

# Mamdouh Habib, former Guantánamo Bay prisoner, speaks with the WSWs

Richard Phillips  
21 September 2005

Until his release without charge in late January this year, 49-year-old Australian citizen Mamdouh Habib was among the more than five hundred men incarcerated as “enemy combatants” in the US government’s military prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

Habib, who is married with four children, has lived in Australia since 1982. Fellow Australian, David Hicks, a 30-year-old Adelaide man, is still held in the notorious prison in violation of the Geneva Conventions and due to face a US military tribunal on frame-up terror charges.

Since release, Habib has been subjected to ongoing state surveillance, harassment by sections of the local media, burglaries of his home and a recent late night assault by three men near his home in western Sydney. These blatant violations of basic democratic rights are aimed at politically intimidating Habib and diverting attention from the illegal nature of his three and a half year imprisonment by the US military.

Habib was seized by Pakistani authorities while visiting that country on October 5, 2001. He was on a bus to Karachi and planned to fly back to Australia, having spent several weeks in Pakistan looking for an Islamic school for his children. After being detained, questioned and beaten by Pakistani interrogators, he was moved, under the direction of the US military, to Egypt, Afghanistan and in May 2002 to Guantánamo Bay, where he remained without charge until he was repatriated.

During this time he was subjected to various forms of physical and psychological abuse by Pakistani, Egyptian and American authorities. This included electrical shocks, water torture, drugs and beatings. He was denied access to a lawyer until October 2004 and told by his American interrogators that his wife and children were dead.

While it claims to have no knowledge of his rendition or illegal transfer to Egypt for torture, the Howard government is deeply implicated in the criminal abuse of Habib’s basic rights. Senior government officials ignored increasingly desperate appeals for assistance by Habib’s wife, Maha, and told the mass media that her husband was a terrorist who had been involved in Al Qaeda.

Since being freed Habib has provided detailed information about his treatment in interviews with the *New York Times* and Australian television programs “Sixty Minutes” and “Dateline” (see “New details of Australian involvement in the torture of Mamdouh Habib”).

Habib’s release on January 28, 2005 caught the Howard government by surprise. Having publicly denounced him as a “dangerous terrorist” over the past three years and been assured by Washington that Habib would be charged and put on trial before a military tribunal, his repatriation was a major embarrassment for Canberra.

US authorities, despite the torture, were unable to concoct a single charge against Habib. Washington was also concerned that if placed on trial, Habib would reveal detailed information about its illegal rendition program, which could lead to politically damaging legal action against the Bush administration.

The Howard government responded to Habib’s release by telling Washington that it would maintain ongoing surveillance. It cancelled his

passport and, with support from the Murdoch media and right-wing talkback radio commentators, has waged an ongoing campaign to discredit Habib.

Habib, who is still recovering psychologically from the trauma of his incarceration, spoke last week with the *World Socialist Web Site* about some aspects of his incarceration and the ongoing media harassment.

*Richard Phillips:* First of all could you describe your feelings arriving home?

*Mamdouh Habib:* This is difficult, but I was very, very happy and thank God that I’m back with my wife and children. I think of the Australian people as part of my family and that this is a peaceful country. The problem is with the government. It is giving us a bad reputation because of its actions with the Americans in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I’ve tried to explain since I came home that I didn’t commit any crime but had been kidnapped and that the Australian government, which should be like parents and always look after its children, was involved. I was taken away from my family, far away, for no reason and on the basis of false rumours. The government says it didn’t know anything about me being sent for torture in Egypt but this isn’t true.

I ask the government: what did I do that you had to have me kidnapped and suffer every kind of possible torture you can imagine? What crime did I commit against Australia or anybody else to deserve this? Electric shock, brain-washing and all sorts of drugs were used on me. What were they trying to achieve? They wanted me to admit to something that I didn’t do.

I know that I can’t make the government listen to me—they attack me all the time and call me a terrorist. But they know that what they did to me and David Hicks is wrong and they’re trying to hide it. They can’t be honest about it.

*RP:* Could you explain how you were arrested in Pakistan and what happened following that?

*MH:* I can’t tell you much because my lawyer says that we should wait until we have a proper legal hearing. This is difficult because it feels like I’m carry around a big bag of rubbish that I need to get rid of. But there is going to be legal action against the *Daily Telegraph*, which said in their newspaper in 2001 that I was a suburban terrorist and wrote other bad things against me. So a lot of information will come out in this case.

As you know, I was detained in Pakistan as I was travelling on a bus when authorities took two German guys off the bus and started questioning them. They were about 18 to 20 years old and had no English, so I tried to help them. But instead of this helping, all three of us were jailed.

*RP:* Could you explain what the Australian authorities did after you were arrested?

*MH:* After about two weeks the German consul came to the prison and met with the German guys. He told the Pakistani authorities that unless they released his citizens within 48 hours there would be serious trouble. The German consul really looked after his guys. But this isn’t what happened to me. An Australian government representative visited me. He

gave me his card and information about my rights and said I should contact a lawyer in Pakistan.

I said, why give me this, what about getting me out like the German guys? I've done nothing wrong but have been kidnapped and your job is to get me out of here and back to Australia. He said that he had no authority in Pakistan and couldn't do anything. His advice to get a Pakistan lawyer was ridiculous—I was under guard all the time and couldn't make contact with anybody.

I made an arrangement with the German guys. If they were released and didn't hear from me in two weeks they should contact my wife and tell her everything and also tell the media in Germany, the Red Cross and other people what had happened.

I can't tell you any more than this at the moment but I was sent to Egypt with the agreement of the Australian consul, where I was tortured and then to Guantánamo Bay.

I always refused to go to the interrogations at Guantánamo Bay and so they would always drag me to them. Australian officials visited me in Guantánamo Bay but I wouldn't cooperate and put my head down. One of them used to bend down and try and look into my face. He used to say, "You look like you're in good shape Mamdouh, and your medical record says that you're good." He was mocking me and knew this wasn't true.

*RP:* Can you describe some of the conditions in Guantánamo Bay?

*MH:* It is hard to talk about all this but I kept saying what had happened to me—that I'd been kidnapped, tortured and that they were trying to brainwash me and agree to things that I had nothing to do with.

In the last months before coming home I was held in Camp 5. This part of Guantánamo Bay is very bad and designed to send people crazy. Bright lights are kept on all the time in the cells, there is loud music and it is either freezing cold, especially at night, or hot. You didn't know day from night and I would often wake up covered in white dust that probably came in through the ventilator. The US criminals who run the camp are trying to destroy people mentally.

The Australian government says it doesn't know anything about this and that I was treated well. This is a lie. The first time I got to speak to a lawyer—Joe Margulies—was in October last year, after I'd been held for over three years.

*RP:* Do you have any idea how David Hicks is?

*MH:* I don't know, but the US government is criminal for what they did to me and are still doing to David Hicks and all the other people still in Guantánamo Bay. We were treated like animals but what could we do; they had all the power over us.

I hope that David comes home to his family soon, but this is going to be hard. The people dealing with him, everyday and every night, are real criminals. These are people who know how to kill and do other very bad things.

The Australian officials say they have brought David vegemite for his sandwiches and told his parents that he is OK. But if they care so much about him why don't they bring him back to Australia where he can get vegemite any time and eat it in his own home.

*RP:* Your home has been burgled several times since returning home and on August 21 you were physically attacked by a group of men. Could you explain what happened?

*MH:* These are things to keep me quiet. After I arrived back in Australia the government said that it would allocate millions of dollars to follow what I do because I'm supposed to be dangerous. This is stupid.

The government has also taken away my passport and even if I try to challenge this in the court my lawyer is not be allowed to see the evidence against me. ASIO [Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation] can say what they want against me but we can't explain that this is wrong. This is not justice.

I've had people break into my home. Nothing was taken, even though there were cameras and other valuable stuff there. Our car has also been

broken into a few times for no reason. If people working for the government did this then it is a waste of taxpayers' money.

Instead of following us, these people could come openly to my house. Maybe they could even help us out by taking the kids to school in the mornings. I have no problem with this because I know I've done nothing wrong. I've got nothing to hide that's why the Americans had to release me.

*RP:* Could you tell me what happened when you were physically attacked?

*MH:* I don't know who did this but it was a few days after the *Daily Telegraph* and 2UE radio announcer John Laws said I was trying to get a disability allowance. These were lies and came out after I'd spoken at a meeting of students at the university in Bankstown on August 17.

I told the students that the problem of terrorism came from the US. I explained that my kidnapping was real terrorism and against someone who had done nothing wrong. I also said that Timothy McVeigh in Oklahoma had carried one of the biggest terrorist attacks in America and that he was not from the Middle East or a Muslim but had been in the US military and his actions had killed many innocent people.

There were questions and I spoke about the Australian government's anti-terror laws, which allow ASIO to hold you without telling you or your family what had happened. Even if your wife or other people knew about it they can't say anything to the newspapers or anybody else. I said this was disgusting and that if there were more laws like this then the government was making Australia like Guantánamo Bay number two.

The next day the *Daily Telegraph* published a picture of me just before I went in the Sydney-to-Surf fun run and said I was trying to get a disability allowance. This was a lie and they knew that. I have not made any application for a disability pension. We don't get any welfare from the government. The Newstart allowance for me was stopped in January. Social welfare even sent us a letter asking us to pay back \$179 because of the money I received from being interviewed on the "Current Affair" program.

Radio announcers on 2UE and 2GB said all sorts of bad things against me and people phoned in calling me a bludger, scum and other things. Somebody even called the radio station and said that if I wanted disability allowance someone should visit me and "organise a disability". John Laws even played a song making jokes about me.

On Saturday our garage was broken into and then the attack happened on Sunday night. My wife and I came home late, at about 11 o'clock, and my son said that a car had been hanging around out the front. Not long after that there was an electricity blackout. We looked outside but there were lights on at other houses in the street.

My wife, Maha, got an anxiety attack and so we went out for a walk at about midnight. Not long after we left home we noticed a car following us with its lights turned off and so we cut across a park but about three men followed. I felt something hit me on the back of the head and I pushed Maha away and this guy came at me from the front. He had some sort of knife and tried to stab me. I went right up close to him and his knife cut me just near my stomach. I think they were trying to scare me because one of the guys said something like "that should keep you quiet" and then they ran off.

When news of this appeared in the media, the newspapers and John Laws said there was something suspicious about me and my wife going for a walk at midnight. But isn't this supposed to be a free country. It's not illegal to go for a walk in your own street any time of the day.

[Attorney-General Philip] Ruddock has said that I'm a suspicious person but I've done nothing to hurt him or the people in this country. What crime have I committed to waste taxpayers' money on this?

The government knows that what happened to me in Pakistan, Egypt and Guantánamo Bay was wrong and they also know that I have a lot of information on their involvement. What happened to me the other night is

because there are people who want to me to say nothing about what is going on.



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