

Freed From Guantánamo, but Still in Limbo 15 Years Later

Abu Bakker Qassim, a Uyghur from China, was dumped in Albania after the U.S. concluded he was not a terrorist, as Chinese authorities had maintained. The only country that wants him is China.



By Andrew Higgins

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TIRANA, Albania — Accused by the United States military of being a terrorist in league with the Taliban, a devout Muslim man from western China spent four years imprisoned at Guantánamo Bay before being cleared and then dumped in Albania 15 years ago.

Still stranded in a country he did not know existed until he was sent there, the man, Abu Bakker Qassim, 51, has a word of warning for the hundreds of Afghans who have fled their country over the past month and followed his path to one of Europe's poorest but most welcoming nations as they wait for admission to the United States.

“The Americans,” he said, recalling how he and four other wrongly imprisoned Uyghurs had been flown to Albania from Guantánamo, Cuba, and assured they would not be staying long, “quickly lose interest — they just threw us away.”

Mr. Qassim has been granted “humanitarian protection” in Albania, the one country that was willing to take him in out of scores asked by the State Department, despite protests from China. He gets a monthly stipend of nearly \$400, but he has not managed to get a visa or a passport, which makes travel anywhere difficult. The only country that really wants him is China, which considers him a terrorist because of his advocacy of independence for his home region of Xinjiang, which he calls Turkestan.

China would certainly arrest him if he ever returned.

I first met Mr. Qassim days after his arrival in 2006 in Tirana, the Albanian capital. At the time, he was despondent. China was demanding that Albania hand him over, describing him and his fellow Uyghurs from Guantánamo as part of a “terrorist force” with “close relations to Al Qaeda and the Taliban.”

He was also very confused, not really sure where the Americans had sent him. He and his fellow Uyghurs were confined to a converted army barracks that had rusty barbed wire on the windows and felt like another prison. Speaking only Uyghur and Chinese, he could not

communicate with anyone in his host country and did not know what the Albanians intended to do with him.

His spirits have now lifted considerably. Albania, a former Communist dictatorship and close friend of China's in the era of Mao Zedong but now a member of NATO and a steadfast American ally, declined Beijing's requests that he be sent to China. Instead, it gave him money to rent an apartment, as well as a monthly allowance for food. He found work in a pizza parlor, made friends at a Tirana mosque and started a new family.

He now speaks fluent Albanian and has forgotten much of the Chinese that he was obliged to learn growing up in Xinjiang.

The tiny Balkan nation that took him in, which recently committed to admitting up to 4,000 Afghans in need of shelter, "has a tradition of hosting people in need," the country's foreign minister, Olta Xhacka, said in an interview.

"We take pride in being hospitable," she added.

Nearly 700 Afghans have already arrived and have been put up in beach resorts along the Adriatic coast.



Afghan refugees this month at the Rafaelo Resort in Shengjin, Albania. Enri Canaj for The New York Times

Mr. Qassim, however, is dismayed that so many Afghans are fleeing, an exodus driven by fear of the Taliban and hope of getting to the United States.

Unlike the Uyghurs, ruled by an increasingly oppressive Chinese government and incarcerated in large numbers in a vast network of Xinjiang internment camps, the Afghans, said Mr. Qassim, have their own country and, no matter how oppressive the Taliban may be, would be better off staying at home.

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“I don’t understand why they left. It would be better to stay in their own country,” he said. “I know what it is to be jailed, but even if they go to jail, they will be near their families.”

Mr. Qassim has not seen his family in Xinjiang for more than 20 years, since he set off with a friend from western China on an ill-fated effort to travel overland to Turkey, where the language is similar to the Turkic tongue spoken by Uyghurs and where he had hoped to find work. He traveled on a Chinese passport valid for only two years.

Stranded in Afghanistan without money or papers at the time of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, he was grabbed by bounty-hunting tribesman on the Pakistan-Afghan border and handed over to the Americans, who were offering cash for suspected terrorists. They considered him an “enemy combatant” and sent him to the prison at Guantánamo Bay to join other Muslims swept up in President George W. Bush’s “global war on terror.”

After being exonerated in 2006 by a military tribunal, Mr. Qassim was led in shackles to a military transport plane and flown overnight to Tirana from Cuba. Repeated efforts since then to get visas for the United States and Canada have failed, and all but one of the Guantánamo five are still in Albania. The one who got out moved to Sweden, where he works as a taxi driver.

Mr. Qassim said he laughed when he heard last month that United States officials were negotiating with the Taliban over access to Kabul’s international airport after the American-backed government collapsed on Aug. 15 and ceded control of the Afghan capital to the insurgents.

During his detention in Guantánamo, he said, “they kept telling me that the Taliban were terrorists and accused me of collaborating with the Taliban, but now they are collaborating with the Taliban.”

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

The world, he noted, “has certainly changed a lot in 20 years.”

One change that brings him comfort, he said, is the evolution of attitudes toward China. When he was first sent to Guantánamo, the Bush administration had embraced China's view that Uyghurs demanding independence or even merely greater autonomy were dangerous extremists. In 2002, Washington named a largely phantom Uyghur group called the East Turkestan Islamic Movement as an affiliate of Al Qaeda, a move that gave cover to Chinese claims that Uyghurs who protested their treatment were terrorists.

Last year, the Trump administration removed the Uyghur group from the United States' terrorism list, saying there was no evidence it existed.

“We spoke about the China risk more than 20 years ago and constantly told everyone: ‘Be careful of China,’” Mr. Qassim said. “But only now are they starting to understand what kind of country the Chinese Communist Party has created.”

He last communicated with his wife and three children in China in 2016, when the Communist Party appointed a new hard-line boss in Xinjiang and began a program of mass detentions that has since put as many as a million or more Uyghurs and other Muslims in “re-education” camps. He worries that his relatives, tainted by his status in China as a dangerous extremist, have become victims of what the State Department this year described as “genocide” in Xinjiang.



Mr. Qassim married a Uyghur woman in Albania, his second wife, with whom he has had three children. Enri Canaj for The New York Times

The last he heard about his 21-year-old daughter in Xinjiang, he said, was that she had not been arrested and was working in a shop, but she was being pressured to marry a Han Chinese so as to prove her loyalty to Beijing and avoid detention.

Cut off from his family in Xinjiang, Mr. Qassim took a second wife in Albania, a Uyghur woman with whom he has had three children. He said he told his first wife by telephone that he had remarried, and “she was a bit angry,” but she understood that because of Chinese policies in Xinjiang, their chances of ever getting back together were slim.

He said that he was deeply grateful to Albania for not sending him back to China and for giving him money, but that he was frustrated that it had stalled on granting him formal asylum or Albanian travel documents despite more than 15 years of residency.

The Albanian Interior Ministry said Mr. Qassim had not applied for a passport. Mr. Qassim said his lawyer had asked the ministry and been told that the Uyghur’s “humanitarian protection” status precluded the possibility of a passport.

While angry at the United States over his years at Guantánamo and his 15 years since in limbo in Albania, he still views America as the Uyghurs’ only real hope.

“If Turkestan ever gets independence, it will be because of America,” Mr. Qassim said. “Every country makes mistakes, but I can’t stop believing in the United States just because they did injustice to five Uyghurs sent to Albania.”

Fatjona Mejdini contributed reporting.

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