

# *The Original 20 Guantánamo Detainees: A Roster, and Where They Are Now*

Starting with the Bush administration, the United States has gradually transferred all but two of the first 20 prisoners at the wartime detention facility to other nations. Here's who, and where, they are.

**By Carol Rosenberg**

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## **Shabidzada Usman Ali, sent to Pakistan in 2003**

Mr. Ali, a Pakistani citizen, was among the earliest people repatriated from Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, at a time when the main prison facility, Camp Delta, held 680 detainees. The journalist Mark Bowden wrote that he traveled to Pakistan to meet some former Guantánamo prisoners and found Mr. Ali and another detainee, who said they had not been abused in American custody “except for some roughing up immediately after they were captured.” Both were in their 20s, he wrote in a later account, from tiny villages in the mountainous region of Pakistan where Al Qaeda and the Taliban hid, and he described them as “hapless young Pakistanis” who were rounded up by “Afghani warlords” for a bounty of \$4,000 a head.

## **Feroz Abassi, sent to Britain in 2005**

Mr. Abassi returned to England, attended university and assumed a new name. He was among a group of former prisoners who received compensation in 2010 from the British government. By 2011, he was divorced, had a son and was working part time for a moving company and for Cage Prisoners, an advocacy group based in Britain for people taken prisoner during the war on terrorism. Friends and lawyers who knew him from his Guantánamo days say he decided not to keep in touch, and he resisted overtures through intermediaries to discuss how he was doing.

## **Omar Rajab Amin, sent to Kuwait in 2006**

Little is known about what became of Mr. Amin since his repatriation. Moazzam Begg, a former detainee who is now a human-rights activist in London, said that he had heard through an intermediary that he “has a happy home and family and is taking it easy.” Lawyers who had worked on his case said that, unlike other Kuwaiti detainees, Mr. Amin adopted a low profile. He graduated from the University of Nebraska about a decade before his capture by Pakistani troops along the Afghan border in 2001.

### **Mohammed al Zayly, sent to Saudi Arabia in 2006**

The Saudi government sent an aircraft to fetch Mr. Zayly, along with 15 other citizens, from Guantánamo Bay. It was part of a brisk period of transfers under the Bush administration that sent some former detainees to prison, typically for leaving the kingdom without permission, and then to an early rehabilitation program for jihadists. Mr. Zayly spent a year in the rehabilitation program, married and became a father. He now works in the private sector, according to a Saudi official who provided the information on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the topic in the kingdom. “He lives in Saudi Arabia and has not been implicated in any legal wrongdoing since his release,” he said.

### **David Hicks, sent to Australia in 2007**

Mr. Hicks was among the best known of the early detainees because he was a Western convert to Islam at Guantánamo. He left the wartime prison after pleading guilty to a terrorism charge, a conviction that was overturned. In 2017, the United Nations Human Rights Committee ruled that Australia violated his rights by imprisoning him for seven months on his return. He spurned efforts to reach him through intermediaries, but people who know him say he still suffers both physical and emotional distress because of his time in Guantánamo and no longer works as a landscape gardener. His last known public sighting was in 2017 entering a courthouse in Adelaide on a domestic violence charge, which was subsequently dropped.

### **Fahad Nasser Mohammed, sent to Saudi Arabia in 2007**

Mr. Mohammed was sentenced to two years in prison and completed the kingdom’s rehabilitation program. He was released in mid-2008 for good behavior, married, had children and found work in the private sector. “He has not been implicated in any legal wrongdoing since his release,” a Saudi official said. At the time of his return, it was

common practice to imprison and charge former detainees with offenses that included leaving the kingdom without permission and carrying a weapon. From there, the men would be sent to the rehabilitation program.

### **Mullah Abdul Qayyum Zakir, sent to Afghanistan in 2007**

Mullah Zakir emerged as a powerful battlefield commander for the Taliban military in southern Afghanistan. At Guantánamo, he was held under an alias, Abdullah Gulam Rasoul, and was also identified as Mullah Abdullah. He was turned over to the Afghan government, which released him, said Bill Roggio, the editor of the Long War Journal, who carefully tracks the Taliban. Mullah Zakir is currently based in Pakistan, between Quetta and Peshawar, where he is associated with a senior Taliban chief, Mullah Muhammad Yaquob, the son of Mullah Muhammad Omar, the reclusive leader who died in 2013, and oversees jihadi troops that are trying to defeat Afghan's unity government. "He's one that shouldn't have been released from Guantánamo," Mr. Roggio said. "He's active to this day."

### **Gholam Ruhani, sent to Afghanistan in 2007**

Mr. Ruhani was released in the same transfer as Mullah Zakir, but little else is known about what became of him. "I confirmed with his family that he had indeed returned and was not imprisoned there," said his pro bono lawyer at the time, Rebecca Dick. "But I never spoke directly to him and I don't know what happened to him." Mr. Roggio of the Long War Journal described him as "a ghost" whose whereabouts he could not pinpoint. Mr. Ruhani was captured with his brother-in-law, one of the Taliban's negotiators, after going to what they believed was a negotiated meeting with U.S. forces.

### **Ibrahim Idris, sent to Sudan in 2013**

The Obama administration agreed to repatriate Mr. Idris after, unusually, declining to contest his unlawful detention petition in federal court. He was treated at Guantánamo for schizophrenia and other health problems and later spent time in the psychiatric ward. Once released, he essentially lived as a shut-in, attended to by family in his native Port Sudan, disabled and unable to work. Another former Sudanese prisoner Sami al-Haj said that he suffered from ailments related to his torture at Guantánamo. Other early detainees and F.B.I. witnesses described an early interrogation practice that shackled some prisoners nude inside an over air-conditioned cell, while blaring loud music and flashing strobe lights at them, to gain their cooperation. He died on Feb. 10.

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### **Mullah Fazel Mazloom, sent to Qatar in 2014**

Mullah Mazloom, sometimes identified as Mullah Mohammad Fazl, was among five Taliban members sent to Qatar in exchange for the release of Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, who was held prisoner by the militant Haqqani network in the tribal area of Pakistan's northwest frontier. Mullah Mazloom, a former chief of the Taliban Army, is accused of having a role in the massacres of Shiite Hazara in Afghanistan before the United States invasion in 2001, crimes that cannot be tried by a military commission. In Qatar, he has emerged as a member of the Taliban negotiating team devising an agreement to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan and determine a power-sharing settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban. He traveled to Pakistan as part of the negotiating team in the summer of 2020, with advance approval of the U.S., Qatari and Pakistani governments.

### **Abdul Haq Wasiq, sent to Qatar in 2014**

Mr. Wasiq, a deputy minister of intelligence before his capture in 2001, was also included in the Bergdahl trade and has joined the Taliban's political office in Doha, Qatar. His brother-in-law, Ghulam Ruhani, was repatriated in 2007. Both men were captured after attending a negotiating meeting with U.S. officials. Once transferred to Doha, where he remains, Mr. Wasiq also took part in the talks with the United States, which resulted in the release of more Taliban prisoners held by the Afghanistan government under a deal with the Trump administration that was meant to halt insurgent Taliban attacks on U.S. forces.

### **Mullah Norullah Noori, sent to Qatar in 2014**

Mullah Noori, who was a provincial governor in Afghanistan, has also joined the Taliban's political office in Doha, Qatar. He and the other four Taliban prisoners who were traded for the release of Sergeant Bergdahl live as guests of the Qatari government like many expatriates in Doha. They have been joined by family, send their children to a Pakistani school set up for foreign families, and live on government stipends in a compound. Their ability to travel is regulated by the Qatari government.

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### **Abdul Rahman Shalabi, sent to Saudi Arabia in 2015**

Mr. Shalabi became one of the best-known Saudi prisoners at Guantánamo because of his long-running hunger strikes, which at times required that he be force fed. After returning to Saudi Arabia in September 2015, he was immediately sent to prison on a three-year sentence that was cut short for “good behavior” and he was released in 2018 after a year or more in a rehabilitation program. He has married and became a father, making good on a wish his lawyer put before the Guantánamo parole board in April 2015 “to settle down, get married and have a family of his own, and put the past behind him.”

### **Ali Ahmad al Rahizi, sent to the United Arab Emirates in 2015**

Mr. Rahizi, a Yemeni citizen who the United States concluded could not safely be repatriated, is confined to a cell in the United Arab Emirates, according to activists who have spoken with the families of Yemenis who were sent there for resettlement by the Obama administration. American officials said that the Emirates had agreed to establish a step-down program for detainees who could not go home — moving from prison to a rehabilitation program to jobs in the area, which relies heavily on foreign labor. That never materialized. The Life After Guantánamo project, based in London, describes detention in the Emirates as grim and threatening, in part because the country has considered involuntarily repatriating former prisoners to Yemen, where they would be in danger.

### **Abd al Malik, sent to Montenegro in 2016**

Mr. Malik, a Yemeni who went by the name Abdul Malik al Rahabi, is living in Montenegro, where the United States sent him for resettlement, and trying to sell works of art he painted while at Guantánamo. He was joined by his wife and daughter, who found life there socially incompatible, so the family moved to Khartoum, Sudan. But life was difficult there, too, and they returned to Montenegro. Art sales stopped some time ago and Mr. Malik's idea to work as a driver and guide for tourists soured when the coronavirus pandemic hit.

### **Samir Naji al Hasan Moqbel, sent to Oman in 2016**

As a Yemeni, Mr. Moqbel was ineligible for repatriation because of the civil war, which made it impossible for the Obama administration to negotiate safe security arrangements. Instead, neighboring Oman agreed to take him, along with 29 other detainees, in one of the most successful resettlement programs. He has found work in a factory, married and is now father to two children, according to the former Guantánamo prisoner Mansour Adayfi, who chronicles life after detention for some former prisoners. As a rule, former detainees in Oman refuse to speak with foreign reporters, apparently at the urging of the host nation.

### **Mahmoud al Mujahid, sent to the United Arab Emirates in 2016**

Mr. Mujahid, a Yemeni, is one of 18 men imprisoned in the United Arab Emirates, which never made good on a deal with the Obama administration to rehabilitate the detainees and find jobs in the country, whose work force is mostly made up of foreigners. Efforts to address the issue mostly stalled during the Trump administration, which dismantled the State Department office that managed Guantánamo transfers. To fill the vacuum, some United Nations experts have expressed concern about the men, particularly over reports that the Emirates planned to repatriate them to Yemen, where the prisoners fear persecution, including death.

### **Mohammed Abu Ghanem, sent to Saudi Arabia in 2017**

Mr. Abu Ghanem, a Yemeni, has a sister who is a naturalized Saudi citizen and sponsored his transfer to Saudi Arabia, where he started off in a rehabilitation program. The Obama administration made similar deals for several Yemeni men with strong family ties to the kingdom. Mr. Abu Ghanem was released a year later, is now married and has a job — something he said he aspired to do in his May 2016 appearance before the Guantánamo parole board. There is no implication of legal wrongdoing on his record, the Saudi official said.

### **Ali Hamza al Bahlul, still at Guantánamo**

Mr. Bahlul, a Yemeni, was the closest person to the Qaeda inner circle who was taken to Guantánamo on that January flight and is serving life in prison as the only sentenced convict among the 40 detainees there. He was convicted in 2008 of three separate war crimes for serving as Osama bin Laden's public relations director and personal secretary. Since 2011, appellate lawyers, who are paid by the Pentagon, have challenged his case and the legitimacy of the military commissions in the federal courts. They have successfully argued to have two of the three charges dismissed and are still appealing his remaining conviction, for conspiring to commit war crimes.

### **Ridah bin Saleh al Yazidi, still at Guantánamo**

Mr. Yazidi, a Tunisian, was cleared for transfer in January 2010, but he has not agreed to meet with either Tunisian or U.S. officials to discuss his repatriation. He has not met with a lawyer for years, and it is not known why he has resisted release. A notation in his case file says that in 2002, he was convicted in absentia in Tunisia for being involved in a terrorist organization abroad, and was sentenced to 20 years in prison. Although the Arab Spring toppled his nation's long-running dictatorship in 2011, the courts from the period remain intact and he could still face punishment on his return.