

Last British prisoner at Guantánamo Bay released

Robert Stevens
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After being held without charge for nearly 14 years, Shaker Aamer, the last British resident to be held in the Guantánamo Bay prison and torture camp, was released on October 30. The British government announced September 25 that Aamer would be freed after 5,017 days in detention.

Meeting his family in the UK, the father of four was introduced for the first time to his youngest son who was born on the day he was first detained by US military authorities 14 years ago.

Last month, in a letter sent by his lawyers to the BBC, Aamer described himself as “an old car that has not been to the garage for years.” He added, “I have known nothing about the real world for more than 13 years.”

Aamer, now 48, is a Saudi national who moved to the US in his early 20s. In 1991, he moved to London, where he met his British wife, Zin. They both moved to Afghanistan in 2001, with their three children, where he worked as a charity worker building wells. In December 2001, just months after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, he was captured by bounty hunters in Afghanistan and handed over to US forces. At the time, he was in the process of applying for British citizenship.

Aamer and the vast majority of those seized during this period were guilty of nothing other than being in the wrong place at the wrong time. As his lawyer Clive Stafford Smith explained, they were captured in Pakistan or Afghanistan and “sold to the Americans for a reward.”

Secret US military files, made public by WikiLeaks, claimed Aamer was “a close associate of [al-Qaeda leader] Usama Bin Laden” and a “reported recruiter, financier, and facilitator with a history of participating in jihadist combat.” These claims were a pack of lies.

Aamer was never charged with a single crime or allowed a court hearing. Instead, he was forced to spend around a third of his life locked up in barbaric conditions.

In 2012, Aamer’s legal team launched proceedings against the UK intelligence services for making “knowingly false statements” to his US captors about him. Legal case papers, brought by UK human rights organisation Reprieve, stated, “Mr Aamer emphatically denies that he is a member of al-Qaeda. The British Security Services will be able to produce not one shred of reliable evidence to the contrary.”

In 2002 Aamer was taken to Bagram airbase, near Kabul. Aamer states that he was physically attacked on a number of occasions at Bagram, with close to a dozen men beating him. He alleges that among those who beat him were interrogators who identified themselves as officers of MI5, the UK’s counter-terrorism agency. He states that on one occasion his head was smashed into a wall in the presence of a British intelligence official. Torture Aamer said he suffered at Bagram included being kept awake for nine days, being covered in freezing water, denied food, and forced to stand on concrete in the winter for 16 hours.

In February 2002, Aamer was sent to the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, as part of the US government’s illegal “extraordinary rendition” programme. The camp, located at a US Naval Base in Cuba, had only just opened in January 2002. While there, he suffered years of abuse, torture and degradation, much of it spent in solitary confinement. He said in 2005, “I am dying here every day, mentally and physically... We have been ignored, locked up in the middle of the ocean...”

In September 2006, Aamer's attorneys filed a motion demanding his removal from solitary confinement. The

motion stated that at the time of filing, he had been held in solitary confinement for 360 days, had been tortured, exposed to temperature extremes, and sleep deprivation.

Aamer informed his lawyers that he had made false confessions during some 500 interrogations in order to end his torture. He took part in a number of hunger strikes. Due to years of brutal treatment, his health declined precipitously, and he lost as much as 40 percent of his body weight.

After seeing Aamer in November 2011, his lawyer said, "I do not think it is stretching matters to say that he is gradually dying in Guantanamo Bay."

Aamer suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. Amnesty International said on his release, "Shaker Aamer is now said to be riddled with arthritis and other medical problems, for which he has not received adequate medical treatment."

When his plane touched down in Britain, it was met by an ambulance.

In 2006, international pressure was mounting on the US to release those held without charge at Guantánamo. According to documents seen by the *Guardian* that year, Washington offered to return all former UK residents held in Guantánamo in June. However, the then Labour government rejected this on the grounds that the conditions attached by the US were "unnecessary and unworkable."

By 2007, under mounting pressure, the Labour government, which had colluded with the US in its extraordinary rendition programme, was forced to request Aamer's release. In August 2007, Foreign Secretary David Miliband requested that the US government release Aamer, Binyam Mohamed, and four other UK residents. At that point, the US released three of the men, but refused to release Mohamed and Aamer.

In 2007, Aamer was finally approved for release by former US President George W. Bush, with his administration forced to admit it had no evidence on which to bring any charges against him. Another approval was signed off on by President Barack Obama in 2009. The US government wanted Aamer to be released to Saudi Arabia, where he would have faced further surveillance and repression. This was opposed by Aamer and his legal team, as he wanted to go to Britain where his family were settled and had

citizenship.

As a result, he had to wait another eight years to be released. He was among 86 prisoners US authorities admitted they had no reason to hold, but who remained in Guantánamo in violation of international law and their elementary human rights.

Despite being entirely innocent, even after his release Aamer faces daily persecution. The *Daily Telegraph* revealed, "[H]igh-level discussions have taken place between London and Washington over how the British security services will monitor potential threats posed by Shaker Aamer... David Cameron, the Prime Minister, is understood to have been personally briefed on the security arrangements which will be put in place surrounding Mr Aamer."

When the announcement of Aamer's release was made, Cameron issued a pro-forma statement that he was "pleased," while stressing, "I obviously want to reassure people that everything to ensure public safety is put in place..."

The BBC noted that while Cameron said Aamer, "won't be detained, it's unlikely we will ever find out if MI5 separately decides to monitor him—by definition its work is secret."

According to Stafford Smith, Aamer is planning to sue the US administration for compensation and is demanding an "open and transparent" inquiry from the Cameron government into allegations that the UK was complicit in his torture.

By January 2009, a total of 779 detainees had passed through Guantánamo since it opened. Despite Obama announcing later that year that he would close the Guantánamo prison camp within a year, the site remains open. After a decade in operation, there were still 171 men imprisoned at Guantánamo and as of October 2015, 112 detainees remained captives there.



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