

“The Bush administration is using Sami Al Hajj to fight Al Jazeera”

An interview with Abdallah el-Binni, director of Prisoner 345

Richard Phillips
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Abdallah el-Binni, director of the documentary Prisoner 345, spoke with the World Socialist Web Site during the recent Sydney Film Festival. El-Binni's 50-minute film examines the US incarceration of Sami Al Hajj, a 36-year-old Al Jazeera cameraman who has been held without charge in Guantánamo Bay for the past four years. (See 53rd Sydney Film Festival--Part 4: Middle East and North African focus).

El-Binni began his career as a war zone photographer in south Lebanon for AFP and later Reuters before becoming a news reporter and television cameraman for Lebanese and Abu Dhabi networks and then Al Jazeera. He reported from Afghanistan and Iraq during the US-led invasions of those countries and currently directs “Witness”, a bi-monthly program for Al Jazeera.

Richard Phillips: Why did you decide to take up this case?

Abdallah el-Binni: My producer, Ahmad Ibrahim, asked me to direct this project because I'd worked in Afghanistan when Sami Al Hajj was there. Although I didn't know Sami at that time, I felt a film was needed to help fight for his release.

We want to tell the world about the plight of Sami and the hundreds of innocent prisoners being held by the US, most of them without charge. If these people are innocent or haven't been charged, then they must be released straight away. If they're guilty, they should be given a proper trial.

Prisoner 345 tries to show what's really going on in Guantánamo—the mental and physical torture, the force-feeding of prisoners, the racism and other things that must be stopped immediately.

We've all seen the Abu Ghraib torture pictures but these methods came from Guantánamo and General Geoffrey Miller, who boasted that he would “gitmoize” Abu Ghraib. *Prisoner 345* provides some details on this and we interviewed Martin Mobanga, who witnessed some of the sexual abuse and the violations of the Koran. He was one of the British prisoners released from Guantánamo.

Mobanga told us that during one incident a praying prisoner was dragged by the hair and told by one of the military officers—“I'm the only god here and you should pray to me.” This sort of thing is happening all the time and it's being used

to break people and get them to confess to anything.

Our film also highlights how the US military has tried to recruit Sami as a spy. He has been interrogated about 130 times but 125 of these sessions have been about Al Jazeera—its staff and what happens there. They've also tried to make him sign an affidavit declaring that he was captured on the battlefield in Afghanistan and was a member of Al Qaeda. He has refused to do so and that's why he is still imprisoned.

Sami was sent to Guantánamo on June 13, 2003 and has now entered the fifth year of his imprisonment. Although he is a mentally strong person, he's just a human being and is under tremendous pressure. The last time his lawyer, Clive Stafford-Smith, saw him, which was a few weeks ago, he was very depressed.

We hope that our film will be a small step toward publicising his case and help to have him, and maybe others, freed from Guantánamo.

RP: Is there a connection between these attempts to recruit Sami as a spy and the American military attacks on Al Jazeera?

AB: I'm not a spokesman for Al Jazeera but in my personal opinion the US is fighting Al Jazeera through Sami and trying to establish a connection between our network and Al Qaeda or other terrorist organisations.

Along with the imprisonment of Sami, there has been the American bombing of our offices in Basra, which is still being investigated, and the jailing of our reporter Tayseer Allouni by the Spanish government, which claims he was linked to Al Qaeda because he interviewed Osama bin Laden after the September 11 attacks. Al Jazeera is not a front for Al Qaeda or any other terrorist group and we are just normal reporters.

RP: How long were you in Afghanistan?

AB: I was there from October 2001 until February 2002.

Actually, there are two amazing ironies here. When Sami was arrested on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, I was in the same area. He was in the guardhouse and I was outside the building but didn't know he was there.

The second irony was that when I visited Kandahar in January 2002 I met five prisoners who'd been arrested by the Taliban before the war. One of them was Jamal al-Harith, a

British citizen who was accused by the Taliban of being a spy and jailed. I was able to interview him on camera after the Taliban fell.

In the footage, which we use in *Prisoner 345*, the Northern Alliance commander assured him that he was now safe and would be handed over to the ICRC [Red Cross]. But one week after the interview Jamal was taken to Kandahar airport. I met him again four years later in London and he told me that the Northern Alliance had sold him to the Americans for a \$5,000 bounty and that he ended up in Guantánamo. It turned out that he was in a cell next to Sami.

Kandahar at that time was a very dangerous place, especially if you were an Arab. The Northern Alliance thought all Arabs were with the Taliban and Al Qaeda and wanted vengeance. Northern Alliance forces stopped us many times between the Pakistan border and Kandahar. Some wanted to kill us, others wanted to sell us to the Americans, so we had to pay them in order stay alive. It was a very risky situation.

Afghanistan is a disaster and I witnessed many terrible things. The Northern Alliance eliminated lots of prisoners and I was there when they attacked a hospital and killed five Al Qaeda members who'd been hiding out there and taken several people hostage.

All news services report only what suits their political line but when you're on the ground and can witness the truth—who is killing whom, who is arresting and buying and selling people—then it's another story. One day what really happened in Afghanistan will come out.

RP: What's your response to official claims that President Karzai is introducing democracy in Afghanistan?

AB: Democracy is a wonderful word but how this system is practised is the real question. It simply cannot be imposed or introduced overnight and those who claim there is democracy in Afghanistan are wrong. The same thing is being said about Iraq but look at what's going on there. Is it democratic to kill thousands of Iraqis?

As a young person, I, like many other young people in the Middle East, had all sorts of dreams about the United States and democracy. Many of us hoped to go to the US and live there. What we see now is not an American dream but a nightmare.

How many Iraqis are dead now—100,000? Nobody really knows and yet it's supposed to be a democracy. And who will give the Iraqis their rights? Saddam Hussein was certainly a dictator and yet during his presidency fewer people died than have been killed by the Americans since 2003.

I was working with Abu Dhabi television prior to the US invasion of Iraq and they asked me if I wanted to cover the war. I said yes but was then told I'd be embedded with the Americans. I didn't want to do that and explained that I'd rather be in Baghdad receiving the bombs rather than with the Americans and sending the bombs.

It was obvious many civilians were going to die, so what

would it really be like being embedded with the US army? This would mean that I'd be filming soldiers while they were bombing and then sitting down and eating with them and then having my reports monitored by their commanding officer.

RP: Could you comment on the suicides in Guantánamo? Sami was on a hunger strike. Is there a danger that he could die?

AB: Clive Stafford-Smith has told us that Sami was no longer on hunger strike and had hidden his hunger protest in order to prevent force-feeding.

I know that some people think the prisoners didn't commit suicide but were killed by the Americans. I believe that they did commit suicide because this is what Guantánamo does to people. One of the prisoners, the younger guy from Saudi Arabia, tried many times to suicide. Anybody kept isolated in a room, with no real human contact, would quickly begin to feel crazy.

There are, of course, many questions. How were they all able to commit suicide on the same day when they're unable to speak to each other and the guards check on them all the time? Whatever happened, the American military is responsible for their deaths. They have killed them slowly by destroying their minds.

We are optimistic that Sami will be released, not just because of our film but through the combined efforts of our lawyer and Al Jazeera. And we hope that Sami will write the script for our next film because he has lots of information.

Erik Saar, a former Guantánamo Bay translator, has written a book and although he doesn't mention Sami by name, he refers to an imprisoned journalist. According to Saar, one of the female interrogators asked Sami what would he do if freed. He replied by saying that he would tell the full story of what happens in Guantánamo and how the Americans are dealing with innocent people and especially Muslims.

RP: But isn't that a reason why the US will not release him?

AB: Yes, that's also true.



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