


An advertisement banner for HP wireless printers. On the left is a silver HP notebook. The main text reads "A GREAT NOTEBOOK DESERVES A GREAT WIRELESS PRINTER." Below this is "Live wirelessly. Print wirelessly." and a "Learn more »" link. On the right, there are several printed photos of people and a white HP printer. The slogan "WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO SAY?" and the HP logo are also present.

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Six Years Inside Gitmo: A Journalist's Tale

By Vivienne Walt

Both John McCain and Barack Obama have said they would [shut the U.S. military detention facility at Guantánamo Bay](#), where about 250 men remain behind bars — some in their eighth year of captivity. But neither presidential candidate has outlined when and how they plan to do it. One man ready to offer them some free advice on the problem of Guantánamo is Sami Al-Hajj, an al-Jazeera TV cameraman recently freed, without facing charges, after six and a half years at Guantánamo. "It's worse than the fire of Hell," he wrote two years ago from his cell to his British attorney, Clive Stafford Smith. "It makes people lose their senses. Death may come at any time."

Al-Hajj [survived Guantánamo](#), although he wrote his son a farewell letter from the prison camp and says he nearly went insane. Like almost all of the approximately 770 detainees who have been held there, Al-Hajj — the only journalist known to have been detained at Guantánamo — never had the opportunity to [answer charges against](#) him in any legal proceeding. With no explanation, U.S. military officials last May flew him to his native Khartoum, and handed him over to Sudanese authorities. In footage that is still being watched on YouTube, Al-Hajj is shown collapsing into the arms of his eight-year-old son Mohamed — who was a 14-month-old baby when Al-Hajj was arrested — weeping and squeezing him silently after his release.

Although Al-Hajj is still trying to comprehend how his life was so drastically transformed, he says he believes he was targeted simply because he worked for Al Jazeera. "Ninety percent of my interrogations were about Al Jazeera," he told TIME earlier this month. "I was interrogated more than 200 times, even a few hours before my release. I kept telling them I was just a cameraman." Al-Hajj believes his arrest in Afghanistan was largely a result of bad timing. As the Taliban's control over Kandahar evaporated in December 2001, the Jazeera man joined dozens of other journalists attempting to enter Afghanistan from Pakistan. Pakistani border officials singled him out, he says, telling him there was a problem with his passport. But even when an intelligence officer arrived to take him away, the cameraman had little sense of danger — he felt sure his arrest was a mistake. He believes that U.S. officials had ordered the arrest of the al-Jazeera cameraman who had recorded the network's October 2001 interview with Osama Bin Laden. Al-Hajj's passport showed that he had been at home in Qatar that month, but he still disappeared into U.S. captivity. Seven months passed before Red Cross officials were able to deliver a letter to Al-Hajj's wife in Qatar — the first proof that her husband was alive. "I am in Guantánamo," the letter read. "I don't know why."

Al-Hajj penned thousands more words during years as Prisoner 345 —including accounts of being force-fed through a tube during months of a hunger strike; of being locked in a cage for two weeks with

no toothbrush or soap, after guards found an iron nail outside his cell window; and of being placed in a single cell with no blanket or bed, after refusing to submit to vaccinations he had already received in Qatar. Asked to comment on these claims, U.S. Navy Commander Jeffrey D. Gordon on Wednesday told TIME that Al-Hajj had "routinely made baseless assertions that are simply not supported by the facts". Stafford-Smith, his attorney, says Al-Hajj's written communications were submitted to military censors before they were taken out of Guantánamo. They include testimony he claims to have collected from scores of other detainees. "I decided to benefit from the experience," Al-Hajj says. "I was a journalist. So I practiced journalism."

At one point Al-Hajj compiled a list of 64 detainees younger than 18, challenging U.S. claims that no juveniles were in Guantánamo. "Sami was remarkable; the guards liked him and would tell him all sorts of stuff," says Stafford-Smith, legal director of the British prisoner-rights organization Reprieve, and who still represents about 35 detainees in Guantánamo.

When the Supreme Court ruled 5-4 last June that Guantánamo's remaining prisoners are entitled to habeas corpus hearings to justify their detention, Guantánamo became an election issue. McCain called the ruling "one of the worst decisions in the history of this country", although he later said it was not as bad as he had first described. Obama, who has called for terror suspects to face trial in the U.S. justice system rather than in military tribunals, welcomed the ruling. Since then government attorneys have presented few habeas corpus documents to justify holding the suspects, saying more time was needed to assemble and vet the evidence. "That is quite unbelievable in my mind," says Emi MacLean, staff attorney for the Center for Constitutional Rights in New York, which coordinates most of the Guantánamo cases. "These are men they have held for more than six years." Most, says MacLean, are either citizens of countries with little standing in Washington, or refugees with nowhere else to go.

Months after his release, Al-Hajj still walks with a limp and the aid of a cane, because of injuries he says were incurred when he was pushed from a military helicopter blindfolded after his arrest in 2001. U.S. military officials say that claim has never been substantiated. Unable to work as a cameraman, he was recently assigned to a new human-rights department in Al-Jazeera's Qatar newsroom, which is to launch a weekly human-rights show in Arabic next month. Despite his years in captivity for, he believes, no good reason, Al-Hajj insists he holds no animus towards Americans. "So many Americans wrote to me in Guantánamo. And I have many American friends."

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