

# Trump's CIA director Gina Haspel watched as a detainee was tortured at US black site in Thailand in 2002

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Recent testimony at a hearing at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, revealed that Gina Haspel, the director of the CIA during the Trump administration who retired in 2021, observed the torture of detainee Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri at a US black site in Thailand in 2002.

According to a report in the *New York Times* on Friday, James E. Mitchell, a psychologist who developed the “enhanced interrogation” techniques implemented by the CIA during the Bush administration, testified that Haspel watched while he and another interrogator tortured Nashiri on multiple occasions.

Mitchell said the “coercive techniques” used on Nashiri at the Cat’s Eye prison in Thailand by him and another CIA psychologist John Bruce Jessen, included waterboarding, forcing the detainee into a small confinement box, slapping him and slamming his head against a wall. Mitchell testified that these techniques were used while Nashiri was naked and sometimes hooded.

Although it has been known for years, although never acknowledged by the US government, that Haspel was the top CIA officer in charge of the Thailand black site and that she wrote reports on the interrogation of Nashiri, this is the first time it has been disclosed that she observed the torture sessions.

The May hearing at which Mitchell testified was part of the pretrial phase of the death penalty tribunal against Nashiri. The military judge in the Guantanamo Bay case, Colonel Lanny J. Acosta Jr., agreed with Nashiri’s defense team that, since the CIA had destroyed the tapes of the two psychologists torturing detainees at the Thailand black site, Mitchell should testify on what was done to their client.

The *New York Times* report says Guantanamo Bay defense lawyers “have been asking military judges to

exclude certain evidence from the war crimes trials of accused Qaeda operatives as tainted by not just torture but also cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.”

Although Mitchell said that he had only “a general memory of what was done” and could not provide a “blow-by-blow recollection of any of that stuff,” he did describe three sessions where he and Jessen waterboarded Nashiri. The *Times* report says, “Dr. Mitchell held a cloth over the man’s face and adjusted it to direct the water as Dr. Jessen poured,” during these sessions.

He further testified that “Mr. Nashiri was so small that they thought he might slide out of his Velcro restraints during portions of the waterboarding. To let Mr. Nashiri breathe between pours, interrogators pivoted him 90 degrees, from lying on his back to a standing position, still strapped to a gurney.”

Mitchell then went on to say that Haspel was an observer of these torture sessions, although she did not directly participate in them. Mitchell also never mentioned Haspel by name and only referred to her in the Orwellian language of the CIA as “chief of the base Z9A.”

The use of codes to refer to people such as Haspel, who were serving in secret roles in Thailand and elsewhere, is part of the “choreography of the hearings at Guantanamo Bay” designed to “keep official secrets out of the public record,” according to the *Times*.

The fate of Nashiri, who has been in illegal US detention for nearly two decades without a trial, is a horrific example of the criminality of American imperialism and its repeated flaunting of international law since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The ongoing violations of basic human rights of those detained at Guantanamo Bay have been overseen by both Democratic and Republican Party occupants of the White

House: George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump and now Joseph Biden.

Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, who is of Saudi Arabian origin, was abducted in Dubai at the age of 36 in November 2002 by the CIA's Special Activities Division and accused of orchestrating the suicide bombing of the Navy destroyer USS Cole in Yemen's Aden harbor in October 2000 that killed 17 US sailors.

He was repeatedly interrogated by the CIA at black sites in Afghanistan, Thailand, Poland, Morocco and Romania for an unknown duration before being transferred to the Guantanamo Bay detention camp. In addition to the recent testimony by Mitchell, previous reports have exposed that Nashiri was stripped naked and hooded and threatened with a gun and a power drill to force him to talk while being tortured.

Although Nashiri was accused of being the al-Qaeda "mastermind" behind the USS Cole bombing, who allegedly reported directly to Osama bin Laden, when he was finally permitted to speak in a 2007 military hearing, he enumerated seven false confessions that were extracted from him during torture sessions.

These details were only revealed publicly in 2009, after the ACLU obtained transcripts of Nashiri's Combatant Status Review Tribunal through a Freedom of Information Act request. On February 5, 2009, the charges against him were dropped without prejudice but he was not released. However, the charges were then reinstated in 2011 and the US military prosecution said it planned to seek the death penalty against him.

In May 2011, Nashiri's legal team filed a case against Poland with the European Court of Human Rights, saying said he was held and allegedly tortured in a secret CIA prison north of Warsaw from December 2002 to June 2003 with the collaboration or consent of the Polish government. The high court ruled that Poland had violated the European Convention on Human Rights when it cooperated with the US and allowed the CIA to detain and torture Nashiri.

The European high court also ordered monetary compensation to Nashiri and that the Polish government release details of his detention and that it seek diplomatic assurances from the US that he would not be executed. A similar ruling in the court of human rights was obtained against Romania in May 2018.

Also in May 2018, prior to the congressional confirmation of Haspel as CIA director, American doctor Sondra Crosby, a professor of public health at Boston University, conducted a medical evaluation of Nashiri and

sent her findings to Senator Mark Warner (Democrat of Virginia). She wrote that Nashiri is "irreversibly damaged by torture that was unusually cruel and designed to break him. In my over 20 years of experience treating torture victims from around the world, including Syria, Iraq, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mr. al-Nashiri presents as one of the most severely traumatized individuals I have ever seen."

This incriminating information about the role of Haspel, who was known at the time to have overseen the torture of Nashiri, did not stop Warner and five other Democratic Party senators from endorsing her as CIA director. During her confirmation hearing Haspel concealed her direct involvement in the torture of Nashiri and numerous others and hid behind the official "we cannot confirm or deny" responses of the CIA about what went on in the black sites it operated around the world.

Haspel is also known to have been involved in the 2005 destruction of the videotapes of the torture of Nashiri and others, such as Abu Zubaydah, the first detainee seized by the CIA and tortured following 9/11.

Haspel even defended the torture program during her confirmation hearing before the Senate Intelligence Committee, saying, "I'm not going to sit here, with the benefit of hindsight, and judge the very good people who made hard decisions, who were running the agency in very extraordinary circumstances." Meanwhile, she was permitted to give her "personal commitment, clearly and without reservation, that under my leadership, C.I.A. will not restart such a detention and interrogation program."

Such assurances are worthless. That people such as Haspel, who is today employed as a consultant for the Atlanta-based international law firm King & Spalding, as well as the psychiatrists Mitchell and Jessen are walking around free and not behind bars is proof that the US government is capable of the most unspeakable crimes now and in the future. While Nashiri and nearly 40 other prisoners remain illegally detained at Guantanamo Bay, there is every reason to believe CIA torture is continuing as part of the geostrategic military operations of US imperialism.



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