

An interview with Mohamedou Ould Salahi, detained and tortured by the US military, CIA

David Walsh
8 March 2021

The Mauritanian (see accompanying review) is now available for streaming on various platforms. It is essential viewing for anyone who desires deeper insight into the character of our time and the criminality of the American ruling class.

It tells the story of Mohamedou Ould Salahi, a Mauritanian citizen, illegally detained and horribly tortured by the US military, CIA and other agencies. Mr. Salahi, now living in Mauritania, was kind enough to answer a number of questions by email recently.

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David Walsh: I have read *Guantanamo Diary*. You went through a horrific experience at the hands of the American authorities for years. For our readers, could you summarize what happened to you after September 29, 2001?

Mohamedou Ould Salahi: In 2000, I was falsely accused of masterminding the so-called Millennium Plot. That accusation cost me my freedom, in that I was confined to Mauritania and my passport was taken away. After 9/11, on September 29, 2001, I was called to a police station [in Mauritania] and interrogated, including by American interrogators, for around 10 days.

On November 20 of the same year I was taken from my mother's house and jailed for eight days. On the 28th, I was delivered to a special, at least partially Jordanian team that rendered me to Jordan. I was interrogated for eight months and I was given to another team that took me to Bagram [Air Base] in Afghanistan (around July 20, 2002).

On August 4, 2002, I was taken to Guantánamo Bay, where I was tortured and forced to sign a false confession and make many false confessions. I was

never convicted or even charged with a crime. We know from records that at least the US government already knew I was innocent in 2005, but I was only released on October 16, 2016!

DW: In particular, could you describe what was done to you in the summer of 2003?

MOS: I was taken to India Block [at Guantánamo] in total isolation and was subjected among other things to the following techniques:

- sleep deprivation for the first 70 days
- non-stop interrogation shifts
- sexual assault on the three different occasions
- water diet after the seventy days to keep me awake
- prevention of praying or fasting
- beating (my ribs were broken in one beating)
- forced to drink and choke on salt water ...

DW: When did you write your book and under what conditions? How was it preserved and eventually published while you were still being held a prisoner?

MOS: In mid-2005 I learned I was going to get a visit from lawyers. I asked the guards for paper and I started to write down my story, as I saw my lawyers as one window of opportunity. I gave my lawyer a more than one-hundred-page summary I wrote in a hurry. My lawyers encouraged me to write more, which I did, and by September 2005, I finished what I had set out to finish. The government classified everything, and it took over seven years for my lawyer to get a heavily classified [redacted] version to publish.

DW: How did you maintain your sanity in 2002-2004? Or did you, in the short term? You describe having visions and hallucinations? How long did they last?

MOS: Indeed, I kept hearing voices and having night

terror. I kept blacking out during the heavy episodes. I could hear my family as clear as crystal talking and listening to music. I kept saying my prayers in my heart and as soon as they allowed me to read material I started to get better.

DW: How did you win your freedom? Who helped you in this process?

MOS: My lawyers, the press, my family, human rights organizations and civil society.

DW: You describe the cruel barbarism of the US military, the CIA and others, and also incredible confusion, backwardness and stupidity. Is that an accurate picture?

MOS: Unfortunately, some are as you describe.

DW: Were there American soldiers, guards or officials who acted decently?

MOS: Yes, a doctor refused to treat me in heavy shackles when he saw I was in pain. Some guards brought me books and food, acting against the instructions of their superiors.

DW: How did the film *The Mauritanian* originate? Did someone contact you after reading the book? How was the script developed?

MOS: Among other producers, Beatriz and Lloyd Levin contacted my lawyers, and won the contract. My lawyers did everything for me since I was not a free man. The script went through many stages and I always offered my opinion when asked to do so.

DW: Benedict Cumberbatch and Jodie Foster have taken principled positions on certain issues. Did they do the film out of a commitment to democratic rights? Did you have the opportunity to explain your situation to them at length?

MOS: I understand Benedict and Jodie both are very picky about their roles, and I do believe that my story was the main reason why they agreed to participate. I met and talked to Jodie. Unfortunately, Benedict and I only spoke on the phone. He invited me to the UK to meet and promote the movie, but my request for a visa was denied.

DW: Did you observe or participate in the filming process? Was it painful, or cathartic, or both, to relive some of these experiences?

MOS: I could not watch a lot of the stuff because it caused me to remember the dark days. I had to be there to help but it was hard for me, to be honest.

DW: Is the film an accurate portrayal of your

experiences?

MOS: Yes. I would say that Guantánamo is accurately dramatized in the film *The Mauritanian*.

DW: As you know, millions and millions of people opposed Bush's policies, including the invasion of Iraq. In our view, the "war on terror" was a pretext for attacks on democratic rights at home and pursuing the American ruling elite's geopolitical interests in the Middle East and Central Asia. How do you view this now?

MOS: Terrorism is a sham and must not be treated as a crime because it is used to oppress political dissent and to collectively punish innocent human beings. There are laws to punish murders and property destruction, etc.

There is no place in a democracy for the blanket accusation of terrorism. Thank you for your bravery!

DW: What would you say to the American people?

MOS: America deserves better than this! Guantánamo must be closed once and for all, and innocent people who suffered there must be given reparations.



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