The Man Beneath The Hood Speaks Out: "They tortured me, they humiliated me"

An interview with Shalah el Kaissi, who has become a symbol of U.S. torture

By **MARY RIZZO and PAOLA COPPOLA**

"They tortured me, they humiliated me, they have destroyed me inside. I want that what has happened to me never happens again, that everyone knows what those months in Abu Ghraib were like. This is my new life: to denounce that which is happening in the Iraqi prisons, to defend the rights of those who are inside of them". Former prisoner number 151716 of the prison of shame speaks. The man who has been recognised in one of the photo-symbols of the violence of Abu Ghraib: the hooded prisoner, standing balanced on a cardboard box, his shoulders to the wall, with his arms opened and the fingers of his hands connected to electrical wires.

Ali Shalal el Kaissi, 42 years old, was arrested in October of 2003 in a car park near the mosque of El Amariyah and was imprisoned with the accusation of being part of the guerrilla movement. In the disgusting jargon of his torturers, he was "Clawman", due to a noticeable burn mark on his hand. He was released January of 2004 and, several months later, founded together with another 12 persons, "The association of the victims of American occupation prisons". Invited to speak at the Conference on Iraq organised by the Anti-Imperialist Camp this October, Hajj Ali ("Hajj is a title that is given to those who have made the pilgrimage to Mecca) knows of the American pressures on the visas which have been denied to the other Iraqis. He is still awaiting a response: "I don't know if I will be allowed to attend," he says. In these days he is in Amman, in Jordan, where he has frequented a formation course for humanitarian operators.

When did you see the photo of the hooded man for the first time and did you recognise yourself? "The volunteers of an Iraqi association that deals with human rights showed me the photos taken at Abu Ghraib. It was a shock, a personal destruction. I suffered that which you see in the images: they covered my head, tortured me and made me undergo such strong pressure. They photographed me many times. But others established that that prisoner was me: human rights organisations and even journalistic investigations, one from the American broadcaster PBS, and another from a magazine, "Vanity Fair".

When were those pictures taken? "As soon as I arrived at Abu Ghraib, they took me to the building where the cells were. The second month of imprisonment was when the torturing began and in the same period they also started to take pictures. I wouldn't know how to say with precision the day because I had lost all cognition of time".

What was the hardest moment during your months of imprisonment? "When they put me on a cardboard box, with electrical wires attached to my hands. And when they left me naked for fifteen days. And, in the background on a loudspeaker they made me hear a song in continuation, By the Rivers of Babylon (by Bony M. ed note). I thought I was losing my mind."

What did they ask you during the interrogations? "They wanted to know if I was fighting against the occupation. But also if I knew people in the area in which I lived: I had the impression that they were searching for someone who would become a collaborator, they wanted information. They wanted me to become "their eyes" in the region. But I didn't know anything, and I did not respond to the questions. In that way, they began the torture. They always asked me the same things, they repeated them dozens of times, I think it was a strategy to make me talk. The interrogations were conducted by persons who said to have worked in Gaza and in the West Bank."

After your release did you denounce that which had happened to you? "They released me prior to the scandal of the photos, telling me that my arrest was a mistake. I denounced that which they did to me to the Iraqi authorities, but they sent me away accusing me of having invented it all."

What effect does it have on you to be a symbol of the torture of Abu Ghraib? "That photo itself for me is a torture, and I would prefer to be remembered for other things. But, I want that which has happened to me to never happen to anyone else. That is why I founded an association, that has nothing to do with political parties. I work to defend the rights of those in prison, to give former prisoners material and psychological help, to be a witness to that which is happening in Iraq."

Do you believe that in the last year, after the violence of Abu Ghraib was exposed, the conditions of the prisoners has improved? "No. I believe that when the telecameras enter into the prisons the situation seems better, but I am always receiving emails from family members of prisoners who denounce abuse and violence, and not only in the prisons run by the Americans. In the zone of Al Garma there are also women and children imprisoned, fifteen in all. The worst part of all of this is that in 99% of the cases the prisoners are innocent and they are then released. But in the meantime, in prison they have lost their dignity."

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