



**Centre for the Response to
Radicalisation and Terrorism**
At The Henry Jackson Society



BRITAIN'S LAST GUANTÁNAMO DETAINEE: WHO IS SHAKER AAMER?

CRT BRIEFING, 9 FEBRUARY 2015

INTRODUCTION

It is UK government policy that Shaker Aamer, the last remaining British resident detained at Guantánamo Bay, be returned. In December 2014, newspaper stories emerged suggesting that this could soon be the case.¹ At a meeting in Washington, DC, a month later, President Obama told Prime Minister David Cameron that the US would “prioritise” the case.²

Aamer, who was born in Saudi Arabia, was captured in Afghanistan in November 2001; he was sent to Guantánamo Bay in February 2002. The US government believes him to be a weapons-trained al-Qaeda fighter; Aamer’s supporters claim that he was in Afghanistan to carry out voluntary work for an Islamic charity.³

Aamer is thought to have been cleared for transfer to Saudi Arabia in June 2007 (although, as late as November 2007, Department of Defense documentation recommended that he continue to be

¹ ‘Guantanamo to free last UK inmate’, *The Sunday Times*, 28 December 2014, available at: http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/uk_news/National/article1500831.ece?CMP=OTH-gnws-standard-2014_12_27, last visited: 29 January 2015; see also: ‘Last British inmate at Guantanamo set to be freed in the new year in fresh push by Obama to empty prison’, *Daily Mail*, 28 December 2014, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2888964/Last-British-inmate-Guantanamo-set-freed-new-year-fresh-push-Obama-prison.html>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

² ‘Barack Obama to “prioritise” case of Guantánamo detainee Shaker Aamer’, *The Guardian*, 16 January 2015, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jan/16/shaker-aamer-guantanamo-bay-prioritise-obama-case>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

³ ‘Shaker Aamer’, *Reprieve*, available at: <http://www.reprieve.org.uk/cases/shakeraamer/>, last visited: 29 January 2015. Others (such as the Member of Parliament for Bolton South East, Yasmin Qureshi) have stated that Aamer was in Afghanistan “legitimately, teaching” (see: ‘Daily Hansard – Westminster Hall, Wednesday 24 April 2013 – Shaker Aamer’, *House of Commons*, 24 April 2013, available at: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmhansrd/cm130424/halltext/130424h0001.htm>, last visited: 29 January 2015).

detained).⁴ ⁵ In December 2007, Clive Stafford Smith, one of Aamer's lawyers, said that his client was "fine" about the prospect of returning to Saudi Arabia;⁶ however, Aamer now insists on returning only to the UK.⁷

WHO IS SHAKER AAMER?

The US government believes Shaker Aamer to be a military-trained al-Qaeda member who recruited for extremist causes and had close ties to Osama bin Laden.⁸

Aamer moved to Afghanistan, with his family, in the summer of 2001; however, the US believes he had visited the country on multiple occasions before:

- On one occasion, he visited Khalden training camp, which hosted several jihadists connected to al-Qaeda.
- In 2000, he accompanied the *mujahideen* on the front lines, carrying a gun as he did so.
- In the summer of 2001, Aamer returned to Afghanistan, living under Taliban rule in Kabul.

In October 2001 – the same month that the US began its bombing campaign in Afghanistan, in response to 9/11 – Aamer moved his family to Pakistan. However, rather than accompanying them, he returned to Afghanistan.⁹

The US believes that Aamer then fought at Tora Bora, Afghanistan, as the US and its allies attacked al-Qaeda and Taliban forces there towards the end of 2001. At Tora Bora, Aamer is thought to have served as a sub-commander under Ibn al-Sheikh al-Libi's command; al-Libi was the *emir* of the Khalden training camp.¹⁰ Multiple detainees at Guantánamo Bay have identified Aamer as the commander of the Juhanya Centre in Tora Bora (Abu Juhanyah was one of Shaker Aamer's aliases).¹¹ Aamer led a group at Tora Bora that included another Guantánamo detainee, Mohammed Mohammed Ahmed Said.¹²

Aamer claims that he was captured, by Afghan forces, in Jalalabad in December 2001. He was in possession of a false Belgian passport at the time.¹³

WHOM DID HE KNOW?

At Guantánamo Bay, seven separate sources have described Aamer's connections to al-Qaeda or Osama bin Laden: Abu Zubaydah, Abdul Bukhary, Muhammad Basardah, Moazzam Begg, Abdallah

⁴ 'Guantánamo Bay: why can't Shaker Aamer return home to London?', *The Guardian*, 20 April 2013, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/20/guantanamo-shaker-aamer-london>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

⁵ 'JTF-GTMO Detainee Assessment – Sawad al-Madani', United States Department of Defense (2007), available at: <http://wikileaks.org/gitmo/pdf/sa/us9sa-000239dp.pdf>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

⁶ 'Three UK residents released from Guantanamo Bay', *ABC*, 20 December 2007, available at: <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2007/s2123933.htm>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

⁷ 'Guantánamo Bay: why can't Shaker Aamer return home to London?', *The Guardian*, 20 April 2013.

⁸ 'JTF-GTMO Detainee Assessment – Sawad al-Madani', United States Department of Defense, 1 November 2007.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ In this context, 'centre' is used to describe the bunkers; caves; and trenches that served as a fighting position or a defensive camp.

¹² 'JTF-GTMO Detainee Assessment – Sawad al-Madani', United States Department of Defense, 1 November 2007; see also: 'JTF-GTMO Detainee Assessment – Mohammed Mohammed Ahmen Said', United States Department of Defense 7 March 2008, available at: <https://wikileaks.org/gitmo/pdf/ym/us9ym-000498dp.pdf>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

¹³ 'JTF-GTMO Detainee Assessment – Sawad al-Madani', United States Department of Defense, 1 November 2007.

Yahy Yusif al-Shibli, Tariq Mahmud Ahmad al-Sawah, and Humud Dakhil Humud Said al-Jadani. In addition, another detainee, Fahd Umar Abd al-Majid al-Umari al-Sharif, has outlined Aamer's military expertise.¹⁴

Aamer is thought to have known several radical Islamists and terrorists, including the following senior al-Qaeda leaders:

- Abu Musab al-Suri, who has previously been described as the ideological “mastermind” behind the 7 July 2005 attacks on the London transport network.¹⁵
- Walid Bin Attash – a senior al-Qaeda operative currently standing trial in a US military commission, for his role in planning 9/11.
- Abu Yasir al-Jazairi, an al-Qaeda facilitator.
- Abu Hafs al-Mauritani, who was on the al-Qaeda *shura* council.

Aamer was also tied to those who were well known within the British jihadist scene, including:

- Babar Ahmad, who has pleaded guilty – in December 2013, in the US – to terrorism offences.
- Abu Hamza al-Masri, the former *imam* at Finsbury Park Mosque, who was convicted in the UK – primarily for hate-speech offences – in February 2006 and has since been extradited to the US (where he has been jailed for life, as a result of terrorism-related charges).
- Abu Qatada, the ideologue whom a Spanish judge described as “Osama bin Laden’s right-hand man in Europe”.¹⁶
- Richard Reid, the al-Qaeda operative who attempted to detonate a shoe bomb on a flight between Paris and Miami, in December 2001.
- Zacarias Moussaoui, the only person to be convicted for involvement in the attacks on 9/11.

THE MOAZZAM BEGG CONNECTION

Aamer and Moazzam Begg, a former Guantánamo Bay detainee from Britain, are close friends and both lived in Afghanistan in 2001 (one report even suggests that they lived in the same house).¹⁷ Begg now vociferously lobbies for Aamer's release, claiming that he is wrongly detained.

However, part of the evidence that the US has used against Aamer is provided by Begg himself. While being detained by the US, Begg identified Aamer as a “recruiter for al-Qaida”.¹⁸ He said that Aamer had fought in Bosnia and was a member of the Zubayr Group, which was run by Abu Zubayr al-Haili (a

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ ‘Syria releases the 7/7 “mastermind”’, *The Telegraph*, 4 February 2012, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/9061400/Syria-releases-the-77-mastermind.html>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

¹⁶ ‘Abu Qatada cleared of terror charges by Jordan court and released from jail’, *The Guardian*, 24 September 2014, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/24/abu-qatada-cleared-terror-charges-jordan-court>, last visited: 30 January 2015.

¹⁷ ‘Guantanamo Bay man seeks “torture evidence” disclosure’, *London Evening Standard*, 08 December 2009, available at: <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/guantanamo-bay-man-seeks-torture-evidence-disclosure-6719315.html>, last visited: 29 January 2015; see also: “‘Awful’ conditions of last British Guantanamo detainee”, *BBC News*, 11 January 2012, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-16519574>, last visited: 29 January 2015; see also: ‘EXCLUSIVE: BBC Radio 5 Live Shaker Aamer interview with comments by Moazzam Begg’, *CagePrisoners*, 30 May 2013, available at: <http://www.cageprisoners.com/our-work/interviews/item/6510-exclusive-bbc-5-live-shaker-aamer-interview-with-comments-by-moazzam-begg>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

¹⁸ ‘JTF-GTMO Detainee Assessment – Sawad al-Madani’, United States Department of Defense, 1 November 2007.

senior al-Qaeda operative from Saudi Arabia).¹⁹ Begg also said that Aamer “spent 30 days training on the AK-47 and rocket propelled grenades.”²⁰

In the past, Begg has claimed to have provided information to the US under duress, implying that his past statements can therefore not be trusted. However, three separate Department of Defense investigations into Begg’s allegations of mistreatment have “found no evidence to substantiate his claims.” A Department of Justice review also concluded that Begg’s claims could not be supported.²¹

WASN’T AAMER ONLY IN AFGHANISTAN TO CARRY OUT CHARITY WORK?

Aamer’s supporters say that he was in Afghanistan for innocent reasons: carrying out charity work.²² This charity has not been named, but has been described as a “Muslim charity building schools for Afghan orphans”;²³ a Saudi Arabian charity;²⁴ and a “children’s charity”.²⁵ Yet, the charities for which Aamer claims to have worked in the past are, in reality, groups providing support to al-Qaeda.

Aamer claims to have worked for a “humanitarian” organisation in Bosnia in 1994, known as the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (RIHS) –²⁶ an outfit based in Kuwait. In January 2002, RIHS was placed on the United Nations Security Council Committee’s ‘Al-Qaida Sanctions List’. Its work in Pakistan and Afghanistan was affiliated with the Afghan Support Committee (which had funded both al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden), and its Pakistan branch had funded al-Qaeda, using money “ostensibly earmarked for supporting orphans”.²⁷ In June 2008, RIHS was designated by the US Treasury, for providing “financial and material support” to al-Qaeda and its affiliates.²⁸

¹⁹ Ibid.; see also: Peritz, A. and Eric Rosenbach, *Find, Fix, Finish: Inside the Counterterrorism Campaigns that Killed bin Laden* (Public Affairs, 2012), p. 49.

²⁰ ‘JTF-GTMO Detainee Assessment – Sawad al-Madani’, United States Department of Defense, 1 November 2007.

²¹ ‘A Review of the FBI’s Involvement in and Observations of Detainee Interrogations in Guantanamo Bay, Afghanistan, and Iraq’, United States Department of Justice (2008), available at: <http://www.justice.gov/oig/special/s0805/final.pdf>, pp. 266-77.

²² For example, see: Berrigan, F., ‘Why I Keep Working to Close Guantánamo’, *The Huffington Post*, 14 March 2014, available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/frida-berrigan/why-i-keep-working-to-clo_b_4586050.html, last visited: 29 January 2015; see also: ‘The lost Briton of Guantanamo: He’s been cleared – but had a devastating secret about MI6 and the Iraq invasion which means he can never be freed’, *The Mail on Sunday*, 21 April 2013, available at:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2312284/Shaker-Aamer-Hes-cleared-devastating-secret-MI6-Iraq-invasion-means-freed.html>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

²³ ‘Prof. Kassem In CBS News On Guantánamo Detainee Shaker Aamer’, *CUNY School of Law*, 2 April 2013, available at: <http://www1.cuny.edu/mu/law/2013/04/02/prof-kassem-in-cbs-news-on-guantanamo-detainee-shaker-aamer/>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

²⁴ ‘Britain asks US to free five from Guantanamo’, *The Telegraph*, 8 August 2007, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1559738/Britain-asks-US-to-free-five-from-Guantanamo.html>, last visited: 29 January 2015; see also: ‘Britain’s Guantánamo survivors are suffering a toxic legacy’, *The Observer*, 1 January 2012, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/01/released-guantanamo-british-detainees>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

²⁵ ‘US refuses to free the final British resident in captivity’, *The Independent*, 25 February 2009, available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/us-refuses-to-free-the-final-british-resident-in-captivity-1631358.html>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

²⁶ ‘JTF-GTMO Detainee Assessment – Sawad al-Madani’, United States Department of Defense, 1 November 2007.

²⁷ ‘QE.R.70.02. REVIVAL OF ISLAMIC HERITAGE SOCIETY’, United Nations Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, 11 January 2002, available at: <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/NSQE07002E.shtml>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

²⁸ ‘Kuwaiti Charity Designated for Bankrolling al Qaida Network’, United States Department of the Treasury, 13 June 2008, available at: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp1023.aspx>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

Aamer has also said that, in 1995, he worked for a Kuwaiti NGO called al-Ahya al-Turath, which is an alias used by RIHS.²⁹

HASN'T HE BEEN CLEARED OF ANY WRONGDOING?

A common refrain from Aamer's supporters is that he has been 'cleared', with the implication (and sometimes explicit claim) that this means that there is no evidence of any wrongdoing from Aamer.

In reality, he has only been cleared for transfer (to Saudi Arabia, his country of birth); the US has not conceded that it was wrong to detain Aamer or accepted that he was only in Afghanistan carrying out charity work, teaching, or any other benign reason offered by his defenders.

As the Brookings scholar Benjamin Wittes has pointed out, "It's a grave mistake to confuse clearing somebody for release, which is a discretionary decision by the Pentagon, with clearing somebody of wrongdoing or being a member of enemy forces."³⁰

WHY CAN'T WE JUST CHARGE HIM?

There are multiple reasons why Aamer cannot be charged in court.

The US has assessed Aamer to have been active in a combat zone in Afghanistan. As part of the international law of war, armies can remove unlawful combatants from the battlefield; yet, intelligence and military operatives' primary focus is preventing the enemy combatant from continuing to fight - not conducting criminal investigations or finding evidence suitable for court. Evidence would have to have been collected from the potential crime scene (for example, a cave in Afghanistan), and, as former CIA Director Michael Hayden has said, it is not practical to "turn the American armed forces or the C.I.A. into C.S.I. Miami or C.S.I. Kandahar, or C.S.I. Jalalabad or C.S.I. Peshawar in order to build up that kind of evidence".³¹

William Lietzau, former US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Detainee Policy, has explained this in the following way:

[I]f you could graduate from a Taliban boot camp of course you can't be prosecuted for anything, you haven't done anything, you're only a graduate. But if you were captured in war, of course you wouldn't release that person, they're still the enemy, they still want to fight you, they still want to kill you [...] So, you wouldn't release them but on the other hand you can't criminally prosecute them.

As Lietzau has outlined in reference to Afghanistan, detention is not "because [combatants] have committed some criminal offence that we want to punish them for, but because they are the enemy."³²

²⁹ Ibid.; see also: 'JTF-GTMO Detainee Assessment - Sawad al-Madani', United States Department of Defense, 1 November 2007.

³⁰ 'UK to press Obama over British resident in Guantanamo', *BBC News*, 27 April 2011, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-13196881>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

³¹ Simcox, R., 'The Presumption of Innocence: Difficulties in Bringing Suspected Terrorists to Trial', *The Henry Jackson Society* (2013), available at: <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/The-Presumption-of-Innocence.pdf>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

³² Ibid.

Even if evidence usable in court was gathered at the time, it would be impossible to use in Aamer's case, for the following reasons:

- UK courts do not have jurisdiction over offences committed in Afghanistan. The number of British fighters now travelling to Syria has led the government to consider changing this law; but it could not be applied retrospectively.
- Evidence collected from interrogations at Guantánamo Bay would likely be deemed inadmissible because Aamer did not have immediate access to a lawyer.³³
- Eyewitnesses who are free to give evidence will be hard to find. As a lawyer speaking to the British media has commented, “[Y]ou would need evidence from witnesses who were actually there at the time who saw them bearing arms against the allies.”³⁴ Getting such people – who likely live thousands of miles away and may even still be detained at Guantánamo – to testify in a British court is almost impossible.
- Aamer cannot be charged with treason. The Treason Act 1351 states that an individual or a group may not kill; conspire against; or declare war against the monarch, his/her family members, as well as several specific governmental offices. Aamer, by fighting against US and Northern Alliance forces in Afghanistan, appears not have committed any such offence, and treason charges are usually applied to wars between nation states – rather than against non-state actors such as al-Qaeda or the Taliban.³⁵

EVEN IF AAMER IS A THREAT...ISN'T HE TOO UNWELL TO KEEP LOCKED UP?

In April 2014, Aamer's lawyers filed a motion in a US court, arguing that Aamer should be released to the UK on the grounds of ill health. They cited a psychiatrist (whom other Guantánamo defence lawyers have also used to diagnose their detainees) who had diagnosed Aamer as suffering from depression, post-traumatic stress syndrome, and paranoia.³⁶ They argued that these conditions would be worsened if Aamer was released to Saudi Arabia rather than the UK.

The suggestion that Aamer is too ill to be detained is a long-held tactic used by Aamer's supporters. In February 2005, Clive Stafford Smith, one of Aamer's lawyers, said that his client was “floridly psychotic”.³⁷ At the same time, Stafford Smith said that Aamer was “really losing it” and “mentally unwell”;³⁸ he repeated this claim in October 2007.³⁹

In September 2006, another of Aamer's lawyers, Zachary Katznelson, argued, in a US District Court, that Aamer was unquestionably “mentally unstable” and that his “only consistent contact with living

³³ ‘Britons Freed’, *The Guardian*, 20 February 2004, last visited: 29 January 2015; see also: ‘Five British Guantanamo prisoners expected to return Tuesday’, *Associated Press*, 9 March 2004, last visited: 29 January 2015.

³⁴ ‘Fanatics to be Feted here for Fighting “Holy War” Against Our Soldiers’, *Daily Express*, 21 February 2004, last visited: 29 January 2015.

³⁵ Stuart, H., ‘British Jihadists: Preventing Travel Abroad and Stopping Attacks at Home – Policy Paper No. 1’, Centre for the Response to Radicalisation and Terrorism at The Henry Jackson Society (2014), available at: <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/British-Jihadists.pdf>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

³⁶ ‘Bid to free last British resident held at Guantanamo’, *BBC News*, 8 April 2014, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-26933512>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

³⁷ ‘Family appeals for release of Guantanamo detainee’, *The Guardian*, 8 February 2005, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/feb/08/guantanamo.politics>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

³⁸ ‘Family of British resident held at Guantanamo appeal for his return’, *The Independent*, 8 February 2005, available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/family-of-british-resident-held-at-guantanamo-appeal-for-his-return-1529561.html>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

³⁹ Stafford Smith, C., ‘America's legal black hole’, *Los Angeles Times*, 5 October 2007, available at: <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/oct/05/opinion/oc-smith5>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

beings beside his captors is with the ants in his cell. He feeds them and considers them his friends”.⁴⁰ Then, in April 2011, Moazzam Begg said that Aamer had “begun to lose a grip on reality, to begin to lose his mental faculties”.⁴¹ Jane Ellison, the Conservative MP for Battersea (Aamer is her constituent), has also raised her concerns about Aamer’s “mental well-being”, in the House of Commons.⁴²

Yet, according to Aamer’s November 2007 JTF-GTMO Detainee Assessment, he “often cit[es] imaginary, or assumed mistreatment of himself, or others [...] in a classic example of al-Qaida counter interrogation techniques.”⁴³ This is a possible reference to the *Declaration of Jihad against the Country’s Tyrants* manual, which was discovered on the computer of an al-Qaeda member in Manchester, England, in 2000. The manual, which likely emerged from Egypt in the early 1990s, encouraged jihadists who were detained or imprisoned to “insist on proving that torture was inflicted” and to “complain of mistreatment while in prison.”⁴⁴

Furthermore, in the past two years alone, Aamer has been coherent enough to write op-eds for *The Guardian* (on two occasions);⁴⁵ *The Independent*;⁴⁶ *Al Jazeera*;⁴⁷ and *New Statesman*,⁴⁸ and is a regular contributor to *The Huffington Post*.⁴⁹ He also detailed his supposed mistreatment in an article for *CNN* and gave an interview which was published by *Al Arabiya*.⁵⁰ In this interview, he outlined his plans as to what work he would like to undertake upon release: working with a university, to “document the history of Guantanamo and to do what I can to ensure justice for everyone there.”

In these op-eds, Aamer makes various accusations of abuse to which he is subjected at Guantánamo Bay. These accusations are regularly regurgitated by his public supporters; however, it is unclear why – if Aamer is so mentally unstable that he talks to ants and is “floridly psychotic” – they are not treating these allegations with more scepticism.

⁴⁰ ‘Lawyers go to court for Guantanamo detainee, saying he is being mistreated’, *Associated Press*, 19 September 2006, available at: <http://humanrights.ucdavis.edu/projects/the-guantanamo-testimonials-project/testimonies/prisoner-testimonies/lawyers-go-to-court-for-guantanamo-detainee-saying-he-is-being-mistreated>.

⁴¹ ‘UK to press Obama over British resident in Guantanamo’, *BBC News*, 27 April 2011.

⁴² ‘Daily Hansard – Westminster Hall, Wednesday 24 April 2013 – Shaker Aamer’, *House of Commons*, 24 April 2013.

⁴³ ‘JTF-GTMO Detainee Assessment – Sawad al-Madani’, United States Department of Defense, 1 November 2007.

⁴⁴ ‘Al Qaeda Manual Drives Detainee Behavior at Guantanamo Bay’, United States Department of Defense, 29 June 2005, available at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=16270>, last visited: 3 February 2015; see also: Bravin, J., *The Terror Courts: Rough Justice at Guantanamo Bay* (Yale University Press), p. 394.

⁴⁵ Aamer, S., ‘Shaker Aamer: My fight for justice in Guantánamo’, *The Guardian*, 14 June 2013, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jun/14/shaker-aamer-justice-guantanamo>, last visited: 29 January 2015; see also: Aamer, S., ‘In Guantánamo, “national security” rides roughshod over human rights’, *The Guardian*, 5 January 2014, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/05/guantanamo-national-security-human-rights-us-military-constitution>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

⁴⁶ Aamer, S., ‘Shaker Aamer: “I may have to die. I hope not. I want to see my family again”’, *The Independent*, 21 April 2013, available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/shaker-aamer-i-may-have-to-die-i-hope-not-i-want-to-see-my-family-again-8581966.html>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

⁴⁷ Aamer, S., ‘The two faces of America’, *Al Jazeera*, 17 November 2013, available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/11/two-faces-america-201311178102778396.html>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

⁴⁸ Aamer, S., ‘Why Russell Brand is banned in Guantanamo Bay’, *New Statesman*, 18 December 2013, available at: <http://www.newstatesman.com/2013/12/why-russell-brand-banned-gitmo>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

⁴⁹ ‘Shaker Aamer’, *The Huffington Post*, available at: <http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/news/shaker-aamer/>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

⁵⁰ ‘Gitmo hunger striker: “What more can they do to me?”’, *CNN*, 26 June 2013, available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/06/26/world/europe/uk-guantanamo-hunger-shaker-aamer/>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

⁵¹ ‘Gitmo inmate Shaker Aamer’s year-end plea’, *Al Arabiya News*, 31 December 2013, available at: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/features/2013/12/29/Gitmo-inmate-Shaker-Aamer-s-year-end-plea.html>, last visited: 29 January 2015.

AAMER'S INFLUENCE AT GUANTÁNAMO BAY

Suggestions of failing mental health do not tally with how others have portrayed Aamer and his role at Guantánamo.

A former warden at the facility has described how Aamer was treated, by other detainees, “like a rock star [...] I have never seen grown men – with beards, hardened men – crying at the sight of another man. [...] It was like I was with Bon Jovi or something”.⁵² Wardens there have also nicknamed Aamer “the Professor”, due to his eloquence and English skills,⁵³ and one officer at Guantánamo Bay has said that Aamer has “an almost hypnotic power over some people”, while others there have labelled him as a “Svengali” figure.⁵⁴

Detainees at Guantánamo have backed this up. For example:

- Mohamedou Ould Slahi has claimed that Aamer “constantly” attempts to make other detainees swear loyalty to him as the *emir* of Guantánamo.⁵⁵
- Muhammad Hamid al-Qarani has stated that Aamer is so influential that he can issue orders for other detainees to try and commit suicide; Aamer has previously stated that the death of a detainee at Guantánamo would “result in the closure of the base.”⁵⁶
- Abd al-Majid Muhammad has claimed that Aamer “runs all the other detainees” there.⁵⁷
- Abdullah al-Noaimi has said that Aamer “was born to be a leader” and became the de facto *emir* of a group of detainees in his Guantánamo cell block on the strength of his personal charisma.⁵⁸⁻⁵⁹

In the past, Aamer has attempted to spread civil unrest at Guantánamo, particularly regarding hunger strikes. As this unrest has spread, Aamer has presented himself to the Guantánamo authorities as an interlocutor who can help bring the situation back under control. At one stage, his influence over the camp was thought to be so significant that he was moved into solitary confinement.⁶⁰ This is unlikely to be an unfounded fear; Department of Defense documentation from 2007 says that Aamer can “summon support from over one half of Camp Delta’s detainee population.”⁶¹ Camp Delta houses the majority of detainees at Guantánamo Bay.

CONCLUSION

There is little reason to dispute the US government’s assessment that Aamer is a trained *mujahideen* fighter who recruits for extremist causes and has wide-ranging connections to al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda-related charities, and known terrorists.

⁵² ‘The Battle for Guantánamo’, *The New York Times*, 17 September 2006, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/17/magazine/17guantanamo.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0, last visited: 29 January 2015.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ ‘JTF-GTMO Detainee Assessment – Sawad al-Madani’, United States Department of Defense, 1 November 2007.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ ‘The Battle for Guantánamo’, *New York Times*, 17 September 2006

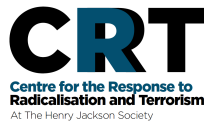
⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ ‘JTF-GTMO Detainee Assessment – Sawad al-Madani’, United States Department of Defense, 1 November 2007.

Even if Aamer is released, there should be no illusions over the nature of his past activities and why he was detained at Guantánamo Bay in the first place.

About the Author

Robin Simcox is a Research Fellow at the Henry Jackson Society. Simcox has spoken on a variety of platforms, including testifying to the House of Representatives Homeland Security Committee, and at the White House, National Counterterrorism Center, British Parliament, US Special Operations Command and the European Parliament. Simcox was previously a Research Fellow at the Centre for Social Cohesion, a think tank studying extremism and terrorism in the UK. He has an MSc in U.S. Foreign Policy from the Institute for the Study of Americas, University of London, and a BA in History (International) from the University of Leeds, which included a year at the University of Newcastle, Australia.



About the Centre for the Response to Radicalisation and Terrorism

The Centre for the Response to Radicalisation and Terrorism (CRT) at The Henry Jackson Society provides top-quality, in-depth research and delivers targeted, tangible and impactful activities to combat the threats from radical ideologies and terrorism at home and abroad.



About The Henry Jackson Society

The Henry Jackson Society is a think tank and policy-shaping force that fights for the principles and alliances which keep societies free – working across borders and party lines to combat extremism, advance democracy and real human rights, and make a stand in an increasingly uncertain world.