

“How can they call themselves champions of democracy?”

Sister of Guantanamo detainee Omar Deghayes speaks out

Barbara Slaughter
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Thirty-five-year-old Omar Deghayes has been imprisoned in the US detention camp in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba for three years. On January 31, 2002, he was arrested in Pakistan along with his wife and young baby by armed local intelligence officers.

Omar’s wife and child were later released, and he was taken to Bagram airbase in Afghanistan. In September 2002, he was transferred to Guantanamo. According to Clive Stafford Smith, the well-known human rights lawyer who is Omar’s solicitor, the British government has refused to act on his behalf on the grounds that he is not a British citizen. They insist that he has to apply to Libya for “consular intervention,” despite the fact that his father, Amer Deghayes, a prominent Libyan trade unionist and lawyer, was allegedly murdered by the Gaddafi regime in 1980 and Omar has had refugee status in Britain since 1987.

In a recent Law Society press conference, Stafford Smith said that in September 2004, the US allowed four Libyan intelligence officers to interrogate Omar in Guantanamo. They accused him of being a member of the Libyan opposition and threatened to kill him.

His family, who originate from Libya but are now British nationals, are campaigning for his release.

His sister, Amani, recently addressed a meeting in Huddersfield to win support for the campaign for her brother’s release. While she was there, she spoke to Barbara Slaughter of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Barbara Slaughter: How long has Omar been in Guantanamo Bay?

Amani Deghayes: About three years, since my wedding. He has never met my husband or daughter. He was kidnapped in Pakistan. Omar had studied law at Wolverhampton University and was doing his legal practice here in Huddersfield University. When he didn’t pass all his exams, he decided to travel for a while. He intended to come back in order to obtain his final qualifications. His intention was to go to Malaysia, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, regions that we have never been to as a family. We have travelled in Europe and North America, and because we are from North Africa, we have seen most of the Arabic countries. At the time, there was a lot of controversy about Afghanistan, and I think, being a curious person, he wanted to go and see for himself what it was like and whether what was being said was true. He met a lady in Afghanistan and married her.

While Omar was in Afghanistan the war started, so he left the country for Pakistan with his family because it seemed to be safer. His child was only a few months old at the time.

While they were in Pakistan, they were all captured and imprisoned, including his wife and child, which is outrageous. Then his wife and child were released, and he was taken first to Bagram airbase in Afghanistan and then to Guantanamo.

BS: Do you know what he was charged with?

AD: We didn’t know anything, but thanks to the BBC we found out

some of the evidence that is supposed to be against him. The main evidence is a so-called Chechnyan “terrorist training video.” In it, there is a caption saying that this is Omar Deghayes—which is my brother’s name—except that the person in it does not look anything like him.

When you are not confronted with the evidence, you can’t challenge anything. It makes it all very difficult to understand what is going on. The only assumption we are making is that someone might have claimed the person on the video as Omar Deghayes—maybe someone who was being interrogated. The video was captured in Spain, and the Spanish government have asked for Omar to be extradited to Spain. This adds another element to his case.

Omar appeared on America’s “most wanted” web site accompanied by that picture from the video.

We took photographs and the video to a recognition expert, Professor Tim Valentine, of Goldsmith’s College, London University. He is an expert on face recognition and has given expert evidence on identification issues in British court cases. His report on Omar is five pages long; it goes into great detail. He concluded it is not the same person. He did it in a very technical way.

You know it shocks me that they can hold someone for such a long time with no concrete evidence and it seems they are not willing to investigate it properly. This is not just about my brother; it’s all the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay. Nobody knows why they are being held.

We found out about the video completely by chance. I was doing an interview about my brother on *BBC Newsnight*, and while they were talking, someone just mentioned the video. I told them we had never seen it and asked if we could have a copy. This is the video that has caused a lot of disaster in my brother’s life and all our lives.

BS: What sort of condition is your brother in?

AD: We have never been able to contact him directly to speak about anything substantial, so all the information we have comes from his lawyer, Clive Stafford Smith.

My brother has undergone some really bad torture in the various places. I can’t talk about the stuff that happened in Bagram yet, because it is not declassified. But some of the stuff from Guantanamo has been declassified, like the fact that he was beaten and had faeces smeared on his face.

He has also been blinded in one eye. One of my brother’s eyes was slightly fragile anyway because he has had operations on it since he was five years old, following a childhood accident. One of the reasons I was born in Switzerland was because at that time it was the most advanced place for treating such eye injuries. My brother had to stay in Switzerland for a considerable time to get treatment. He had to go back there every year for follow-up treatment. It is very sad that after all those years he ends up with that same eye completely blinded. Clive Stafford Smith tells

me that it is milky and white.

They sprayed pepper in his eyes, and one of the soldiers poked him in the eye as well. He couldn't see anything for about a week because of the pain. It continues to cause him pain because it is light-sensitive, and they won't allow him to wear an eye patch to protect it.

It is just horrific stuff, even if it wasn't my brother. I think it is disgusting for anyone to be treated like that—even a convicted criminal—let alone someone who has not even been charged with an offence. I don't understand how they can call themselves the “champions of democracy.” They invaded Iraq to teach the Iraqis about democracy, and this is how they behave.

BS: What do you think about the American and British governments?

AD: I think they are terrible. It is really shameful for the Labour Party, which has always stood for left-wing values, which are all about protecting civil liberties and being fair. Then they go and attack a country that has not attacked them, and while they are there, they do the most outrageous things. All the stuff that is coming out from Iraq is shocking.

BS: Evidence that has been gained under torture is now accepted in British law courts.

AD: Someone who is being tortured will say anything to make it stop. The interrogator thinks he knows what the answer is and won't stop the torture until they agree. It makes me wonder about what is happening to the world, because this is why we left our country, Libya.

BS: Why did your family leave Libya?

AD: My father, Amer, was executed in Libya because of his political beliefs. I was 5 at the time and he was 40. He was asked by the Gaddafi government to spy on people he knew who had been politically active in the past. He refused to cooperate, knowing that in a dictatorship like the one that we still have he would be marked for death. He was prepared for that, and he was given a period of time to think about it. He still refused and that was it. On February 26, 1980, they came and picked him up. After three days, we were told he had committed suicide in prison. There is an Amnesty International report about how he was killed.

That was in 1980. We had a lot of terrible times after my father died. People were scared to associate with us. My four brothers were treated differently at school. Omar himself nearly got into a lot of trouble. He had exams, and they asked him to write an essay on the revolution. He must have been 10 years old. He started writing a lot of anti-revolution stuff about how they killed my father and how terrible and unfair they are. It was a really dangerous thing to do for all of us.

Luckily, Omar had a teacher who was our neighbour and she explained to the headmaster about my father and persuaded him not to put the essay through, so nothing happened. But there were other incidents. Another brother had military training in his school and a bullet went missing. Of course, they picked him because of my father's name, and he was put in a cell. There were lots of things like that.

We weren't allowed to leave the country until 1986, when the whole family came here to Britain. Before that, only Omar was allowed to travel to Switzerland for his eye treatment.

I thought that the terrible experiences we had in Libya were all behind us. We have made a home for ourselves in the UK, and we are very grateful for that. We have had a safe life up till now. We have always had strong links with the UK, which is why we came here. My brothers and I used to stay with an English family in Brighton to learn English, and I was about three when we first visited. My father had a house in Brighton as well, so we had friends there.

BS: Your family have British citizenship, don't they?

AD: Well we all do apart from Omar. He is a bit stubborn. He made an application before he went travelling because he did not want to do the application at the same time as everyone else. Then, while his application was being processed, he was called for an interview, but he was away, so we wrote to the Home Office asking them to put the application on hold.

Then all this happened.

BS: What response have you had from the government?

AD: They were giving us very lame responses until quite recently. We were getting standard letters saying things like, “We can't make any consular representation on his behalf as a foreign national. He should appeal to his own country because he is not a British citizen.”

As a recognised refugee, Britain is supposed to be his surrogate state and protect him. For him to appeal to Libya is just ridiculous because of our history. It is just not an option for the family, especially for him because he is religious and he is known to be religious.

BS: How much support have you received here in the UK?

AD: People in Brighton and people in general have been really supportive. We didn't speak about it for a long time, because it is a very private thing. It's not easy to go around telling everybody about it. You don't know whether they are going to be horrible or nice. But since we came out and spoke about it three months ago, it's been really good.

There have been lots of activities in Brighton organised to support Omar, including meetings, demonstrations and newspaper articles. So much so that the council in Brighton passed a motion calling on the British government to recommend to the Americans that they should either try or release him. It was almost a unanimous vote, with only two or three dissenters. In the end, Baroness Symons from the Foreign Office invited a member of my family and Clive Stafford Smith to meet up with her.

BS: What about people in your neighbourhood?

AD: So many people are sympathetic, saying how terrible they feel for Omar and how they are so outraged that this is happening. And they are shocked that it is someone from Brighton that is going through this. People think it is something that happens on some weird planet. Local groups have been doing a lot of work to publicise Omar's case.

It is so nice and heart-warming to see that people do care, because I think if you just watch the media and listen to the rubbish that a lot of the politicians come out with, you would think nobody does.

BS: What do you think about the changes that are happening in Britain, the new laws that are being introduced, where people can be imprisoned in their own homes without charge?

AD: It is really shocking. I am horrified because having lived in a country like Libya where there are no such protections—where people can just be picked up anywhere because of something they said, or something someone else said they said, or because of something they did—it could be anything. Perhaps they had a conversation where they maybe said that something wasn't quite right with the country. I am very anxious that these things are happening here. You can't say it is like Libya, but it is dangerous—it is a slippery slope.

We are talking about rights that people have fought for years to win. I really hope that it does not change, because that's how the Nazi regime started.



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