

By James Risen

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The United States subjected Suleiman Abdullah Salim to harsh tactics in a secret prison and held him without charge for years. He was found not to be a terrorist threat, but he pays a deep price to this day.

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — At first, the Americans seemed confused about Suleiman Abdullah Salim. They apparently had been expecting a light-skinned Arab, and instead at a small airport outside Mogadishu that day in March 2003, they had been handed a dark-skinned African.

“They said, ‘You changed your face,’” Mr. Salim, a Tanzanian, recalled the American men telling him when he arrived. “They said: ‘You are Yemeni. You changed your face.’”

That was the beginning of Mr. Salim’s strange ordeal in United States custody. It has been 13 years since he was tortured in a secret prison in [Afghanistan](#) run by the [Central Intelligence Agency](#), a place he calls “The Darkness.” It has been eight years since he was released — no charges, no explanations — back into the world.

Even after so much time, Mr. Salim, 45, is struggling to move on. Suffering from [depression](#) and post-traumatic stress, according to a medical assessment, he is withdrawn and wary. He cannot talk about his experiences with his wife, who he says worries that the Americans will come back to snatch him. He is fearful of drawing too much attention at home in Stone Town in Zanzibar, [Tanzania](#), concerned that his neighbors will think he is an American spy.

When he speaks, not in his native Swahili but in the English he learned from his jailers, Mr. Salim nearly whispers. "Many times now I feel like I have something heavy inside my body," he said in an interview. "Sometimes I walk, and I walk, and I forget, I forget everything, I forget prison, The Darkness, everything. But it is always there. The Darkness comes."

Mr. Salim was one of 39 men subjected to some of the C.I.A.'s most brutal techniques — beatings, hanging in chains, sleep deprivation and water dousing, which creates a sensation of drowning, even though interrogators had been denied permission to use that last tactic on him, according to a Senate Intelligence Committee investigation into the agency's classified interrogation program.

In a series of recent interviews in Dubai, Mr. Salim described his incarceration by the C.I.A. and the United States military as a terrorism suspect. His account closely parallels those provided by other detainees, witnesses and court documents, and confirms details in the Senate report about his treatment.

Today, back in Stone Town, Mr. Salim is trying to support his family, though some of his attempts at jobs have not worked out. He now breeds pigeons, raising them for a local market. They are both his livelihood and his solace.

They help him, Mr. Salim said. They quiet his mind.



Bred for Pigeons, like after the New York 2001 attacks, offered to be a soldier and Salim, who has a Life Interrupted

Exactly why Mr. Salim fell into American hands remains murky; leaks to the press at the time of his capture suggested that intelligence officials suspected he had links to Al Qaeda, but the C.I.A. has never publicly disclosed the reasons. An agency spokesman declined to comment for this article.

Mr. Salim had been drifting into a nomadic life in one of the world's poorest regions, where the C.I.A. after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks had promised allies cash rewards for terrorism suspects. Governments and warlords turned over hundreds of men to the United States, in many cases with little evidence of wrongdoing.

Mr. Salim grew up on Africa's eastern edges, but from boy to man never quite found himself. One of eight children in a family in Stone Town, a historic district of Zanzibar City, he apprenticed on the local fishing piers, then joined the crews going out for kingfish and barracuda in the Indian Ocean.

He dropped out of school after ninth or 10th grade and headed for Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's largest city, where he worked in a clothing shop. He moved a few years later to Mombasa, on

Kenya's coast, where he ferried cargos of dried fish, rice and oil with a crew of two.

Then the outside world intruded. In August 1998, Qaeda suicide truck bombers blew up the United States Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Mr. Salim said a man whose boat he used for the cargo runs was suspected of involvement in the plot. (Mr. Salim said that while he was in prison, American officials told him that the man had died, but he knows no other details.) The boat was soon seized by a Somali pirate, he said.

Mr. Salim moved on to Kismayu, a Somali port town, and was hired as a harbor pilot. It was a good job, maybe too good for a foreigner with no ties to [Somalia](#)'s powerful clans and militias. "You had to pay off militias every time you moved a ship," he said. "The clans were trouble, so I left."

By 2000, he was sleeping in a mosque and begging on the streets of Mogadishu, the Somali capital. Eventually, a shop owner offered him odd jobs and work as a driver for him and his sister, who Mr. Salim said worked for Mohammed Dheere, a Somali warlord.

In March 2003, Mr. Salim was driving his employer through the capital when they pulled over to help a stalled vehicle. Suddenly, three gunmen appeared, dragged Mr. Salim out and started beating him, he said. He got away, but the men found him at the hospital where Mr. Salim's boss had taken him.

The men said they worked for Mr. Dheere, and they claimed he owed the warlord money, Mr. Salim recounted. "I said no, but they kept saying, 'You stole money from Mohammed Dheere.'"

The men drove him to a small airport outside the city. The Americans were waiting.



Mr. Salim al-Hazragi / Bryan Denton / The New York Times
Hanging in Chains

They asked him over and over about his appearance, Mr. Salim said. “They said: ‘You are not Suleiman. You changed your face.’ I say: ‘Go to Tanzania. Go see my mother and take a picture of me.’”

He was turned over to the Kenyan authorities, who flew him to Nairobi. But after questioning him, the Kenyans sent him back to Somalia and the Americans. (Kenyan officials did not respond to a request for comment about Mr. Salim’s case.)

This time the Americans kept him. News accounts, [including an article in The New York Times](#), soon appeared quoting United States and Kenyan officials describing the capture of a Qaeda operative from Yemen identified as Suleiman Abdalla Salim Hemed, who was wanted in connection with the 1998 embassy bombings. Mr. Salim said he never used the name Hemed and had nothing to do with Al Qaeda or terrorism.

The news reports also said Mr. Dheere, who died in 2012, had agreed to hunt down suspects, including the man identified in the press as Mr. Hemed, for the C.I.A. in return for money.

From Somalia, the C.I.A. flew Mr. Salim to a United States base in Djibouti. He was blindfolded and stripped, and an object was inserted in his rectum while the Americans photographed him, according to court documents. Just before he left Djibouti, Mr. Salim recalled, one of the captors told him that he was going to the “prison of the pharaohs.”

He was flown to Afghanistan, not Egypt as he guessed from what his captor said, and taken to the pitch-black, stinking and cavernous building that Mr. Salim calls The Darkness.

Music blasted nearly 24 hours a day while he was chained in solitary confinement so dark that he could not see the shackles on his arms or the walls of his cell. He said he could no longer listen to any of the songs that were on the prison playlist.

The Americans routinely hauled him from his cell to a room where, he said, they hanged him from chains, once for two days. They wrapped a collar around his neck and pulled it to slam him against a wall, he said. And they shaved his head, laid him on a plastic tarp and poured gallons of ice water on him, inducing a feeling of drowning.

“A guy says to me, ‘Here the rain doesn’t finish,’” Mr. Salim recalled. Several men wrapped him in the tarp and kicked him “many times, many times,” he added. At one point, a cast that a prison doctor had put on his hand — a finger had been broken by the Somali gunmen — became waterlogged. The doctor cut it off, and the water dousing continued.

Mr. Salim described other grisly practices by his jailers: placing him in a coffin-like box, his arms stretched and chained, on top of cleaning chemicals; strapping him to a gurney and injecting him with drugs that made him woozy; bringing dogs into a room to threaten him.

The 2014 Senate Intelligence Committee report noted that Mr. Salim was one of at least six detainees in 2003 who were “stripped and shackled nude, placed in the standing position for sleep deprivation, or subjected to other C.I.A. enhanced interrogation techniques.” The report said officials at C.I.A. headquarters had approved the use of some of the harsh tactics against Mr. Salim, but rejected interrogators’ requests for water dousing.

While 39 men endured the enhanced techniques, they were among at least 119 captives who went through the C.I.A.'s network of secret prisons. Many were later released without charges. A quarter were men who were picked up by mistake or on evidence that proved unreliable, a Senate inquiry later found. Others were low-level militants; some were suspected terrorist leaders, including accused plotters of the Sept. 11 attacks.

Mr. Salim said the interrogators had repeatedly questioned him about his ties in Kenya and Somalia. Among other things, he said, they claimed that he had falsified cargo documents on his boat, apparently to hide supplies for terrorists.

"They always asked the same questions. I say I don't know. They say, 'You know.' Same question, same answer, and two guys would beat you, and same question, and they beat you."

Desperate, Mr. Salim decided that suicide was his only escape. He hoarded the ibuprofen pills he sometimes was given, hiding them in the waistband of his pants. When he thought he had enough — 26 tablets — he tried to take them all at once. A guard, probably alerted by images from a video camera in the cell, rushed in and stopped Mr. Salim just as he began swallowing.

As he recounted the episode to a reporter, Mr. Salim began to cry uncontrollably, placed his arm across his face and rushed from the hotel room. Two days passed before he agreed to finish telling his story.

Five weeks after arriving in Afghanistan, Mr. Salim said, he was moved to the "Salt Pit," a secret underground C.I.A. prison. Mr. Salim, who was blindfolded while being transferred, said that he did not travel far. The available evidence suggests that The Darkness was most likely a different section of the same facility.

Conditions improved slightly, though Mr. Salim was still interrogated regularly. "Every day questions: 'You know him? You know him?'"

After 14 months, the C.I.A. in July 2004 handed Mr. Salim over to the United States military, which moved him to Bagram prison, outside Kabul. The young guards there nicknamed him Snoop because of his resemblance to the rapper Snoop Dogg.

The military held him for four more years. "Many times, they would say, 'We know you are innocent,'" Mr. Salim said, referring to American personnel at the prison. "And many times they said that 'you can go home, but it will take time.' But they didn't do it."

In Bagram, he was kept in a large cage with as many as 22 other prisoners. Pigeons flew in and out of the large, drafty prison. "I remember one flew in, and was just outside our cage," he said. "I was thinking, the pigeon was free and I was in the cage."



Mr. Salim looking over pigeons in Johannesburg. He said the birds helped quiet his mind.

/Bryan Denton for The New York Times

'A Ghost Walking'

In August 2008, Mr. Salim was released. The United States military gave him a document stating that there were no charges against him and that he had been "determined to pose no threat to the United States Armed Forces or its interests in Afghanistan."

The military freed him with no possessions save the long red trousers and top that were his prison uniform, and no place to go. Mr. Salim had to borrow ill-fitting clothes from an International Red Cross representative in Afghanistan, who arranged for him to fly home to Zanzibar. Mr. Salim has kept the too-small clothes from the Red Cross man ever since.

At the airport in Zanzibar, he was met by a half-dozen members of his family and Tanzanian security officials. "They asked me the same questions the Americans had always asked me," he said. But after two days, the Tanzanian government left him alone, with no restrictions on his activities. Tanzanian officials did not respond to a request for comment on his case.

In late 2008 or early 2009, two F.B.I. agents came to Tanzania to check up on him, Mr. Salim said. One agent said he had a gift: a T-shirt that said "Hakuna Matata" — no worries — from "The Lion King." Mr. Salim angrily tossed it back. An F.B.I. spokesman said he had no information about the episode.

Mr. Salim returned to the world a stranger. He had gotten married just two weeks before he was taken captive in Mogadishu, but his wife disappeared while he was gone and he could not find her.

Back in Stone Town, Mr. Salim found simple tasks difficult. He was depressed and experienced [nightmares](#) and flashbacks about his time in prison, he said. They felt so real that he could not understand what was happening to his mind.

His attempts to work proved frustrating. His sister offered to pay him to drive his niece to school, but he got lost on the first day. He wanted to go back to sea, but local fishermen thought they might get in trouble associating with him.

In 2009 or 2010, Mr. Salim went to Dar es Salaam seeking a license to become a merchant seaman, but he did not pass the test. He briefly worked for a cargo shipping company in Japan, but he said that loading containers hurt his back, already injured in prison.

He listed other chronic physical problems from his time in custody: headaches, neck and [shoulder pain](#), and severe gastrointestinal problems, common among detainees. Without a job, he lived with his mother and his sister at different times, humiliated that he was having so much trouble supporting himself.

In 2010, Dr. Sondra Crosby of the Boston University School of Medicine, a physician, a Navy reservist and an expert on torture, was asked by Physicians for Human Rights, a New York-based group, to evaluate Mr. Salim.

She was shocked by what she found. Mr. Salim, who is 6-foot-2, was emaciated “like a skeleton,” Dr. Crosby said in an interview. In her assessment, she wrote that “he is plagued by profound distress, inability to eat and [inability to sleep](#).”

“He describes himself as a ghost walking around the town,” she added. She noted other symptoms: flashbacks, short- and long-term [memory loss](#), distress at seeing anyone in a military uniform, hopelessness about the future and a strong avoidance of noise. “He reports that his head feels empty — like an empty box,” she said.

Dr. Crosby concluded that Mr. Salim showed many symptoms of [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) and [major depression](#).

He appears, she wrote, “to have suffered severe and lasting physical and psychological injuries as a result of his arrest and incarceration by U.S. forces.”

He is now a plaintiff in a lawsuit against two C.I.A. contractors who helped devise and run the brutal interrogation program of which he was a part. "I want the people who did this to be judged," he said.

Mr. Salim remarried and has a 5-year-old daughter, but he finds it impossible to talk to his wife about what happened to him, or how it still haunts him. He says others around him do not understand what he went through.

He lives in a three-room house owned by a relative in a poor neighborhood outside Stone Town. Until recently, he made some money by taking tourists fishing on a boat owned by his brother-in-law. But it was swamped in a storm several months ago.



10-12-16 After Torture, Ex-Detainee Is Still Captive of ‘The Darkness’