

Al Jazeera journalist among 10 jailed in Spain

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Al Jazeera journalist Tayseer Alouni was among 10 people jailed by a Spanish court on November 19 for suspected links to Al Qaeda.

The 10 have been charged with membership of an Al Qaeda cell said to have participated in the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington in 2001. They were initially arrested in September 2003, but freed on bail. The court ordered their re-arrest claiming they may flee in the run-up to their trial.

National Court prosecutor Pedro Rubira argued for the 10 to be sent to prison, claiming that “the nearness of the trial increased the risk of flight from justice, especially given that the charges relate to a terrorist organisation that has the means to prevent its militants appearing before court and being tried.”

The trial is expected to begin by the end of February.

Lawyers for the 10 have criticised the order, stating that their clients had no intention of fleeing, given that they had abided fully by their bail conditions and had lived and worked in Spain for years. Alouni told the *El Pais* newspaper, “How am I going to run away? If I flee I risk my entire journalistic career.”

Alouni, who has both Spanish and Syrian citizenship, was a well-known war correspondent in the Mideast for *Al-Jazeera*. He rose to international prominence when he interviewed Osama bin Laden shortly after the September 11 attacks. He was the Kabul correspondent for *Al-Jazeera* during the Afghanistan war.

The journalist’s initial arrest was widely interpreted as an attack on the freedom of the press and provoked protests from human rights groups, colleagues at *Al Jazeera* and other journalists.

The father of five was first arrested in September 2003 at his home in Granada. Suffering from a serious heart condition, he was released a month later. On the day of his second arrest, Alouni was due to undergo treatment and according to his wife has received no medical attention since being jailed.

Alouni’s wife, Fatima Hamed, said that Spain’s prisons have become “another Guantanamo,” with authorities isolating suspected Islamic militants. She told the Australian *ABC News* that her husband had been placed in solitary confinement without his lawyer being notified.

According to *ABC*, a spokeswoman for the prison system confirmed that Alouni and 85 others were being held in isolation. *ABC* reported, “Alouni must eat meals in his cell and can only exercise alone on the prison patio for one hour a day despite ill health.”

The 10 are among 35 people, including Osama bin Laden, indicted in September 2003 by Judge Baltasar Garzon on charges of belonging to or collaborating with Al Qaeda. Garzon charged some of the 35 with actually helping prepare the September 11, 2001, attacks. Arguing that Al Qaeda used Spain as a staging ground for the attacks, Garzon claimed jurisdiction to seek prosecution.

The judge claims that Alouni was a right-hand man of Imad Eddin Barakat Yarkas, alias Abu Dahdah, who was arrested on November 13, 2001, and is charged with providing financing and logistics for people in Europe said to have plotted the attacks. Garzon alleges that Alouni used the cover of journalistic trips to get money and messages to Al Qaeda members in Afghanistan in the late 1990s. He also accused Alouni of helping militants arriving in Spain by providing them with housing, money and residency papers.

Alouni has consistently denied any all the charges and any connection with Al Qaeda or involvement in terrorist activities.



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