

Beat: Miscellaneous

Alleged Bin Laden bodyguard eligible for release from Guantanamo Bay

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USPA News - A Yemeni man accused of having served as one of Osama bin Laden's closest bodyguards at the time of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States no longer poses a threat and should be eligible for release from Guantanamo Bay, a U.S. military board has recommended. Mahmud Abd Al Aziz Al Mujahid, 33, was captured by Pakistani forces in December 2001 while attempting to cross the Afghanistan-Pakistan border after fleeing hostilities at Bin Laden's mountain complex at Tora Bora in eastern Afghanistan.

He was captured along with 31 other alleged al-Qaeda fighters and eventually transferred to Guantanamo Bay. But he has become a model prisoner during the more than 12 years in captivity, having learned English, complying with orders, and helping defuse conflicts among detainees and camp authorities. He now wishes to be transferred to a Western country to start a family, or alternatively be sent back home to Yemen. "Wherever I am sent, I will seize every opportunity for self-improvement. I am determined to be, and will be, a law-abiding and productive member of society," Mujahid told the military's periodic review board (PRB) during a hearing in November. "When I am released, I will look for work. ... I will want to get married and start a family while I can still perform my responsibilities as a husband and father. Most of all, I want to catch up with life." The U.S. Defense Department announced on Thursday that the board had concluded its review of Mujahid's case and agreed by consensus that "continued law of war detention" is no longer necessary to protect the United States. "Mujahid is therefore eligible for transfer subject to appropriate security and humane treatment conditions," the Pentagon said in a statement. But approval for release from six departments and agencies will still be required, a process that could take months or years. The release process is further complicated by the U.S. government's suspension of Yemeni repatriations due to the security situation in the country, but the board recommended to allow third country resettlement if a government is willing to take Mujahid. According to military documents, multiple sources identified Mujahid as a close bodyguard of late al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. They said Mujahid became one of Bin Laden's bodyguards after the USS Cole bombing in October 2000 and continued to accompany him until November 2001, two months after the attacks of September 11. But Mujahid has denied having ever been Bin Laden's bodyguard, denied having received military training while in Afghanistan, and denied having had any prior knowledge of the September 11 attacks or having heard any rumors concerning such a plot. He further claimed his brother Riyadh was not affiliated with al-Qaeda or the Taliban, even though U.S. intelligence agencies also accuse Riyadh of having served as a bodyguard for the terrorist leader. "An individual who has sat with Osama bin Laden more than ten times stated the detainee was always with Osama bin Laden in Kabul, Afghanistan, Kandahar, Afghanistan, and al-Farouq [training camp] and described him as a good fighter," according to a summary of evidence that described accounts of multiple people who identified Mujahid as Bin Laden's bodyguard. Bin Laden was killed by U.S. forces in May 2011 during a secret operation in the Pakistani city of Abbottabad. It was considered a major blow to the organization, which was also responsible for carrying out the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States that left nearly 3,000 people killed. Guantanamo Bay was opened in 2002 in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks and remains open despite U.S. President Barack Obama ordering its closure within 12 months on January 22, 2009. And while 155 people remain imprisoned nearly five years later, only a handful of them are facing charges, although nine were released in December alone. Obama pledged last year to renew his efforts to close the detention facility, saying Guantanamo Bay is not necessary to keep Americans safe. "The idea that we would still maintain forever a group of individuals who have not been tried, that is contrary to who we are, it is contrary to our interests, and it needs to stop," he said on April 30, 2013. "Congress determined that they would not let us close it," he added at the time, pointing to congressional restrictions on the transfer of prisoners from Guantanamo Bay as an obstacle to close the prison. Observers, however, note that Obama himself has repeatedly signed such restrictions into law. As many as 15 detainees are also believed to remain on a hunger strike, down from 106 inmates last year, resulting in the military force-feeding all of them, which is contrary to international standards. The Pentagon stopped providing daily updates on the hunger strike in early December, saying the figures serve no operational purpose and "detract from the more important issues." As part of the 2001 terrorist attacks, nineteen al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked four passenger planes before crashing two of them into the World Trade Center in New York and another into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. The fourth, United Flight 93, crashed into a field in Stonycreek Township near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Nearly 3,000 people were killed.

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Editorial program service of General News Agency:

United Press Association, Inc.
3651 Lindell Road, Suite D168
Las Vegas, NV 89103, USA
(702) 943.0321 Local
(702) 943.0233 Facsimile
info@unitedpressassociation.org
info@gna24.com
www.gna24.com