

“War on Terror” Abuses in Bosnia and Herzegovina: new Cageprisoners report

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In an excellent new report from the human rights group Cageprisoners, Citizens No More: ‘War on Terror’ Abuses in Bosnia and Herzegovina, researcher Asim Qureshi travelled to the Balkans to investigate three strands of the “Global War on Terror” that have impacted on the area: the abduction, brutal imprisonment (and, in one case, “extraordinary rendition”) of two charity workers and a publisher in September 2001, just two weeks after 9/11; the plight of the six Algerian-born Bosnian citizens in Guantánamo (Qureshi conducted interviews with four of the men’s wives); and the recent pressure exerted on the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina — by the United States — to revoke the citizenship of hundreds of naturalized Bosnians from countries throughout North Africa and the Gulf, to tear them from their families, and to return them to the countries of their birth, where, unsurprisingly, many of them will face hardship and persecution.

While the story of the Guantánamo prisoners is an ongoing disgrace, and the currently unfolding deportation story is also extremely important — as Fadhil al-Hammadani, an Iraqi facing deportation, explained, “When they extradite me to Iraq, they will do so as a terrorist, not like a man without papers” — I’m going to focus in this article on the first of these stories, which has received little attention to date, concerning Nihad Karsic and Almin Hardaus, two charity workers for the Saudi High Commission for Relief (a charity that provides humanitarian aid to war orphans).

Abducted from their workplaces on 25 September 2001 by Italian carabinieri (part of the Italian peace-keeping force), Karsic and Hardaus were taken to an army base at Butmir, where they were hooded, held in cages and interrogated (and, in Hardaus’ case, interrogated by an American soldier), and then transported to a US army base in Tuzla, in a manner that would later become standard operating procedure for “terror suspects.”



“They handcuffed me, hooded me and placed earphones over my ears,” Karsic said. “I had these ski glasses, but blacked out.” In Tuzla, the men were then subjected to a pattern of abuse that was also to become depressingly familiar: “held in solitary confinement, forcibly stripped naked, forcibly kept awake, repeatedly beaten, verbally harassed,

deprived of food and photographed.” When they were released after a week, Karsic said that the Americans told him “they had made a mistake,” gave him 500 dollars and made him sign a document where he promised not to say a word about what had happened.

A corollary to the case of Karsic and Hardaus concerns the Egyptian-born Munich-based publisher Abdel Halim Khafagy, who travelled to Bosnia in September 2001 in order to distribute copies of the Koran. Although he was 69 years old at the time, Khafagy — and a Jordanian companion, of whom, shockingly, nothing further has been heard — was abducted by masked men from a hotel room in Sarajevo the night before Karsic and Hardaus were seized, beaten severely in the head, and also taken to Tuzla, where he was held for several weeks, before being “rendered” to Egypt and its notorious torture prisons.

When he was finally returned to Germany, two months after his initial abduction — and largely, it seems, through pressure exerted on the German government by Walter Lechner, a lawyer hired by his family — Lechner described meeting a “severely haggard elderly gentleman, who was under heavy shock. His nerves had been shattered and he was not fully aware of what had happened to him.” Khafagy has since left Germany, and, according to classified documents released to the press and described in a WSWS article in December 2006, was abducted because he had been “confused with another person,” rather like Khalid El-Masri, another German who was abducted because the US and German authorities had mistaken him for someone else, who was seized in Macedonia and transferred to a secret CIA prison in Afghanistan for five months.

As WSWS noted, the abduction of Khafagy, just two weeks after 9/11, undermined the German government’s ludicrous claim that it “only became aware of US secret prisons in Europe through media reports.” As the article also made clear, German agents were summoned by the Americans to read documents and to help with the interrogation of Khafagy in early October 2001, and one German agent later told a German TV programme, “I can still remember that the majority of [the] seized documents were heavily covered in blood ... The Americans were obviously proud of the fact that the head wound incurred during the arrest had needed 20 stitches.” In addition, as Cageprisoners noted, bringing the story of Nihad Karsic and Almin Hardaus back into the spotlight also focuses attention on the Italian government — led at the time by Silvio Berlusconi — which is already under scrutiny for its part in the abduction of the cleric Abu Omar from a street in Milan in February 2003, and his subsequent rendition to Egypt.

The struggle to dismantle the unprincipled post-9/11 world of vengeance, torture and criminally poor “intelligence” has, in many ways, only just begun, and will take years to unravel, but

Cageprisoners are to be commended for resuscitating this early story of the murky involvement of European countries in the abduction, illegal imprisonment and “extraordinary rendition” of its citizens and residents.

For more on US torture policies, see my book *The Guantánamo Files: The Stories of the 774 Detainees in America’s Illegal Prison* (published by Pluto Press, distributed by Macmillan in the US, and available from Amazon — click on the following for the US and the UK). To receive new articles in your inbox, please subscribe to my RSS feed.

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