

# ISAS Insights

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## ***Zero Dark Thirty* and US-Pakistan Relations:**

### **A Hostile Future?**

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Since its release in December 2012 the film *Zero Dark Thirty* has received critical acclaim for dramatising a complex and traumatic event in recent American national life as a cinematic narrative. Its portrayal of political violence and the role of torture – euphemistically called ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’ – is vivid, arresting, confronting and horrifying. For its cinematic achievements the film received five Oscar nominations including the best film of the year.

Its makers claim it is an authentic portrayal of real events and that torture of detainees produced valuable information which was the key to finding Osama bin Laden’s hideout in Abbottabad, Pakistan. These claims have provoked criticism from journalists and public officials familiar with the Central Intelligence Agency’s torture regime. According to the Acting Director of CIA Michael Morell, the film’s depiction that the enhanced interrogation techniques led to finding bin Laden is “false”<sup>2</sup>. The key members of the United States Senate’s Intelligence Services Committee and the Armed Services Committee Senators Dianne Feinstein, Carl Levin and John McCain have called the film’s version of post-9/11

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Morell’s letter was posted on the CIA public website on 21 December 2012 and published in Huffington Post 22 December 2012.

counterterrorism history “grossly inaccurate” and “dangerous” because it has “the potential to shape American public opinion in a disturbing and misleading manner”<sup>3</sup>.

Journalists familiar with CIA’s interrogation programme are critical of the film’s portrayal of the role of enhanced interrogation programme since most of it is still shrouded in secrecy. According to American journalist Steve Coll, the “problem in assessing Zero Dark Thirty’s fealty to the facts about torture is that most of the record about the CIA’s interrogation program remains secret, including the formally sanctioned use of water boarding and other brutal techniques between 2002 and 2006. So does the full record of the CIA’s search for bin Laden after September 11”<sup>4</sup>. All CIA documents and records are classified and remain secret. This raises serious questions about the reliability of some of the key features of the movie such as the role of real-life CIA agent Maya and her dogged pursuit of Osama bin Laden.

The film shows torture techniques – such as being strung up by ropes, stuffed into a box, water boarding, sleep deprivation, sexual humiliation and other brutal forms of physical abuse – as central to finding clues to bin Laden’s hiding place. But according to the information from the Senate Intelligence Committee Study released by Senators Feinstein and Levin, the CIA did not learn about the existence of the Osama bin Laden’s courier or his hideout in Pakistan from CIA detainees subjected to coercive techniques. Instead, the CIA learned of the existence of the courier, his true name and location “through means unrelated to the CIA detention and interrogation program”<sup>5</sup>. The film grossly overemphasises the role of torture in gathering important clues about bin Laden’s hideout in Pakistan. In doing so, it completely ignores the serious internal dissensions in the US intelligence community about the role and regulation of torture. The emphasis on torture may be “healing” for Maya and her fellow-Americans’ bruised psyche, but it offers a potent weapon to Jihadis in their future recruitments.

The torture scenes largely revolve around Ammar whose character is based on a CIA detainee Ali Abdul Aziz Ali also known as Ammar al-Baluchi, a nephew of the September 11 attacks mastermind Khalid Sheikh Muhammad. He was arrested in Pakistan in 2003 and held there in a secret CIA prison for three years and then transferred to Guantanamo. Ammar is accused of transferring money to the 9/11 hijackers. The film shows him being subjected to torture and humiliation without any recourse to lawyers. He finally succumbs to the torture and becomes compliant. But in reality, Ali has been a defiant prisoner and an active participant in the Guantanamo court, and his lawyers have asked the military court for the identities of the CIA agents who interrogated and tortured him in custody<sup>6</sup>.

As regards to the purpose of the Navy Seals mission, the film unambiguously suggests that the objective was not to capture but kill bin Laden. Was the killing authorised by President Obama under his “targeted killing” policy? President Obama’s counterterrorism advisor, the

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<sup>3</sup> For full text of Feinstein et. al. letter and statement see: <http://www.feinstein.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2012/12/feinstein-releases-statement-on-zero-dark-thirty>

<sup>4</sup> Steve Coll, ‘Disturbing & Misleading’, The New York Review of Books, February 7 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Feinstein, op cit.

<sup>6</sup> Coll, op cit.

new CIA Director John Brennan, and the Attorney General Eric Holder, however, have publicly stated that targeted killings are authorised only when capture is not “feasible” and a threat of attack is “imminent” or the killing would significantly disrupt terrorist plans and capabilities. It would appear that none of these conditions was applicable and bin Laden could have been captured and brought to face justice for his criminal actions against the United States. However, according to a report published on 20 January 2013 in *The Washington Post*, the CIA is exempt from following these rules in Pakistan<sup>7</sup>. Why this exemption and would not this exception accentuate anti-US resentment in Pakistan and further worsen the already-strained US-Pakistan relations?

These obvious flaws have not affected the film’s box office success and the praise from critics. One factor contributing to its popularity may be due to the fact that a majority of Americans support torture and this support is increasing. After the traumatic events of September 11, Americans see revenge and retaliation as appropriate and acceptable responses to terrorism. *Zero Dark Thirty* has served the purpose of making torture – an immoral and illegal behaviour – more acceptable. The stance taken in the film will reverberate in the political landscape of Muslim countries like Pakistan and accentuate widespread hostility to the United States. This hostility is already undermining the legitimacy of the Pakistani government which many Pakistanis regard as subservient to the US. Such perceptions are creating serious hurdles in countering terrorism in Pakistan.

The hostility towards the US is not new in Pakistan but it received a boost in 2002/3 when President Pervez Musharraf’s government under American pressure withdrew its support for Islamist militants fighting in Kashmir and Afghanistan. This shift was a major factor in undermining Musharraf’s “Enlightened Moderation” policy which, though never fully developed, nevertheless sought to increase economic growth by addressing the underlying problems of the Pakistani economy such as corruption and by instituting reforms to improve the position of women, education, freedom of the media, local democracy and by rolling back some of Zia ul Haq’s harsher Islamisation policies<sup>8</sup>.

During my fieldwork in Pakistan in 2005-2007, I was struck by the widespread perception among Pakistanis that Musharraf government was subservient to the US and following its orders to kill its own people. This perception was even shared by the police and intelligence officers I interviewed. A number of senior counterterrorism officers told me that their policies to “reform” high-value terrorists in Pakistani jails were unsuccessful because of their intense hatred of Musharraf government<sup>9</sup>.

I was told that that many detained terrorists were sponsored by Pakistani intelligence agencies to help the Taliban regime. After the Taliban regime was overthrown following the US invasion of Afghanistan, they were arrested and tortured in Afghanistan. They felt betrayed by the Pakistani government. Torture left them bitter, angry and full of hate. During

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<sup>7</sup> David Cole, ‘13 Questions for John O. Brennan’, *The New York Review of Books*, February 21 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Anatol Lieven, *Pakistan: A Hard Country* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), Chapter 6.

<sup>9</sup> Riaz Hassan, *Life as a Weapon: The Global Rise of Suicide Bombings* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), Chapter 5.

these years many high-value Al-Qaeda leaders were also arrested by Pakistani intelligence agencies and handed over to the US. As in the case of Ammar they were kept in secret CIA jails in Pakistan and brutally tortured. Many Pakistani journalists knew about their torture and incarceration and wrote about it in the media. These reports were instrumental in turning even the urban middle classes against the Musharraf government.

The film's portrayal of torture and its apparent sanction by the US authorities largely confirm widely-held beliefs and perceptions in Pakistan and will further fan hostility towards the US. Perhaps the greatest impact of Zero Dark Thirty will be that it will become a powerful tool for recruiting future generations of Jihadis in Pakistan, who will see helpless and defenceless Muslims being tortured as part of the American policy, and that the Pakistani government was doing the same following American orders. Zero Dark Thirty may be healing for many Americans but deeply troubling for those who think that it makes torture acceptable and a powerful tool for militant groups to seduce future recruits for advancing their political agenda and hostility to America.

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