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Who Are the Four Afghans Released From Gitmo?

By Andy Worthington

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Over the weekend, 12 prisoners were released from Guantánamo, as the Justice Department announced in [a press release](#) on December 20. I have previously reported the stories of [the two Somalis](#) who were released – emphasizing how nothing about their cases demonstrated that they were "the worst of the worst" – and will soon be reporting the stories of the six Yemenis transferred to the custody of the Yemeni government. For now, however, I'd like to turn to the four Afghans transferred to the custody of the Afghan government, because, in contrast to the fearmongering of opportunistic Republicans, who continue to claim that Guantánamo is full of terrorists, the stories of these four men demonstrate instead the incompetence of senior officials in the Bush administration, revealing how, instead of detaining men who had any connection to al-Qaeda, or those responsible for the 9/11 attacks, they filled Guantánamo with what Maj. Gen. Michael Dunlavey, the commander of Guantánamo in 2002, [described as "Mickey Mouse" prisoners](#).

Sharifullah, the U.S. Ally Who Had Guarded Hamid Karzai

The first of the four Afghans, Sharifullah, who was 22 years old at the time of his capture, was seized by U.S. forces from an Afghan military compound with another man, Amir Jan Ghorzang (identified by the Pentagon as Said Amir Jan), who was [released from Guantánamo in September 2007](#). Both men were accused of hoarding explosives for the Taliban and being involved in various plots, but insisted that they were loyal government soldiers. In Guantánamo, Sharifullah explained that he was one of the first recruits in the new Afghan army, trained by British officers, and added that he had then spent seven months as part of a group that was responsible

for guarding President Karzai. When he was unable to get a promotion, however, he returned to Jalalabad, where he had just taken up a new position as an officer when he was seized.

Amir Jan Ghorzang was the more vociferous of the two in Guantánamo, lamenting the fact that the U.S. soldiers who had seized them had been duped by traitors who were taking money from both the U.S. military and al-Qaeda and were passing off innocent men as members of al-Qaeda and the Taliban. "I'm here because somebody got paid some dollars," he explained, adding that he had been imprisoned by the Taliban for five years, because of his opposition to them, and had also worked for Haji Qadir, a commander who fought with the Americans during the battle of Tora Bora, a showdown between al-Qaeda and U.S.-backed Afghan forces in December 2001.

The cases of both men – as with many other men who had been working for the Karzai government but had been betrayed by rivals – revealed how little the U.S. authorities were concerned with establishing the truth about their allegations, as it would have been easy to track down witnesses in Afghanistan who could have verified their stories (as reporters for McClatchy Newspapers did in 2008, when [they interviewed Ghorzang](#)). Nevertheless, he was, in the end, more fortunate than Sharifullah, whose continued presence in Guantánamo for two years and three months after his release was, frankly, inexplicable. As Ghorzang explained in the following exchange in Sharifullah's tribunal, when he was called as a witness:

Sharifullah: "Do you know that I was involved to work in the new government? Was I honestly working and working for the new government?"
Ghorzang: "You were working with the new government and he was involved with the Karzai government, in support of the Karzai government."

Mohammed Hashim: The Fantasist Put Forward for a Trial by Military Commission

The story of the second man, Mohammed Hashim, remains as bewildering now as it was when he was put forward for a trial by military commission at Guantánamo in May 2008 and I wrote an article titled "[Afghan Fantasist to Face Trial at Guantánamo](#)," in which I stated that it "appear[ed] to plumb new depths of misapplied zeal." Hashim, who was about 26 years old at the time of his capture, was first seized by Afghan forces after he was found taking measurements near the home of Mullah Omar, the Taliban's reclusive leader, and asking locals about security arrangements. Subsequently released, he was then seized again and handed over (or sold) to U.S. forces.

If there was something about the circumstances of his initial capture that should have set alarm bells ringing, regarding his mental health, these were ignored when the U.S. authorities decided to charge him with "conducting reconnaissance missions against U.S. and coalition forces," and "participating in a rocket attack venture on at least one occasion against U.S. forces for al-Qaeda," and ignored the fact that, at his tribunal, his testimony revealed that he was (as I described it) "either one of the most fantastically well-connected terrorists in the very small pool of well-connected terrorists at Guantánamo, or, conversely, that he [was] a deranged fantasist. From the resounding silence that greeted his comments at his tribunal, I can only conclude that the tribunal members, like me, concluded that the latter interpretation was the more probable."

After explaining that he had spent five years with the Taliban, because he needed the money, Hashim proceeded to claim that:

"he knew about the 9/11 attacks in advance, because a man that he knew, Mohammad Khan, 'used to tell me all these stories and all the details about how they were going to fly airplanes into buildings. He didn't tell me the details, that it was New York, but he said they had 20 pilots and they were going to orchestrate the act.' What rather detracted from the shock value of this comment was Hashim's absolutely inexplicable claim that his friend Khan, who had told him about the 9/11 plan, was with the Northern Alliance, the Taliban's opponents, who were also implacably opposed to al-Qaeda."

Hashim also claimed that he and another man had been responsible for facilitating Osama bin Laden's escape from Afghanistan and that, afterward, he had worked as a spy and had heard about how the Syrian government had been sending weapons to Saddam Hussein, which had then been sent to Afghanistan via Iran. As I explained at the time, the cumulative effect of Hashim's statements was that it was "impossible not to conclude that [his] story was, if not the testimony of a fantasist, then a shrewd attempt to avoid brutal interrogations by providing his interrogators with whatever he thought they wanted to hear."

A darker truth, of course, may be that his rambling statement actually revealed the themes pursued relentlessly by the interrogators at Guantánamo: not only "what do you know about the 9/11 attacks?" and "when did you last see bin Laden?" but also, at [the insistence of Vice President Dick Cheney](#), "what was the connection between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein?" As we know from the interrogations of the CIA's most famous "ghost prisoner," [Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi](#), who [confessed under torture in Egypt](#) that there were connections between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein, which was later used as part of the justification for the invasion of Iraq, securing this sort of information was regarded as critical in the run-up to the invasion, even though the administration claimed that its embrace of torture (or, rather, the euphemistically named "enhanced interrogation techniques") was designed to prevent further terrorist attacks.

Abdul Hafiz: The Wrong Man With a Satellite Phone

The third man, Abdul Hafiz, who was 42 years old when he was seized in 2003 from his village near Kandahar, was accused in his tribunal of working for a Taliban militia group and of being involved in two killings in Kabul. It was also alleged that he was captured with a satellite phone linked to one of the killings and that he "attempted to call an al-Qaeda member who is linked to the murder of an ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] worker."

In response, Hafiz, who described himself as "handicapped" and who repeatedly stated that he has problems with his memory, claimed that his name was Abdul Qari, and that he had been confused with Abdul Hafiz, because Hafiz, for whom he had been working, had given him the phone at a checkpoint. As he stated, "He told me that he did not have any documents to have the phone with him. So he said, 'You can have my phone because you are handicapped and I don't think they will search you.'" He added that he did not even know how to use the phone.

Describing Hafiz as someone who supported the new government of Hamid Karzai and was "preaching in the village to bring the peace," he said, "I was working for him to bring peace. ... He gave me the telephone in the morning and told me to keep it in my pocket. He told me to work and preach to the people not to fight. That war is not good. This is the reason that I lost my leg. Fighting is not good. War does not have good consequences."

He also explained, "I was just in my home when they captured me and brought me here. I didn't do anything," and expressed frustration at not being able to see classified documents containing evidence against him, saying, "In our culture, if someone is accused of something, they are shown the evidence." At his review in 2005, he presented the board with letters from his family – all addressed to Abdul Qari, not Abdul Hafiz – including one from his brother, which read, "My respectful brother, you didn't have any relationship with any political people. We were hoping that you would get released very, very soon. We do not understand why you're still detained there without a crime." He was clearly so desperate to be freed from Guantánamo and not to be "amongst these beasts and these people" (as he described his fellow prisoners at one point), that he even offered to present the board with a letter from his wife, even though "It is a big shame in our culture to read my wife's letter to you, but now I am in a very tough situation."

Mohamed Rahim: A Spectacular Case of Mistaken Identity

If Abdul Qari's continued imprisonment appeared to be inexplicable, there was, on the surface at least, more of a case against Mohamed Rahim, the fourth prisoner released over the weekend, but this too collapses spectacularly under scrutiny. A resident of a village near Ghazni, Rahim was accused, in his tribunal, of being the chief of logistics for a company providing support directly to the Taliban government, of working for the Taliban Intelligence Office, and of controlling a large weapons cache for the Taliban. In response, he explained that he had been forced to work for the Taliban, and that, because he "was sick" and unable to fight, he was made to work in an administrative post. He denied the allegation that he worked for the Taliban Intelligence Office, calling it an "outrageous" accusation, and he also denied controlling a weapons cache. "This doesn't make sense," he said. "I was captured in my house. I have no information on these weapons."

By the time of his next review, in 2005, numerous other allegations had been added, including a claim that he was "identifiable as a former companion of bin Laden during the jihad against the Russians," and another that he "was among a group protecting bin Laden at his last meeting at Tora Bora." It was also suggested that he "was entrusted by bin Laden to exfiltrate his guard forces from Afghanistan back to their countries of origin," and that "bin Laden and his companions spent the night in a house belonging to an Afghan acquaintance of the detainee."

There was more in this vein, including a claim that he "attempted to export gems from Afghanistan to Germany in order to raise revenue to finance al-Qaeda," but what was completely overlooked by his review board – and presumably, by those who were supposed to be capable of analyzing the intelligence relating to the Guantánamo prisoners – is that when he stated "I am a sick poor farmer with enemies," he was telling the truth for one particularly glaring reason, which only emerged in passing in his review, when his designated military officer (a soldier assigned to him in place of a lawyer) pointed out that he was Hazara.

One of four main population groups in Afghanistan – the others being Pashtuns, Tajiks, and Uzbeks – the Hazara, Shia Muslims who are at least partly of Mongol origin, were despised by the Sunni Taliban, who slaughtered them in their thousands. As a result, it is not only appropriate to conclude that the allegations against Rahim were invented by his enemies, but also to conclude that his enemies in Guantánamo came up with the outrageous claims that he was intimately associated with Osama bin Laden.

Release or Imprisonment in Afghanistan?

With the exception of [Mohamed Jawad](#), who was [released in August](#) after he [won his habeas corpus petition](#), these men are the first Afghans released since January 2009, when [Haji Bismullah](#), who worked for the government of Hamid Karzai as the chief of transportation in a region of Helmand province, was released. Of the 219 Afghans once held at Guantánamo, there are now just 21 remaining in the prison, but it is uncertain whether the four men just released will regain their freedom, or whether, in common with all the Afghan releases since August 2007 (except Jawad, whose case attracted international scrutiny), they will be [imprisoned on arrival in Kabul](#), in a wing of the main prison, Pol-i-Charki, which was refurbished by the U.S. military, and which, although nominally under Afghan control, is reportedly overseen by Americans.

After all this time, and with such scandalous stories of ineptitude on the part of the United States, I would say that the least these men deserve is to be freed outright and allowed to be reunited with their families.