

“I have nothing nice to say about Murray”

By Nathan Hamm, 2,355 words

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Nathan Hamm (26, from the US) says what in his opinion is a true reflection of the situation in Uzbekistan. Thereby, he tells us why Craig Murray is wrong - and counterproductive.

Editor's Preface: To see the first edition of this article, click [here](#).

responsibly and carefully.

A Registan reader's question

Is Torture Systemic?

Major Mike Ford of Blackburn left a question recently about former British diplomat Craig Murray and the issue of torture in Uzbekistan:

First, my short answer on whether or not torture is systemic on Uzbekistan: probably.

I've read the many posts regarding Craig Murray but, for all the personal attacks on this particular individual, I am unable to find in your discourse any sense of the true level of torture in Uzbekistan. I am able to identify the obvious hyperbolic rhetoric used by Mr Murray but is torture in Uzbekistan "systemic," as he suggests? Perhaps you could enlighten me with your expert knowledge of the region so that a fuller picture of this man's increasingly public campaign in my hometown can be ascertained.

Any answer to this question depends upon whether or not "systemic" means "widespread" or "a policy ordered by the highest levels of the executive" or even something entirely different.

First off, the big problem is that Uzbekistan's government is incredibly opaque, so it's exceedingly difficult to tell who orders what and why exactly officials at certain levels do the things they do. The government gives very vague guidelines to local officials (whenever they bother to give guidelines) so decisions are very timidly made if made at all.

True, I have nothing nice to say about Murray; my co-blogger Laurence Jarvik isn't a fan either. It is also true that I personally have never really discussed the level of torture in Uzbekistan, though I have discussed some of Murray's particular accusations. So, I'll answer the question that's been posed to me. But I'll also discuss what should be done and why I don't think Murray's approach best serves the people of Uzbekistan.

Second off, officials often deal with a multitude of pressures that are difficult to balance. I ran into this occasionally whenever I had to ask low-ranking officials to offer fairly tame support for a project or idea.

The biggest pressures are in the areas of crime and punishment, and security.

And it's not just a discussion that needs to be had about Uzbekistan. These are issues that policymakers and analysts face every day, and they are issues that need to be dealt with

There are competing interests in the Uzbek judicial system. In the fight between prosecutorial expediency and justice, justice always seems to lose. Police are so poorly

equipped and trained to investigate crimes that prosecutors can usually only get convictions through confessions. To put it most mildly, police "extract" confessions. Most readers who have followed arguments on torture know that this produces inaccurate results and often only gives the outward appearances of having solved crimes-or as is often the case in Uzbekistan, serious security concerns.

When I talk about the weakness of the investigative and prosecutorial arms of the Uzbek judicial system, it's probably important to point out to those inclined to distrust me (and among Murray's crowd there are plenty, I'm sure) that my argument, while fairly intuitive, is backed up by Ruslan Sharipov, who has experienced Uzbekistan's prisons firsthand and was himself **tortured**:

...the worst physical violence takes place at this [pre-trial] stage, when the suspect is entirely in the hands of the police. They are generally seeking a signed confession [which is] a document that in court is always sufficient to produce a guilty verdict, even if the accused recants and says he or she signed under duress.

The level of pressure applied to detainees means that most will sign anything after only two or three days, even confessing to a theft of which he or she is totally innocent. After the extraction of a confession-[confessions are] commonly the centrepiece of the prosecution's case-the accused goes to the next stage, a prison in either Tashkent or another city.

Because confessions are such a crucial element of any trial, torture is commonplace, regardless of whether the alleged crime is petty theft or political sedition.

Methods used in the interior ministry include general beatings and more sophisticated brutality including electric shock, suffocation by placing a gas mask or plastic bag on the suspect's head, and pulling out fingernails and teeth.

So, if "systemic" means "widespread," then yes, torture is systemic in Uzbekistan. It is often the only way for police and prosecutors to secure convictions, and paranoia and

overzealous police most certainly lead to too many innocent people confessing to crimes they did not commit.

But is the torture an explicit government policy?

On a certain level, this is an irrelevant question. That torture is common is a problem regardless of why.

On another level, though, this question is absolutely crucial. I do believe the Uzbek government would like to eliminate torture if for no other reason than it is good for business to do so (I say this for lack of better phrasing.) If Uzbekistan were a company, the truth is its reputation would give it less currency with the public than Enron or Halliburton. The government knows this, knows it suffers as a result, and yet still lets its paranoia and fear of instability prevent it from making bold steps toward solving the problem.

It's hard because Uzbekistan is such an opaque state; who has what powers and where decisions made?-not even the officials know this, so it is difficult to determine in exactly what way torture is systemic. It certainly is part of the system, in that prosecutors and police rely on it to secure convictions. And the government has made moves to reduce torture, but not with much zeal.

And if that's all you wanted to know, especially those of you who will have the opportunity to vote for Craig Murray, then you can stop reading now. If you're going to vote for him because torture happens in Uzbekistan, go right ahead. Just know that doing so on just that basis endorses a foreign policy approach that ensures the continued abuse of human rights and torture in Uzbekistan.

What is to be done?

I believe that heaping condescending scoldings upon the Uzbek government, as Murray has done, is not an effective strategy for those genuinely interested in stopping torture in Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan's government is pretty touchy, and the type of criticism preferred by the Left tends to lead

to backlashes from touchy governments. I'm not saying that it's necessary to walk on eggshells or keep all criticism out of the public's view. I'm saying that it's necessary to tone down the rhetoric and recognize and reward improvements when improvements occur. And they do occur, despite what bombastic, overheated critics may assert.

One of the smarter strategies for eliminating torture in Uzbekistan that doesn't necessarily rely on the goodwill of the government is to improve the investigative skills of police and the ability of prosecutors to build cases based on evidence rather than confessions. It's not as if every prisoner is railroaded through trials. There are other precedents. On those rare occasions when evidence has been properly gathered and submitted in court, judges have been willing to dismiss charges-and in fact have done so when the evidence showed the culprit's innocence. (I should note here that with some high-profile cases, there is pressure from the top to round up people and convict them quickly to maintain the government's image as a provider of stability, one of its central claims to legitimacy.)

The problem with the combative, lecturing approach is that it results in the lecturer, be it a state, an NGO, or a particular individual, breaking contact or losing all leverage with the mid and low-level bureaucrats, prosecutors, and police officers that are the key to improving the humanitarian health of Uzbekistan's institutions.

Specialists agree with this diagnosis. For example, when the CSCE held hearings regarding the State Department's decertifying direct aid to the Uzbek government due to human rights problems, the experts were nearly unanimous: the relationship should continue. One of those who supported the continuation of direct US aid to the Uzbek government was Abdurahim Pulatov of the opposition Birlik Party. Who supported the cut-off? Human Rights Watch, an organization whose approach is so wrapped up in condescending lectures that its role in Uzbekistan could best be compared to that of a particularly hard-to-kill fly. Sure, they draw a reaction, but usually only in response to a big commotion.

Robert Kaplan is less of an idealist than me, but he touches on this theme at the end of **Eastward to Tartary**:

I am afraid that calls in Western capitals for "democracy" while branding as "evil" those who do not comply-is an evasion, not a policy. Holding an election is easy. But because the "state," as Buckhardt says, "is a work of art," building one from scratch requires guile, force, and years of toil. ... The only way to ensure that the latter triumphs [liberal democracy] is not to force elections on societies ill-prepared for them but to project economic and military power regionally, through pipelines and defense agreements. If our weight is felt, our values may follow. But if we only lecture sanctimoniously, new empires that arise in the Near East will not reflect our values. The human landscape is grim, but great powers throughout history faced grim landscapes and were not deterred from pursuing their goals.

Like Kaplan, and unlike so many of Murray's adorers, I've seen a slice of that grim human landscape. Uzbekistan transformed me. The world is a nasty, brutal place. I firmly believe that Uzbeks deserve all the rights, freedoms, and opportunities that those of us in the West enjoy. Wishing it to be won't make it so. Engagement, as unseemly as it may be, is the only option available to those who want a realistic shot at addressing torture in Uzbekistan.

Back to Murray and The Real Issue

Murray's Uzbekistan strategy, inasmuch as he has one, has been to walk the "may our souls be pure" path. It sounds perfectly dandy on its own. However, as is often the case in this world, we can't have our cake and eat it too. The alternative, specifically framed, is to walk the "may our influence make Uzbekistan a better place" path. The issue is how we can make a difference, and in my opinion, the second path is the best way to reach our goal.

Let me re-phrase: moral posturing may be good for one's soul, but it doesn't make a dictator change his tune; engagement produces results.

The primary reason why torture isn't the core issue in the "Murray controversy" is that the Foreign Office was right to pull him from his station. Regardless of the truth of his accusations, by becoming a condescending moralizer, Murray rendered himself ineffective, both as a diplomat and as a reformer.

There is a third reason why the Foreign Office was right: is Murray really interested in serving his country or the Uzbek people?

I am very suspicious of Murray not only because of his techniques and manifest lack of political aptitude, but also because, if one examines the Press coverage closely, his care about torture in Uzbekistan seems to always peak whenever the Foreign Office brings up allegations concerning his behavior as ambassador.

You ask: why is Murray even running if he, as I assert, only cares to promote his fame and influence? In The Guardian, which has kindly agreed to give him a free weekly soapbox, he **waxes serious**. But what has he said in the **recent past**?

My immediate plans...I intend to stand against Jack Straw in his Blackburn constituency. Just to annoy him.

I won't selectively quote. But keep in mind that reason number one is to annoy Jack Straw:

And to bring home this question of complicity with dictatorships, complicity with torture in the War on Terror, because Jack Straw himself personally took the decision to use Uzbek torture-based intelligence. It was put to him, he discussed it. He discussed it with the head of MI6 and they decided they would continue using it. So I want to hold him accountable for that, and to make sure that the electors and his own constituency know all about it. I'm not anticipating being elected I should hasten to say. You can be the first people to publish that!

What is it that Craig Murray cares about: Uzbeks being tortured or his government accepting intelligence received from torture? Well, I think his statement is fairly unambiguous, as are his actions: he cares more about sticking it to his government than Uzbekistan becoming a better place. That doesn't necessarily mean he doesn't care about the latter, but it's a second-order priority.

I understand Murray's point of view, the "we need to worry about purifying our government" argument. I've encountered it often, and I believe it's morally reprehensible when purity is gotten by turning one's back on the plight of another people. I believe it's doubly reprehensible when made by someone like Murray, who actually had the power to make a difference-which he renounced with his unprofessional behavior and his obstinate refusal to accept that maybe the government making the policy he was employed to enact might have a long-term vision for making the world a better place. And I believe it's triply reprehensible to go around professing to care about one situation while focusing all of one's energy on another situation, all the while trying to make a quick buck as a career critic.

Major Ford, if you intend to base your vote on a moral foreign policy, keep in mind that morality is about ends and means. Murray's way, the antagonist's route, may leave Britain as innocent as a lamb, but it will certainly destroy the ability of your government to make positive changes in the Uzbek government. But if you want revenge on your government, then by all means, put this man-child in office. Just know though that in the real world, compromises sometimes must be made, and Murray's unwillingness to compromise will leave the world a colder place.