

died.

“Let’s go!” the inspector said to me. The black guy, who never took his eyes off me, carried the luggage and pushed me before him toward a dirty small room at the secret gate of the airport. In the room, the black dude unfolded his dirty black 100 year-old turban.

“Mask your face thoroughly with this turban,” said the Inspector. Typically Mauritanian: the Bedouin spirit still dominates. The inspector should have foreseen that he would need a Turban to wrap my head, but in Mauritania organization is almost non-existent; everything is left to whim and chance. It was tricky, but I hadn’t forgotten yet how to fold a turban around my head. It is something people from the desert must learn. The turban smelled of piled-up sweat. It was just disgusting to have it around your mouth and nose. But I obediently complied with the orders and held my breath.

“Don’t look around,” the inspector said when the three of us stepped out of the room toward the parked Secret Police car, a [REDACTED]. I sat in the passenger’s seat, the inspector drove, and the black guy sat in the back seat, without saying a word. It was about sunset, but you couldn’t tell exactly because the cloud of sand was covering the horizon. The streets were empty. I illegally looked around whenever the chance arose, but I could hardly recognize anything.

The trip was short, about ten minutes to the Security Police building. We stepped out of the car and entered the building, where another guard was waiting on us, [REDACTED]. The environment was an ideal place for mosquitoes, human beings are the strangers in that place: filthy toilet, dirty floor and walls, holes connecting all the rooms, ants, spiders, flies.

“Search him thoroughly,” the inspector told [REDACTED].

“Give me everything you have,” [REDACTED] respectfully asked me, wanting to avoid searching me. I gave [REDACTED] everything I had except for my pocket Koran. The inspector must have realized I would have one, for [REDACTED] came back and said, “Do you have a Koran?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Give it to me! I told you to give me everything.” By now the guard was growing afraid of being sent back again, so he searched me gently, but he didn’t find anything but my pocket Koran. I was so sad, tired, and terrorized that I couldn’t sit up straight. Instead I put my jacket on my face and fell on the inch-thick, worn-out 100-year-old mattress, the only object that existed in that room. I wanted to sleep, lose my mind, and not wake up until every bad thing was over. How much pain can I take? I asked myself. Can my family intervene and save me? Do they use electricity? I had read stories about people who were tortured to death. How could they bear it? I’d read about Muslim heroes who faced the death penalty, head up. How did they do it? I didn’t know. All I knew was that I felt so small before all the big names I knew, and that I was scared to death.

Although the mosquitoes were tearing me apart, I fell asleep. Every once in a while I woke up and asked myself, Why don’t they interrogate me right now, and do with me whatever they want, and everything will be over? I hate waiting on torture; an Arabic proverb says, “Waiting on torture is worse than torture.” I can only confirm this proverb. I managed to perform my prayers, how I don’t know.

Sometime around midnight I woke up to people moving around, opening and closing doors in an extraordinary manner. When the guard opened the door to my room, I glimpsed the face of a

Mauritanian friend who happened to be with me a long time ago when I visited Afghanistan in 1992 during the struggle against communism. He looked sad and weathered, and must have gone through painful torture, I thought. I almost lost my mind, knowing for sure I was going to suffer at least as much as he had, given his close relationship with the Mauritanian president and the power of his family—qualities I don't have. I thought, The guy surely must have spoken about me, and that is the reason why they brought him here.

“Get up!” said the guards. “Put on your turban.” I put on the dirty turban, gathered my last strength, and followed the guards to the interrogation room like a sheep being driven to its last destination, the slaughterhouse.

When I was driven past the guy I had seen earlier, I realized he was just a screwed-up guard who failed to keep his uniform the way it should be. He was sleepy and drowsy: they must have called him in the midst of his sleep, and he hadn't yet washed his face. It was not the friend I thought it was; anxiety, terror, and fear were dominating my mind. Lord have mercy! I was somewhat relieved. Did I commit a crime? No. Did my friend commit a crime? No. Did we conspire to committing a crime? No. The only thing we had done together was make a trip to Afghanistan in February 1992 to help the people fighting against communism. And as far as I was concerned that was not a crime, at least in Mauritania.

So why was I so scared? Because crime is something relative; it's something the government defines and re-defines whenever it pleases. The majority of people don't know, really, where the line is that separates breaking the law from not breaking it. If you get arrested, the situation worsens, because most people trust the government to have a good reason for the arrest. On top of that, if I personally had to suffer, I didn't want anybody to suffer with me. I thought they arrested my friend in connection with the Millennium Plot, if only because he had been in Afghanistan once.

I entered the interrogation room, which was the office of the DSE. The room was large and well-furnished: leather couch, two love-seats, coffee table, closet, one big desk, one leather chair, a couple of other chairs for unimportant guests, and, as always, the picture of the president conveying the weakness of the law and the strength of the government. I wished they had turned me over to the U.S.: at least there are things I could refer to there, such as the law. Of course, in the U.S. the government and politics are gaining more and more ground lately at the cost of the law. The government is very smart; it evokes terror in the hearts of people to convince them to give up their freedom and privacy. Still, it might take some time until the U.S. government overthrows the law completely, like in the third world and the communist regimes. But really that is none of my concern, and thank God my government doesn't possess the technology to track Bedouins in the vast desert.

There were three guys in the interrogation room: the DSE, his assistant, and his recorder. The DSE asked them to bring my stuff in. They thoroughly searched everything I had; no stone remained unturned. They didn't speak to me, they only spoke with each other, mostly in whispers, just to annoy the hell out of me. At the end of the search, they sorted out my papers and put aside the ones they thought interesting. Later on, they asked me about every single word in those papers.

“I am going to interrogate you. I just want to tell you as a forewarning that you better tell me the whole truth,” the DSE said firmly, making a big effort to take a break from smoking his pipe, which he never took off his lips.

“I sure will,” I answered.

“Take him back,” the DSE dryly ordered the guards.

“Listen, I want you to tell me about your whole life, and how you joined the Islamic movement,” said the DSE when the guards dragged my skeleton away from the mosquitoes and back into the interrogation room.

If you get arrested for the first time, chances are that you’re not going to be forthcoming, and that’s OK; even though you know you haven’t done any crimes, it seems sensible. You’re very confused, and you’d like to make yourself appear as innocent as possible. You assume you are arrested more or less on a reasonable suspicion, and you don’t want to cement that suspicion. Moreover, questioning involves a lot of stuff nobody wants to talk about, like your friends and your private life. Especially when the suspicions are about things like terrorism, the government is very rude. In the interrogation you always avoid talking about your friends and your private, intimate life. And finally, you are so frustrated because of your arrest, and you really don’t owe your interrogators anything. On the contrary, they owe you to show you the true cause of your detention, and it should be entirely up to you to comment then or to leave them be. If this cause is enough to hold you, you can seek professional representation; if not, well you shouldn’t be arrested in the first place. That’s how the civilized world works, and everything else is dictatorship. Dictatorship is governed by chaos.

To be honest with you, I acted like any average person: I tried to make myself look as innocent as a baby. I tried to protect the identities of every single person I knew, unless he or she was too well-known to the Police. The interrogations continued in this manner, but when they opened the Canadian file, things soured decidedly.

The U.S. government saw in my arrest and my rendition to Mauritania a once-in-a-blue-moon opportunity to unveil the plan of Ahmed Ressam, who back then was refusing to cooperate with the U.S. authorities. Furthermore, the U.S. wanted to learn in detail about my friends in both Canada and Germany, and even outside those countries. After all my cousin and brother [REDACTED] was already wanted with a reward of U.S. \$5,000,000.* The U.S. also wanted to learn more about the whole Jihadi issue in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya. Expertise for free. For the aforementioned, and for other reasons I don’t know, the U.S. drove my case as far as it could be driven. They labeled me “Mastermind of the Millennium Plot.” They asked all countries to provide any tiny bit of information they possessed about me, especially Canada and Germany. And since I am already a “bad” guy, force must be applied to roast me.

To the dismay of the U.S. government, things were not really as they seemed, nor did the government achieve what it wanted. No matter how smart somebody plans, God’s plan always works. I felt like 2Pac’s “Me Against the World.” And here’s why.

All the Canadians could come up with was, “We have seen him with x and y, and they’re bad people.” “We’ve seen him in this and that mosque.” “We have intercepted his telephone conversations, but there’s nothing really!” The Americans asked the Canadians to provide them the transcripts of my conversations, but after they edited them. Of course it doesn’t make sense to selectively take different passages from a whole conversation and try to make sense of them. I think the Canadians should have done one of two things: either refused to provide the Americans any private conversation that took place in their country, or provided them the whole conversation in its original form, not even translated.

Instead, out of the words the Canadians chose to share with their U.S. colleagues, U.S. interrogators magically stuck with two words for more than four years: Tea and Sugar.

“What do you mean by tea and sugar?”

“I mean tea and sugar.” I cannot tell you how many times the U.S. asked me, and made other people ask me, this question. Another Mauritanian folktale recounts about a man who was born blind and who had one chance to get a glimpse of the world. All he saw was a rat. After that, whenever anybody tried to explain anything to the guy, he always asked, “Compare it with the rat: Is it bigger? smaller?”

Canadian intelligence wished I were a criminal, so they could make up for their failure when ██████████ slipped from their country to the U.S. carrying explosives.* The U.S. blamed Canada for being a preparation ground for terrorist attacks against the U.S., and that’s why Canadians Intel freaked out. They really completely lost their composure, trying everything to calm the rage of their big brother, the U.S. They began watching the people they believed to be bad, including me. I remember after ██████████ plot, the Canadians tried to implant two cameras, one in my room, one in my roommate’s. I used to be a very heavy sleeper. I heard voices but I couldn’t tell what it was—or let’s say I was too lazy to wake up and check on them. My roommate ██████████ was different; he woke up and followed the noise. He laid low and watched until the tiny hole was through. The guy in the other room blew through the hole, and when he checked with his eye, he made eye contact with ██████████.

██████████ woke me up and told me the story.

“██████████, I heard the same voices in my room.” I said to him. “Let’s check!” Our short investigation was successful: we found a tiny twin hole in my room.

“What should we do?” ██████████ asked.

“We call the police,” I said.

“Well, call them!” ██████████ said. I purposely didn’t use our telephone; instead, I went out and used a public phone, dialing 911. Two cops showed up, and I explained to them that our neighbor, without our consent, drilled two holes in our house, and we wanted him to be held for his illegal action toward us. Basically, we asked for a fair relief.

“Put some caulk inside the holes and the problem is solved,” said one of the cops.

“Really? I didn’t know that. Are you a carpenter?” I said. “Look! I didn’t call you to give me advice on how to fix my house. There’s an obvious crime behind this, trespassing and violation of our privacy. If you don’t take care of us, we’ll take care of ourselves. And by the way: I need you guys’ business cards,” I said. Each one silently produced a business card with the other cop’s name and contact on the back of it. Obviously, those cops were following some idiot directions in order to deceive us, but for the Canadian Intel it was too late. For days to come we were just sitting and making fun of the plan.

The irony was that I lived in Germany for twelve years and they never provided any incriminating information about me, which was accurate. I stayed less than two months in Canada, and yet the Americans claimed that the Canadians provided tons of information about me. The Canadians don’t even know me! But since all Intel work is based on what ifs, Mauritania and the U.S. started to interpret the information as they pleased, in order to confirm the theory that I was the mastermind of the Millennium Plot.

The interrogation didn’t seem to develop in my favor. I kept repeating my Afghanistan Jihad story of 1991 and early 1992, which didn’t seem to impress the Mauritanian interrogator. Mauritania

doesn't give a damn about a trip to Afghanistan; they understand it very well. If you try to make trouble inside the country, however, you're going to be arrested, regardless of whether or not you've been in Afghanistan. On the other hand, to the American government a bare visit to Afghanistan, Bosnia, or Chechnya is worth watching you for the rest of your life and trying to lock you up. All the Arabic countries have the same approach as Mauritania, except the communist ones. I even think the communist Arab countries are at least fairer than the U.S. government in this regard, because they forbid their citizens to go to Jihad in the first place. Meanwhile, the U.S. government prosecutes people based on an unwritten law.

My Mauritanian interrogator was interested in my activities in Canada, which are non-existent in the criminal sense, but nobody was willing to believe me. All my answers to the question, "Have you done this or that while in Canada?" were, "No, No, No, No." And there we got completely stuck. I think I looked guilty because I didn't tell my whole story about Afghanistan, and I figured I had to fill that gap in order to make my case stronger. The interrogator had brought film equipment with him that day. As soon as I saw it, I started to shake: I knew that I would be made to confess and that they were going to broadcast me on the National TV, just like in October 1994, when the Mauritanian government arrested Islamists, made them confess, and broadcast their confessions.* I was so scared my feet couldn't carry my body. You could tell there was a lot of pressure on my government.

"I've been very patient with you, boy," the interrogator said. "You got to admit, or I am going to pass you the special team." I knew he meant the torture team. "Reports keep coming every day from everywhere," he said. In the days before this talk I couldn't sleep. Doors kept getting opened and closed. Every move around me hit my heart so bad. My room was next to the archive, and through a small hole I could see some of the files and their labels; I started to hallucinate and read papers about me that didn't exist. I couldn't take anything anymore. And torture? No way.

"Look, Director! I have not been completely truthful with you, and I would like to share my whole story." I told him. "However, I don't want you to share the Afghanistan story with the U.S. government, because they don't understand this whole Jihad recipe, and I am not willing to put gas on the fire."

"Of course I won't," the DSE said. Interrogators are used to lying to people; the interrogator's whole job is about lying, outsmarting, and deception. "I can even send my recorder and my assistant away, if you'd like," he continued.

"No, I don't mind them around." The DSE called his driver and sent him to buy some food. He brought chicken salad, which I liked. It was my first meal since I left Senegal; it was now February 12, 2000.

"Is that all you're gonna eat?" wondered the DSE.

"Yes, I'm full."

"You don't really eat."

"That's the way I am." I started to recount my whole Jihad story in the most boring detail. "And as to Canada or an attack against the U.S., I have nothing to do with it," I finished. In the days that followed I got, by far, better treatment and better food, and all the questions he asked me and all my answers were consistent in themselves and with the information he already knew from other sources. When the DSE knew that I was telling him the truth, he quit believing the U.S. reports to be the Gospel truth, and very much put them aside, if not in the garbage.

██████████ showed up to interrogate me. There were three of them, ██████████. Evidently the Mauritanian authorities had shared all of my interviews with ██████████, so that ██████████ and the Mauritanians were at the same level of information.*

When the team arrived they were hosted at ██████████ gave me a forewarning the day they came to interrogate me.†

“Mohamedou, we have nothing on you. When it comes to us, you are a free man,” he told me. “However, those people want to interrogate you. I’d like you to be strong, and to be honest with them.”

“How can you allow foreigners to interrogate me?”

“It’s not my decision, but it’s just a formality,” he said. I was very afraid, because I had never met American interrogators, though I anticipated that they would not use torture to coerce information. But the whole environmental setup made me very skeptical toward the honesty and humanity of the U.S. interrogators. It was kind of like, “We ain’t gonna beat you ourselves, but you know where you are!” So I knew ██████████ wanted to interrogate me under the pressure and threat of a non-democratic country.

The atmosphere was prepared. I was told what to wear and what to say. I never had the chance to take a shower or to wash my clothes, so I wore my some of my dirty clothes. I must have smelled terribly. I was so skinny from my confinement that my clothes didn’t fit; I looked like a teenager in baggy pants. But as much as I was pissed, I tried to look as comfortable, friendly, and normal as I could.

██████████ arrived around 8 p.m., and the interrogation room was cleaned for them. I entered the room smiling. After diplomatic greetings and introductions I sat down on a hard chair, trying to discover my new world.

The ██████████ started to talk. “We have come from the States to ask you some questions. You have the right to remain calm. You may also answer some questions and leave others. Were we in the U.S., we would have provided you with a lawyer free of charge.”

I almost interrupted his nonsense and said, ‘Cut the crap, and ask me the questions!’ I was like, ‘What a civilized world!’ In the room, there were only the ██████████ interrogators with an Arabic interpreter. The Mauritanian interrogators stepped outside.

“Oh, thank you very much. I don’t need any lawyer,” I said.

“However, we would like you to answer our questions.”

“Of course I will,” I said. They started to ask me about my trip to Afghanistan during the war against communism, showed me a bunch of pictures, asked me questions about Canada, and hardly any questions about Germany. As to the pictures and Canada, I was completely truthful, but I deliberately withheld some parts of my two Afghanistan trips in January 1991 and February 1992. You know why? Because it is none of the U.S government’s business what I had done to help my Afghani brothers against the communists. For Pete’s sake, the U.S. was supposedly on our side! When that war was done I resumed my regular life; I hadn’t broken any Mauritanian or German laws. I legally went to Afghanistan and came back. As for the U.S., I am not a U.S. citizen, nor have I been in the U.S.—so what law have I possibly broken? I understand that if I enter the U.S. and they arrest me

for a reasonable suspicion, then I completely have to explain to them my position. And Canada? Well, they made a big deal out of me being in Canada, because some Arab guy had tried to attack them from Canada. I explained with definite evidence that I was not a part of it. Now F*ck off and leave me alone.

The [REDACTED] interrogators told me that I wasn't truthful.

"No, I was," I lied. The good thing was that I didn't give a damn about what they thought.

[REDACTED] kept writing my answers and looking at me at the same time. I wondered, how could he do both? But later I learned that [REDACTED] interrogators study your body language while you're speaking, which is nothing but bullshit.* There are many factors involved in an interrogation, and they differ from one culture to another. Since [REDACTED] knows my entire case now, I suggest that [REDACTED] should go back and check where he marked me as lying, just to check his competence. The U.S. interrogators also went outside their assignment and did what any interrogator would have done: they fished, asking me about Sudan, Nairobi, and Dar Es Salaam. How am I supposed to know about those countries, unless I have multiple doppelgängers?

[REDACTED] offered to have me work with them. I think the offer was futile unless they were dead sure that I was a criminal. I'm not a cop, but I understand how criminals can repent—but I personally had done nothing to repent for. The next day, about the same time, [REDACTED] showed up once more, trying to get at least the same amount of information I had shared with the Mauritians, but there was no persuading me. After all the Mauritanian authorities duly shared everything with them. The [REDACTED] didn't push me in any uncivilized way; they acted rather friendly. The chief of the team said, "We're done. We're going back home," exactly like Umm 'Amr and her donkey.† [REDACTED] left Nouakchott, and I was released

[REDACTED].*

"Those guys have no evidence whatsoever," the DSE said sadly. He felt completely misused. The Mauritians didn't want me delivered to them in the first place, because it was a no-win situation: if they found me guilty and they delivered me to the U.S., they were going to feel the wrath of the public; if not, they would feel the wrath of the U.S. government. In either case, the President was going to lose his office.

So in the end, something like this must of happened under the table:

"We found nothing on him, and you guys didn't provide us any evidence," the Senegalese must have said. "Under these circumstances, we can't hold him. But if you want him, take him."

"No, we can't take him, because we've got to get evidence on him first," answered the U.S. government.

"Well, we don't want to have anything to do with him," said the Senegalese.

"Turn him over the Mauritians," the U.S. government suggested.

"No, we don't want him, just take him!" cried the Mauritanian government.

"You got to," said the U.S. government, giving the Mauritians no choice. But the Mauritanian government always prefers keeping peace between the people and the government. They don't want any trouble.

"You are free to go," said the DSE.

"Should I give him everything?"

“Yes, everything,” the DSE answered. He even asked me to double-check on my belongings, but I was so excited I didn’t check on anything. I felt as if the ghoul of fear had flown from my chest.

“Thank you very much,” I said. The DSE ordered his assistant and recorder to drive me home. It was about 2 p.m. when we took off toward my home.

“You’d better not talk with journalists,” said the inspector.

“No, I won’t.” And indeed, I never disclosed the scandal of foreign interrogators violating the sovereignty of my country to journalists. I felt so bad about lying to them.

“Come on, we have seen the [REDACTED] God, those journalists are wizards.

“Maybe they were listening to my interrogation,” I said unconvincingly.

I tried to recognize the way to my home, but believe me, I didn’t recognize anything until the police car parked in front of our house and dropped me there. It had been almost seven years since I saw my family last.† Everything had changed. Children had become men and women, young people had become older. My strong mom had become weak. Nonetheless everybody was happy. My sister [REDACTED] and my former wife had hardly slept nights, praying to God to relieve my pains and sufferings. May God reward everybody who stood on my side.

Everybody was around, my aunt, the in-laws, friends. My family kept generously feeding the visitors, some of whom came just to congratulate me, some to interview me, some just to get to know the man who had made news for the last month. After the first few days, my family and I were making plans for my future. To make a long story short, my family wanted me to stay in the country, if only to see me every day and enjoy my company. I said to myself, Screw it, went out, found a job, and was enjoying looking into the pretty face of my mom every morning. But no joy is forever.