

Revelations of “systemic” torture by British military

Paul Mitchell
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The *Guardian* newspaper has obtained access to training manuals that detail the interrogation techniques used by British military personnel in Iraq. In an exclusive report published Monday, the newspaper quotes from the documents, which are described as an “Introduction to Interrogation and Tactical Questioning”.

According to the *Guardian*, the documents advocate the use of “threats, sensory deprivation and enforced nakedness”. *Guardian* reporter Ian Cobain writes that the training manuals urge interrogators “to provoke humiliation, insecurity, disorientation, exhaustion, anxiety and fear in the prisoners they are questioning, and suggest ways in which this can be achieved”.

A PowerPoint slide dated September 2005 recommending the use of enforced nudity to humiliate detainees says, “Get them naked”. According to Cobain, the documents advise that prisoners be kept naked if they do not obey commands.

Blindfolds and ear muffs are among the equipment listed in the training manuals, along with plastic handcuffs. Interrogators are advised that they can legally deprive prisoners of sleep. While prisoners must be allowed eight hours rest out of every 24 hours of questioning, this does not have to be 8 continuous hours, according to the manuals seen by the *Guardian*.

All these techniques are in contravention of the Geneva Convention of 1949. The Convention prohibits the use of “moral or physical coercion” and “outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment”.

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) originally released the documents for the inquiry into the death of Baha Mousa. An Iraqi hotel worker, he was tortured to death in British custody. The documents were never used as evidence and have not been published or released on the inquiry’s website. The *Guardian* acquired them under a Freedom of Information Act request.

All of the documents were created after 2005 and indicate that these techniques were in use after Baha Mousa’s death at the hands of British troops in September 2003. Some of the documents were written after January 2008, when a

British military inquiry claimed that the abuse of prisoners was not endemic.

The *Guardian* revelations follow a preliminary high court ruling in July this year which found that “There is an arguable case that the alleged ill-treatment was systemic, and not just at the whim of individual soldiers”.

The ruling came after the court had seen evidence presented on behalf of 102 Iraqis held as prisoners by the British military. A legal team led by Birmingham solicitor Phil Shiner claims to have evidence of systematic abuse of detainees. It includes the cases of 59 Iraqi civilians who say they were hooded by British troops. Eleven claim to have been subjected to electric shocks, 122 claim that ear muffs were used for sound deprivation, 131 say they experienced sight deprivation through the use of blackened goggles, 52 say they were deprived of sleep, 39 allege they experienced enforced nakedness, and 18 claim that they were forced to watch pornographic DVDs.

In addition, a number of cases have emerged in which British troops allegedly killed Iraqi civilians. The case of Baha Mousa is one of the few that ever reached court. One soldier was jailed for a year after pleading guilty to inhumane treatment of Baha Mousa, but six other soldiers were acquitted.

Most cases have never reached court. Abdul Jabbar Musa Ali, a 55-year-old head teacher, was detained by soldiers of the Black Watch and allegedly kept hooded and beaten. Other prisoners claim that his screams stopped abruptly. When his family retrieved his body they found it to be extensively bruised.

Tanik Mahmoud was dead on arrival at a US Air Force base. It is alleged that he was kicked to death in a British Chinook helicopter by members of a Royal Air Force regiment who had detained him at a checkpoint.

Ather Karim Khalaf is said to have been shot and beaten at a British checkpoint after his car door swung open and struck a British soldier. He subsequently died in hospital from his injuries.

Nineteen-year-old Said Shabram drowned after he was

allegedly pushed into the Shatt-al-Arab waterway by British troops. Another man, Munaan Baili Akaili, was rescued by passersby.

The rescued man said, “Said and I were very afraid and started begging the soldier to stop. The soldier continued to push us towards the edge. He seemed to get agitated that we would not jump in, and at one point I thought he was getting so angry he would shoot us. The soldiers were laughing. The soldier with the gun suddenly pushed us into the water”.

The training manuals that the *Guardian* has obtained are consistent with a mounting body of evidence pointing to the use of torture and inhumane treatment as a matter of routine by British forces during the occupation of Iraq. British treatment of prisoners seems to have been consistent with that employed by US forces at Abu Ghraib and other detention centres.

The training manuals form part of courses run by F Branch, which is part of the Joint Services Intelligence Organisation (JSIO). The JSIO’s headquarters are at Chicksands in Bedfordshire, about an hour’s drive north of London. The Labour government deployed the JSIO into Iraq, where top secret Joint Field Intelligence Teams (JFIT) operated inside detention camps under its aegis.

British military and intelligence were clearly aware that the techniques described in the manuals were illegal under international and British law, since they insisted that the JFITs keep their activities secret. In some cases even the commanding officers of the facilities were not informed.

There is a long history of such brutality by British interrogators. According to the *Guardian*, the documents describe how the military developed its interrogation techniques over decades of counter-insurgency campaigns in Borneo, Malaya, South Arabia, Palestine, Cyprus and Northern Ireland.

They stress the need for interrogators to find discreet and “nasty” places, such as shipping containers, “out of hearing” and “away from media”, to conduct interrogations. Experience in other operations had shown the importance of avoiding bad publicity, the manuals explained. They warned that problems had been created by “our own side” during operations in Oman, where Britain fought two wars in defence of the sultan before deposing him and installing his son.

Prisoners, one manual says, should be “conditioned” before questioning in order to provoke “anxiety/fear”, “insecurity”, “disorientation” and “humiliation.” Interrogators are advised to probe the detainee’s anus and search behind his foreskin.

Another recommended technique is “positional asphyxiation.” Baha Mousa is believed to have died as a result of this technique. It involves a soldier kneeling on the

prisoner’s back and slowly tightening the hood that has been put over his head. Baha Mousa’s body also had 93 separate injuries, consistent with a severe and sustained beating.

The Ministry of Defence responded to the *Guardian* report by claiming it was “committed to fully observing the law at all times”. It stated, “Torture and abuse of detainees are prohibited and anyone suspected of committing acts of torture or abuse will be investigated and dealt with appropriately”.

The MoD statement added that “some past practices and training methods were not compliant with acceptable standards and [it] has been working hard to remedy deficiencies where identified”.

The MoD’s assurances are not credible. It was only through years of persistent effort to extract information from the Ministry of Defence by lawyers acting for Mousa’s family that the latest documents ever came to light.

There is a consistency between the recent revelations in the *Guardian*, the evidence from WikiLeaks, and the Baha Mousa court case, all of which document systemic practices involving the abuse and torture of prisoners. These crimes have been sanctioned and overseen at the highest levels of the British military and political establishment.

While the *Guardian* has acted as whistleblower, the liberal media has little desire to expose the full extent of the crimes involved. At the same time as it published the revelations about the secret training manuals for interrogators, the *Guardian* gave space to former foreign secretary Jack Straw to appeal for the Human Rights Act to become a part of the British national character.

Straw was in the Labour government that joined the illegal US invasion of Iraq. If the same criteria were applied here that were applied at the Nuremberg Tribunal for Nazi war criminals, Straw and many of his colleagues, including former prime minister Tony Blair, would find themselves in the dock.



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