

The US military detains another of its Guantanamo Bay soldiers

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Just three days after the Bush administration reported the detention of Captain Youseff Yee, a Muslim chaplain at the Guantanamo Bay concentration camp in Cuba, Pentagon officials on Tuesday revealed that another soldier from the camp, air force translator Senior Airman Ahmad al-Halabi, was secretly arrested and jailed more than two months ago.

Information about al-Halabi's July 23 detention only emerged after his military-appointed lawyers released details of the extensive charges laid against him. Al-Halabi, a 24-year-old native of Syria who moved to the Detroit suburb of Dearborn, Michigan as a teenager, is being held at a prison on Vandenberg Air Force Base in southern California. Authorities have imposed restrictions on him including banning al-Halabi from speaking Arabic. That means he has to speak through a translator when his father visits.

The young man has been charged with eight counts related to espionage, three counts of aiding "the enemy", eleven counts of disobeying a lawful order, nine counts of making a false official statement and one count of bank fraud. The 30 charges range from alleged attempts to pass information to Syria, to conducting "unauthorised communications" with prisoners "by furnishing and delivering unauthorised food, to wit: baklava pastries".

From the facts stated in the charges filed against al-Halabi, it seems that the only specific evidence against him may be that by supplying food he displayed sympathy and humanity toward the prisoners, many of whom have been detained and interrogated, without charge, for more than 18 months. But if convicted by a military court-martial on the charges of espionage, al-Halabi faces execution.

The vague charges against al-Halabi include that he attempted to pass on information that he "had reason to believe could be used to the injury of the United States or to the advantage of Syria, a foreign nation." He is also accused of failing to report contact with the Embassy of Syria.

Members of his family said investigators were misinterpreting his innocent contacts with the Syrian Embassy, which occurred recently as he arranged visits to Syria in order to marry his Syrian-born fiancée and bring her to the US. When arrested at a naval air station in Florida, en route to his home base in Sacramento, California, he had a ticket to fly to Syria

several days later, where he was to marry.

Al-Halabi worked as an Arab-language translator at Guantanamo Bay for nine months, between November 15, 2002 and July 23, 2003. The government alleges that he wrote emails to an unauthorised person or persons whom he knew to be "the enemy", took photographs of the camp and tried to deliver two handwritten notes and a laptop computer with more than 180 electronic versions of letters from prisoners.

The documents do not specify who "the enemy" is, and prosecutors have refused to identify the alleged intended recipients. His military attorney, Air Force Major James E. Key, denied the charges. "Airman al-Halabi is not a spy and he is not a terrorist," Key said. "We asked who the enemy is, and we haven't been able to get an answer."

Military prosecutors fought to keep al-Halabi's "Article 32" preliminary hearing secret and closed to the public. Brigadier General Bradley S. Baker, the presiding officer, ordered the entire hearing closed, but al-Halabi's lawyers objected. Baker's order was overturned by the Air Force Court of Appeals, but much of the three-day hearing, which began on September 15, was closed after prosecutors argued that national security would be compromised. Baker has the power to order a full court-martial.

Al-Halabi appears to be an unlikely spy. He went straight into the Air Force after graduating from Fordson High School in Dearborn in 1999, and worked as a supply clerk before being pressed into service as a translator, his attorney told the Associated Press. Al-Halabi did well. He was named Airman of the Year one year and promoted fairly quickly to senior airman, before serving in Kuwait prior to the Iraq war.

The facts and circumstances surrounding the arrests of Yee and al-Halabi remain shrouded in military secrecy. But what is known so far raises the distinct possibility of a witchhunt, orchestrated at the highest levels in Washington, to prevent military personnel who have served in Guantanamo Bay from making public any details of the brutal treatment being meted out to the more than 660 prisoners being held there in violation of international law and the US Constitution.

Pentagon officials have alleged that al-Halabi and Yee knew each other at Guantanamo Bay, while refusing to say whether they are accused of acting in concert. Marine Corps General

Peter Pace, vice chairman of the Pentagon Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters US intelligence was digging into the background of the two men. “We will chase these rabbits as far as we need to, to find out where they lead,” Pace stated. “We don’t presume that the two we know about is all there is to it.”

Pace’s comments confirm that the Pentagon’s most senior officers are closely involved in pursuing the affair.

Judging by comments from an unnamed military official, the case against Yee, who has yet to be charged, is flimsy. The official told Fox News he was having a difficult time assessing the meaning of the articles said to be in the chaplain’s possession when he was arrested.

Yee was detained in part because he carried “classified information” without having something called a “courier card” in his possession. Such mistakes are not uncommon, the official said. Yee also possessed a laptop equipped with a modem, which is strictly forbidden at Guantanamo Bay. The official pointed out that nearly every laptop now sold is equipped with a dial-up modem.

Military officials referred to an ongoing investigation and said additional arrests of other members of the US military were possible shortly. An unnamed member of the navy was among those being questioned.

As the WSWS has already pointed out with regard to Yee’s arrest, it is implausible to suggest that any “enemy” could have benefitted from documents in his possession.

“In what way could he have helped these men and youth who have been held behind razor wire without charges, lawyers, visits from their families or indeed any contact with the outside world for nearly two years? It hardly seems likely that he was plotting a jail break or was preparing to hand over secret information to Al Qaeda or the Taliban.” [Why has the US government imprisoned Captain Yee?]

The more likely threat is that Yee and al-Halabi displayed some sympathy for the detainees, were intimately familiar with their appalling treatment and were not trusted to keep quiet about it.

It is not difficult to see why ordinary US servicemen, especially those from an Arabic or Islamic background, would be morally outraged by the illegal and barbaric conditions at Guantanamo Bay, and would want to make them public.

Both Yee, as a chaplain, and al-Halabi, as a translator, would have witnessed first-hand how detainees, including children, have been stripped of their most basic democratic rights. They are confined to tiny cells, interrogated by psychological stress methods defined as torture under international law, and denied all contact with the outside world, except for occasional, heavily-censored letters. A rapidly rising suicide rate has given rise to fears that prisoners are being physically tortured or even killed.

The charges against al-Halabi indicate that the alleged espionage affair may also be aimed at ratcheting up the Bush administration’s rhetoric against Syria. Syria remains on the

State Department’s list of countries sponsoring terrorism and the right-wing Murdoch-owned Fox News network in the US has already pointed the finger at Damascus. “The arrests raise new questions about Syria’s motives and actions in the US campaign against Islamic fundamentalist terrorism,” it reported.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and other administration officials have previously accused Syria of possessing chemical weapons and of helping Saddam Hussein’s regime before and during the recent Iraq war. Rumsfeld has also said Syrian nationals make up the largest number of foreign fighters captured in Iraq since the end of major combat. Syria has denied all the accusations, as well as the latest bid to link it to alleged spies in Guantanamo Bay.

Syrian Information Minister Ahmad al-Hassan described the charges connecting al-Halabi to Syria as “baseless and illogical”. “How could Syria have spies in Guantanamo? Is the CIA incapable of finding a trustworthy translator?” he said.

Another revealing aspect of the affair is the involvement of a senior US Democrat, Senator Charles Schumer of New York. He took credit for the arrest of Yee and demanded that the investigations be stepped up. He told CNN that six months ago, at his urging, the Justice and Defense departments opened a probe into the two organisations that train and certify Muslim military chaplains such as Yee.

Schumer claimed that the inspectors general had “dragged their feet” and Yee’s arrest underscored the need to pick up the pace. A government official confirmed to CNN that both the American Muslim Armed Forces and Veterans Affairs Council and the Graduate School for Islamic Studies are under investigation for allegations of supporting terrorism.

Schumer’s role highlights the bipartisan character of what appears to be a witchhunt against those of Muslim backgrounds in the US armed forces as well as a determined effort to defend the Bush administration’s flagrant abuse of fundamental democratic rights at Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere.



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