

Britain: Right-wing campaign waged against freed Guantánamo detainee

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Recently released Guantánamo Bay prisoner Binyam Mohamed has given further details of his ordeal at the hands of his interrogators and torturers in Pakistan, Morocco, Afghanistan and the United States base in Cuba. Mohamed was initially arrested in Pakistan in April 2002 and handed over to the US.

Mohamed was finally released on February 23 this year. He states that the British intelligence agency MI5 was complicit in his torture from the very beginning of his incarceration in Pakistan. Speaking to the BBC last week he called for former US President George W. Bush and ex-British Prime Minister Tony Blair to stand trial.

He is now seeking to become a full British citizen, after being forced to leave Ethiopia, the country of his birth. His British residency expired in 2004, the year he was sent to Guantánamo Bay.

Ever since it became clear that the US government was unable to find a shred of evidence linking Mohamed to any terrorist activity and that he would be released, a ferocious right-wing campaign, led by the opposition Conservative Party, has been whipped up against him and other British residents being held at the camp.

The Conservative Party has consistently portrayed former Guantánamo inmates as a potential security threat. From the moment he descended the steps of the plane bringing him back to the UK, Tory MPs have queued up to denounce Mohamed and to claim that his arrival should be opposed, up to and including his deportation to Ethiopia.

Shadow Foreign Minister David Lidington said, "There are some serious questions to be asked about his immigration status in this country which are separate from the questions about the alleged torture.

"I believe that these allegations of torture do need to be properly investigated by the judicial authorities. But I think there is also a question about whether Mr Mohamed should remain permanently in the UK".

Tory MP David Davies said, "I don't think it should be a source of pleasure to anyone that this man has returned to

the UK. He is an Ethiopian national who was lucky ever to be in Britain in the first place. If he was flown back to Addis Ababa, I think we would all breathe a sigh of relief".

Davies made this the occasion for a generalised attack on released detainees: "There is no way that we should take in any more people who have been linked to terrorism and may pose a threat to national security. It is bad enough that we have taken in our own nationals and residents, who have not only been allowed to stay but may now be entitled to compensation".

Another Tory MP Philip Davies commented on Mohamed, "It's absolutely ludicrous. This guy isn't a British citizen; he just happened to be residing in Britain. I cannot see any advantage to the British taxpayer in him coming here. The likelihood is that he will be on benefits, and we will be forking out for him while the country is going bankrupt".

Claiming that Mohamed represented an imminent danger he continued, "If the Prime Minister is prepared to put the British public's safety at risk in order to massage his own ego, then he should be ashamed".

Tory MP Patrick Mercer said, "In my mind, that is the point where we say enough is enough. While I understand President Obama's desire to close Guantánamo Bay, I do not see why we should offer a home to terror suspects with no links to the UK".

The Conservative campaign has been taken up by the right-wing press, including the *Sun*, the *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Express* and *Daily Mail*.

The *Daily Mail* published an article with the headline "£250,000 bill for return of 'torture' prisoner as luxury jet flies him from Guantánamo to Britain". The *Sun* described him as a "terror suspect" who was living in Britain "illegally".

Following Mohamed's interview with the BBC the *Sun* published an article, "Outrage at BBC torture claims", once again citing David Davies who was "astonished the BBC was happy to give him time to slag off the country he wants to live in but aren't interested to inquire what he was doing in Afghanistan".

Whatever denials of a connection are made, the attack on Mohamed in particular is motivated by concern that his allegations of British collusion in torture threaten the highest echelons of government and the state.

This was noted by *Guardian* columnist Timothy Garton Ash, commenting on the High Court testimony of the MI5 officer who interviewed Mohamed in Pakistan, "Witness B". Ultimately, Garton Ash explained, "Even if Witness B were prepared to be the fall guy (and it doesn't sound like it), any serious criminal investigation would have to inquire into the chain of command, which presumably went up through the head of MI5 to the then chair of the joint intelligence committee, John Scarlett, now head of MI6, and perhaps higher still, to the then prime minister Tony Blair".

More generally, the campaign to vilify Mohamed is intimately linked to the widespread denunciation of Muslim protestors against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq by the media, the Tories and the government, including Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

Last week, 20 or so Islamists held a protest stunt in Luton at a parade of 200 soldiers of the 2nd Battalion—The Royal Anglian Regiment, just returned from Iraq. Having made no effort to link up with broader anti-war sentiment, and chanting denunciations of those in the parade as "butchers" and "cowards", the protest was certainly aimed at generating a hostile response.

Sure enough, the press condemned the legitimate and legal protest as "anti-British" and used it to demand that future protests be banned. Richard Littlejohn in the *Daily Mail* insinuated that violence would be justified, stating, "The Royal Anglians would have been forgiven had they fixed bayonets and charged. If these Toytown Talibandits consider themselves part of the global jihad and think killing British soldiers is a way to behave, let them step up to the plate—not hide behind a police cordon".

The *Daily Express* said of the regiment, "Few would have blamed them had they confronted the rabble in front of them, their fury fired by the memory of, for example, the five regimental comrades killed by the Taliban during a four-week period in the summer of 2007".

It added, "British Army commanders have spoken of finding themselves fighting British Muslims in Afghanistan—a 'mini civil war', one called it. On current trends, that civil war will soon be waged on the home front, too".

The comment then tarred all British Muslims as potential terrorists. "The Muslim population of Luton is about 15 percent and rising fast; it is mainly comprised of families with links to Pakistan—a country regarded as the international hub of Islamist terrorism. In this it is by no means exceptional among British towns and cities".

Leo McKinstry, in the same newspaper, described the protesters as "the enemy within" and said the fact that such a protest could place had resulted in "a land where patriotism has been eroded and the very concept of Britishness is vanishing. As a result of mass immigration and the ideology of multiculturalism, those who risk their lives on our behalf are no longer honoured in the way that they deserve".

The ubiquitous David Davies MP called for a ban on all protests against the military, stating that "I've taken the religious hatred bill and taken out all references to religion, and I've changed it to uniformed military personnel on official duties, and if that's tabled and passed, that would give British soldiers the same rights".

It was left to Con Coughlin in the *Daily Telegraph* to make the most explicit link between the denunciation of the Luton protests and the attack on Mohamed. Under the headline, "Too little action is being taken by the authorities against hostile Muslims", he complained that "we are simply not competing on equal terms with the enemy".

After railing against the "disgraceful reception" given to the soldiers by the protesters in Luton, he complained that, "When the former Guantánamo detainee Binyam Mohamed claimed that British intelligence officials were complicit in his torture, the main focus of the controversy was the alleged collusion of ministers, rather than precisely what Mr Mohamed was doing in Afghanistan".

The furious condemnations of the right to protest as being "anti-British", the invocation of a "civil war" waged on the "home front" against the "enemy within", goes far beyond earlier expressions of anti-Muslim sentiment. Together with the suggestions that, despite the lack of evidence, those detained at Guantánamo such as Mohamed were probably terrorists anyway, the aim is to justify even greater attacks on the fundamental democratic rights of all, such as free speech and the right to assembly.



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