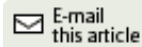


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Death before dishonor

Some Muslims say the mistreatment of Iraqis at Abu Ghraib violates cultural and Islamic values. Others point out: Cruelty knows no cultural bounds.

By SHARON TUBBS, Times Staff Writer

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As bad as the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison appeared to most Americans, some Muslims say Islamic beliefs and cultural taboos in the Middle East likely made the situation worse than people in the West can fathom.

"Death would be more merciful than doing this to them," said Ahmed Bedier, a spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations in Florida. "I would rather die."

One photograph that sticks in his mind shows Pfc. Lynndie England with a naked inmate on a leash. As Bedier saw it, England was saying, "You are my animal. I control you and there's nothing you can do about it."

Hassan Sultan, 20, president of the University of South Florida's Muslim Student Association, thinks he would fight prison guards and endure the consequences of rebellion rather than face such treatment. "We're humans, and to be treated as animals. . . ."

Muslims and experts in Islamic studies say societal values and Islamic rules for living add a deeper dimension to the abuse.

But as cogent as such arguments may be, some Muslims disagree. They say such arguments tend to further marginalize Muslims. Any man - Iraqi, American or European - would be equally humiliated if put in the same position.

"It's humiliating to any human being, to anyone who has standards," Sultan said.

Ebrahim Moosa, an associate research professor with Duke University's Department of Religion, said as much.

"I don't buy this idea that there's more humiliation in one culture than in the other," he said. Sodomize a man, any man, and he will be humiliated, Moosa said. Some

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will say they would rather die, while others will not. "I don't think there's anything exceptional about their response to torture," he said.

Sure, he said, men in a patriarchal culture don't want to be controlled by a woman such as England. "But wouldn't the same be true in the United States with women called to break down black or white men (during an interrogation)? It's a way to break down machismo."

Mixing talk of the abuse scandal with culture and religious practices keeps Americans from relating to what happened, Moosa said. It helps the Western world continue to refer to the Iraqis as extremists, as "those people," he said.

"Why don't we ask how would Americans respond to that kind of torture?" he said, theorizing that the United States would call for harsher sanctions than it may give soldiers like England.

TV channels in the Middle East are broadcasting scenes of American soldiers who don't speak their language cursing Iraqi civilians in the streets, he said. "It's the height of self-delusion to think that the Iraqis are only angry because of the torture," he said.

But statements like those from radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh illustrate that the seriousness can be lost in cultural translation. After initial pictures were released a month ago, Limbaugh likened some of the acts to fraternity pranks.

The abuse, Limbaugh said, was "no different than what happens at the Skull and Bones initiation (at Yale)." He compared the pictures to "standard, good old American pornography."

But some Muslims say the Middle Eastern concept of honor has as much to do with the prisoners' humiliation as anything else.

"The idea of shame or saving face is very much part of the society," Bedier said. "That's why, for some of these individuals, they would have rather been killed than for their integrity, their honor to be exposed like that."

That idea, however, extends beyond Muslims, said Akbar Ahmed, an anthropologist and leading Islamic scholar at American University in Washington, who wrote *Islam Under Siege: Living Dangerously in a Post-Honor World*.

"The entire Mediterranean culture, whether it's Italian culture, whether it's Spanish culture, whether it's Greek culture, is charged with the idea of honor," he said. "You know all the honor killings and the vendettas, you know your whole literature is full of these dramas around the notion of honor. So when you strip someone, when you sodomize someone, when you set a dog on someone, you're violating all the honor codes."

This is why many would prefer death, Ahmed said. "They would say, how do we end the shame? In our culture, in the East, it's not just you the individual. . . . In Western culture it's me, me, me. In the East, it's me plus my family plus my society. So a lot of people there think I've brought shame indirectly, not to myself, but to my family."

What has happened at Abu Ghraib is the "ultimate paradox," Ahmed said. The methods were the same used by Saddam Hussein, who understood the culture and used it against the Iraqi people, he said.

"He would have men humiliated, some raped. He would threaten them with rape for their wives. . . . They could not stand that, so they would collapse, they would give in."

The fact that they were victims, that some have been released from prison, may not matter to some, Ahmed said. In the cases of women who have been raped in the Middle East, many opt not to tell because they will be regarded as shameful to the family. In some cases, Ahmed said, their own brothers and fathers will denounce them.

The nudity, in particular, is shocking to people in the Middle East, where Islam prohibits men from being uncovered from their navels to their knees. Some Muslims believe women must be covered except for their faces and hands.

"You talk to some people on campus and they'll say, "What's the big deal?" " Ahmed said. "They do mooning all the time, they show bottoms, they show breasts, they do all sorts of things." But this doesn't happen in the Middle East.

Even some married couples are wary of being nude with their spouses. "Here we have a situation of a man not married to Lynndie England, having to stand nude, having his photographs taken, having electrical wires attached to his genitals," Ahmed said. "This is violating all the cultural codes in the Middle East. And then, in an Islamic context, it's even worse."

The fact that England is a woman makes the picture of her holding a man on a leash "even more demonizing" Bedier said. "Aggressive behavior by women is not something that they (people in Iraq) are accustomed to," he said.

"It's a very strange and extreme type of torture," he said.

For instance, it's frightening enough to be attacked by a dog, as some Abu Ghraib photographs show. Now consider that dogs and some other animals hold a certain taboo in Islam. Muslims are not to be touched by certain animals that shed hair, such as a dog or cat, before saying their daily prayers, said Ahmed. If they do come in contact with such animals, they may be considered "ritually impure." To perform daily prayers, Muslims must be in a state of purity. So dogs have the potential to contaminate. "Setting a dog upon an individual is seen as horrific because of the notion of purity," Ahmed said.

In one photo, "not only is the dog touching the man, but the dog is biting the man, taking chunks out of him," Ahmed said. "So we are not only talking of pollution, we're talking of something a bit more."

Some people have argued that the photos showed typical interrogation techniques. That's doubtful, says Bill Schrieber, an interrogation trainer for John E. Reid and Associates, a company in Chicago that trains interrogators for law enforcement agencies and the military.

Schrieber went to Iraq last October to teach military officers how to get information

leading to Saddam Hussein's whereabouts. Interrogation techniques are psychological, and virtually the same regardless of culture, he said. "In essence, it's how to outwit a subject," he said. The idea is to minimize the crime and shift blame to get the person to admit to what they know.

"I think that the pictures you saw had nothing to do with softening anyone up for interrogation," he said. He chalks it up to perversion on the part of a few. "I think they'd be humiliating to anyone."

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