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Lost In Guantánamo: The Faisalabad 16

by Andy Worthington

On the evening of March 28, 2002, an armed group of FBI agents and Pakistani commandos, accompanied by a hundred local police, [stormed Shabaz Cottage](#), an apartment in a quiet neighborhood in the city of Faisalabad, Pakistan. Their target, who had been tracked by the careless use of a satellite phone, was Zayn al-Abidin Muhammad Husayn, more commonly known as Abu Zubaydah. Acknowledged as a facilitator for recruits attending the Khaldan training camp in Afghanistan, Zubaydah was regarded by the CIA as a far more significant figure.

Apprehended as he attempted to flee the house, Zubaydah reportedly received gunshot wounds in his stomach, one of his legs, and his groin, and after his capture was immediately rendered to a secret CIA prison in Thailand, where, as General Michael Hayden, the CIA's director, acknowledged in February this year, he was subjected to the ancient torture technique known as [waterboarding](#), a form of controlled drowning. He was later transferred to other secret prisons — in [Poland](#), and possibly on the island of [Diego Garcia](#) — until his eventual transfer to Guantánamo, along with 13 other “high-value detainees,” in September 2006.

Disputes within the U.S. administration over Zubaydah's alleged significance have never been resolved. Dan Coleman, a senior FBI operative, [maintains](#) that he was “insane, certifiable, split personality,” based on an analysis of his dairies, which revealed mundane accounts of life as recorded by three different personalities, and according to Ron Suskind, in his book [The One Percent Doctrine](#), other officials confirmed that Zubaydah appeared to know nothing about terrorist operations, and was, instead, a minor logistician. Nevertheless, the CIA took over his interrogations from the FBI and subjected him to torture, and after he arrived at Guantánamo, President Bush took the opportunity to [declare](#), “We believe that Zubaydah was a senior terrorist leader and a trusted associate of Osama bin Laden.”

While the story of Abu Zubaydah has been reported extensively in the media, there has been far less coverage of the seven men seized with him during the Faisalabad raid, and almost no mention whatsoever of 16 other men seized in a raid on another house in Faisalabad that same evening, even though the stories of two of these prisoners shed light on the CIA's policy of

rendering terror suspects to third countries for torture, and others cast doubt on the Pentagon's justifications for holding prisoners in Guantánamo.

Information about the two suspects who were rendered to torture was provided by the journalist Stephen Grey in his book [Ghost Plane](#), following an interview with [Abdullah Almalki](#). A joint Syrian-Canadian national, Almalki was seized by Syrian intelligence agents in May 2002, at the request of the Canadian authorities, and imprisoned and tortured for 22 months in the notorious military prison known as the "Palestine Branch," before being released without charge. He explained to Grey that two suspects seized with Zubaydah — Omar Ghraresh and an unnamed teenager — were rendered to the "Palestine Branch" on May 14, 2002, along with Abdul Halim Dalak, a student seized in Pakistan in November 2001. Ghraresh, he said, had explained to him that in Pakistan U.S. agents had shown him photos of Abu Zubaydah looking battered and bruised, and had told him, "If you don't talk, this is what will happen to you."

As in the cases of dozens of other "ghost prisoners," the U.S. government has never acknowledged its role in the rendition and torture of Ghraresh, Dalak and the unnamed teenager, and their current whereabouts are unknown.

However, more is known about the prisoners who were transferred to Guantánamo. Four of the men seized with Zubaydah — Ghassan al-Sharbi and Jabran al-Qahtani (both Saudis), Sufyian Barhoumi (an Algerian) and Noor Uthman Muhammed (a Sudanese) — were put forward for [trial by military commission](#) in June this year, accused of various plots involving explosives, and, in [Muhammed's case](#), of being the deputy emir of the Khaldan training camp.

Their cases are notable because the charges against them were [dropped](#) by the Pentagon in October, after their prosecutor, Lt. Col. Darrel Vandeveld, [resigned](#), stating that the trial system was designed to prevent the disclosure of evidence essential to the defense, and citing examples in one of the cases he was prosecuting, that of an Afghan prisoner named [Mohamed Jawad](#). The Pentagon gave no explanation for dropping the charges, but commentators suggested that officials were concerned that, if the cases proceeded to trial, Vandeveld would cause them further embarrassment by testifying for the defense.

It is not known whether Vandeveld possesses information that undermines the Pentagon's claims against these men, but the recent release from Guantánamo of another prisoner captured with Abu Zubaydah indicates that not everyone seized in the Faisalabad raids was connected with al-Qaeda.

Labeled Ahmed, a 50-year old Algerian (also identified as Abdallah Hussein), was repatriated on November 10, after being "approved for transfer" by a military review board. During a review in 2006, he explained that he had ended up at Zubaydah's house by accident.

A former drug dealer in Europe, Ahmed told the military panel that he had been imprisoned many times in Germany and Italy, and explained that he decided to go to Afghanistan in March 2001, after someone he met at a mosque in Hamburg recruited him by showing him

videos of mujahideen in Afghanistan and Chechnya, although he added that he actually hoped to buy heroin to sell in Europe so that he could buy his own nightclub.

Ahmed said that he arrived in Afghanistan at the start of September 2001, trained at al-Farouq (the main camp for Arabs) for 12 days until the camp closed in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, and then fought with the Taliban until December, when he left for Pakistan with a group of 20 other people, staying for three months in safe houses in Bannu and Lahore. He said that he was then told to go to Faisalabad, where some people would come to give him his passport and send him back to Germany. He explained that he was with two other people, a Russian and a Yemeni, but that, after they arrived at Shabaz Cottage, they were told that they had been brought there by mistake and would be moved to another house after the evening prayer.

Ahmed insisted that he didn't want to leave, because the previous houses had been crowded, whereas this house was "big and nice" and "everybody had their own room," and explained that he refused to leave in the vehicle that was brought in the evening. Several days later, he said,

The guy from al-Qaeda, Daoud [identified in the hearing as Zubaydah] questioned me as to who I was, what I was doing here and who brought me. I said I'm from Germany waiting on my passport. When I get it, I will leave. He said, no problem, you can stay here for a week. I stayed there for about 12 days and the Pakistani police came. They took us to prison. Daoud was arrested with us, you can ask him about us.

The house to which Ahmed and his companions were supposed to have been delivered was the Crescent Mill guest house (also referred to as the "Issa" guest house, after its owner, and "the Yemeni house," after most of its guests), and it was here that the Russian and the Yemeni who arrived at Shabaz Cottage with Ahmed were seized, along with another 14 prisoners. Mostly aged between 18 and 24, there were 11 Yemenis, an Algerian, a Palestinian, and a Saudi, and all are still in Guantánamo, with the exception of Ali Abdullah Ahmed al-Salami, one of three prisoners who [died in Guantánamo](#) in June 2006, apparently after committing suicide.

Of the remaining 15 prisoners, only one has been approved for release from Guantánamo, even though there is little in any of the men's stories to suggest that they were involved in any kind of militant activity. Ten of the 17 have maintained that they were students at Salafia University, run by the vast missionary organization Jamaat-al-Tablighi, and that the guest house was a university dorm, two have stated that they traveled to receive medical treatment, and another, Fahmi Ahmed, said that he went to Pakistan to buy fabrics, taking money that he had borrowed from his mother, but explained that he actually spent most of his time "like a wild man," drinking and smoking hashish. The prisoner cleared for release, Mohammed Hassen, was

not even living at the house, and was caught up in the raid after visiting for dinner and staying the night.

Only three of the men have admitted that they ever set foot in Afghanistan: Ahmed Abdul Qader, a Yemeni, who said that he went to Afghanistan for charitable work, and Ravil Mingazov and Jamil Nassir, the Russian and Yemeni who were taken to Abu Zubaydah's house by mistake just two weeks before the raid. Nassir's story involves conflicting claims that he either undertook military training in Afghanistan, was a humanitarian aid worker, or had traveled to Pakistan for medical treatment, and Mingazov, a former ballet dancer, fled religious persecution in his homeland, and has stated that he was with Jamaat-al-Tablighi in Lahore when he joined Labeled Ahmed on the ill-fated trip to Faisalabad.

The allegations made against these prisoners give little reason to doubt their stories. They contain claims by the U.S. authorities, as with many other prisoners involved with Jamaat-al-Tablighi, that the organization was "used to mask travel and activities of terrorists," but this allegation has never been regarded as legitimate outside Guantánamo. For the most part the prisoners' insistence that they traveled from their home countries to study in Faisalabad via Karachi (and often via Jamaat-al-Tablighi mosques in Lahore and Raiwand, where the organization has its headquarters) is at odds with a catalog of other allegations made under unknown circumstances by unidentified "al-Qaeda operatives" and other unidentified "sources," who claimed to have seen the men at various times in Afghanistan.

With Labeled Ahmed now released, it is unclear how the Pentagon can maintain that it has any reason to hold the 16 other prisoners seized in the Crescent Mill guest house. One particular comment that Ahmed made during his military review, when he stated that, because he, Mingazov and Nassir "did not have a connection or relationship with Abu Zubaydah," they "should have been placed in the Yemeni house," indicates that, although Abu Zubaydah had some sort of contact with the house, it was not a place that had any connection with terrorism, and was, at best, a place where a few foreigners fleeing from Afghanistan could be concealed alongside a group of students.

Mohammed Hassen's lawyer, David Remes, says his client has paid dearly for being at the wrong place at the wrong time: "Mohammed has spent a quarter of his life behind bars because he made the mistake of visiting a friend at a guest house the night it was raided." Noting that Mr. Hassen was cleared for release nearly three years ago but remains imprisoned at Guantánamo, Remes added,

This is more than injustice. It's a nightmare. My client is particularly unfortunate, because he was not even living at the house, but nothing I have either seen or heard, in my discussions with other lawyers and my analysis of Mr. Hassen's case, indicates that any of these men constitutes a threat to the United States.

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.

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