

By Brian Stelter

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Of the 779 known detainees who have been held at [Guantánamo Bay](#), Cuba — terrorism suspects, sympathizers of [Al Qaeda](#), people deemed enemy combatants by the United States military — only one was a journalist.



Sami al-Hajj, left, and, right, with his son, Mohammed, and Al Jazeera's news director, Waddah Khanfar, during a ceremony in Sudan after his release from the Guantánamo Bay detention center in May 2008.

The journalist, Sami al-Hajj, was working for [Al Jazeera as a cameraman](#) when he was stopped by Pakistani forces on the border with Afghanistan in late 2001.

[The United States military accused Mr. Hajj of, among other things, falsifying documents and delivering money to Chechen rebels](#)

, although he was never charged with a crime during his years in custody.

Now, more than a year after his release, Mr. Hajj, a 40-year-old native of Sudan, is back at work at the Arabic satellite news network, leading a new desk devoted to human rights and public liberties. The captive has become the correspondent.

“I wanted to talk for seven years, to make up for the seven years of silence,” Mr. Hajj said through an interpreter during an interview at the network’s headquarters in Doha, Qatar.

Among [Al Jazeera](#)’s viewers in the Arab world since the 9/11 attacks, perhaps nothing has damaged perceptions of America more than Guantánamo Bay. For that reason, Mr. Hajj, who did a six-part series on the prison after his release, is a potent weapon for the network, which does not always strive for journalistic objectivity on the subject of his treatment. In an interview, Ahmed Sheikh, the editor in chief of Al Jazeera, called Mr. Hajj “one of the victims of the human rights atrocities committed by the ex-U.S. administration.”

But Mr. Hajj has not restricted himself to Guantánamo and his own incarceration. He has expanded the network’s coverage of other rights issues, including press freedom in Iraq, [Palestinians](#)

in Israeli prisons and the implications of the

[USA Patriot Act](#)

. On a Wednesday morning in mid-August, Mr. Hajj pushed Al Jazeera’s news desk to cover a [hunger strike](#)

by political prisoners in Jordan, and he happily pointed to a nearby television when the Jordan news scrolled on the bottom of the screen.

Nor has his experience radicalized him: he said that, despite his upbringing in a violent and often repressive country and his experience in detention, he maintained a sustaining belief in democracy and the rule of law.

Terry Anderson, an Associated Press correspondent who was detained in Lebanon from 1985 to 1991 by Islamic fundamentalists, said he could understand Mr. Hajj's chosen assignment.

"In prison, what do you do? You think about your life. You think about what you were doing, and how it led you here," Mr. Anderson said.

Mr. Hajj's story is well known to Al Jazeera viewers, but not to most Americans. (As with the experiences of many detainees at Guantánamo Bay, his version is uncorroborated by American officials or any documents.) After working at a beverage company and then trying to start a business in Azerbaijan, he began working as a cameraman for Al Jazeera in 2000. He was captured on Dec. 15, 2001, trying to cross the border back into Afghanistan with his camera and a correspondent.

He later came to believe that the Americans were seeking another Al Jazeera cameraman, one with a similar name who had recorded an interview with [Osama bin Laden](#) after the Sept. 11 attacks.

After being detained by local authorities in Pakistan, Mr. Hajj was transferred into American custody and, he says, tortured and beaten at a prison at the [Bagram air base](#) in Afghanistan. He was moved to Kandahar and then transported to Guantánamo Bay in mid-2002. Looking back, he says he thinks that he was sent there in part because he was a journalist.

"I had seen a lot of things that I shouldn't have seen," he said, citing the treatment of prisoners at Bagram in particular. Mr. Hajj claims that in lengthy interrogations he was asked for details of the network's staff, policies and processes and that some guards started calling him "Al Jazeera" as a nickname.

He said an interrogator once asked him, "How much does bin Laden pay Al Jazeera for all the propaganda that Al Jazeera supplies?"

“You’re asking the wrong question,” he replied, emphasizing that bin Laden was not a propaganda partner of Al Jazeera, “he’s a newsmaker.”

In American custody, he tried to keep practicing journalism, he said, writing eyewitness accounts for his lawyers and family members, interpreting fellow detainees’ stories of abuse and even making drawings of forced feedings during a hunger strike.

“I felt that I needed to document this for history,” he said, “so that the next generation knows the depth of the crime that was committed.” He audibly emphasized the Arabic word for depth as he spoke.

During the interview, Mr. Hajj displayed a deep wound on his left leg, which he said he suffered when he was pinned against cell bars during a beating at Guantánamo. He reiterated that the emotional trauma was more extensive than the physical; he says he continues to see psychotherapists.

Asked about questioning about Al Jazeera, a Pentagon spokesman said members of the media “are not targeted by U.S. forces, but there is no special category that gives members of media organizations immunity if captured engaging in suspicious, terror-related activity.” The spokesman added that all detainees were treated humanely while in custody.

According to Zachary Katznelson, the legal director for Reprieve, a human rights group that represented Mr. Hajj, the allegations changed over the years: “First, he was alleged to have filmed an interview of Osama bin Laden. It was another cameraman. So, that allegation disappeared. Then the U.S. said Sami ran a jihadist Web site. Turns out, there was no such site. So that allegation disappeared. Then, the U.S. said Sami was in Afghanistan to arrange missile sales to Chechen rebels. There was no evidence to back that up at all. So that allegation disappeared.”

[Mr. Hajj's release](#) , back to Sudan on a stretcher, came in May 2008 after lobbying by human rights groups and the government of Sudan. The Pentagon spokesman said Mr. Hajj’s release to Sudan “indicated our belief that the government of Sudan could effectively mitigate the threat posed” by him.

Since his release, he has put on weight and honed his rhetoric. He splits his time between Al Jazeera and the Guantánamo Justice Center, a group he co-founded for former detainees. Through the center he is helping to prepare legal action against former President [George W. Bush](#) and officials of his administration.

Even during a translated interview, he remained keenly sensitive to language, calling the detainees at Guantánamo “captives,” to call attention to what he says is a “place outside of law.”

When a visitor mentioned “enhanced interrogation techniques,” an American term that characterizes harsh treatment of detainees, Mr. Hajj interrupted the interpreter and said, in Arabic, “instead of torture?”

“We are giving the wrong impression” with that term, he said. “We as journalists are violating human rights because we are changing the perception of reality.”

Oddly, while in a prison sanctioned by American authorities, Mr. Hajj put his faith in the American political system. He gathered bits of news from the guards and, leading up to the 2004 election, was sure that American voters would reject Mr. Bush, which would lead to his freedom. When the guards informed him that the president had been re-elected, he was stunned.

“I was sure I would outlive Bush,” he said.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: December 26, 2009

An article on Wednesday about a former detainee at Guantánamo Bay, Sami al-Hajj, who now leads a news desk at Al Jazeera that covers human rights and public liberties, misspelled the

surname of the editor in chief of the Arabic satellite news network in some copies. He is Ahmed Sheikh, not Sheik.