

Guantánamo Diary Revisited: Mohamedou Slahi seeks out his torturers

Joanne Laurier
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As the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) recently reported, the Mauritanian writer and former Guantánamo torture camp inmate, Mohamedou Ould Slahi, was invited to act as curator this year of Berlin’s African Book Festival, scheduled to take place in August. Slahi’s first novel, *The Actual True Story of Ahmed and Zarga*, is due to be published in Germany.

Slahi was subsequently removed by book festival organizers, following a right-wing smear campaign in the German press and on social media. He was falsely accused of being an “Israel-hater” and antisemite.

Slahi, who was held by the US for 14 years in the Guantánamo hellhole, continues to be abused by his tormentors. He was imprisoned in the notorious Cuban prison after US investigators alleged he was one of the masterminds of the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. He was only released in 2016. Slahi, according to a statistic kept by the detention center, was the “most tortured man in Guantánamo.” No evidence has ever been produced to convict him of any crime.

A strong, moving feature film, *The Mauritanian*, with Jodie Foster playing his lawyer, was released in 2021. It was based on Slahi’s account of his ordeal, *Guantánamo Diary* (2015), an international bestseller.

John Goetz, an American journalist based in Germany who wrote an article for *Der Spiegel* about Slahi in 2007, has created (along with Ben Hopkins) an in-depth and jarring documentary about Mohamedou’s case, *Guantánamo Diary Revisited* (also known as *In Search of Monsters*, and, in German, *Slahi und seine Folterer: Das Leben nach Guantanamo*).

In the film’s opening, Goetz argues that “it’s a David and Goliath story ... the whole weight and power of the American government focused against one individual.”

Slahi 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 Afghan government fell, he returned to Germany and had no further involvement with Al Qaeda. He later spent time in Montreal working as an electrical engineer.

The September 2001 events served as the occasion for a frontal assault on democratic rights in the US, including the passage of the 2001 Patriot Act, the spread of unrestrained 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.

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 Slahi 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.”

In *Guantánamo Diary Revisited*, Slahi—who endured countless forms of abuse at the hands of the nefarious “special projects” team between 2002 and 2004—and the filmmakers attempt to track down his torturers in the military and intelligence apparatus. Slahi makes an appeal to his persecutors to come to tea with him. He explains that, in his view, “Forgiveness is the best form of revenge.” Goetz sets off for the US to try and locate any or all of them.

The first of the four willing to speak to Goetz, a guard who was in his early 20s when he was deployed at Guantánamo, was known to Slahi by the nickname “Master Jedi.” Now living with his family in Kentucky, he is the only interviewee who expresses remorse for his participation in the torture. He now subsists on a cocktail of prescription pills for various conditions, including depression, insomnia and PTSD.

“Master Jedi” tells the filmmakers: “I wanted to reach out and apologize for the things that I did. And if they hurt him in any way, I wanted to find clearance and acceptance. I

can't apologize for the government. That's not what I can do. But I can apologize for myself if that makes any sense."

On the other hand, "Mr. X" claims at first that "the man was not tortured. That man was not harmed ... that's not torture, that's techniques." Mohamedou rebuts this claim: "He put me in the fridge like every night. He shackled me bent—I was bent on the floor like this. Strobe light. They played loud music all night long. He stripped me naked one time and then he showed me pictures ... he insisted I be scheduled 24/7. Then I was deprived of food ... very weak. He broke my ribs. He almost killed me twice. He hurt me a lot." In the end, Mr. X is forced to acknowledge, "Yeah, it's torture."

In *Guantánamo Diary*, Slahi describes Mr. X's role: "It was in Gold Building. Mr. X and his colleague kept hitting me, mostly on my ribs and my face, and made me drink salt water for about three hours before giving me over to an Arabic team with an Egyptian and a Jordanian interrogator. Those interrogators continued to beat me while covering me in ice cubes, one, to torture me, and two, to make the new, fresh bruises disappear. Then, after about three hours, Mr. X and his friend took me back and threw me in my present cell. 'I told you not to fuck with me, Motherfucker!' was the last thing I heard from Mr. X."

A female intelligence officer, Sydney, remains convinced that Slahi is a monster: "He is very charismatic ... He could sell ice to an Eskimo," and has the audacity to accuse Slahi of being manipulative.

"In my favor," responds Mohamedou, "I never killed, I never participated in action." As a further punishment, he is denied a visa to visit his family in Germany.

Richard Zuley is the most aggressive and unrepentant of the four. He is described in *Guantánamo Diary* as head of the "special projects" interrogation group. Zuley has a foul history, as a Chicago policeman.

In 2015, the *Guardian*, on the basis of an extensive investigation, reported that Zuley's "brutal interrogation techniques—prolonged shackling, family threats, demands on suspects to implicate themselves and others" were similar to tactics he had used "for years, behind closed police-station doors, on Chicago's poor and non-white citizens. Multiple people in prison in Illinois insist they have been wrongly convicted on the basis of coerced confessions extracted by Zuley and his colleagues." Zuley's "detective work, particularly when visited on Chicago's minority communities, contains a dark foreshadowing of the United States' post-9/11 descent into torture." The former policeman led Mohamedou's interrogation.

Zuley ends the interview with filmmaker Goetz by nearly punching his cameraman. On screen, he is one unpleasant customer, who gloats that he managed to force a

"confession" out of Slahi.

Guantánamo Diary Revisited is a powerful documentary that reveals Mohamedou to be extraordinarily intelligent and humane—perhaps too forgiving! By contrast, his abusers come off as backward, ignorant or gullible—or worse. At the very least, the organizers of Slahi's torture should all be behind bars.

"Master Jedi" is contrite, at any rate, having come from poverty himself and joining the military at a young age as a means of supposedly creating a better future. He now battles his nightmares by plying himself with medication. "Mr. X" wrestles with his demons by painting pictures about the torture he inflicted on Slahi. Sydney lives comfortably with the notion that Mohamedou deserved his treatment and wishes him dead. Zuley remains a "believer" in the "war on terror."

A May article in the *New York Times* reported that since "2002, roughly 780 detainees have been held at the American military prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Now, 30 remain. Of those, 11 have been charged with war crimes in the military commissions system — 10 are awaiting trial and one has been convicted. In addition, three detainees are held in indefinite law-of-war detention and are neither facing tribunal charges nor being recommended for release. And 16 are held in law-of-war detention but have been recommended for transfer with security arrangements to another country." These bland statistics hardly begin to suggest the quantity of human suffering and despair that this horrible, shameful facility has witnessed.

In a 2021 interview with the WSWS, in reply to the question, "What would you say to the American people?," Mohamedou commented: "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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