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Tonight, 100 million people are expected to watch the first presidential debate, where the topics will likely include foreign policy and terrorism. Eight years after President Obama vowed to close Guantánamo during his first year in office, it remains open. Meanwhile, Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump has called for the prison's expansion. Today, in a Democracy Now! exclusive, we speak with a former Guantánamo prisoner who was cleared to leave under President Bush and President Obama but remained at Guantánamo for over 12 years. Jihad Abu Wa'el Dhiab has never been charged with a crime. While at Guantánamo, he launched a series of hunger strikes to demand his freedom, and was among a group of prisoners subjected to force-feeding. Now released to Uruguay, he is currently on a hunger strike to push for his demand to be allowed to reunite with his family in Turkey or in an Arabic-speaking country. Earlier this month, Dhiab slipped into a coma for nine hours while he was on a hunger and thirst fast, revived only by a hydrating IV while he was in that coma. The day after Dhiab awoke, Democracy Now! was able to speak to him in an exclusive interview. Special thanks to José María Ciganda, Alessandro Maradei and Andrés Thomas Conteris.

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## **AMY GOODMAN: This is *Democracy Now!*, [democracynow.org](#), *The War and Peace Report***

**. I'm Amy Goodman. Tonight, 100 million people are expected to watch the first presidential debate—among the topics, foreign policy and terrorism. Guantánamo was not expected to still be an issue at these debates, but eight years after President Obama vowed to close the prison during his first term in office, it remains open. Meanwhile, Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump has called for the expansion of Guantánamo.**

Well, today, in a *Democracy Now!* exclusive, we speak with a former Guantánamo prisoner who was cleared to leave under both President Bush and President Obama but remained at Guantánamo for over 12 years. His name is Jihad Abu Wa'el Dhiab. He has never been charged with a crime. At Guantánamo, he launched a series of hunger strikes to demand his freedom. He was among a group of prisoners subjected to force-feeding. The Obama administration is refusing to release video of the force-feeding to the public, but after a judge ordered it, the Obama administration did give the redacted [video] to the court, which reportedly shows graphic images of guards restraining Dhiab and feeding him against his will. The case is currently on appeal. Human rights groups have long said the force-feeding of Guantánamo

prisoners amounts to torture.

Dhiab is currently on a hunger strike to push for his demand to be allowed to leave Uruguay in order to reunite with his family in Turkey or in an Arabic-speaking country. Dhiab's supporters say he's temporarily resumed drinking liquids and is gaining strength, but he plans to return to a thirst and hunger strike as soon as Tuesday if there's no solution to his long-standing request to rejoin his family.

Earlier this month, Dhiab slipped into a coma for nine hours while he was on a hunger and thirst fast, revived only by a hydrating IV while he was in that coma. A few hours after he came out of the coma, I was able to speak with him in an exclusive *Democracy Now* interview. He was exhausted. He was lying on his bed in Montevideo, Uruguay. I asked him to begin by talking about how he felt.

**JIHAD ABU WA'EL DHIAB:** I feel really very, very worse. All my body hurt me, and my kidney, my headache, my stomach, my right side really bad. Many things. But I feel all my body hurt me.

**AMY GOODMAN:** There's a battle in court in the United States to release the videotape of your force-feeding in Guantánamo. Can you describe what that force-feeding was like for you?

**JIHAD ABU WA'EL DHIAB:** Like the United States always say in the media, "Human rights, human rights, human rights." There's never in Guantánamo, don't have any human rights. Never, never, never. He took the video from first time go to me in my cell to move me to chair and give me the tube for give me forced feeding. But if you see this video and see the guard, how treatment with me, how beat me, how make with me, that's not human.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Dhiab, in Guantánamo, one nurse refused to force-feed the prisoners. Can you talk about that nurse?

**JIHAD ABU WA'EL DHIAB:** This nurse, from first time come into Guantánamo, me and my brother spoke with him many time. "Why you come in here? This your job, this human right job, a good job. Why come in here for torture the person, the detainee?" He think, think, think too much. After that, he said, "Give me couple days. I take decision for that."

He, after two days or three days, come and tell me, "Jihad, there I don't leave anyone tell me my number, because I am not number, I have name." He tell me, "Jihad, I take decision." I tell him, "What?" He said, "Now I stop give any force-feed for anyone. I refuse to give any. And I spoke with the government in the Guantánamo about this." I tell him, "Me and all my brothers said for you, thank you very much for that," because I respect this person very—he helped me, and he a gentle man. He treatment with us there—only him, treatment with us from first day coming there. I see him always, he not all right. And he treatment with us very, very well. And after that, I tell him, "Thank you very much about this." He said, "What's happened after that, I don't care, but I don't—I refuse give any force-feeding."

And after that, he move from there. And I hear after that in the news they want to take him to court about he refused—because he refused the Army order. But I respect this person. I need all the person make like him and treatment like him, because this all right idea.

**AMY GOODMAN:** President Obama says he wants to close Guantánamo. Do you believe that will happen?

**JIHAD ABU WA'EL DHIAB:** If he wants to close Guantánamo, he can. He can now. Now. He can give order, close Guantánamo. He can close Guantánamo. But he coward. He can't take this decision, because he scared. But Guantánamo supposed to close, should be closed, Guantánamo, because Guantánamo, that's not good for the United States. Never.

**AMY GOODMAN:** That's Jihad Abu Wa'el Dhiab, a Syrian prisoner at Guantánamo for more than 12 years. He was released to Uruguay. He was speaking to us in English from his bed in Montevideo, Uruguay. He's been on a hunger strike. At the time of our interview, he had just

come out of a nine-hour coma after refusing water, as well. Throughout our interview, which we did just after he revived, he was very tired and weak. He would sometimes switch into Arabic from the English, the language of course he felt more comfortable in. This is Dhiab speaking about why the U.S. wouldn't want to release the video of his force-feeding at Guantánamo and more.

**JIHAD ABU WA'EL DHIAB:** [translated] The U.S. does not want the world to see the truth about what happens in Guantánamo. They want to keep the black box closed and to show instead that the black box is full. But it is indeed actually empty and a lie. They can't let the world see the video and know the truth, because the truth will contradict the reasons the U.S. is holding the prisoners.

For example, I have papers showing to be innocent since 2006, since the time of George Bush, yet they kept me in Guantánamo. And again, I had papers proving my innocence in 2009 with Obama now president, but they still kept me in Guantánamo. I ended up staying until December 2014. And even the media started to report on me, saying that I was a victim and that I was an innocent man that didn't do anything wrong. In Guantánamo, they said I will not get out until I admit a crime. This is the fact of America. You have to admit to any crime. Why? I said I will not admit to anything. I didn't do anything. That is number one. But they will not say up front to their people, "We caught innocent people who didn't commit any crime." They had to create anything. They must force us to admit anything. They offered multiple choices for us to admit something. Is that justice? The issue is, the United States knows it's wrong and implicated in Guantánamo, but the U.S. does not want to apologize and go back and stop this injustice and solve this problem.

With this, I want to send a message to the American people about the American government's policy, with Muslims and non-Muslims, because their policies with Muslims will bring a lot of problems. America is who creates enemies for themselves. America is who creates terrorism and hostility toward themselves.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Dhiab, are you willing to die on this hunger strike?

**JIHAD ABU WA'EL DHIAB:** [translated] I can only see two solutions: Either I am reunited with my family or I will have to pay with my life. I want to reach my family, that I have not seen for 15 years. I didn't see any of them—my mother, father or brothers and sisters. I lost my son in war in Syria, and 28 others of my family died, as well. My entire family is spread out in different countries, leaving no one with my parents. This is a very complicated issue. I want my right to live a good life and to be free.

**AMY GOODMAN:** That's Jihad Abu Wa'el Dhiab. He was held at Guantánamo for more than 12 years, has not seen his family for between 15 and 20 years, speaking to us exhausted from his bed in Montevideo, Uruguay. He's on a hunger strike, had just come out of a coma extremely weak and tired, after refusing water, and he had been hydrated through an IV during the coma. Less than a week ago, he lifted his dry fast at the behest of his support group. He says he's going to go back to a thirst and hunger strike if he cannot reunite with his family.