

By Clara Gutteridge

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In fall 2009, I found myself in a Tanzanian hotel lobby, sitting across from Suleiman Abdallah, a lanky man with a goofy smile and a broken tooth. Over the next few days, he would describe in excruciating detail how he had been captured in Mogadishu in 2003 by a Somali warlord and handed over to American officials, who had him rendered via Kenya and Djibouti to Afghanistan for five years of detention and torture. Imprisoned in three different US facilities, Suleiman had been unceremoniously released from Bagram Air Force Base the year before, with a piece of paper confirming his detention as well as his innocence. By the time I met him, he was a free man, living with his mother and attempting to rebuild his life.

I had first come across Suleiman's case in 2006. At that time my work at the British legal charity Reprieve involved searching for information about prisoners who had been "disappeared" by the United States in the "war on terror." Finding people was like assembling a jigsaw puzzle for which one had first to hunt for the pieces. Evidence of Suleiman's existence was available only in fragments: a 2003 CNN report that one Suleiman Abdallah had been captured by Somali and Kenyan security personnel; other media reports suggesting that there had been help from plainclothes American officers and a notorious Somali warlord named "Mr. Tall." A subsequent report placed Suleiman in Kenya, whose security minister announced that he was to be flown to the United States for trial, for offenses related to the 1998 embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.

In fact, Suleiman never arrived in the United States, and none of the authorities ever disclosed his whereabouts. Suleiman joined the growing list of disappeared prisoners held at undisclosed locations with no access to a lawyer, tracked by a handful of global NGOs.

As in other countries caught in US crosshairs following the attacks of September 11, 2001, a bounty system emerged in Somalia in 2002, whereby people were captured by local warlords and sold to the CIA as "terror suspects" in return for cash. In lawless Somalia, anyone without local protection is highly vulnerable; as with many others, the main operating factor in Suleiman's abduction appears to have been that he was a foreigner with few local connections.

As East Africa's quiet war on terror became an increasing focus of my work, Suleiman's file grew steadily more intriguing. Shuttled through the global system of secret US prisons, he remained mostly invisible. His name appeared in the margins of a confession barred by a Kenyan court in 2005 for having been obtained through torture. A 2007 report from West Point suggested that upon capture Suleiman was initially presented to the CIA as Fazul Mohammed, a Comorian terror suspect who was eventually killed by Somali police in Mogadishu last year. Elsewhere, media reports confirmed that as a young man, Suleiman's nickname was "Travolta" because of his love of dancing.

But I still had no idea where Suleiman was being held. My questions probing his whereabouts evoked only blank faces from the former US prisoners I interviewed around the world. Finally, in 2008 I learned "off record" that Suleiman was being held at Bagram by American troops. About a year later, I discovered that he had been released. I arranged to visit him at his home on the Indian Ocean.

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At our first meetings in Stone Town, the crumbling capital of Zanzibar, Suleiman would turn up wild-eyed, refusing food because eating upset his stomach. We soon forged a routine of driving together into the bush, where, he said, he could find peace. On our first trip, Suleiman drove to a derelict underground prison that had once been used by Arab slave traders, a dungeon that presumably resembled the first place he was held in Afghanistan, a secret prison he called "The Darkness."

When Suleiman arrived there, he thought he was back home in Zanzibar, so overwhelming was the distinctive smell of the coral reef. (A clinical psychologist would later explain that olfactory hallucinations are a common response to extremely stressful situations. They are the brain's way of making one think there is something familiar to hold on to.) In fact, Suleiman was thousands of kilometers from his familiar Indian Ocean reefs, in an underground prison in central Afghanistan.

"It was pitch black, with constant noise and not enough food," he recalled. His American interrogators would pour freezing cold water on him and beat him, saying, "We know you are a sea man, but here we have more water than out there in the sea. It never stops raining here."

Suleiman also describes being hung from the ceiling in the “strappado position,” slung in chains so that his toes just touched the floor. He also says American interrogators would take the ablution jug (used by Muslims for ritual cleansing before prayer), and stick its long spout up his rectum.

In mid-2003, Suleiman arrived at Bagram, where he was ordered to stand within the outline of a square drawn on the floor. “From today onward, your name is 1075,” the American guards told him. “You are in our box, and we have five basic rules: One: No talking. Two: Don’t look around. Keep your face down. Three: Don’t touch anything around the cage. Four: Don’t speak. Five: Don’t run.” Later, one of the guards looked at tall, skinny Suleiman and said, “You must be related to Snoop Dogg. Maybe he’s your father.” After this Suleiman’s name at Bagram was Snoop Dogg.

At Bagram, Suleiman never saw the sun, only the constant, blinding lights hanging just above his wire-mesh cage. He says he would look at the birds flying among the rafters, swooping down to peck around his cage. Bird droppings fell from the high ceiling through the mesh. Watching them, Suleiman would think, “Look at me today! I am on the side that the birds ought to be. I am in the cage, and they are free!”

Suleiman was finally released in July 2008. What prompted the decision is unclear. Authorities most likely realized that he had little intelligence to offer and posed no threat. So they let him go.

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In the early days after his release, Suleiman hardly slept. Walking along an empty Zanzibar beach, Suleiman described how he would wake at night, panicking that he was back at Bagram. The only way he had found to ease his anxiety after a flashback was to play with the baby rabbits his family kept in a hutch in the yard. Shrugging, Suleiman explained that his family told him he was crazy for playing with rabbits in the middle of the night.

In the spring of 2010, Suleiman met with an American legal team, along with Kenyan and American medics who specialize in assessing and treating victims of torture. Suleiman had reached out in a plea for help rebuilding his life. The purpose of their trip was to conduct a

medical evaluation and discuss his legal options. Sondra Crosby, a Boston-based medical doctor who works with Physicians for Human Rights, describes the clinical evaluation as “unorthodox, to say the least.”

“We had to conduct the assessment over two days in a hotel room, because in Zanzibar we had no access to clinical facilities,” she recalls. “The litany of abuses described by Suleiman included severe beatings, prolonged solitary confinement, forced nakedness and humiliation, sexual assault, being locked naked in a coffin and forced to lie on a wet mat, naked and handcuffed, and then rolled up like a corpse. It was extremely tough. There were times when both of us clinicians, and the patient, broke down in tears.”

Suleiman’s legal options were few. “There is currently no political or judicial avenue available to a person like Suleiman who has been wronged by the United States,” explains attorney and professor Joe Margulies, author of *Guantánamo and the Abuse of Presidential Power*. “In limited circumstances, like prisoners at Guantánamo, people can seek their release in court, but no one can seek anything more than that.” Under both the Bush and Obama administrations, he notes, “any suggestion that the US should compensate an innocent man for the wrong done to him is a complete nonstarter.”

In theory, Suleiman could have sued one of the regional states—Djibouti or Kenya—for their complicity in his rendition and torture. But weak, slow-moving and overburdened legal systems make this option unlikely to yield any tangible benefit.

Regardless, in the face of such evident suffering, a principally legalistic response felt insufficient. “It was difficult to leave Suleiman after having uncovered such desperate need and having no available resources to alleviate his suffering,” Crosby recalls. So, scattered across three continents, with minimal funding and lacking access to the proper facilities, a support team comprising members of Reprieve, Physicians for Human Rights and the Independent Medico-Legal Unit (IMLU), a Kenyan NGO, cobbled together ad hoc basic treatment for Suleiman. Antidepressants were mailed to him, and an IMLU psychologist made regular trips from Kenya to meet with him. Crosby has continued to keep in touch with him by telephone, and has developed a relationship of trust against significant odds.

Three years following his release from Bagram, despite being found to “pose no threat to the United States,” the stigma of being a former detainee continues to haunt Suleiman. Like former Guantánamo prisoners, whose mobility is forever restricted and who become immediate

suspects during any terror threat, Suleiman, and men like him, are stuck indefinitely with the nebulous label of “terror suspect.” For Suleiman, this is a significant hobble on his recovery. He has been advised not to travel to Kenya, as this could result in his disappearance or rendition once again, so he has been unable to travel to the regional torture rehabilitation center in Nairobi for proper medical treatment. He lives an isolated existence in Stone Town, where many people are afraid to associate with him, and he lacks the confidence and emotional resources to build relationships.

“Suleiman’s post-traumatic stress disorder left him unable to work and without means to support himself,” says Crosby. “His lack of self-sufficiency has led to further depression and feelings of inadequacy and shame, because he has to rely on his family for his basic needs.”

Crosby is now working with a European psychologist on a plan to take Suleiman to a torture rehabilitation center in Britain for six months of intensive therapy. After that, he will return to Zanzibar, where he will have local support to start a microeconomic project building a small business. She is optimistic: “Now all we need is the funding!”

So far, finding funding has proven difficult. “But more important,” says Crosby, “recently, I have detected something new in our communication—hope. Suleiman is now hopeful about his recovery and future. And I am hopeful that it is possible to repair the wounds my country has inflicted.”

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