

Shaker Aamer – British Resident Cleared for Release from Guantánamo Bay

Shaker Aamer has been held prisoner in Guantánamo Bay since 13 February 2002. He is a legal permanent resident of the UK, married to a British national, with four British children. His family all live in Wandsworth. Mr. Aamer has long been cleared for release by the United States. He has never been charged by the United States with a crime and has never received a trial. However, he has been repeatedly abused and subjected to extended isolation in Guantánamo Bay.



Mr. Aamer grew up in Saudi Arabia with his four siblings. When he was a young boy, his parents divorced and his father remarried. Mr. Aamer's step-mother was unkind to her new family. Mr. Aamer left his unhappy childhood behind when he turned seventeen. He ran away to America to join a family he had known from home. They spent a happy year in Maryland, before Mr. Aamer returned to Saudi Arabia. He spent the next few years travelling in Europe and the Middle East, before moving to London where he met his wife and married. Their first child,

Johina, was born in 1997. Mr. Aamer was a hands-on dad. He changed nappies without complaint and loved entertaining the baby. Their family grew and grew. Michael was born in 1999, Saif a year later and little Faris in 2002. Mr. Aamer always told his wife he wanted twelve children. But he has never set eyes on his youngest son.

Mr. Aamer worked as an Arabic translator for the solicitor who advised him on his immigration case. People always approached him for advice about their problems and translating for refugees put Mr. Aamer where he loved to be – as counsel, listening and advising. But the work could not support his expanding family. Mr. Aamer dreamed of starting his own business selling clothes. He travelled to the Middle East, collecting samples of material.

In June 2001, Mr. Aamer visited Afghanistan with his whole family to do voluntary work for an Islamic charity. He stayed in Kabul, which was at peace at the time. When the bombing of Kabul began, Mr. Aamer moved to Jalalabad. Fearing he would be taken

prisoner by the Northern Alliance, Mr. Aamer went into hiding with an Afghan family. When soldiers arrived, Mr. Aamer's hands were shaking. "Five men with guns pointed at my head, searched me and then took away all my belongings, even my glasses."

Mr. Aamer was sold to the Northern Alliance and then to a group in Kabul who beat him for two weeks and accused him of killing their leader. Mr. Aamer had no idea what they meant. When they took him and four other Arabs outside Kabul in the middle of the night, Mr. Aamer was convinced they were going to kill him. The sound of a helicopter and American accents filled him with relief. "Oh my God! Americans! Yes, yes, we are saved!" But he had been sold once more, this time to the American forces.

Mr. Aamer arrived at Bagram Air Force Base at the end of December 2001. He suffered terrible abuse at Bagram. Forced to stay awake for nine days straight and denied food, he dropped 60 pounds. U.S. personnel would dump freezing water over Mr. Aamer and make him stand, freezing, on the concrete for the next 16 hours. As a result of freezing weather and the cold water abuse, Mr. Aamer's feet got frostbite and began to swell and turn black. The U.S. would beat his feet and give him nothing for the resulting pain, even when he begged for it. They would tie Mr. Aamer's arms behind his back, and then his feet, and then link his feet to his wrists, so that if he moved he could start strangling himself. Other times, Mr. Aamer was forced to stand up for 16 hours a day, sometime more. They would make him hold his arms out straight ahead of him for a long time, and would hit him if he let them drop. Mr. Aamer was kept awake for nine days and nights in a row.

During interrogations, Mr. Aamer began to say whatever the U.S. wanted, whether it was true or not. "Right up till now I really don't remember a lot of things I said in the Bagram and Kandahar interrogations. It was torture, pure and simple. They made me agree that I did things, and admit things I did not do or see. They made me say I knew people who they said were terrorists. One time, they took me in a dark room in Bagram and said, 'Is this the guy?' I couldn't even see who it was. I couldn't have said if it was my own brother. But I had to say who it was. They made me say I had been to some camp in 1998, which was a lie. But for the most part, I cannot even tell you what I said."

Mr. Aamer arrived at Guantánamo Bay in February 2002. But despite the hardships he has endured, Mr. Aamer remains kind and supportive. He looks out for his fellow prisoners. When the military police beat up a prisoner while he was praying, Mr. Aamer initiated the first hunger strike. More than three hundred prisoners began refusing meals. As the initiator of the strike, the Americans negotiated with Mr. Aamer, promising changes in the camp conditions. The commander of the camp visited him in person. Mr. Aamer was assured that the Geneva Conventions would be respected if the men gave up their hunger strike. Based on these promises, the hunger strike ended on July 28, 2005. But as soon as public scrutiny passed, the mistreatment began anew. And the promises made to Mr. Aamer remained unfulfilled. When the hunger strike began again, Mr. Aamer was placed in solitary confinement as punishment in September 2005. He has remained in solitary confinement ever since. His isolation cell is 6 by 8 feet, without a single window. The neon lights glare down 24 hours a day. Mr. Aamer is often kept in freezing conditions in nothing but shorts. He is frequently suffocated by pine oil which is sprayed into his air conditioning. The water is cut off for long periods, so Mr. Aamer has nothing to drink and no water to flush the toilet.

In August 2007, the British Government requested that Mr. Aamer be returned to the United Kingdom. However, negotiations with the American government ended in December 2007 and have not been renewed.