

POW Testimony: Iraqi Woman's Story, detained and tortured by US Military

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Nagem Salam interviewed a former Abu Ghraib female detainee who was arrested by US forces on September 14, 2003 and detained in Ba'qouba, Tikrit, Abu Ghraib and the Tesfirat transfer station.

"I'm afraid to give my real name," she said to begin the interview. After being detained in her hometown of Ba'qubah on September 14, 2003 and held in three detention facilities for four months, she preferred to be called Umm Taha.

"The American's picked me up for nothing, so what's stopping them from doing it again?"

A highly educated woman with four children, she had worked for the Iraqi government as a legal investigator. While sitting in her home on September 14 of last year, she received a phone call from an interpreter for the coalition forces who asked her to meet some US soldiers at the governorate building.

"He told me they just needed to verify something and that it would only take five minutes," she said with disbelief, "but when I arrived there the Americans tied my hands and held guns to my head."

Like most Iraqis who have been detained by the US-led coalition forces, Umm Taha was not charged with any crime, nor given a reason for her capture. When she asked why she was being detained, a soldier told her, "We're taking you to Ibel Fanas Airport and we'll tell you there," she said. She was then roughly loaded into a military vehicle and driven to the holding facility.

Once there, she was frisked by a female soldier in front of several men, which is grossly disrespectful of her culture and Islamic religious beliefs. "After this, they yelled at me, pushed me around, put me in an old bathroom, threw me a blanket and closed the door."

The bathroom had four clogged toilets and it was infested with insects, and extremely hot and dirty. "They kept me in there for 22 days and the only time I was allowed outside was to use the toilet since none of them in my cell worked." When she was taken out to relieve herself, she was forced to do so in front of male detainees. "It was a disgrace," she said while looking at the ground.

Aside from humiliating "bathroom" breaks, and getting fluid infusions in the clinic and being forced to clean the mainstream detainee toilets in front of the men, she spent 22 days in solitary confinement in a small room with four grungy, clogged toilets.

"I slept on the ground," she exclaimed. "It was very dirty, very hot and had a horrible stench. I was nauseated and vomiting most of the time."

Her mistreatment didn't end there. While she was given food and water, the food was military MREs, the water was taken from a barrel outside and thus was extremely hot. Due to her deteriorating physical condition, she had to be given several bags of fluids with a dirty IV.

Due to physical nausea coupled with a deep anxiety for her two small children left unattended at home, Umm Taha wasn't able to eat, and grew weaker by the day. "My 12-year-old son and 14-year-old daughter were alone," she cried while explaining her desperate situation, "and I had no idea what would become of them."

Around 3-4 days after her initial detainment, she was interrogated by an MP who referred to himself as "The Scorpion," along with a Lebanese translator named Ija.

"They asked me so many questions," she explained: "Am I Sunni or Shiite? Am I a Ba'thist? What is my name?" Finally, "The Scorpion" accused her of assisting high-ranking Ba'thists by allowing some of them to hold meetings in her home.

"I'm not even a Ba'thist," she said while holding her arms in the air, "I told them I had papers in my purse that proved that I am not in the party and that Saddam killed one of my relatives, but they didn't care."

Umm Taha claimed that the documents the US soldiers refused to look at proved that she had spent 3 months and 10 days in jail because of Saddam Hussein.

Whether Umm Taha was guilty of her charges or not, this does not detract from the fact that the treatment both she and other detainees received at the hands of US soldiers throughout her detention was illegal, immoral and inhumane.

On the fifth day of her detention, several of the US soldiers who transported her to the holding facility were killed in an attack. She was interrogated harshly, verbally, and she was psychologically abused by three men and accused of planning the attack.

Her 11th day of detention at the airport brought another interrogation. "They asked me if I knew General Mahmoud and I told them that is the name of half of the generals in Iraq," she stated firmly. She continued to answer their questions until one of the soldiers threatened her family and threatened to send her to Guantanamo.

To this, she grew very angry and frustrated, and yelled at them, "This is your democracy?"

On the 23rd day, Umm Taha was transferred to a detention facility in Tikrit. "They roughly loaded several of us into a truck with a canopy," she explained. "Then when we arrived, they made us sit there for 3 hours in the extreme heat before unloading us. Inside, they made me kneel on the ground against a wall with my hands on my head for nearly an hour while yelling 'Don't Move!' over and over in my ear."

She grew angry and told of male detainees who had their faces scraped across the floor by American soldiers. When she was finally allowed to move away from the wall, her hands and feet were shackled, which is how they would remain for her 11 days there.

Umm Taha was kept in a tent surrounded by razor wire with another woman and 10 children between the ages of 10 and 14 years.

Her humiliating treatment at the hands of the American soldiers continued in Tikrit. She was forced to use a sieve to separate feces from urine in a latrine waste bucket. "A soldier made me carry the heavy bucket of feces 100 meters, then he poured benzene on it, lit it on fire, and made me stir it for half an hour," she exclaimed in disbelief.

"I pleaded with them because I was still sick," she said quietly while crying, "I told them I couldn't do this, but they made me do it anyway." Afterwards she was given 5 bags of IV fluids until she somewhat recovered, but her paramedic was not allowed by the soldiers to have her shackles removed during her treatment.

The soldier who had refused the removal of her irons told her, "If your little finger touches a soldier, I will consider it an attack on the coalition forces."

Umm Taha tells of what she saw during her stay in Tikrit: soldiers putting their boots on detainees' heads, Iraqis being loaded into civilian cars with Kuwaiti license plates and driven from the prison, and daily humiliating treatment of the general population of the detainees at the hands of the occupying soldiers.

On October 15th, she was transferred to the notorious Abu Ghraib prison, without being told why, and held for three months. She was locked in a cell on the second floor of a building and not allowed to leave it aside from 8 days in the clinic for more treatment due to her deteriorating health.

Her stay at Abu Ghraib would find her witnessing the most horrendous events she'd ever seen, but not before she suffered more humiliating treatment from US soldiers.

"There was a black American soldier named Joyner who refused to take me to the clinic when I was so sick," she said, her anger palpable, "but some Iraqi social workers finally took me there."

According to Umm Taha, Joyner came every morning to beat on the cell bars with a metal rod at 4 a.m., and forced all of the prisoners to yell, "Good morning sir!"

"We were never allowed to sleep through a night," she exclaimed sadly. "He would come at 2, 3 and 4 a.m., and beat on the bars every time. I was always so exhausted."

She told of a woman who was brought in named Afaf Said, who had a black eye and bloody lips. "She was married to a relative of Saddam, and was brought in with her teenage son," explained Umm Taha, "She told me she was put in a wooden cage and beaten."

Across from Umm Taha's cell was a room that the soldiers called, "The Shower." Periodically detainees were brought in, placed on the ground, and had bags of ice dumped on them. "The next morning they were either dragged or carried out by soldiers to be taken to the clinic," she explained.

From the time of her initial detention until she was released, she was never allowed a shower or a change of clothes.

During November, Umm Taha says, many of the detainees in Abu Ghraib rioted against their

mistreatment. As a result, 14 Iraqi men were stripped naked and sacks were placed over their heads by US soldiers, and brought into the corridor beneath Umm Taha's cell. Thus, she had a clear view of the atrocities that ensued.

"The soldiers made them all stand on one leg, then they kicked them to make them fall to the ground," says Umm Taha.

She watched Lynndie England, the female American soldier made infamous in the widespread incriminating photos, dance around laughing while using a rubber glove to snap the detainees on their genitals. "The soldiers also made all the men lay on the ground, face down, spread their legs, then men and women soldiers alike kicked the detainees between their legs," she said quietly.

After pausing, she added, "I can still remember their screaming."

She said that, in addition to this, the detainees were ordered to crawl around the corridor on all fours and make cow and sheep noises as the American soldiers laughed at them.

Umm Taha told of other humiliating and degrading events she witnessed. Detainees would hold their Qur'an out of their cell bars in order to have some light to read with, "And when they did this," she said, "soldiers would hit them on their arms."

She claims that the soldiers distributed bibles written in Arabic to the teenagers being held in Abu Ghraib, of which there were at least 20 in her building.

"Everyday, morning and evening, I saw people tortured and humiliated in the corridor in front of my cell," she cries.

While she was transferred out of Abu Ghraib on November 11th, she ended up spending two months at the Tesfirat transfer station near the Olympic stadium in Baghdad.

Upon her release on January 10, 2004, she was left with nothing as she walked onto the streets of Baghdad with no money and wearing the same clothing she was initially detained in. She was lucky enough to find a taxi, which drove her to Ba'qubah, where some friends paid him for the ride.

"I found out that while my two children who were living with me had been cared for by relatives in a nearby village, the news of my two older children crushed me," she said sadly.

Her 20-year-old son had joined a gang and sold her home after it had been completely looted, while her 21-year-old daughter had married a thief.

"My life is shattered," Umm Taha said while crying once again, "and I can do nothing. There is no compensation."

"I spent 20 years building my life, and now I'm 50 years old," she added, "I can't start over again."

She was simultaneously saddened and angered by both her experience and what is happening in her country today. "We have no present. We have no future," she said, "The occupiers have destroyed our life, and what have we done?"

“We want to leave here—leave our country to the people who ‘liberated’ it,” she added.

After pondering for a moment, before standing to leave the room, she said, “I am like a tree which has been uprooted. I have no roots anymore.”

Nagem Salam is an American journalist of Lebanese descent who has worked in Iraq for a total of four months since the Anglo-American invasion of spring 2003. His articles focus on Iraqis and how the occupation of their country affects their daily life.

Iraq

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