

Torture as a response to the 'war on terror' in America and Turkey

Michael Flynn reflects on the acceptance of torturing suspected terrorists in America and Turkey.

Turkey and the United States have long maintained a friendly and abiding relationship. The geopolitical connection is well known; the countries are long-standing NATO partners and the United States maintains several military bases in the country. Both countries are largely defined by their embrace of militarism. This embrace is no quick, perfunctory clasp but a deep soul-hug, one made to assure one's actuality. The Bush Administration's decision to assume a "war-footing" and embark on a military campaign against "terror" and rogue states has certainly been disastrous to the nation's economic and civic health, not to mention security. Although morally and legally indefensible, and strategically foolish, the Bush Doctrine needs to be understood in the context of an American foreign policy that has rarely remained true to democratic principles, and far too frequently engaged its armed forces in acts of barbarism. For close to two decades the United States' expenditures on war-related matters has dwarfed that of every other nation – be they friend, foe, or rogue – and the military-industrial complex Eisenhower worried could "endanger our liberties or democratic processes" has matured into a over-coddled, ruinous hydra with lairs in over ninety nations, a wily creature who wins supporters with taxpayer-supplied boodle and discredits its critics by questioning their love of freedom, their sympathy for terror.

As the nation maintaining NATO's second largest standing army Turkey

is no piker in the war-making game. The Turkish military, writes Hugh Pope, "views itself as a central pillar and guarantor of Turkish independence and sovereignty." Pope also writes, "while Persians may nurture poetry, the Armenians crafts, the Arabs language, and the Jews religion – the core genius of the Turks is military organization." For those who argue that democracy is essentially a civilian-based project, who believe that untidiness and loyal opposition are essential elements of an open society, this presents real problems. European concern regarding Turkey's militarism is often cited as one of the principle reasons underlying its exclusion from the European Union – but this concern is not the sole property of the West. In a recent *Turkish Daily News* column, Orhan Kemal Cengiz, writes:

"Turkey and her military are at a crossroads. The country will wither aim at being a first class democracy, which I believe can lead to being a strong world power, or it will continue to act like an authoritarian regime. Of course, there will always be excuses for our defective democracy: 'enemies'; 'extraordinary and sui generis condition'; 'terror' (although its solution is democracy); 'the danger of Sharia'; and others.

There is no iron law requiring militaristic societies to develop a torture apparatus and program, yet few resist the temptation – and neither Turkey nor the United

States has been abstemious. "Soon after the attacks of September 11" writes Alfred McCoy, "the White House made torture its secret weapon in the War on Terror." The Bush administration has struggled ceaselessly to legalize torture, while simultaneously producing a series of lies ranging from the flyweight to the heavyweight to cover its practice. These lies have been accompanied by the efforts of terrorism pundits to justify, even countenance, torture as necessary to any responsible national security strategy. Alan Dershowitz has been the effective practitioner of this form of punditry. As I read Dershowitz, there are certain situations in which torture, and only torture, can provide the necessary information that will allow the authorities to diffuse the nuclear device and prevent the annihilation of several hundred thousand innocent women and children. In the Dershowitzian melodrama the torture victim is always a Muslim extremist, the civilization saved always Western in location or aspiration.

In Amnesty International's latest report on Turkey's human rights situation the authors contend, "there were continued reports of torture and ill-treatment by law enforcement, although fewer than in previous years. Detainees alleged that they had been beaten, threatened with death, deprived of food, water, and sleep during detention. Some of the ill-treatment took place in unofficial places of detention." Amnesty is also concerned that the recent revision of Turkey's "Law to Fight Terrorism" will "greatly widen the scope and numbers of crimes punishable as terrorist offenses." In both Turkey and the United States to be categorized as a terrorist is to be rendered suitable for experimentation and unworthy of empathy or restraint. As Turkish human rights lawyer Gul Kireckaya argues, "if someone gets taken into a police station they get beaten. If you're on terrorist charges, and for as long as you don't confess, you'll be tortured. And by that I mean electricity, sexual abuse, whatever. This country is like that." This is what Pamuk must have been thinking when he wrote that police

stations constitute the “dark spot on the Turkish subconscious.”

It must be noted that last year Amnesty charged the United States – not Russia, not China, not North Korea, not Iran, – with running the “gulag of our time.” And, as for torture in “unofficial places of detention,” the CIA’s practice of setting up “black sites” where their operators interrogate and kill “ghost detainees” has received almost no attention. Torture is certainly not new to the American scene: it has been a central operating procedure in all of our imperialistic wars; in wars we were losing, in wars we lost. It has long been tolerated in our attempts to influence and control political scenes in the Central and South America, Asia, and Africa and the School of the Americas has provided instruction and moral support for some of the world’s most enthusiastic operators of state torture.

In the wake of the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, the spectre of the terrorist occupies American consciousness. It is only slightly irresponsible to contend that every sentient American carries out their daily affairs accompanied by an elaborated mental profile of “the terrorist,” and an imagined scenario of the next terrorist attack. It is no more irresponsible to argue that, despite the fact that over the past six years the incidents of torture outnumber the incidents of terrorism, the ordinary American has given the matter of torture no more than five minutes’ consideration. This inequity should not be understood solely as a moral failure: Americans have been soused with images of mutilated bodies, demolished buildings, and twisted trains, presented by the mainstream media as victims of Islamacists’ fanatical quest to return the world to a theocratic death camp. Outside the amateur photographs from Abu Ghraib and a few falsified stories on Guantanamo and the torture renderings, the mental ledger on matters pertaining to state torture has been embargoed.

In her fine new book, *Inventing Human Rights*, Lynn Hunt writes that “we must recognize the torturers and murderers and how to prevent their

emergence in the future, all the while recognizing that they are us. We can neither tolerate nor dehumanize them.” As I teach courses on political violence at a college dedicated to educating students interested primarily in pursuing careers in criminal justice and public service, Hunt’s injunction resonates deeply. Many of my American graduate students aspire to positions in the CIA or other arm of the ever-expanding homeland security/ counterterrorism apparatus; others are currently employed in law enforcement. Some of these students are taken with the ticking time-bomb scenarios produced by Dershowitz and others, or the torture scenes on popular television programs, and have stated that they would have little difficulty engaging in torture. In every instance the students making these admissions were young Caucasian men and many of them romanticized the imagined act. I’ve been even more disturbed when several of my Turkish students, all members of the Turkish National Police, have insisted on the effectiveness of torture – in some instances supporting their claims by invoking personal experience. These disclosures occurred during classroom discussions, and although I managed to refrain from publicly shaming, or demonizing, these young men, I was horrified by their casualness with cruelty. I now understand that when a person has, in fantasy or fact, perpetrated or abetted an evil act, and torture is always evil, he must insist on the act’s utility – or its protective, even salvational, value.

Through these and other teaching experiences I have formed a hypothesis that the terrorist and the state torturer are twins, fraternal not identical. When one appears inquiries are instinctually made regarding the whereabouts of the other. Both are organizational men or women, both have migrated into extremism, both view transparency and non-violence as quaint or dangerously naïve. It is not that they reject negotiation, even conversation, outright; they believe that these must accompany, or follow, the violent or coercive deed. Both are deeply, deeply impatient

and hungry for heroic meaning and believe that this requires blood sacrifice. Knowing that they can never achieve authentic autonomy, both are fueled by rage.

On my trip to Istanbul I reread Henri Alleg’s, *The Question*, during a stopover at de Gaulle. Alleg’s account of his experiences of illegal detainment and torture by the French Paras during the Algerian war remains, tragically, required reading – as does Sartre’s preface. I’ll close with Sartre:

“Happy are those who have died without ever having to ask themselves: ‘If they tear out my fingernails will I talk?’ But happier are others, barely out of their childhood, who have not had to ask themselves that other question: ‘If my friends, fellow soldiers, and leaders tear out an enemies fingernails in my presence what will I do?’”

The crimes my students perpetrated, or consider, were or will be done outside my presence. This provides no solace. ■

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