

“Blood on British Hands”: The Fate of Guantanamo Detainee 239 British National Shaker Aamer

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“...and if any one saved a life, it would be as if s/he saved the life of all mankind. ...” (Qur’an 5:32)

“How does it become a man to behave towards the American government today? I answer, that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it.” (Henry David Thoreau, 1817-1862.)

On Tuesday, 13th April, as British politicians travelled the country, promising a brave new world on Election day (6th May) a letter was delivered to the British Prime Minister’s residence, Number 10, Downing Street.

Both former Prime Minister Gordon Brown and his successor, Conservative leader, David Cameron, have made much, recently, on television, with breaking voice, of personal grief. Both have lost children, Brown and his wife, a baby daughter in 2004 and Cameron and his wife, a disabled son, last year.

They were an uncomfortable watch. Grief – the ultimate, surely, the loss of a child – is private, personal, engulfing. It is overwhelmed moments, only shared with those closest. Cameron further informed the nation that he and his wife enjoyed their “cuddles.” Sarah Brown called the dour, charmless Gordon: “My hero.” Skin crawling stuff. Were they attempting the last political card in an effort at erasing the collective electoral memory of a cross party political rip-off of the tax payer, in an expenses scandal of enormity. With tarnished politics, mired in lies, illegal invasions and illegal acts?

Brown, of course was the Chancellor of the Exchequer under discredited former Prime Minister Blair. Brown wrote the cheques for the Iraq and Afghan blood-lettings, until he became Britain’s unelected Prime Minister. Cameron voted for both aggressions. Both have responsibility for uncounted, unimaginable deaths – and those of the children of others.

As they attempted to “connect with the people”, ploughing embarrassingly round what they thought were “people” type places: food stores, gas stations, malls (even, in Cameron’s case, a long abandoned gas power station) grabbing hands, kissing strangers’ babies, flanked by minders and media, did they reflect that, with an angry, disillusioned electorate (no, not “apathetic”, as they like to say, frankly, largely furious) a little humility might have been apt? However, when a letter was delivered, which could have given Brown the chance to really show a human side, take a stand for decency and the rule of law, the then Prime Minister was polishing his ego elsewhere.

The letter read, in part:

“Time may be running out for you to obtain the release and return of British Resident Shaker Aamer, still detained after more than eight years in Guantánamo.

You have claimed to have made repeated requests to the U.S., for his release, yet you have failed to bring him home. It is beyond belief that Shaker, a long-term legal British resident, cleared for release in 2007, without charge, remains in Guantánamo in a cell, 6 foot by 8 foot, in solitary confinement, in the harshest of conditions.

Your Government has been derelict in its duty to protect Shaker Aamer, a refugee from Saudi Arabia, who was given indefinite leave to remain in the UK and whose only wish is to return to family and home here in London.

“He has had his head repeatedly smashed against walls. His eyesight has been affected by the constant bright lights of his cell and he has lost half his body weight. A detention report states that his mental health is deteriorating. Despite knowing the extent of the abuse of his human rights, your Government, to its shame, has not used its power and authority to demand the immediate release and return of Shaker Aamer, victim of

rendition and torture.

“Very soon you will be asking the country to vote for you. People of goodwill everywhere would celebrate if you ensured the return of Shaker Aamer to his family whilst there is still time for your Government to act.”

Reality is stark and bleak: “We appeal to you to note well the words of Brent Mickum, US lawyer for Shaker Aamer: ‘He is still being tortured down there. And if he ends up dying down there, I have to say there is blood on the British hands.’ British Resident Shaker Aamer is being tortured in Guantánamo and his life is in your hands.”

The letter was signed by the “Save Shaker Aamer Campaign.”

The election has come and gone. With a coalition government, headed by Tory, David “Gaza must not be allowed to remain a prison camp” Cameron,(1) with Liberal Democrat, Nick “the illegal invasion of Iraq” Clegg,(2) as his Deputy. As ever, a new era of politics was promised. Politics-with-a-human-face type statements, demonstrated, largely, by open neck shirts and Cameron walking to Parliament, rather than taking a limo the few yards from his official residence. This month has seen the election of Ed “It is a duty to comply with international law” Miliband (3), as Labour Leader.

Addressing the plight of Shaker Aamer, held in another illegal prison camp, might indeed signal something of humanity, substance and return to a semblance of legality (not difficult to improve on Barrister Blair’s ten years slaughter-fest) but Aamer’s case has been met by all, with another deafening silence. Shaker, with Moazzam Begg, had gone to Afghanistan before the events of 11th September 2001. They went to help people of a poor Islamic country, the tenets of their faith dictating that one must strive always to help those never able to repay. Begg’s project was to fund simple schools and sink wells, where there were none. Aamer went, in June 2001, to do voluntary work with an Islamic charity.

Lawyer Clive Stafford Smith of legal organization Reprieve (4) states: “Shaker is a natural leader who is known for his concern for others .. in London, he worked as an Arabic translator for the solicitor who advised him on his immigration case. Helping refugees put Shaker where he loved to be – as counsel, listening and advising. But in the end, it was his

dedication to the welfare of others that led to his detention in Guantánamo Bay.”

He was working in Kabul, when the US bombing began in October 2001. The US were offering vast sums, for “bad guys”, in a country where people were in need of so much, consequently, uncounted numbers were taken by the unscrupulous, for financial reward.

“Soldiers arrived, took him away at gunpoint, having stripped him of all his belongings. Sold to various groups, he was repeatedly beaten, until driven out of Kabul one night, with four other Arab prisoners. He was convinced they were about to be executed. Hearing a helicopter and American voices, his relief was unbounded. It was also ill founded.”

Taken to Bagram Air Force Base in late December 2001, he was: “... forced to stay awake for nine days. Denied food, he lost sixty pounds in weight. US personnel poured freezing water over him. Combined with the bitter Afghan winter, his feet to become frostbitten. Chained for hours in positions that made movement unbearable, and his swollen, blackened feet were beaten.”

Desperate to end his torture, Shaker began to say whatever the US wanted, resulting in him being transferred to Guantanamo, in February 2002.

Despite the hardships he has endured, Shaker remains the kind and supportive man he was when he was captured, with a reputation for looking out for his fellow prisoners.

When the military police beat up a prisoner while he was praying, Shaker initiated the first hunger strike at Guantánamo. More than three hundred prisoners began refusing meals. The Americans negotiated with Shaker, promising changes in the camp conditions. But the promises were broken. When the hunger strike began again in September 2005, Shaker was placed in solitary confinement as punishment. He has remained alone in a six foot by eight foot windowless cell ever since.

After Reprieve took up his case, Shaker was cleared for release. The British government have requested he is returned to the United Kingdom, but negotiations with the U.S., ceased in December 2007 and only spluttered in to life again in December 2009.

The (London) Independent reported then, that the Foreign Office was “deeply engaged” in negotiations for Shaker Aamer’s return, but the Obama administration was resistant to the British government’s demands, claiming that he still “represents a security risk.”

A Foreign Office spokesman explained: “We have made an exceptional request for the release and return of Shaker Aamer, a Saudi national, to the UK”, adding, “This is because of the exceptional nature of the Guantánamo facility and our sustained efforts to see it closed. Though we were successful with securing the return of four other non-UK nationals, we have not been able yet to do so with Shaker.”

The British government’s record in gaining the release of hostages, of any kind, is seemingly a testament to indifference, ineptitude or ignorance, more often than not ending in tragedy. Meanwhile Shaker waits alone in his cell, officially cleared of wrongdoing, but still paying the cruellest of costs for his kindness to others.

As for the “exceptional request” for release, were the US and UK not “shoulder to shoulder” in the “special relationship” and “coalition”? The British government could “demand”, were they really serious. And the “sustained efforts” to see Guantanamo closed? Blink and you have missed it. “Efforts” have barely hit the small print, yet alone the headlines.

In context, in March 2006, Andrew MacKinley, a Labour Member of the Commons select Committee on Foreign Affairs, called the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, “a wimp”, for failing to make stronger protests to President Bush earlier, after a UN Report the previous month, found that treatment of prisoners amounted to torture. Governmental “wimps” have come and gone and nothing has changed.

So Shaker, now nearing nine years on, remains in helpless, voiceless, limbo. “The only time I have seen him emotional was over his family. I was able to get photographs of his youngest child into him, but that was very heartbreaking for him, in a way he didn’t want to see it. I saw him for the first time in May 2005 and got a photo into him shortly after that, he really broke down at that because it was so difficult”, said Reprieve Director, Clive Stafford Smith.

Thousands of people have campaigned tirelessly for the release of Shaker Aamer. (5) Yet in spite of the Bush Administration, conceding in 2007, that there was no evidence against him, clearing him for release, and the former Archbishop of Canterbury’s former Special Envoy, Terry Waite writing in his support: “The fact that individuals have been detained for years in Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere, on suspicion, is disgraceful and ought to have no place in the procedures of any country that prides itself on respect for the rule of law. I add my voice to the many thousands of people who are profoundly disturbed by the detention of Mr Aamer and others and would urge that he be released forthwith”, he remains incarcerated.

Waite knows a little about being illegally incarcerated, he was held hostage in Lebanon for nearly five years. Those who held him illegally, were called: “terrorists”, by Western governments and media.

Another who has spoken for Aamer is former Guantanamo guard Terry C. Holdbrook, who said: “He’s a wonderful character- unbelievably intelligent, very polite, very well-mannered, great etiquette... no matter whom the guard was he was working with- whether it was a very ignorant uncaring American with no recognition for his situation... He was a wonderful person- I absolutely enjoyed spending time with him.” (6)

Is there any reason for the shameful foot dragging on both sides of the Atlantic? Many think so. With the US and British governments’ alleged involvement in rendition and torture coming increasingly under scrutiny, those who know Aamer say who would certainly throw much more needed light on it from what he has seen and experienced from day one of his kidnapping.

The new Cameron-Clegg coalition continue seamlessly along the path of Blair and Brown, having achieved another tragic hostage death, that of aid worker, Linda Norgrove, in Afghanistan, on 9th September, in agreeing a bungled attempt by US forces, to “rescue” her, when negotiations were already underway for her release by tribal leaders, who understood the complexities.

Footage taken from an aircraft overhead, show a soldier throwing a grenade in to the building where she was held, resulting, unsurprisingly, in her death and that of nine others.

“We did the right thing, it was the Taliban’s fault”, the action was “fully supported”, are the deluded messages from Whitehall, further endorsing Britain and the US’s woeful, murderous ineptitude. Another day, another “tragic mistake”, a few more human lives.

William Hague, the UK’s new polished-headed Foreign Secretary, has dug out predecessor, the late Robin Cook’s “ethical foreign policy” (the one that silently killed six thousand Iraqi children a month, during the embargo) so here is a suggestion for him. Given it has not got off to a great start, read another letter, then get on a ‘plane, or telephone to Washington and demand the immediate return of Mr Aamer.

The letter was to Gordon Brown, delivered at the same time as the one above – the messages are more vital than ever, after another nine months of waning health. It is from Johina Aamer, Shaker’s twelve year old daughter, in careful, painstaking handwriting, it reads:

“Dear Gordon Brown,

I hope you are in good health. I am writing to ask you for my father’s release. As you might know, my father has been away for 8 years, he was taken away since I was four years old. It has been most of my life.

My brother Faris has never seen his father and misses him a lot. Sometimes he thinks other people are his father. Once a man came to do our garden, Faris (has) a lot of fun and laughs with him. When he left, Faris asked my Mum, “Is that my Dad?” He has never felt what it’s like to be with a father or to go out with him. Faris has had no experience at all of what it’s like to have a father just like every child does.

My mother is very patient but sometimes when she misses him too much she gets depressed. My mother is also a psychiatric patient. Whenever she gets depressed we have to go to my grandparents’ house where my grandparents look after her. When she is ill she is in bed day and night and can’t do much. I really hate it when she gets depressed.

At school, when it is time to go home, most of the children have their fathers pick them up which makes me miss him even more. I never really go to do things with my father.

Also there is no reason for my father to be in prison. There have never been any charges made against him and he is innocent. My father has suffered for eight years in prison for no reason. I hope there can be a change now. He has got so many illnesses such as asthma and many physical problems. He is also the only British resident there.

I take that you understand this as a father and a husband. Nobody would like to be separated from their fathers or mothers. It is not nowhere near fun to be without a father we’ve missed so much.

I hope this letter can make a difference and that my father is released as soon as possible.

Thank you.

From

Johina Aamer Daughter of Shaker Aamer.”

Faris, who thought the gardner might be his father, was the child whose photograph reduced his father to tears. As the new Prime Minister, is pictured in a photo-op, feeding and cuddling his new baby, how better to celebrate her birth and that of a new government and “ethical foreign policy”, than by restoring this father to his family, normality to a twelve year old fighting a battle beyond her years, and little boy, who will no longer have to ask if a stranger is his father.

Notes

1. www.reprive.org.uk/shakeraamer
1. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/jul/27/david-cameron-gaza-prison-camp>
2. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newsttopics/politics/nick-clegg/7903576/Coalition-confusion-as-Nick-Clegg-tells-Commons-that-the-Iraq-war-was-illegal.html>
3. http://www.labourfriendsofpalestine.co.uk/?page_id=621
4. <http://www.reprive.org.uk/shakeraamer>
5. <http://www.cageprisoners.com/our-work/alerts/item/352-save-shaker-aamer-campaign-action-points-for-new-government>
6. <http://www.andyworthington.co.uk>

See also:

<http://www.cageprisoners.org.uk>

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