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Investigation by Neil Mackay

**ON each** stage of his journey, as he descended further and further into the gulags and torture chambers of the war on terror, Benyam Mohammed al-Habashi was shadowed by British intelligence. The British were there in Karachi when Americans interrogated him and Pakistanis tortured him; they were feeding questions to the Moroccan torturers who took a scalpel to his penis; they stood back and watched as he was dragged to an American torture chamber in Afghanistan and then to the gulag of Guantanamo, where he languishes to this day.

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Al-Habashi is a perfect example of what happens to a person who has been subjected to “extraordinary rendition”. This process sees someone suspected of involvement in terrorism snatched off the streets, usually in a third world country, then flown around the world by the CIA to regimes which indulge in torture, to be questioned on behalf of the US.

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Hundreds of these “rendition flights” come through the UK, and the payback for the UK is that British intelligence gets to question some of the suspects by proxy – the proxy usually being a Middle Eastern torturer.

If al-Habashi was anything, he was naive, according to Clive Stafford Smith, his internationally acclaimed campaigning lawyer, who has been awarded the OBE for his human rights work. An Ethiopian by birth, al-Habashi came to the UK when he was just 16, seeking political asylum. He soon became a popular young teenager in the Kensington area of London, but got mixed up with a bad crowd and wound up on drugs.

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Editor James  
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These two  
men are  
experts on  
rendition: one  
invented it,  
the other has  
seen its full  
horrors

Investigation  
by Neil  
Mackay

In a bid to kick his habit, he decided to take a trip to Pakistan and Afghanistan to get himself together and to see what life under Islamic law was like. Stafford Smith says: “He wanted to see the Taliban with his own eyes to decide whether it was a good Islamic country.”

September 11 happened, and al-Habashi was on his way back to the UK when he was seized at Karachi airport. The authorities said his passport was invalid. Many young Muslims from around the world, who had been foolish enough to take a voyeuristic trip to the Taliban’s regime around the time of the attacks on the twin towers, were seized in Pakistan and Afghanistan in follow-up anti-terror swoops. A lot of them, like al-Habashi, claim they were just curious civilians and devout Muslims, with no links to terrorism.

Al-Habashi was seeking refugee status in the UK and thought of himself as British, so he was surprised when the American FBI arrived at the Pakistani jail to interrogate him. They told him he was a top al-Qaeda operative. Al-Habashi pointed out that he couldn’t even speak Arabic.

He laughed at them, and the Americans told him that if he didn’t start talking, he’d be taken to an Arabic country and tortured. When they left, angry at his refusal to talk, the Pakistanis came into his cell. He was beaten with a belt and had a gun stuck in his chest. In comparison to what he was to go through later, this was nothing.

After his beating, two MI6 officers came into the room. In a statement taken by Stafford Smith in Guantanamo Bay, Habashi says: “They gave me a cup of tea with a lot of sugar in it. I initially only took one. ‘No, you need a lot more. Where you are going, you need a lot of sugar,’ they said.

“I didn’t know exactly what [the MI6 officer] meant by this, but I figured he meant some poor country in Arabia. One of them did tell me that I was going to get tortured by the Arabs.”

This is the first time evidence has come forward to show British intelligence directly co-operating with torture – in this case the torture of a man claiming political asylum in the UK. Previously, the UK was thought only to have offered logistical support in the torture of terror suspects, allowing planes ferrying captives held by the Americans to regimes such as Egypt and Syria where they

would be tortured, to refuel at airports such as Glasgow International.

The Pakistanis then gave al-Habashi to masked American soldiers. A report by Stafford Smith reads: “They stripped him naked, took photos, put fingers up his anus and dressed him in a tracksuit. He was shackled, had earphones put on, and was blindfolded. He was put into a plane.” He landed in Morocco eight hours later.

The Americans told al-Habashi that they wanted him to give evidence against Jose Padilla, an American who has been in custody awaiting trial for three and a half years, accused of planning to plant a “dirty bomb” in the US. They also wanted him to give evidence against senior al-Qaeda figures in captivity, including Abu Zubaydah, the number three in the terror organisation, and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind of 9/11. The Americans told him they believed he was al-Qaeda’s “ideas man” – an accusation that Stafford Smith says is “beyond absurd”.

Al-Habashi was then confronted with the Moroccan torture team. With a macabre flourish, some even wore bondage-type masks to give the torment an added mediaeval flavour. Stafford Smith says: “The British government was complicit in some of the abuse that took place against Benyam, at least to the extent that the government told the Moroccans information that they would then use against him in the torture sessions.” The Moroccans knew about his personal fitness trainer, what grades he got at school, where he studied and where he lived.

Until now, it has never been alleged that British intelligence aided and abetted torture by passing information to interrogators, which was then used to question suspects. Lying in his cell, al-Habashi says in his statement: “I was not of this world. I did not believe this was real, that this was happening to me. It never, never crossed my mind that I’d end up being hauled half-way across the world by the Americans to face torture in a place I had never been – Morocco.”

One guard told him how the torture would happen, saying: “They’ll come in wearing masks and beat you up. They’ll beat you with sticks. They’ll rape you first, then they’ll take a glass bottle, they break the top off and they make you sit on it.”

When he was hit with questions that could only have come from British intelligence, he told his interrogators that the British should ask him the questions themselves. The lead interrogator then said: “Why do you think the Brits sold you out to us so cheaply? Why do you think they sent you here?” An interrogator added: “We have been working with the British, and we have photos of people given to us by MI5”. He was later shown pictures of people suspected by the British of being in al-Qaeda and questioned about them.

Al-Habashi’s statement says: “I realised that the British were sending questions to the Moroccans ... I sought asylum in Britain rather than America because it’s known as one country that has laws that it follows. To say that I was disappointed at this moment would be an understatement.”

Later, the men in masks arrived. First, they just beat him until he vomited. “I awoke on the floor,” he wrote. “I’d pissed on myself.” He was refused access to the lavatory and his food was stopped. The beatings became regular.

One day, he was taken into a room with meat hooks hanging from the ceiling. He was shackled and tied up and beaten again. When he awoke from unconsciousness he could hear screams in the rooms nearby. Soon he worked out why his neighbouring prisoners were crying out.

During his next torture session he was tied up again. His clothes were cut off with a scalpel and he was left naked in front of his captors. His torturer-in-chief told one of the guards: “Show him who’s a man.” The interrogator then began to slice his own chest with the scalpel.

“One of them,” al-Habashi’s statement says, “took my penis in his hand and began to make cuts. He did it once, and they stood still for maybe a minute, watching my reaction. I was in agony, crying, trying desperately to suppress myself, but I was screaming ... They must have done this 20 or 30 times in maybe two hours. There was blood all over ... They cut all over my private parts. One of them said it would be better to just cut it off as I would only breed terrorists ... there were even worse things. Too horrible to remember, let alone talk about.”

In total, al-Habashi spent 18 months in Moroccan detention. He was tortured with the scalpel once a month. He once asked a

guard why they were doing this to him and was told: “It’s just to degrade you, so when you leave here you’ll have these scars and you’ll never forget. So you’ll always fear doing anything but what the US wants.”

It didn’t take long for al-Habashi to start confessing to anything his torturers accused him of: that he’d met Osama bin Laden six times; that he’d suggested targets to bin Laden; that he was close to 25 leading al-Qaeda figures; that he was the al-Qaeda “ideas man”.

The other forms of torture he was subjected to included prolonged sleep deprivation; being drugged; forced to listen to music by Meatloaf and Aerosmith non-stop; being made to watch pornographic films; having naked women paraded in front of him. He says thinking of Jesus and the prophet Mohammed kept him going.

In January 2004, his guards told him he was going home. He was handed over to the Americans and one female soldier was horrified at his physical state. She took pictures of him, she said, in order “to show Washington it’s healing”.

He wasn’t going home, though. He was off to a US-controlled holding centre in Kabul, Afghanistan. There, he was beaten by the Americans and dumped in a cell with a bucket for a lavatory. Urine and excrement were all over his bedding. The cell was pitch black most of the time.

He was hung up from a pole and allowed to sleep only every second day. His legs swelled and his hands became numb. Again he was exposed to loud music, this time Eminem and Dr Dre, and horror-movie soundtracks were also played to him 24 hours a day for two full weeks.

“The CIA worked on people, including me, day and night,” he says. “Plenty lost their minds. I could hear people knocking their heads against the walls and the doors, screaming their heads off.” Al-Habashi says he met a fellow prisoner in Guantanamo Bay who was in the same Kabul jail and has now “totally lost his head”.

Initially, al-Habashi was threatened with torture, but he just asked the Americans to tell him what they wanted to know. “From then on,” he wrote, “they would give me the name and the

story behind each picture [of a suspect].”

They then coached him in how to make a statement against himself and Jose Padilla, the “dirty bomber”.

“They said ‘this is the story that Washington wants’. It was about a ‘dirty bomb’. I was meant to steal the parts and build it with Padilla in New York. I didn’t even know what a dirty bomb was ... I could not understand and got it wrong. They hung me up for 10 days, almost non-stop.”

He was transferred after about four months to the US prison at Bagram air base in Afghanistan. While the prisoners showered, GIs talked about which of them “was worth penetrating”. In May 2004, he was finally shown to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

The Americans then helped him compose his confession. “The story was like this,” al-Habashi says. “First, Jose Padilla and I were meant to have good connections because we both spoke English. We were meant to have been hanging out together. Second, I was meant to have come to Afghanistan with him ... third, I was meant to say that he and I were going to go to the US to explode a dirty bomb ... By then, I just did what they told me.”

In September 2004 he was transferred to Guantanamo Bay. There he was threatened with rape by soldiers. Stafford Smith is now to sue the British government for its part in al-Habashi torture.

“I never thought the British government would allow me to be slashed with a razor blade for a year,” al-Habashi wrote in his statement. “I never thought they would let me be hauled to Kabul for further abuse before my trip to Guantanamo. I want out of this hellish cell [in Guantanamo] and back to my home on the Goldborne Road in London.”

*16 October 2005*

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