

By Andy Worthington

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As the prison-wide hunger strike continues at Guantánamo, and even the authorities are admitting that [84 of the remaining 166 prisoners](#) are on hunger strike (edging ever closer to the figure of 130 cited by the prisoners themselves), it remains imperative that those of us who are committed to the closure of the prison continue to publicize the hunger strike, and to maintain pressure on the administration to resolve it — by releasing [the 86 prisoners cleared for release](#), and by initiating objective reviews of [46 others designated for indefinite detention](#) without charge or trial in a executive order issued by President Obama two years ago.

To maintain pressure on the Obama administration, it is crucial that the prisoners' stories are told, as has been happening over the last few weeks with reports following phone conversations between the prisoners and their lawyers — in the cases of Shaker Aamer, the last British resident in the prison (see [here](#) and [here](#)), and also with [Samir Mogbel](#), whose testimony was presented as an op-ed in the [New York Times](#)

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These men are all represented by lawyers at [Reprieve](#), the London-based legal action charity founded by Clive Stafford Smith, and below I'm posting Clive's account of his conversation by phone with another of Reprieve's client, [Younus Chekhouri](#), a Moroccan whose story has long fascinated me, as he has always been one of the most peaceful prisoners in Guantánamo, and has always categorically refuted all the allegations against him that relate to terrorism and military activity.

I found his testimony from Guantánamo, in the tribunals and review boards that took place under President Bush, to be both compelling and credible, and below I include [the description of him](#) that I included in [a series of articles](#) about the remaining prisoners in Guantánamo back in 2010. What I only found out from Clive's recent conversation, however, is that Younis is a Sufi — a fact which, on its own, should have told the US authorities that he was not who they thought he was, as Sufi Muslims had no involvement with either military activities of the Taliban or the international terrorism of al-Qaeda.

This is my commentary from 2010:

Chekhouri is [accused](#) of being a founder member of the Moroccan Islamic Fighting Group (or GICM, the Groupe Islamique Combattant Marocain), who had a training camp near Kabul, but he has [always maintained](#) that he traveled to Afghanistan in 2001, with his Algerian wife, after six years in Pakistan, where he had first traveled in search of work and education, and has stated that they lived on the outskirts of Kabul, working for a charity that ran a guest house and helped young Moroccan immigrants, and had no involvement whatsoever in the country's conflicts. He has also repeatedly explained that he was profoundly disillusioned by the fighting amongst Muslims that has plagued Afghanistan's recent history, and he has also

expressed his implacable opposition to the havoc wreaked on the country by Osama bin Laden, describing him as “a crazy person,” and adding that “what he does is bad for Islam.”

I hope you find Clive's account enlightening, and I urge you to share it if you do. To reiterate, it is only by waking the world up to the fact that the men in Guantánamo are human beings that we will secure the necessary outrage that will force President Obama to act. On that front, I think Younus's story, with its harrowing details, and its powerful demonstrations of Younus's own humanity and kindness, is of great importance.

Clive Stafford Smith's Statement Recounting His Phone Conversation with Younus Chekkouri, March 29, 2013

On Tuesday, April 9, 2013, at approximately 11am EST, I spent sixty minutes on an unclassified phonecall with my client Younus Chekkouri, whose Internment Serial Number is 197. We spent most of the phonecall on the subject of the hunger strike.

When I use quotes, that is my best reconstruction of what Younus reported being said, but it is clearly not verbatim. I regret that I have not, given the time constraints, been able to check my notes and my memory with my client, but I am confident that my notes are as accurate as I could reasonably manage. However, the telephone line was very bad and it was difficult to hear my client on a number of occasions.

Younus is one of the most compliant prisoners in Guantánamo Bay. He is a Sufi and as such is averse to violence. I have seen his detention record while in Guantánamo, as of the disclosures made in his habeas case, and he had (as I recall) only one disciplinary in almost a decade, and that was for something fairly frivolous where it seemed that a particularly harsh guard had it in for him. (Some of my clients have had scores of disciplinaries for a broad range of violations.)

Younus has been very, very depressed. He has been [cleared for a long time](#) and desperately misses his wife and family — but he has always preached restraint for the seven years I have known him. It is all the more surprising, and worrying, that he has taken part in this hunger strike for two months now.

Younus was on the block where the problems originally began, on February 6, 2013. Indeed, I saw him that day, since I was in Guantánamo Bay for a visit. The issue involved searching of the Qur'ans. This has been an issue over many years, though it had been essentially resolved as long as seven years ago by an agreement not to search the Qur'ans.

As Younus relayed to me, the detainees reject wholeheartedly the notion that the Qur'ans were used to hide pills. Indeed, he described the number of places where the detainees could hide pills if that was what they really wanted to do; he also described the manner in which the authorities can ensure that prisoners take their medications, checking in their mouths to ensure that the pills have been swallowed.

Younus stated that this was just a well-worn and unwise pretext for trying to impose control on the prisoners. He relayed how the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] had confirmed to him and others that this was a pretext being used by the US authorities, and that it was not based in fact. There is an Islamic advisor (he gave me the name, but I do not include it here as I have no desire to get the man in trouble by naming him in a public document) who has been telling the JTF-GTMO authorities how best to manipulate the prisoners' beliefs (about whom, more below).

As before, the prisoners offered either to comply with the search methods that have been used before (where US officials do not handle the Qur'ans, and use metal detectors if they have any question about it being used to hide weapons) or simply give up their Qur'ans. The US authorities refuse to allow them to hand in their Qur'ans, apparently from fear that it will make them look bad that the prisoners do not have Qur'ans (it is hard to imagine a different reason for refusing such an offer).

However, unfortunately the original complaint about the desecration or disrespect of the Qur'an has now exploded into something far broader, seemingly in response to the aggressive reaction by the US authorities to the original complaints. Younus reported that he had been one of the prisoners originally seeking to avoid a confrontation, and to resolve the issues. But the response was harsh and immediate.

Younus came back to his cell after a search to find that it "looked like Hurricane Katrina had just been through." The soldiers had taken most of Younus' 'comfort items', including his books,

as well a large number of his legal papers. They had been silly as well: they took only one of his shoes, leaving him just one. He had nothing that he had not been legally given, and taking it away seemed very wrong and very unfair.

The prisoners on the block started their hunger strike soon after, though they continued for a few days to eat things that they already had. The hunger strike proper did not begin for a few days, when all of that had run out, and they had even finished eating the food that had long since expired (some was two years out of date, some of it had been hoarded for feeding to the banana rats).

Younus has lost about 30 lbs.

He may not be listed as an official hunger striker as he has been accepting liquid nutrient, Ensure. But he is not taking that, it is for another striker, who is a fellow prisoner who he holds in very high regard. His friend (who he did not name, as we were not meant to discuss the names of other prisoners on the call) had dropped to 120 lbs, and almost died. The man's face changed from red to blue. He refused to go to the clinic. Younus worried so much about him that he (Younus) requested Ensure and made his friend drink it, in order to make him a bit better. This is just one example of many ways in which the authorities have their figures wrong about prisoners, and who is or is not on strike.

Younus estimated that eighty percent of the prisoners in Camp VI are on hunger strike. The people who are not doing it are primarily the infirm prisoners — he was allowed to mention the name of [Saifullah Paracha](#) (ISN 1094), another prisoner who I have met in Guantánamo. Saifullah is 65 years old and in bad health, with a heart condition. [also see [here](#) and [here](#) for other articles about him].

Younus reported that in the early days of the hunger strike, those who were recognized as strikers were taken to Camp V, so many people are there. But even of those who remain in Camp VI, he said, eighty percent are involved in the strike. While he cannot say for sure how many in Camp V are on strike, he estimated that overall well over 100 prisoners are taking part.

Younus is drinking water but there have been problems. The water was severely restricted and his block (which is, again, perhaps the most compliant) only got it back because one of the prisoners' lawyers made a fuss about it in the media. Younus understands that other blocks (and Camp V) are treated differently, and some still have very little access to water.

Younus is eating only Metamucil at the moment, only periodically, as he has been given it as a putative cure for his cholesterol problems. "When I eat it, it feels like the best food in the entire world. I am addicted to the small pieces of Metamucil," he reported. (This concerns me, although I am not a doctor, since I understand that taking a fiber supplement can decrease the absorption of minerals by decreasing the transit time, lowering the concentration of minerals by accumulating more fecal matter, and can also cause the minerals to become trapped in the feces, leaving the body without absorption. This could affect individuals who may not be meeting, or barely attaining, their body's mineral or nutrient needs. See Kies, Purified Psyllium Seed Fiber, Human Gastrointestinal Tract Function, and Nutritional status of Humans, Unconventional Sources of Dietary Fiber, ACS Symposium Series 214, at 61–70 (1983).)

He has taken some powdered juice, but is having problems making tea as the guards do not let them have cups any more — so they have to do with plastic containers to heat up water in the microwave for tea. Younus is concerned that the long term use of the same plastic containers in this way will cause cancer.

Younus reported all the same physical problems that I have documented over several years — pain in the feet, the knee, the back, his testicles, and his throat. But he says that all of this is subsumed by the fact that he has pain everywhere since he is starving the whole time. "Really, now it is just pain everywhere. I don't want to die in Guantánamo."

Younus said that he now wakes up in the middle of the night, starving, and he remembers his dreams, where he has imagined that he is faced with large piles of wonderful food. It is torture.

Younus wrote a sign on the window of his block: "Dial 911 — I'm starving." He wrote another that simply said SOS. But nobody paid attention.

As the treatment spiraled down, for the first time, Younus seriously thought about harming himself.

Younus states that he has a message for President Obama: “The nightmare has started again. For some time, things had got a bit better here, some of the guards were acting like human beings. Even if we were treated like sheep, at least we were not always mistreated. But now it has changed again. And now 86 of us have been cleared for release and we are still here. Let us leave Guantánamo with clear hearts, and without hatred. Hatred is evil, and it harms the person who is hating as well as the person who is hated.”

When I asked why this change of treatment had taken place, Younus opined that it seemed to be advice that was coming from the supposed Islamic expert on how to break Muslims. “There is one man who is giving Islamic advice, who pretends he is a Muslim, and thinks he understands our minds, our diverse culture, our souls, everything.” Apparently the leadership in Guantánamo is back to trying to break them, as they might break an animal or abuse a child, thinking that this is the way to treat prisoners, even people who have long since been cleared for release.

Younus does not want to be on this hunger strike, but he feels that he has no choice. He asks only that he be treated with respect, and that the prisoners who are cleared be allowed to leave — to go back to their families, to have hope, and to live their dreams.

Younus did not want to finish without thanking the people around the world, including those in America, who have shown support for their human rights. He asked that I express his gratitude to those who had not forgotten him and the other prisoners.

While I would obviously prefer that Younus should be permitted to testify to the facts that he related to me himself, the foregoing is as accurate an account as I am able to produce from my notes of my conversation with him about the current state of the hunger strike in Guantánamo Bay, and the unfortunate response by the authorities to it.