iraqi prisoners by Danish interrogators at Camp Eden in southern Iraq. As well as the two senior officers, a lower ranking intelligence officer and several troops are being investigated.

Denmark’s Defence Minister Soren Gade, told Danish television, “There may be doubt about the leadership’s judgement and I have therefore decided to send home the commanders.” Later an armed forces spokesman Lt. Col. Hans-Christian Mathiesen told Reuters that there would be an investigation involving several Danish personnel.

It is the second case to have leaked out alleging prisoner abuse by Danish forces in Iraq. In May, a Danish soldier was officially reprimanded for assaulting an Iraqi prisoner with the butt of a rifle.



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