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Thirteen years after the September 11 attacks

CIA torture and the “war on terror”

Joseph Kishore

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Today marks the thirteenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The events of that day were followed within days by the proclamation of a “war on terror” by the Bush administration, a so-called war that has continued in different forms to the present.

From the outset, the “war” was a lie. The acts of terrorism, the circumstances and background of which have never been the subject of a serious investigation, were used as a pretext for implementing an agenda, long in preparation, for military aggression abroad and the destruction of democratic rights at home.

More than a decade later, the Obama administration is seeking to repackage this war, using the actions of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), itself a product of US support for Islamic fundamentalists in the imperialist interventions in Libya and Syria, as the *casus belli* for a massive bombing campaign in the Middle East.

The deeply reactionary and anti-democratic essence of the “war on terror” is expressed in the use of torture as an instrument of US policy. Recent events have confirmed that the highest levels of the US government and American intelligence authorized, monitored and sought to cover up the most barbaric forms of torture—acts that are clear violations of international and domestic law as well as the Constitution of the United States.

First is the publication by the British *Telegraph* newspaper of details of CIA “waterboarding,” a method that was used against at least three US prisoners: Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, allegedly involved in planning the September 11 attacks; Abu Zubaydah, an alleged aide to Osama bin Laden; and Abd al Rahim al-Nashiri, alleged to have planned the USS Cole bombing in 2000.

“They weren’t just pouring water over their heads or over a cloth,” the standard definition of waterboarding used by the CIA, one source told the *Telegraph*. “They were holding them under water until the point of death... This was real torture.” According to another unnamed source who is familiar with a still classified Senate Intelligence Committee report on CIA torture, the brutal methods employed would “deeply shock” the population if they were revealed.

This was followed Monday by an announcement from Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein that a summary of the Intelligence Committee report, which was supposed to come out last month, might not be ready before Congress adjourns later this month, preventing the question of torture from becoming an issue in the November midterm elections. Feinstein cited conflicts with the CIA over redactions demanded by the agency, but the delay is politically convenient for all sides.

The report in the *Telegraph* has been ignored by the American media. It has not been mentioned by the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* or reported by major US television news outlets. While the images of the beheading of journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff by ISIS have been reprinted in newspapers throughout the country accompanied by denunciations of the acts as “barbaric,” no similar publicity has been given to the barbaric actions of CIA officials operating under the direction of the American government.

Similarly, the constitutional crisis that erupted earlier this year between the Senate and the CIA has been almost entirely dropped by the media. In late July, the CIA’s own Office of the Inspector General concluded that the agency hacked into Senate computers as the Intelligence Committee’s report on CIA torture was being compiled, yet nothing has come of this open violation of US law and the Constitutional separation of powers.

This silence is not surprising. The crimes revealed implicate not only the Bush administration, but the entire political establishment.

The torture of Zubaydah (captured in March 2002), al-Nashiri (captured in November 2002), and Mohammed (captured in March 2003) was a critical stage in the raft of anti-democratic measures implemented as part of the “war on terror.”

Secret memos were drawn up by Justice Department lawyers to spin a pseudo-legal rationale for torture. This rested on the claim that the “war on terror” gave the president, as the commander in chief, unrestrained powers that trumped all legal and constitutional restraints. These arguments would then be marshaled to justify unending war, domestic spying, military tribunals, indefinite detention of US citizens and non-citizens without charges and other violations of core democratic rights.

The torture memos outlined the legal framework for presidential dictatorship—a framework that has been followed by the Obama administration in expanding the powers of the National

Security Agency (NSA) and justifying the assassination of anyone declared a “terrorist,” including US citizens, without due process.

After taking office, the Obama administration did everything it could to cover up for CIA torturers and for those who directed them. Soon after his 2009 inauguration, Obama announced that the torture programs had been ended, but that there would be no accountability. It was necessary “to look forward as opposed to looking backwards,” he declared.

In November 2010, the Justice Department said it would not prosecute anyone for the destruction of hundreds of hours of taped interrogations (including torture) of Zubaydah and al-Nashiri. These tapes had been viewed by top Bush administration officials, likely including President George W. Bush himself.

Then in 2012, the White House announced that the only two cases it was considering for prosecution would be dropped. These involved the fatal torture of one prisoner in Afghanistan (Gul Rahman, alleged to be part of the insurgency against the US occupation, who died after being shackled to a concrete wall in near-freezing temperatures at a CIA prison), and one prisoner in Iraq (Manadel al-Jamadi, whose corpse was photographed packed in ice after he died at the hands of the CIA in 2003).

Finally, the Justice Department announced earlier this year that there would be no criminal charges brought against the CIA in response to the revelation that it spied on the Senate.

The only person prosecuted in relation to CIA torture was John C. Kiriakou, a former CIA official who was the first to speak openly about waterboarding in 2007. Kiriakou was indicted by the Obama administration in 2012 under the Espionage Act and pleaded guilty of violating the Intelligence Identities Protection Act. He is currently serving a 30-month prison sentence.

What is revealed in these events is a military-intelligence complex which, behind the formal trappings of democracy, engages in criminal actions without any consequences. The various institutions of the state and the major political parties function as representatives of this apparatus and the financial aristocracy it serves. The mass media consists of paid apologists and propagandists who help in covering up these crimes, while seeking to establish the political and ideological framework to legitimize them.

The fundamental target of all these actions is not “terrorism,” but opposition to the policies of the American financial aristocracy both abroad and at home. The barbaric act of torture—which the Enlightenment jurist and philosopher Cesare Beccaria called an act “worthy of a cannibal”—reveals the social outlook and reactionary essence of the American ruling class and the methods it is preparing to use against the working class in defense of its economic system.