

The Mauritanian: 14 years in Guantánamo detention camp—the horrifying reality of America’s “war on terror”

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Directed by Kevin Macdonald; written by M.B. Traven, Rory Haines and Sohrab Noshirvani; based on the book by Mohamedou Ould Salahi

The Mauritanian, directed by Kevin Macdonald, is based on the 2015 memoir *Guantánamo Diary* by Mohamedou Ould Salahi, held for 14 years without charge in the American military’s Guantánamo Bay, Cuba detention camp.

Scripted by M.B. Traven, Rory Haines and Sohrab Noshirvani, the film powerfully exposes the reality of America’s “war on terror.” It lays bare the systematic criminality, including the use of illegal detention, torture and murder, of the Bush and Obama administrations, the US military, the CIA and other agencies.

Through the individual nightmare of Salahi’s decade-and-a-half ordeal, one comes to understand more deeply and viscerally the “volcanic eruption” of American imperialist violence with which humanity has come face to face.

The events chronicled in *The Mauritanian* were set immediately into motion by the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. It should be clearer today than it was two decades ago that the Bush administration took advantage of the outrage produced by 9/11 to launch long-prepared, long-term invasions and occupations of Central Asia and the Middle East.

The September 2001 events also served as the occasion for a frontal assault on democratic rights in the US, including the passage of the 2001 Patriot Act, the proliferation of unchecked spying, “extraordinary rendition,” indefinite detention, torture and military tribunals associated with Guantánamo and CIA black sites, along with the militarization of police agencies and the persecution of Muslims and immigrants.

Mohamedou Ould Salahi, an innocent individual, was tragically caught up in this global maelstrom.

Justifying its conduct on the basis of the September 18, 2001 joint resolution of Congress authorizing President George W. Bush to use force against those who planned and carried out the 9/11 attacks, “the U.S. government,” writes Salahi in *Guantánamo Diary*, “started a secret operation aimed at kidnapping, detaining, torturing, or killing terrorist suspects, an operation that has no legal basis. I was the victim of such an operation, though I had done no such thing and have never been part of any such crimes.”

Salahi was born in the northwest African nation of Mauritania in 1970. An exceptional student, he received a scholarship to study engineering in Duisburg, Germany in 1988. In 1991, he traveled from Germany to Afghanistan to join the *mujahedin* movement, swearing allegiance to Al Qaeda. After the central government fell, he returned to Germany and claimed he had no further involvement with Al Qaeda. He later spent time in Montreal working as an electrical engineer.

Salahi was subsequently detained and interrogated by the authorities of various countries—Canada, Mauritania, the United States and Senegal—but

each time he was released for lack of evidence against him. However, in November 2001, he was asked to voluntarily report to a police station in Nouakchott, Mauritania for questioning, which he did.

The movie opens at this point, as a title explains, “two months after 9/11.” Mohamedou (Tahar Rahim) is picked up by the Mauritanian authorities because “the Americans want to talk to you.” He quickly deletes the contacts in his cell phone and says goodbye to his mother, who is grasping her Muslim prayer beads. He will never see her again.

In his book, Salahi writes: “As to my arrest, it was sort of like political drug-dealing: the FBI asked the U.S. president to intervene and have me arrested; in turn George W. Bush asked the vanishing Mauritanian president for a favor; on receiving the U.S. president’s request, his Mauritanian colleague moved his police forces to arrest me.” What happened to Salahi in his first years of imprisonment we only learn about later.

In 2005, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, criminal defense lawyer Nancy Hollander (Jodie Foster) is asked to inquire into Mohamedou’s situation. He has been accused of being one of the Al Qaeda masterminds behind 9/11, allegedly having fielded a call from Osama bin Laden’s cell phone. Detained for several years, he still has not been charged with anything.

Hollander explains to her law firm that “I’m defending *habeas corpus*, which Bush and [Secretary of Defense Donald] Rumsfeld are gleefully dismantling. ... The US government is holding upwards of 700 prisoners in Guantánamo. We don’t know who they are, the charges against them, and when or if, they’ll ever appear before a judge.” For support, she enlists the help of novice Teri Duncan (Shailene Woodley), and they subsequently fly to Cuba to meet Mohamedou.

Simultaneously, Colonel Stuart Couch (Benedict Cumberbatch), whose close friend died in the 9/11 attacks, is asked to prosecute the case and ensure Salahi gets the death penalty.

When Nancy and Teri meet Mohamedou, he explains that “I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. And because of this they kidnapped me from my home, imprisoned me in Jordan for five months, then a military base in Afghanistan—which was like living in a toilet, by the way—and then brought me here, with a bag on my head and chains around my body. ... They think they can do it because I am an Arab and my country is weak—and I am stupid.”

“It’s like he’s on some screwed-up round the world cruise,” quips Teri. When the attorneys file a lawsuit against the US government, Rumsfeld and Bush, they receive 20,000 pages in redacted material. Confronted by a journalist from the *Wall Street Journal* who suggests she is “a terrorist lawyer,” Nancy responds: “When I defended someone charged with rape, no one thought I was a rapist ... But when it’s someone accused of terrorism—well, people like you think that’s different.”

In one affecting sequence, an emotional Mohamedou recites a Muslim

prayer from his cell. Other voices further down the grim, dank corridor chime in.

Hollander, one tough cookie, loses her temper with Mohamedou when he questions her determination: “The wardens at eight separate penitentiaries send me Christmas cards, okay? ... I’m down three marriages and I was on the wrong side of every one of them. I was a bad mother to my only son. ... Because I’m here, I’m always here. This is my life. So don’t question my commitment to your case.”

The Mauritanian contains chilling scenes of torture, inflicted on Mohamedou at Guantánamo by US military intelligence in 2003 and 2004, crimes for which each and every participant and those who authorized them should be indicted and imprisoned.

Mohamedou’s US captors, pursuant to a “special interrogation plan” personally approved by Rumsfeld, do their barbaric worst. Their methods include long-term isolation, mock executions, sleep deprivation, excruciating stress positions, combined with various physical, psychological and sexual humiliations. The torturers threaten to rape his mother, keep him in a freezer and douse him with cold water, blast his ears with rock music, threaten to kill him and repeatedly beat him.

“Humiliation, sexual harassment, fear, and starvation was the order of the day until around 10 p.m. Interrogators made sure that I had no clue about the time, but nobody is perfect; their watches always revealed it. I would be using this mistake later, when they put me in dark isolation.” (*Guantánamo Diary*)

In Macdonald’s movie, Hollander and prosecutor Couch finally have the opportunity to read the descriptions and transcripts of Salahi’s brutal tribulations. When a military colleague argues that Mohamedou has signed multiple confessions, Couch responds: “He spent seventy days in special projects, tortured. Nothing he said will be admissible ...”

His torturers, Couch goes on, “threatened to have Salahi’s mother shipped to Gitmo to be raped by other detainees. And it’s all documented, it’s systemic, OSD [Office of the Secretary of Defense] approved. Rumsfeld’s signature is on the top-sheet. The whole well’s poisoned. ... What’s been done here is reprehensible.”

Couch adamantly avows that “I’m not going to do this. It’s against the Constitution. It’s against my principles as a Christian. I’m not doing it.” He is called a “traitor” and resigns from the case.

Later, when Nancy meets Couch, she remarks, “You know, I think I figured out why they built the camp down there. We were both wrong. It wasn’t the detainees they wanted to keep out of the courts, it was the jailers. My client’s not a suspect, he’s a witness.”

Eventually Mohamedou has his day in court.

On October 16, 2016, 5,445 days after he drove himself to Mauritania’s national police for questioning and was forcibly disappeared, Mohamedou was released from Guantánamo and flown home to Nouakchott, Mauritania.

The Mauritanian’s postscript informs us that on March 22, 2010, Salahi won his case. Nonetheless, the Obama administration appealed and Salahi was returned to custody for another seven years. Mohamedou’s mother died in 2013 never having seen her son since his arrest. Nancy Hollander’s clients include one of the men still held in Guantánamo, and whistle-blower Chelsea Manning.

Neither the CIA, the Department of Defense, nor any other government agency has admitted responsibility or offered any apology for the abuse that occurred at Guantánamo. Of the 779 prisoners who have been held at Guantánamo, eight have been convicted of a crime, with three of those convictions overturned on appeal.

In this exceptional film, the cast was “involved from the beginning, and enthusiastic to have the story told,” director Macdonald explained in an interview. Rahim delivers an outstanding performance, bringing to life the resilience, fundamental optimism, sharp (and often necessarily dark) sense of humor and deep humanity of Mohamedou Salahi.

Explains Macdonald: “He [Rahim] gave everything to it, and he suffered for it. He wore real chains, his legs were bleeding, and he insisted on not eating for three weeks. He would just eat one egg white day, so I was genuinely very worried. ...”

The filmmaker refers to the charming video clip at the film’s conclusion when the real Mohamedou sings along with Bob Dylan’s “The Man In Me” from *The Big Lebowski*, “which,” explains the director, “is his favorite movie.”

Foster and Cumberbatch add their tremendous skills and sincerity to the project. Cinematographer Alwin H. Küchler captures the claustrophobic horror of the detention center hellhole even as guards or torturers surf in the Caribbean only a short distance away.

In an interview with *Forbes*, the filmmaker talked about Barack Obama not closing Guantánamo—one of his election promises. “Most of the people in Guantánamo—the vast majority—were just farmers. They were people sold down the river by somebody they thought was a friend who accused them of being al-Qaida for \$50,000 or \$100,000. I think something like 80 percent of the people sent to Guantánamo were basically just victims of that.”

This is a terrible story, courageously and honestly told. Macdonald has an interesting filmography, but *The Mauritanian* elevates his stature enormously. This is a work, as it were, on the right side of history. All those involved deserve to be congratulated. If the film is given the opportunity to attract an audience, it will have a measurable impact on public opinion. It will contribute to the general disgust and horror with which America’s crisis-ridden, murderous rulers are viewed by increasingly wide layers of the US and global population. Along the way, *The Mauritanian* serves as a healthy antidote to the torture apologetics of such lying, miserable films as Kathryn Bigelow’s *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012).

In the final analysis, the “war on terror,” initiated by the invasion of Afghanistan, like the criminal war against Iraq, was not about terrorism, but rather part of Washington’s drive for global hegemony and, specifically, US dominance over two major oil- and gas-producing regions on the planet, the Caspian Basin and the Middle East.

What have nearly two decades of direct US intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq wrought? Millions of deaths and millions more driven from their homes, creating the largest refugee crisis in history as the pandemic rages.

In Guantánamo, Mohamedou Salahi spent many sleepless nights, “shivering in my shackles, eating countless tasteless MREs [ready-to-eat meals], and listening to ‘Oh say can you see, by the dawn’s early light’ in an endless, repeating loop.” Through *The Mauritanian*, Salahi, who has no hoods, barbed wire or shackles, no army or gang of torturers, now tells his side of the story.



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