

IBN SHEIKH AL-LIBI'S AND ABU ZUBAYDAH'S COFFINS

At Mary's instigation, I went back to look at Ibn Sheikh al-Libi's description of how he was shoved into a coffin-like box in Egypt. (Thanks to burnt for the searchable copy.)

According to al-Libi, the foreign government service [redacted] "stated that the next topic was al-Qa'ida's connections with Iraq. ... This was a subject about which he said he knew nothing and had difficulty even coming up with a story." Al-Libi indicated that his interrogators did not like his responses and then "placed him in a small box approximately 50cm x 50cm." He claimed he was held in the box for approximately 17 hours. When he was let out of the box, al-Libi claims that he was given a last opportunity to "tell the truth." When al-Libi did not satisfy the interrogator, al-Libi claimed that "he was knocked over with an arm thrust across his chest and he fell on his back." Al-Libi told CIA debriefers that he then "was punched for 15 minutes."216

(U) Al-Libi told debriefers that "after the beating," he was again asked about the connection with Iraq and this time he came up with a story that three al-Qa'ida members went to Iraq to learn about nuclear weapons. Al-Libi said that he used the names of real individuals associated with al-Qa'ida so that he could remember the details of his fabricated story and make it more believable to the foreign intelligence service. Al-Libi noted that "this pleased his [foreign] interrogators, who directed that al-Libi be taken back to a big room, vice the 50 square centimeter

box and given food.”²¹⁷

That mock burial—and al-Libi’s subsequent lies about Iraqi ties with al Qaeda—happened sometime before February 22, 2002, when a DIA cable challenged the report.

This is the first report from Ibn al-Shaykh [al-Libi] in which he claims Iraq assisted al-Qa’ida’s CBRN efforts. However, he lacks specific details on the Iraqi’s involvement, the CBRN materials associated with the assistance, and the location where the training occurred. It is possible he does not know any further details; it is more likely this individual is intentionally misleading the debriefers. Ibn al-Shaykh has been undergoing debriefs for several weeks and may be describing scenarios to the debriefers that he knows will retain their interest. Saddam’s regime is intensely secular and is wary of Islamic revolutionary movements. Moreover, Baghdad is unlikely to provide assistance to a group it cannot control

Al-Libi was, you’ll recall, the onsite manager of the Khalden training camp, a camp that trained a range of Muslims, a policy that put it at odds with Osama bin Laden, who wanted training to be limited to al Qaeda operatives.

Just over a month after al-Libi claimed, having been shoved in a coffin for almost a day, there were ties between al Qaeda and Iraq, the US captured al-Libi’s associate, Abu Zubaydah, who handled logistics for Khalden. Rather than send Abu Zubaydah off to the Egyptians, as the US had done with al-Libi, they instead sent Abu Zubaydah to a CIA run black site in Thailand.

And there, less than three months after the Egyptians shoved Ibn Sheikh al-Libi in a coffin overnight, James Mitchell threatened to do the

same with Abu Zubaydah. Ali Soufan objected and told Mitchell doing so was torture. Soufan left the black site and alerted DOJ of what Mitchell had intended to do.

And then, some time later (Abu Zubaydah says it was about 3 months after his surgery, so perhaps mid-July) they did shove Abu Zubaydah in that coffin-like box. Here's Abu Zubaydah's description of being placed in a similar coffin-like box.

Two black wooden boxes were brought into the room outside my cell. One was tall, slightly higher than me and narrow. Measuring perhaps in area 1M X 0.75m and 2 m in height. The other was shorter, perhaps only 1m in height.

[snip]

After the beating I was then placed in the small box. They placed a cloth or cover over the box to cut out all light and restrict my air supply. As it was not high enough to even sit upright, I had to crouch down. It was very difficult because of my wounds. The stress on my legs held in this position meant my wounds both in the leg and stomach became very painful. I think this occurred about 3 months after my last operation. It was always cold in the room, but when the cover was placed over the box it made it hot and sweaty inside. The wound on my leg began to open and started to bleed. I don't know how long I remained in the small box, I think I may have slept or maybe fainted.

I was then dragged from the small box, unable to walk properly and put on what looked like a hospital bed, and strapped down very tightly with belts. A black cloth was then placed over my face and the interrogators used a mineral water bottle to pour water on the cloth so that I could not breathe.

[snip]

[describing how things got better] The tall box was removed, but the short one remained in the room outside my cell, I think as a deliberate reminder as to what my interrogators were capable of.

It's unclear whether this treatment occurred before or after John Yoo finished his memo authorizing torture. Both would be equally damning, as the suggestion that this box was a coffin would put its use in the category of mock burial. Roughly around July 24, John Yoo told CIA's John Rizzo that approving mock burial would take some time to do. Yoo would later tell OPR that he considered mock burial to be torture.

There is, however, one more irony. On July 31, 2002, the DIA sent out a second cable challenging the false confession al-Libi had made in late February.

It is plausible al-Qa'ida attempted to obtain CB assistance from Iraq and Ibn al-Shaykh is sufficiently senior to have access to such sensitive information. However, Ibn al-Shaykh's information lacks details concerning the individual Iraqis involved, the specific CB materials associated with the assistance and the location where the alleged training occurred. The information is also second hand, and not derived from Ibn al-Shaykh's personal experience.

Just past noon on that day, Jennifer Koester sent Patrick Philbin an email alerting him that the White House wanted them to finish the memos authorizing Abu Zubaydah's torture by close of business the next day.

"John wanted me to let you know that the White House wants both memos signed and out by COB tomorrow,"

Those memos would either retroactively or prospectively authorize Abu Zubaydah to be exposed to the same kind of treatment Ibn Sheikh al-Libi had undergone five months earlier.