

Obama and torture

4 January 2013

As the Obama administration prepares to begin its second term, with its liberal and “left” apologists speculating on prospects for progressive action, events have once again made clear that the Democratic president is continuing and deepening the crimes of his predecessor.

In his first four years in office, Obama and his attorney general, Eric Holder, worked aggressively to shut down all investigations into CIA torture and other crimes committed in the name of the “war on terrorism.” It intervened in case after case to quash lawsuits seeking to hold accountable those who had illegally abducted and tortured thousands of individuals. It sought dismissal of legal actions seeking to uncover information about these crimes by invoking state secrecy.

The result of this sordid policy is that the torturers and those who gave them orders, from the CIA interrogators all the way to the White House, have enjoyed complete immunity. This is the foul political climate in which a fascistic film like *Zero Dark Thirty*, implicitly justifying torture and implicating the entire American people in this crime, can receive multiple awards and critical acclaim.

But, as a report this week in the *Washington Post* makes clear, the actions of the Obama White House have not been directed merely at covering up and exonerating the crimes of the past, but of making it possible to continue them on a qualitatively new level.

The *Post* recounts the fate of three men—two of them Swedish citizens and the third a longtime British resident, all of Somali origin—who were detained as they traveled through the African country of Djibouti and thrown into prison cells, where they were subjected to repeated interrogations by US intelligence operatives over the course of several months.

The supposed crime of these secret detainees was supporting al-Shabab, an Islamist militia that has controlled large swathes of southern Somalia. While

the organization has been implicated in no attacks against the US, it has been designated as a foreign terrorist organization by Washington, which has placed bounties on the heads of al-Shabab leaders.

Underlying this designation is the US government’s bid to exploit the “war on terrorism” pretext to tighten American control over Somalia, a strategic territory whose coastline abuts the Bab al-Mandab Strait, the link between the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean through which much of the world’s oil is shipped.

Entitled, “Renditions Continue Under Obama, Despite Due-Process Concerns,” the *Post* article states: “The men are the latest example of how the Obama administration has embraced rendition—the practice of holding and interrogating terrorism suspects in other countries without due process—despite widespread condemnation of the tactic in the years after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.”

Arrested last August, the three men were produced in a New York federal court only on December 21. What had happened to them over the course of the intervening four months was not disclosed by federal prosecutors.

The report cites a 2011 case against another alleged al-Shabab supporter, an Eritrean, who was rendered to a Nigerian jail for US interrogation. Testimony of an American interrogator in his case described how the individual was first subjected to illegal methods of interrogation by a “dirty team” of US agents before being turned over to a “clean team” that read him his Miranda rights against self-incrimination and then sought to obtain a confession that could hold up in a US court of law.

Depicted here is what former Vice President Dick Cheney once described as going over to the “dark side,” a euphemism that encompassed rendition, torture and extra-judicial killings.

The report on the three men charged as al-Shabab supporters comes just weeks after the European Court

of Human Rights issued a stinging decision ruling that the abduction, rendition and protracted “forced disappearance” of Khaled El-Masri, who was grabbed by the CIA in Macedonia nearly nine years ago, in and of themselves “amounted to torture.”

During the years he was held incommunicado, El Masri was subjected to multiple acts of torture, including sodomy, sensory deprivation, physical assaults, forced feeding and denial of medical care. This is the point of rendition and secret detention: to create the conditions for “breaking” a detainee. This was the case under Bush, and it remains so under Obama.

What has changed? According to the *Post* article, an “impasse” with Congress over the fate of the US military prison camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba and barriers to the administration’s proposal to try alleged terrorists in US courts “have led to a de facto policy under which the administration finds it easier to kill terrorism suspects” by means of drone missile attacks, while rendition “has become even more important than before.”

On the same day as the *Post* report, a New York federal judge rejected a lawsuit demanding that the US government make public a memorandum spelling out the Obama administration’s legal justification for claiming the right to assassinate US citizens, including New Mexico-born cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, killed in a 2011 drone strike in Yemen.

Judge Colleen McMahon’s decision amounted to a statement of impotence on the part of the judiciary in the face of the decade-long assault on democratic rights and the gross criminality of the executive branch.

“I can find no way around the thicket of laws and precedents that effectively allow the executive branch of our government to proclaim as perfectly lawful certain actions that seem on their face incompatible with our Constitution and laws, while keeping the reasons for their conclusion a secret,” she wrote.

Once again, the absence of any significant constituency within America’s ruling establishment for constitutional principles and democratic rights is revealed. The US president, Barack Obama, has arrogated to himself the right to subject US citizens to indefinite military detention and order their assassination without charges or trials, on his sole say-so that they are enemies of the state. And neither the

judiciary nor any leading figure in either major party, nor the corporate-controlled media, is prepared to challenge this dictatorial policy.

In the final analysis, this political trajectory is rooted in the historic crisis of American capitalism and its malignant expression in the chasm dividing a financial oligarchy from the working class, the vast majority of the population. The unprecedented growth of social inequality renders democratic rights and core constitutional principles unviable.

Conscious that its policy of imposing the full burden of the crisis on the backs of working people will provoke revolutionary upheavals, the ruling establishment is preparing the framework for a police dictatorship. The working class must make its own preparations. The defense of all democratic and social rights today depends upon the working class mobilizing its independent political strength in a struggle to put an end to capitalism.

Bill Van Auken



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact