

Journalist released from Guantánamo details abuse

Naomi Spencer
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After six years of imprisonment without charge, a well-known cameraman for Al Jazeera news was released May 1 by the US military. The reporter, Sami al-Hajj, was captured in 2001 while covering the US invasion of Afghanistan and subjected to the torture and abuse that is routine at US military-run prison camps.

Without prior announcement, the military returned al-Hajj to his home country of Sudan with two other prisoners who had also been held for years at the US-run Guantánamo Bay prison. Al-Hajj was gaunt and too weak to stand or speak as soldiers carried him off the C-17 cargo plane and placed him, still shackled, on a stretcher. He was transported immediately to a hospital in Khartoum. His brother told reporters he did not immediately recognize al-Hajj, who had been seized as a healthy 32-year-old and now resembled a man in his eighties.

Al-Hajj spent the last 16 months of his imprisonment as a hunger striker. Twice a day, soldiers strapped him into a restraint chair and shoved a feeding tube through his nose to his stomach. Human rights lawyers for al-Hajj—a survivor of throat cancer—have said that the force-feedings scraped his throat raw. Over the course of 480 days, the journalist lost 40 pounds.

While imprisoned, he was denied medical care for his cancer, kidney infections, and injuries. He was also subjected to beatings, extreme temperature exposures, sexual assault, threats with military dogs, and other human rights violations. Al-Hajj also reported that guards defaced the Koran and flushed the book down the toilet.

His US captors did not publicly acknowledge that al-Hajj was among the prisoners at Guantánamo until it was revealed in documents obtained in April 2006 through a Freedom of Information Act request.

Speaking to Al Jazeera television from his hospital bed in Khartoum on Friday, al-Hajj stated: “I’m very happy to be in Sudan, but I’m very sad because of the situation

of our brothers who remain in Guantánamo. Conditions in Guantánamo are very, very bad, and they get worse by the day.

“Our human condition, our human dignity was violated, and the American administration went beyond all human values, all moral values, all religious values. In Guantánamo...rats are treated with more humanity. But we have people from more than 50 countries that are completely deprived of all rights and privileges, and they will not give them the rights that they give to animals.

“For more than seven years, I did not get a chance to be brought before a civil court. To defend their just case and to get the freedom that we’re deprived of, they ignored every kind of law, every kind of religion. But thank God. I was lucky, because God allowed that I be released.

“Although I’m happy, there is part of me that is not, because my brothers remain behind, and they are in the hands of people that claim to be champions of peace and protectors of rights and freedoms.

“But the true, just peace does not come through military force, or threats to use smart or stupid bombs, or to threaten with economic sanctions. Justice comes from lifting oppression and guaranteeing rights and freedoms and respecting the will of the people and not to interfere with a country’s internal politics.”

In a second statement that was reported by Reuters later on Friday, al-Hajj said, “Security and human rights are inseparable issues—you cannot have one without the other. Human rights are not only for times of peace—you need to hold onto them always, even during difficult times and times of war.” “My last message to the US administration,” he concluded, “is that torture will not stop terrorism—torture is terrorism.”

Al-Hajj was detained by Pakistani forces on December 15, 2001, at a border crossing while heading, along with another Al Jazeera reporter, into Afghanistan. He was held in Pakistani custody for three weeks, then handed

over to US forces stationed at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan, a makeshift prison camp that was notorious for torture. He was held for 16 days at the base, which he told the press freedom group Committee to Protect Journalists were “the longest days of my life.” He was severely beaten by soldiers, who accused him of recording videos of Osama bin Laden. Al-Hajj was then shifted to another prison facility at Kandahar; in June 2002, he was delivered, bound and gagged, to Guantánamo.

Although US officials have given multiple rationales for his detention, al-Hajj told reporters that a primary purpose was “to abort free media reporting” in the Middle East. He said that in the hundreds of interrogations to which he was subjected, his captors repeatedly tried to get him to say there was a link between Al Jazeera and Al Qaeda.

Al Jazeera news, by far the most popular media outlet in the Middle East, has been particularly targeted by the US for its critical reporting of the invasions. Its offices and reporters have come under fire of US military multiple times since the invasion of Afghanistan, including bombings of the media outlet’s offices in Kabul in 2001 and Baghdad in 2003, to which al-Hajj made specific reference. The US administration absurdly claimed both attacks were mistakes. However, internal memos emerging in 2006 from the Tony Blair government in Britain indicated that top British and US officials—including US President George W. Bush—advocated the attacks and wanted Al Jazeera’s Qatar headquarters bombed as well.

The US military has attempted to quash and intimidate coverage of the war that is outside of its control. On the same day that American forces bombed Al Jazeera’s Baghdad office, troops also opened fire on a hotel housing more than 100 “non-embedded” press correspondents. Since the initiation of the so-called “war on terror,” dozens of independent journalists have come under US fire and been killed, wounded, or detained. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, since 2001, at least 10 other journalists have been detained by the US military for long periods without charge, then eventually released.

While the news of al-Hajj’s release received considerable coverage in the international press, US reports were notably muted. Most of the major papers carried short items or republished wire reports from Reuters or the Associated Press. On May 2, ABC News opted to run a counter-report featuring three unidentified “Pentagon officials,” who claimed al-Hajj had boarded the plane at Guantánamo “healthy and good-natured” and portrayed his weakened state upon disembarking in Sudan

as his “latest effort to influence public opinion.”

In a nauseating display of irony, the officials, whom ABC News did not bother to identify by name, rank, or position, called al-Hajj “a manipulator and a propagandist.”

His credibility was questionable, the officials said, because there was “no information to substantiate his allegations that he was mistreated at Guantánamo.”

Indeed, the US military and the Bush administration are responsible for the fact that there is little publicly available documentation of al-Hajj’s treatment, for reasons that are obvious by the physical condition in which the former detainee arrived. For years, the military did not even admit to his imprisonment, let alone allow human rights monitors regular access to him.

It is beyond question that the man was abused. In addition to bearing scars and the devastating physical effects of his hunger strikes upon his return, al-Hajj exhibited signs of paranoia from his abuse. And in a clear indication that al-Hajj was not well treated even after his release from Guantánamo, other detainees that were aboard the flight last week told the press that they had all been handcuffed, chained and blindfolded the entire time.

Continuing to insinuate al-Hajj’s association with militant or terrorist activity, one of the Pentagon plants told ABC, “I expect he’ll likely be in the news for some time to continue claiming all sorts of wild things. It’s the advantage they have in this fight. It’s a war of ideas, and they can claim any wild number of things happened to them and they’ll capitalize on it. It puts the pressure on us to disprove them.”

Similarly, another unnamed Pentagon official told Reuters that al-Hajj was “not being released,” but rather “being transferred to the Sudanese government.” Sudanese officials took pains to make it clear that al-Hajj was not in custody and did not face any charges.



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