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## **Prisoner Release Highlights Guantánamo Failures**

### **by Andy Worthington**

Guantánamo, it seems, is about to become a buzzword once more, as it is, in many ways, the most iconic symbol of Barack Obama's challenge to undo the Bush administration's zeal for unfettered executive power. Already, however, [pundits](#) are stepping forward to point out the difficulties involved in dismantling the system, whining about the dangerous terrorists held there, and neglecting to note that, above all, Guantánamo is a brutal and failed experiment, in which hubris and torture are tangled up with, on the one hand, a small group of terrorist threats and, on the other, many more examples of prisoners seized and held as a result of bungled intelligence and pointlessly abusive interrogations.

Behind the rhetoric, few commentators spare a thought for the victims of this sustained example of lawlessness, stupidity, and cruelty, most of whom are still held in crushing isolation for 22 or 23 hours a day, despite never being charged or tried for any crime.

On the eve of the presidential election, three prisoners — one from Kazakhstan, one from Tajikistan, and one from Somaliland — were [released](#) from Guantánamo, and their stories neatly encapsulate many of the chronic failures relating to the prisoners' initial arrest and detention that still plague the prison as the new administration begins considering how to shut it down.

#### **The teenager from Kazakhstan**

The last of four Kazakhs in Guantánamo, Abdulrahim Kerimbakiev, was seized by Northern Alliance soldiers in a house raid in Kabul in December 2001, along with two compatriots from his home village. He was 18 years old at the time, as was one of his companions, Abdullah Magrupov, who had only been at the house for five days, after studying at a madrassa in Karachi. At his tribunal at Guantánamo, Magrupov said that they were captured by a Northern Alliance commander, who held them in "some kind of huge container" and "a place like a barn," before transferring them to U.S. custody.

During his tribunal, Kerimbakiev explained that he had traveled to Afghanistan in 2000 with ten family members, including his grandmother, his mother, and his sisters and brothers, but

what interested the U.S. authorities was his alleged status as a cook for the Taliban. Kerimbakiev denied the allegations, saying that he lived a simple life in a house in Kabul, where he spent most of his time growing vegetables. This was difficult for the tribunal to accept, and prompted one of its members to say, “We're trying to understand why you're here. The United States wouldn't detain someone for more than two years for simply growing vegetables. Can you help us understand?”

Although it was quite possible to be imprisoned for growing vegetables, Kerimbakiev explained that the other man captured with him, Yakub Abahanov, “was a cook for the [Taliban] back-up forces,” and it seems likely, therefore, that Kerimbakiev was actually growing vegetables for the Taliban — although none of this explains why a teenager scraping a meager living from feeding the troops of the Afghan government should be transported halfway around the world to spend the next seven years of his life in a prison for terror suspects. Nevertheless, while Abdullah Magrupov and Yakub Abahanov were released in December 2006, Abdulrahim Kerimbakiev's perceived lies led to him being held for another 23 months.

### **A 63-year old Somali refugee**

The story of Mohammed Hussein Abdallah, a father of eleven who was 57 years old when he was dragged from his house in Peshawar, Pakistan, and transported to Guantánamo, is no less shocking. If Abdulrahim Kerimbakiev's experience indicates misplaced zeal on the part of the United States' Afghan allies, Mohammed Abdallah's experience demonstrates similar failings on the part of the Pakistani authorities and the U.S. agents who were advising them.

Mohammed Abdallah is one of dozens of Guantánamo prisoners seized in house raids in Pakistan — mostly between January and July 2002 — who were working for Gulf-based charities, which, in the eyes of the U.S. authorities, were fronts for terrorist activities. The pursuit of these organizations began after U.S. Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill blacklisted two organizations: the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (RIHS), a Kuwait-based NGO, with branches around the world, whose stated aim was “to improve the condition of the Muslim community and develop an awareness and understanding of Islam amongst the non-Muslim communities, by concentrating on youth and education,” and the Afghan Support Committee (ASC), which, according to the U.S. Treasury, had been established by Osama bin Laden in the 1980s.

In a [statement](#), Paul O'Neill claimed that personnel in both groups, including two alleged directors, Abu Bakr al-Jaziri and Abdul Muhsin al-Libi, “defrauded well-meaning contributors by diverting money donated for widows and orphans to al-Qaeda terrorists.” This may or may not have been the case, but al-Jaziri and al-Libi were never caught, and those who took the blame instead were the organizations' innocent workers, who were responsible for the lion's share of their charitable work, which included running schools and orphanages, drilling wells, and building mosques.

On May 27, 2002, five members of RIHS — one Jordanian and four Sudanese — were seized in house raids in Peshawar and transported to Guantánamo. All were subsequently released (between November 2003 and December 2007), but one of them, Hamad Gadallah, an accountant who clearly impressed his tribunal with his descriptions of a competent and principled organization that “had nothing to do with any terrorist acts,” explained that his downstairs neighbour, Abu Mohammed — a teacher from Algeria who did not work for the RIHS — was arrested on the same day. This was indeed the case, but what Gadallah did not know was that two other teachers were also seized on the same day: Menhal al-Henali (a Syrian, who was released in November 2003), and Mohammed Hussein Abdallah.

At Guantánamo, Abu Mohammed (who was released in November 2006, but was [sent to Albania](#) because of fears that he would be tortured in his home country) explained how the three men used to travel to work together in a bus that was provided for the teachers, and Abdallah expanded on the story during his tribunal.

Refuting an allegation that he was “arrested in a raid on suspected al-Qaeda residences and support facilities connected to the Afghan Support Committee,” he pointed out that he had lived in Peshawar under UN refugee status since 1993, had never worked for the ASC, and had spent the two years prior to his capture teaching orphans in a Red Crescent school. He said that he rented a house where he lived with one of his daughters and her family, and denied having anything to do with any kind of terrorist organization. “If there is anybody here that should be called a terrorist,” he said, “it should be the people that came to my house that took me at two o'clock in the morning in front of my children and grandchildren. The women were crying and the children were terrorized, crying and screaming.” Called as a witness during his hearing, Abu Mohammed described Abdallah as “basically a family man [who] just goes from home to work and does not really associate with people, period. Very rarely do you see him with other people.”

### **The taxi driver from Tajikistan**

The [released](#) Tajik, Zainulabidin Merozhev, was a relatively late arrival at Guantánamo. Seized by U.S. forces in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-e-Sharif on July 3, 2003, when he was 25 years old, he was identified as “Jumma Jan,” and was accused, at Guantánamo, of being a high-ranking Taliban member, who “reportedly was assigned a mission in Tajikistan after 11 September 2001, as part of an al-Qaeda and Taliban operational plan.” It was also alleged that he had a “leadership role” in a rocket attack on U.S. forces at the airfield in Mazar-e-Sharif, that he was “implicated” in an assassination attempt on General Dostum, one of the leaders of the Northern Alliance, and that he was a commander in Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (HIG), a ferociously anti-American militia controlled by the warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (who, ironically, was one of the major beneficiaries of U.S. backing during the Afghan resistance to the Soviet occupation in the 1980s).

In response, Merozhev, who had probably been identified by opportunistic U.S. allies, availing themselves of the substantial bounty rewards available for “al-Qaeda and Taliban suspects,” explained that he was not “Jumma Jan,” and was nothing more than refugee from Tajikistan who had worked as a driver. He said that he had arrived in Afghanistan with his family as a refugee during the civil war in Tajikistan, when he was a teenager, and had then traveled to Pakistan, where he received an education.

Unfortunately, he then contracted tuberculosis, but when he tried to return to Tajikistan, he was befriended by an “Afghanistan gentleman” who provided him with a car, so that he could earn money as a taxi driver to pay for his medical treatment. He admitted that, during this period, at the end of the 1990s, he had also used the car to drive around a Taliban leader called Guli, a double amputee responsible for security, but he insisted that he only took the job because he needed the money to continue his treatment, and pointed out that before his capture he had spent several years driving a tractor and a bus.

The reality of Merozhev’s tuberculosis was apparently not in doubt, as he stated that he had received treatment in U.S. custody — for four months at Bagram airbase, and for seven months in Guantánamo — where, he said, he had spent 48 days in an isolation ward, but it remains unclear why he was held for so long. As he explained in a review board in 2005,

Since I have been here in Cuba, they have just interrogated me for less than twenty minutes, once, only once. I don't know how these accusations have come about. I have been here for one and a half years and only one time have they interrogated me.

The fate that awaits Merozhev in Tajikistan is impossible to gauge. Although some of the eight Tajiks released from Guantánamo between November 2003 and March 2007 were freed without charge on their return home, two of the three prisoners released last March were subsequently put on trial and [sentenced](#) to 17 years imprisonment in “high-security penal colonies” (labor camps) for “serving as mercenaries in Afghanistan” — where they were accused of aiding the Taliban by fighting for the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) — and for taking part in “illegal border crossing.” After passing sentence, the judge announced that both men had maintained their innocence, and added, “In their last words, they said they didn’t expect such consequences for acts they committed.”

This was clearly something of an understatement, but while the Pentagon has no doubt been using their sentences as part of an unprincipled attempt to justify its detention policies, other observers might be more tempted to conclude that they simply exchanged one form of arbitrary imprisonment for another, and to focus on the stories of Abdulrahim Kerimbakiev, Mohammed Hussein Abdallah and Zainulabidin Merozhev as more representative of caliber of

prisoners swept up in one of the most ill-conceived dragnets ever launched by a democratic country.

*Andy Worthington is the author of [The Guantánamo Files: The Stories of the 774 Detainees in America's Illegal Prison](#) (published by Pluto Press). Visit his website at: [www.andyworthington.co.uk](http://www.andyworthington.co.uk).*

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