Khaled El-Masri grew up in Lebanon. When he was twenty-three, he and his family moved to Germany in order to escape the Lebanese civil war. El-Masri worked there as a car salesman and became a German citizen in 1995. In 2003, the Central Intelligence Agency misidentified him as an al-Qaeda operative with a similar name. This is what happened.

On December 31, 2003, El-Masri boarded a bus from Ulm, Germany to Skopje, Macedonia, where he intended to take a brief holiday. The drive proceeded as expected until the bus crossed into Macedonia. Without explanation, Macedonian law enforcement officials boarded the bus and escorted him off. They confiscated his passport and transported him to a hotel in Skopje, where he was detained and interrogated for 23 days.

I was guarded at all times, the curtains were always drawn, I was never permitted to leave the room, I was threatened with guns, and I was not allowed to contact anyone. At the hotel, I was repeatedly questioned about my activities in Ulm, my associates, my mosque, meetings with people that had never occurred, or associations with people I had never met. I answered all of their questions truthfully, emphatically denying their accusations. After 13 days I went on a hunger strike to protest my confinement.

In January, the CIA discussed the possibility of removing El-Masri from the Macedonian officials and transporting him to a different country for more controlled interrogation. The Director of the CIA’s al-Qaeda unit supported this plan and gave orders to proceed. On January 23, 2004, a team of Macedonian men told El-Masri that he would be returned to Germany. They then instructed him to report, on video, that he had been treated well and would arrive home soon. Next the men handcuffed and blindfolded El-Masri and drove him to the airport.

The car eventually stopped and I heard airplanes.
The men led El-Masri into a building at the Skopje airport, where members of the CIA “black renditions” team assumed custody of him.

I was severely beaten by people’s fists and what felt like a thick stick. Someone sliced the clothes off my body, and when I would not remove my underwear, I was beaten again until someone forcibly removed them from me. I was thrown on the floor, my hands were pulled behind me, and someone’s boot was placed on my back. Then I felt something firm being forced inside my anus. I was dragged across the floor and my blindfold was removed. I saw seven or eight men dressed in black and wearing black ski masks. One of the men placed me in a diaper and a track suit. I was put in a belt with chains that attached to my wrists and ankles, earmuffs were placed over my ears, eye pads over my eyes, and then I was blindfolded and hooded. I was put in a belt with chains that attached to my wrists and ankles, earmuffs were placed over my ears, eye pads over my eyes, and then I was blindfolded and hooded.

The team led El-Masri onto a waiting plane.

I was thrown to the floor face down and my legs and arms were spread-eagled and secured to the sides of the plane. I felt two injections, and I was rendered nearly unconscious.

The aircraft first flew to Baghdad.

At some point, I felt the plane land and take off again.

Then it departed for Kabul, Afghanistan.

When it landed again, I was unchained and taken off the plane.

The team removed El-Masri from the plane and placed him in the back of a car. The vehicle drove for ten minutes until they arrived at a building.

I was thrown to the floor, and kicked and beaten on the head, the soles of my feet, and the small of my back. I was left in a small, dirty, cold concrete cell. There was no bed and one dirty, military-style blanket and some old, torn clothes bundled into a thin pillow. I was extremely thirsty, but there was only a bottle of putrid water in cell. I was refused fresh water.

El-Masri had arrived at a CIA-run facility called the “Salt Pit.” It was located at an abandoned brick factory north of the Kabul business district. Since 2001, the CIA used this site to detain and interrogate high-level terrorist suspects.

That first night I was interrogated by six or eight men dressed in the same black clothing and ski masks, as well as a masked doctor and a translator. They stripped me of my clothes, photographed me, and took blood and urine samples. I was returned to my cell, where I would remain in solitary confinement, with no reading or writing materials, and without once being permitted outside to breathe fresh air, for more than four months. I was worrying a lot about my family. Ultimately, I was interrogated three or four times, always by the same man, with others who were dressed in black clothing and ski masks, and always at night. The man who interrogated me threatened me, insulted me, and shoved me. He interrogated me about whether I had taken a trip to Jalalabad using a false passport, whether I had attended Palestinian training camps, and whether I knew September 11 conspirators or other alleged extremists. As in Macedonia, I truthfully denied their accusations. Two men who participated in my interrogations identified themselves as Americans. My requests to meet with a representative of the German government, a lawyer, or to be brought before a court, were repeatedly ignored.

Back at the CIA’s Counterterrorism center, the Office of Technical services analyzed El-Masri’s passport. By March, they concluded the passport was genuine; the CIA realized they had captured the wrong person. The question was: Now what? Then-director George J. Tenet, along with national security advisor Condoleezza Rice,
allegedly believed that the German Interior Ministry should be notified of the situation. However, the Germans did not receive the news until two months later. And El-Masri remained in Kabul.

In March, El-Masri began a hunger strike. After 27 days, he was brought to two American officials, one of whom directed the detention center and the other who held a superior position.

I pleaded with them to either release me or bring me to court, but the American prison director replied that he could not release me without permission from Washington.

He continued the hunger strike for ten more days.

On day 37 of my hunger strike I was dragged into an interrogation room, tied to a chair, and a feeding tube was forced through my nose to my stomach. After the force-feeding, I became extremely ill and suffered the worst pain of my life.

The CIA knew that Macedonia did not want to receive El-Masri. So they arranged to have him flown to Albania.

In mid-May, a German who identified himself only as “Sam” visited El-Masri. “Sam” asked him the same questions he had heard repeatedly, regarding terrorist associations and the forged passport. He visited El-Masri three more times in the next few weeks. In late May, “Sam,” the American prison director, and an American doctor visited all together. They informed El-Masri that he would be released in a week.

I was warned that as a condition of my release, I was never to mention what had happened to me.

I was accompanied by Sam and also heard the voices of two or three Americans. Sam informed me that the plane would land in a European country other than Germany, but that I would eventually continue on to Germany. I believed I would be executed rather than returned home.

When the plane landed, Mr. El-Masri was placed in the back seat of a vehicle. He was not told where he was. The vehicle drove up and down mountains for more than six hours. When it finally came to a halt, El-Masri’s blindfold was removed and he received his belongings and passport. The driver ordered him to walk down the path without looking back.

I believed I would be shot in the back and left to die, but when I turned the bend, there were armed men who took my passport.

El-Masri explained that he did not know where he was. The officer told him that he was in Albania. He then presented El-Masri to a superior officer who drove him to Mother Theresa Airport in Tirana. He was then flown back to Germany.

Only when the plane took off did I believe I was actually returning to Germany. When I returned I had long hair and a beard, and had lost 40 pounds. My wife and children had left our house in Ulm, believing I had left them and was not coming back. I have very bad feelings about the United States. I think it's just like in the Arab countries: arresting people, treating them inhumanly and less than that, and with no rights and no laws.
In June 2004, the German Office of the Prosecuting Magistrate in Munich began to investigate El-Masri’s story. They confirmed his travel to Macedonia and, through radioactive isotope analysis of his hair, obtained evidence that he had visited a South Asian country and was deprived of food for an extended time.

In 2005, the American Civil Liberties Union filed a case against CIA Director George Tenet on El-Masri’s behalf. In 2006, the highest appeals court dismissed the case on the grounds that it would expose state secrets. In 2007, the Supreme Court refused to hear the case.

On December 13, 2012, the European Court of Human Rights (which does not have jurisdiction over the United States) found that Macedonia had violated the European Convention on Human Rights’ prohibition on torture, and ordered it to pay damages to El-Masri.

This story sounds like a scene from Homeland or 24. Even if we can grasp its reality, it seems far away – plotted in quiet corners of the CIA headquarters and orchestrated in tumultuous South Asian countries.

It does not sound like a saga that has deep roots in Smithfield, NC, less than an hour from Duke’s campus. It hardly feels like the type of program to be enabled by North Carolina’s state and local governments.

And it certainly does not seem to be the sort of issue that ignites fierce debate amongst neighbors about what goes on in their backyards. But it is.

Aero Contractors, a corporation headquartered at Johnston County Airport in Smithfield, North Carolina, operated the flight that transported El-Masri from Macedonia to the Salt Pit in Afghanistan. Aero’s employees are residents of North Carolina. The Johnston County government, using taxpayer dollars, facilitates Aero operations. Some residents can even see Aero planes flying above their houses.

To effectively consider the North Carolina connection to torture, we must understand the background of the CIA extraordinary rendition program.
Extraordinary rendition: defined

Extraordinary rendition is defined as “the transfer—without legal process—of a detainee to the custody of a foreign government for purposes of detention and interrogation.” The phrase derives from the legal concept of “rendition,” which means “to return” or “to surrender” a suspect from one jurisdiction to another. Under Article 3 of the United Nations Convention Against Torture, to which the United States is a signatory, it is strictly illegal to render someone to a country where torture is likely.

In practice, extraordinary rendition takes different forms. Geography and judicial jurisdiction vary from case to case. For example, the CIA transported Khaled El-Masri from one foreign country to another under no judicial directive. But at times, the CIA seizes suspects because they have been issued an arrest warrant. The depth of CIA involvement also varies. In some cases, the agency merely orders the rendition while during others, like El-Masri’s, they lead detention and interrogation procedures at “black site” facilities.

Extraordinary rendition: pre-9/11

Since the nation’s founding, American leaders have debated the efficacy and morality of rendition. Most early cases involved foreign fugitives who were captured in the United States. The government wrestled over whether to return them to their home countries when their justice systems were excessively harsh. In 1792, Thomas Jefferson directly stated that, “to remit a fugitive to excessive punishment is to be accessory to the crime.”

As the country evolved, the issue of rendition complicated. In 1886, the courts convicted a suspect who had been kidnapped from Peru by U.S. forces. The landmark Supreme Court case that followed, Ker v. Illinois (1886), established that a prisoner who violated U.S. law cannot claim any Constitutional violation if (s)he is kidnapped from a foreign country and returned here for trial.

In 1984, Congress incorporated a new statute of the Comprehensive Crime Control Act that enabled the FBI to render suspects back to the United States, no matter where the criminal acts occurred. Soon after the law was passed, agents lured a wanted Lebanese terrorist suspect into international waters and then arrested him. Here, for the first time, the U.S. exercised legal power to arrest a suspect who committed crimes abroad and return him to the United States. The idea, according to the FBI, was to “[send] a message to terrorists that we would pursue them no matter where they tried to hide.”

During the Clinton administration, the concept of “extraordinary rendition” developed radically. Unlike historical “rendition” in which the government took suspects back to the United States for trial, intelligence agencies began abducting suspects from one foreign country and transporting them to another – not for trial but for information gathering.

Michael Scheuer, a former CIA counterterrorism expert explains that, “it was begun in desperation.” He and his colleagues had spent much of the mid-1990’s studying al-Qaeda’s operations and by 1997 his department
had formulated a focused mission to capture bin Laden and his associates. But Scheuer and his colleagues quickly realized that the traditional justice system would never work for that type of prisoner.

Firstly, American courts demand that all evidence be obtained legally – and that, when asked, prosecutors reveal their method of discovery. The agency, for security reasons, could not give up most intelligence information or procedures. The CIA recognized that foreign governments would refuse to testify in American courts for the same reason. Furthermore, bureaucratic overlap presented practical barriers.

The State Department and FBI frequently thwarted CIA evidence-gathering efforts that they deemed jurisdictional overreach – particularly when diplomats or American citizens were involved.

As Scheuer describes, “We were turning into voyeurs. We knew where these people were, but we couldn’t capture them because we had nowhere to take them…we had to come up with a third party.” And so, modern extraordinary rendition was born.

Egypt, it turns out, was the perfect third party. A strategic ally with a reputation for criminal brutality, their agents could be trusted to forcefully elicit information from suspects. Moreover, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak’s primary opponents were radical Islamists linked to al-Qaeda. Egypt acquiesced and quickly formed a secret pact with the United States.

The process worked as follows: Egypt issued a formal arrest warrant (often in absentia) for a suspected terrorist. The U.S. would coordinate or fund intelligence efforts in the country where the suspect resided. When this intelligence led to a suspect’s capture, he would be flown to Egypt for interrogation. According to Scheuer, Americans could give Egyptians the questions they wanted to ask the detainees in the morning and get answers by the evening. However, U.S. personnel were never permitted to be in the same room as the suspect.

The CIA ensured that every suspect undergoing this procedure had been formally issued an Egyptian arrest warrant. Caseworkers even prepared the equivalent of a rap sheet for each suspect and the CIA’s legal counsel approved every operation.

The Clinton administration soon expanded the program to Syria, Jordan, and Morocco. Those, along with Egypt, are to-date the four countries most active in receiving U.S.-sponsored renditions.
Extraordinary rendition: post-9/11

Less than a decade later, the system evolved again.

Vice President Dick Cheney set the tone for a new era of intelligence gathering when he famously said on Meet the Press, five days after 9/11, that the government needed to, “work through, sort of, the dark side.” He explained that, “A lot of what needs to be done here will have to be done quietly, without any discussion, using sources and methods that are available to our intelligence agencies, if we’re going to be successful. That’s the world these folks operate in. And so it’s going to be vital for us to use any means at our disposal, basically, to achieve our objective.”

A few months later, top Justice Department officials sent a series of famous memoranda to the President regarding updated counterterrorism strategies. These documents outlined a policy labeled by White House officials as the “New Paradigm” for treating suspects in the war-on-terror. They emphasized the absolute need for speedy information in order to protect American lives. The Justice Department argued that it was “appropriate” and “consistent with military necessity” to disregard the Geneva Conventions’ regulations for detainee treatment.

Many officials at the State Department disagreed with this finding. William Taft IV, the State Department’s legal advisor, warned the administration that, “if the U.S. took the war on terrorism outside the Geneva Conventions, not only could U.S. soldiers be denied the protections of the Conventions—and therefore be prosecuted for crimes, including murder—but President Bush could…be prosecuted for war crimes.”

Nonetheless, on February 7, 2002, President Bush signed a memo stating he accepted the Justice Department’s legal conclusion and believed that he had “the authority under the Constitution” to deny protections of the Geneva Conventions to combatants picked up during the war in Afghanistan.

With newfound leeway, the CIA restructured rendition. Instead of relinquishing detainees to another country’s officials and trusting their procedures, the CIA operated its own detainment and interrogation centers in third countries. It was at this time that the CIA constructed a number of secret prisons, known as “black sites,” all around the world.

Despite Bush’s executive permission for these new techniques, the administration found itself in unknown and risky legal territory. John Radsan, a former CIA lawyer, commented that, “As a society, we haven’t figured out what the rough rules are yet. It’s the law of the jungle. And right now we happen to be the strongest animal.”

By holding terrorist suspects without charges or counsel and obtaining their “confessions” through torture, intelligence officers are often unable to convict them in U.S. courts – or even use them as witnesses. But by releasing them, these officers expose themselves to domestic and international criminal charges.

Jamie Gorelick, the former deputy attorney general and a member of the 9/11 Commission, explained, “It’s a big problem. In criminal justice, you either prosecute the suspects or let them go. But if you’ve treated them in ways that won’t allow you to prosecute them you’re in this no man’s land. What do you do with these people?”
Over 54 foreign governments spanning 5 continents have participated in CIA secret detention and extraordinary rendition programs by contributing intelligence or housing “black sites.” Some, including Canada, the United Kingdom, and Denmark, are well-established democracies.

The international human rights community has loudly condemned post-9/11 torture and extraordinary rendition programs. Governmental and non-governmental organizations have accused the United States of violating the Convention Against Torture, Article 3(1) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 9(1) – not to mention the Geneva Conventions, which many assert should not have been disregarded. Many reports also criticize the U.S. government’s lack of transparency with regard to counterterrorism investigation and interrogation policies. Many reports also criticize the U.S. government’s lack of transparency with regard to counterterrorism investigation and interrogation policies.

Nonetheless, President Obama’s Interrogation and Transfer Policy Task Force recently announced that intelligence operations “in which the United States moves or facilitates the movement of a person from one country to another or from U.S. custody to the custody of another country” would continue.

Aero Contractors: The North Carolina connection

Jim Rhyne, a chief pilot for CIA flights during the Vietnam War, founded Aero Contractors in 1979 at the agency’s request. Most of Aero’s early work involved transportation of foreign dignitaries visiting the United States. But from at least 2001 to 2006, Aero operated aircraft for the extraordinary rendition program. Aero employs about 130 workers and owns about 26 planes. The corporation operates out of Johnston County Airport in Smithfield, NC.

Flight records confirm that Aero completed individual renditions of Binyam Mohamed, Abou Elkassim Britel, Khaled El-Masri, Bisher Al-Rawi, and Mohamed Farag Ahmad Bashmilah using two aircraft, a Gulfstream V turbojet and a Boeing
Business Jet. For most of these missions, dummy flight plans concealed the routes to the “black sites” where detainees landed. Jeppesen Dataplan, Inc, a subsidiary of Boeing, provided this logistical support and flight mapping.

Typically, the missions ran as such: first, a few Aero employees would fly from Johnston County Airport in North Carolina to Dulles Airport outside Washington, DC. There, the “rendition team” of CIA detention and interrogation experts boarded. Next, the plane flew to the country where the terrorist suspect was located. The rendition experts prepared the detainee for travel “by a standardized procedure intended to put the individual in a state of total immobility and sensory deprivation.” During flight, the suspect would remain deprived of sight, sound, and the ability to move or communicate. When the plane landed, he would remain blindfolded, handcuffed, and hooded until he arrived at the “black site.”

One immediate question regarding Aero operations is: why choose Smithfield, NC for a headquarters? First of all, the airfield’s proximity to Fort Bragg served a tactical advantage – particularly in Aero’s early days when the planes frequently transported Special Forces operatives and other military officials. Additionally, Smithfield is small and rural; its population approximates 12,000. The Johnston County Airport is too small to have a tower, meaning there is no observation of or record-keeping about Aero’s flights. As one analyst explained, “If you wanted to shut up a secret operation, this is where you would do it. It's a God, guns and guts area.”

And shutting up the secret operation was crucial for Aero’s success. Robert W. Blowers, the corporation’s assistant manager, told a journalist that, “We’ve been doing business with the government for a long time, and one of the reasons is, we don't talk about it.” Even Ray Blackmon, the Johnston County Airport manager, admits, “To tell you the truth, I don’t know what they do.” He noted that Aero uses its own mechanics and fuel tanks. A former Johnston Airport pilot commented, “Sometimes a plane would go in the [Aero] hangar with one tail number and come out in the middle of the night with another.”

Despite these efforts for secrecy, one wonders how discreet such a corporation would be within such a small community. Trevor Paglen and A.C. Thomas, two investigative journalists, visited Smithfield to explore that question.

They spoke with Allyson Caison, 51, a real estate broker and mother of two. She has lived in Smithfield for many years and remembers the first time she heard about Aero’s operations in 2005, at a Boy Scout meeting. “It was kind of a ‘Mayberry cloak-and-dagger’,” she says. Most startling to her were the personal connections she shared with several Aero employees. She remembers thinking, “Holy cow, I know these people…I’ve baked gingerbread houses for a couple of them.” She was outraged and joined a budding protest movement, spearheaded by a group called NC Stop Torture Now.

But not all Smithfield residents feel the same way – particularly Allen Mims Jr., the chairman of the Johnston County Board of Commissioners. He has publicly reminded citizens that Aero is a tax-paying, employment-providing company and has warned anti-torture activists that they were “barking up the wrong tree.” He also asserted that he would be proud to know that the corporation had aided the CIA in combating terrorism. As he put it, “It’s not much different from hiring a taxicab,” he said. “I'd rather that the CIA do it that way than put a terrorist on a Delta flight and endanger the rest of us.”
A day in Smithfield, NC: What I saw

On an average afternoon in April, I drove 40 minutes from Duke’s West Campus to Johnston County Airport.

The entrance to Aero Contractors’ area appeared as welcoming as I had expected: a towering gate adorned with threats against unlawful entrance and a card-access entry point. As I pulled back to drive away, a sympathetic elderly lady with delicately coiffed hair rolled down the window of her white GMC. “What’s over here?” I asked.

“Oh, just different companies. The commuter terminal is over there,” she replied in a grandmotherly tone.

The juxtaposition between mystery and innocence that characterized this interaction permeated my entire Smithfield experience. Did she know what I was really looking for? Did she work for Aero Contractors? Did she even know what they did?

At the three-room commuter terminal, I met John, a fuel technician. He repairs, refuels, and maintains the aircraft that dock in Smithfield. I asked about Aero Contractors and he said that he had never interacted with them. When I queried about NC Stop Torture Now, he explained that they had adopted a nearby highway and sometimes came to take pictures at the airport, but he didn’t really know about their opinions. I quickly realized that John, though tremendously kind and eager to help my project, neither knew nor particularly cared about the subject.

Next I met Chris, an older gentleman who coordinates a flight service for rescue dogs. He has never worked with Aero Contractors nor does he know about their operations but when he heard about my project, he sat down and offered to brew some coffee.
“People don’t understand the private airline market,” he said, emphasizing the total independence of every company that contracts with Johnston County Airport. “It would be a shame to connect the facility to what gets transported through there.”

He went on to explain that local airports sustain the North Carolina economy. Many, such as Johnston County, were built in the aftermath of WWII, when land was far cheaper than it is today. If Johnston County Airport gets shut down, the government will find a place equally useful out of which to conduct its operations, he assured me. But the local economy would never recover. “I spent 27 years in the military fighting for our right to be against things. Just make sure you’re pointing your finger in the right direction,” he warned.

Again, the sweet ambiguity plagued me as I drove downtown. Had John heard about the nature of Aero Contractors’ work? Did he support extraordinary rendition? Or did he not believe it? Furthermore, I puzzled over the North Carolina connection to this much larger web. Why focus on Smithfield at all?

The Neuse River Bridge was under construction. Advisory signs appeared as I drove down I-95, about five miles away from the Smithfield town center. After five more minutes of driving, I passed a series of billboards displaying the “Barrel Monster,” an icon who uses kitschy phrases and cheesy gestures to remind visitors that the shops of Smithfield still need their business, even though the bridge closing forces a roundabout route downtown. As this bright orange character led me through quiet highways lined mostly with churches, I started to understand the small-town charm that Smithfield seeks.

Downtown Smithfield includes four main streets lined mostly with bail bonds establishments, private attorneys’ offices, and a few coffee shops. The streets were quiet on this weekday afternoon. And so, I was soon to discover, were the people.

In terms of their relationship with this issue, a manager at the Smithfield land zoning office said it best: “If you would ask 9 out of 10 people [about the connection between Aero Contractors and extraordinary rendition] they
wouldn’t know about it unless they happened to read it in the papers.”

“And after that?” I asked.

“They really don’t mind.”

Others expressed more pronounced doubt about the Smithfield connection to extraordinary rendition. When I asked one café owner what he knew about the anti-torture protests at the airport, he laughed. “I’m sorry, I was just laughing at how you said that – torture.” He assured me that, “I know a lot of people who work over there and if even half of what they said was true, they wouldn’t work there. I don’t have all the facts and it’s just my opinion but I don’t have a problem with them being here.”

That day, I talked to receptionists, shop workers, and personnel at the Development Corps, Land Use center, and Town Hall. “I really don’t know much,” “Maybe you should talk to the folks at the airport,” and “I’ve seen it on the news but I don’t have an opinion” were the common responses.

I left Smithfield under the impression that most residents remain generally apathetic on the issue.

Meeting with NC Stop Torture Now

One week later, after communicating with the leadership of North Carolina Stop Torture Now, I was kindly invited to attend their monthly meeting. Given the Smithfield commentary – one shop owner described the organization as “a couple angry people on the side of the road” – I expected a radical cluster of emotional activists.

But as the eight of them conversed in the basement of a Unitarian Universalist church in Raleigh, I was struck by the depth and breadth of their research-driven agenda. They discussed the United Nations’ request for the United States to honestly report interrogation practices in the upcoming 4th Periodic Review of compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). They anticipated press coverage of the Constitution Project’s report on post-9/11 extraordinary rendition. They devised press and logistical arrangements for a clean-up of the highway that runs alongside Johnston County airport, which the organization recently adopted. They began planning a conference in Charlotte, reached out to a torture victim in Italy, and organized an appeal to a U.S. Senator.
The reaches of this organization are substantive and multi-disciplinary; they act locally but think internationally. They aim, over all, to expose and end the practice of torture.

After the meeting, I spoke individually with a few members. The words of Chris, the rescue dog pilot, were still fresh in my mind: why act here in North Carolina? The Smithfield population generally does not believe the reports nor care about them. And policy decisions come from Langley, the Capitol, or the White House.

One of the senior North Carolina Stop Torture Now members explained that the organization does engage with the issue at the national and international levels. By supporting the release of research reports and communicating with federal legislative and judicial officials, they apply political pressure on actual decision-making bodies. Why the local activism and publicity component? To keep people aware.

This gentleman explained that the torture agenda functions in two ways: (a) people forget about it, or (b) people rationalize it and then forget about it. NC Stop Torture Now works locally and vocally to keep torture on the public agenda. He told me, “It might take twenty years. It will take long work and a lot of patience and determination. But we cannot let this be forgotten.”

So what?

This story is neither a Jack Bauer episode nor an Oscar-nominated feature film. As author A.C. Thompson wrote, “This is an American story, a neighborhood story.”

Citizen journalists and activists deserve responsibility for bringing much of this information to light and working tirelessly to change policy. Some of their neighbors support families on Aero salaries and have flown planes to “black sites” around the world transporting terrorist suspects.

Whether your perspective aligns more with a Smithfield resident or a North Carolina Stop Torture Now activist, you as a member of the Duke community cannot escape the fact that this issue is being fought and lived in our backyard.
**Photo citations**

1. Khaled El-Masri (AFP Photo/DDP/Sebastian Widmann)
2. Salt Pit (historycommons.org)
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4. Khaled El-Masri (Reuters/Susana Vera)
5. Durham, NC to Smithfield, NC (Google Maps)
6. Hosni Mubarak (Presidenza della Repubblica)
7. The four countries most active in receiving U.S.-sponsored renditions (Missions Atlas Project)
8. George W. Bush (Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)
9. Map (Open Society Foundation)
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11. NC Stop Torture Now demonstration (Flickr/gnuru)
12. All Smithfield and Johnston County Airport photos are my own.
13. Barrel Monster (NCSU)
14. NCSTN logo (NC Stop Torture Now)
15. Adopt a Highway (NC Stop Torture Now)
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