

Australian police harass former Guantánamo prisoner

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More than a year after he was released without charge from Guantánamo Bay, Mamdouh Habib continues to be harassed by Australian authorities. Fifty-year-old Habib, who lives in Sydney's southwestern suburbs with his wife and four children, was one of two Australian citizens illegally held in Guantánamo Bay. David Hicks, a 30-year-old former stockman from South Australia, remains in the notorious prison camp.

Habib was seized by Pakistani police in October 2001 during a visit to that country. Jailed without charge and without any access to a lawyer or contact with his family, he was falsely accused of terrorism and then illegally transported by the US military to Egypt, where he was imprisoned for six months and subjected to electric shocks, drugs, beatings and other torture techniques. In 2002 he was moved via Afghanistan to Guantánamo Bay and held there for almost three years. He was tortured again and told that his wife and children had been killed.

US and Australian authorities, supported by the mass media, claimed Habib was a dangerous terrorist and should be put on trial before a US military court. Much to the political embarrassment of the Australian government, however, Washington suddenly decided to release Habib without charge in January 2005. It was feared that legal action mounted by his lawyers in US courts could expose his illegal transport and detention in Egypt and other aspects of America's "extraordinary rendition" program.

The Howard government responded by canceling Habib's Australian passport and informing the Bush administration that it would keep him under ongoing surveillance. Since then Habib, who is still recovering from the physical and psychological abuse he suffered, has been subjected to an ongoing campaign of harassment, accompanied by lies and distortions from

the Murdoch-controlled media and right-wing radio announcers. These include malicious accusations that he has been falsely claiming government welfare.

Habib's home has been burgled on several occasions and he was assaulted by three unknown men and suffered a knife wound late one night last year near his home. While he has reported these incidents to police, there have been no investigations and no one has been charged.

The campaign of harassment, however, reached a new level on March 29. On that evening, Habib and his teenage son Mustafa reported a drive-by shooting of two young men—Bassam Chami and Ibrahim Assad—near the Habib family home. The shooting was one of several gang killings that have recently occurred in southwest Sydney. But instead of being treated as important witnesses who might have been able to assist police inquiries into the murders, Habib and his son were treated like criminals. They were detained overnight without charge by New South Wales state police, strip-searched and subjected to lengthy interrogations.

Habib, who had picked up his son from work, was driving home at about 10 p.m. when he saw the aftermath of the shooting and immediately phoned police. He remained at the crime scene until a police officer arrived and explained that although he was prepared to make a statement he wanted first to take home his son, who works two jobs and was very tired. The cop refused this request. Additional officers arrived on the scene, including a member of the dog squad, who demanded that Habib and his son immediately come to the local police station and be interviewed.

When Habib suggested that police come to his home for the interview he was physically assaulted by the officers. Alarmed over the attack, Mustafa attempted to

shield his father but was sprayed with pepper gas and thrown in the police wagon. A commanding officer declared Mamdouh Habib a terrorist and ordered another cop to “take this terrorist and put him in the wagon”.

Numbers of local residents who began gathering in the street were shocked by the police actions. One woman who witnessed the police assault told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: “There were five or six coppers hitting into him [Mamdouh Habib], dragging him to the police car. I told them, ‘Why are you taking him? He hasn’t done anything’.” She said that police told her to, “Get in your house or we’ll arrest you too’.”

On arrival at the Parramatta police station at approximately 11 p.m., Habib and his son were stripped naked and had their clothes and shoes taken away for forensic examination. Both men were blood tested and subjected to four hours of interrogation before being released, barefooted and in white jumpsuits, at 7 a.m.

Habib’s car and other items, including their clothes and shoes, were impounded for two days. The inside panels of the vehicle had been removed and the entire car dusted for fingerprints. Police also confiscated tools, mobile phones and other personal items, which have still not been returned.

Habib reported that police have returned only \$44 from an estimated \$800 that was seized during his detention. During the interrogation one police officer asked Habib: “Where do you get your money from if you’re not working?”

During his incarceration in Guantánamo, Habib was interrogated on several occasions by Australian police and intelligence authorities. He says that during one of these sessions Australian Intelligence and Security Organisation (ASIO) officers said: “If you ever return to Australia and are released we are going to make your life miserable.”

Habib told the *World Socialist Web Site* that his detention at the end of March was in line with these threats.

“The government and the police are trying to get me in some way,” he said. “I couldn’t believe what they did. It is supposed to be a democracy here but they treated us like in Guantánamo. There are things still missing from the car, including car tools and a fishing knife, and I’m worried that these items could be used

to try and frame me up in some way.

“They say I’m a terrorist and use all sorts of lies against me. The reason for this is they don’t want anyone speaking about what went on there—what happened to me and other people in Egypt and Guantánamo—and they want to destroy me.

“I can handle all sorts of pressure—I had many bad things done to me in Egypt and Guantánamo—but why are they trying to put this on my family? This is wrong. We’ve never done anything against the government, all we want is a peaceful life,” he said.

Habib said that the ongoing attempts to bully him were having a serious impact on his family, particularly his youngest daughter, but that he would not be silenced.

He is planning legal action against the police over the detention. Whatever the outcome, the harrassment of Habib and his family are a particularly sharp expression of the ongoing assault on basic democratic rights being conducted by the Howard government and its state government allies against the working class as a whole.



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