

Another sign of popular disgust

Australian film festival audience invites Mamdouh Habib to speak about Guantánamo documentary

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While the Howard government attempts to claim that “ordinary Australians” support its so-called “war on terror” and associated assault on basic democratic rights, a brief episode at the recent Sydney Film Festival provided yet another sign of the growing popular disgust with Canberra.

The incident occurred during a question and answer session on June 22, following the screening of *Prisoner 345*, a new documentary. The 50-minute film by Ahmad Ibrahmin and Abdallah el-Binni deals with the US imprisonment of Sami Al-Hajj, a 36-year-old Al Jazeera cameraman currently jailed without charge in Guantánamo Bay.

Al-Hajj, who was sent by the network to cover the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, was illegally detained during that assignment. He was brutally interrogated in Pakistan and at the notorious US-run Bagram airbase in Afghanistan, before being transported to Guantánamo in June 2002.

It is estimated that Al Hajj has been interrogated around 130 times—and mostly about the operations of the Al Jazeera network. (The documentary, which will be reviewed in future coverage of the Sydney Film Festival, is to be screened at festivals in Melbourne, Auckland, Los Angeles, Canada and Lebanon over the next few months).

After several exchanges of questions and answers, one person noted the presence of Mamdouh Habib in the audience. Habib, an Australian citizen, was illegally arrested in Pakistan in October 2001, sent by US authorities to Egypt for six months, where he was tortured, forced to sign false confessions, and then

transported to Guantánamo. With active political support from the Howard government, which claimed his detention was necessary to fight Islamic terrorism, he remained in Guantánamo for almost three years, before being repatriated without charge to Australia in late January 2005.

The audience member said that Habib was “the most appropriate figure” to comment on the documentary and suggested that he be invited to speak.

Habib was warmly applauded as he approached the stage and in a brief speech said that the film had “stressed him out”.

“It was very difficult to watch,” he explained, because it was a true exposure of “how the American military treats everyone in Guantánamo.”

Habib, a quiet-spoken man, went on to say that US claims about the recent suicide of three inmates at the US military prison were lies.

“There is no way to commit suicide in Guantánamo because you are being watched all the time. There are no places in the cell to hang anything, let alone sheets or blankets, so there is no way you can hang yourself. These are just more lies about what goes on there,” he said.

“Howard says that David Hicks [a 30-year-old Australian who has been incarcerated in Guantánamo since early 2002] is in good health and there are no problems. This is another lie. He said the same things about me. How can you believe these people? They lie to the media and they lied to my wife about where I was and yet they knew that I’d been sent to Egypt for torture.

“Australian representatives in Pakistan interrogated me and they knew exactly what was going on. Australian officials saw me in Guantánamo and they knew the bad state I was in, but Howard and Downer kept saying I was in good health,” Habib said. “Don’t trust anything the government says about Guantánamo.”

Habib called for the release of Hicks and said that the main thing blocking his freedom was the Australian government.

“If Howard asked Bush to free David Hicks, he could be home tomorrow,” he said to loud applause.

During Habib’s incarceration in Pakistan, Egypt and Guantánamo, where he was completely unable to defend himself, he was viciously slandered by the Howard government. While Habib’s wife Maha desperately called on Canberra to investigate his illegal transfer to Egypt, the government ignored her pleas and endorsed his transfer to Guantánamo.

Senior ministers, who gave the White House a blank cheque to do whatever they liked with Habib, publicly accused the 50-year-old working-class father of four of being a dangerous Islamic terrorist and a threat to “the Australian way of life”.

In May 2002, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer told Australia’s National Press Club that he had “no sympathy” for Habib and that Canberra would do nothing to secure his legal rights, despite the fact that he was never charged with any crime by the Bush administration. Former Attorney-General Daryl Williams told the media at the time that, although Habib had no access to a lawyer, he “was not being denied any of his rights”.

In January 2004, current Attorney-General Phillip Ruddock told journalists that the repatriation of Habib and Hicks would “send a message that Australia is soft on terrorists”. When asked about reports that Hicks had suffered serious weight loss, caused by physical and psychological abuse in Guantánamo Bay, Ruddock cynically declared: “When we inquired about [his weight loss] what we ascertained was that he’d been doing what a lot of Australians do, he’d been on a diet and a fitness regime. And maybe some people want some advice from him as to how it works.”

Despite a mountain of evidence from countless human rights organisations, the Howard government still denies that Habib, Hicks and other Guantánamo

prisoners have been tortured. Outside the US, Australia is one of the only countries to support the planned US military trials of Guantánamo inmates and to this day, its official mantra is that the prisoners are “healthy” and being “treated well”.

Canberra’s vicious attacks on Habib have been repeated and embellished in the Murdoch media, in particular by its Sydney-based tabloid, the *Daily Telegraph*, and by various right-wing radio announcers who have attempted to portray Habib as an Al Qaeda “sleeper”.

Since Habib’s release, these media outlets have maintained an ongoing campaign to discredit him and divert attention from the Bush and Howard governments’ violations of his basic legal rights.

Habib, whose passport was cancelled by Canberra after he returned to Australia in 2005, has also been subjected to a range of provocations. He remains under constant surveillance by Australian intelligence officers and the federal police. (See “Australian police harass former Guantánamo prisoner”).

Habib’s comments to the Sydney Film Festival and the warm audience response are highly significant. They demonstrate yet again that the barrage of government and media lies are wearing very thin. They also provide an indication of the ever-widening gulf that exists between the government and its media backers on the one hand, and broad layers of the Australian population on the other.

Predictably, local journalists covering the festival failed to report Habib’s remarks, and the Sydney Film Festival has omitted any mention of his attendance in the news section of its web site.



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