

# Ex-detainees' woes in Yemen add to U.S. fears of releasing others

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ADEN, YEMEN -- Two years ago, Mohsin al-Askari was released from his prison cell at Guantanamo Bay, but he has found neither freedom nor a new life in his homeland. Potential employers are afraid to hire him. At 28, he depends on his father for financial support, charities for medical care.

With each rejection, his frustration grows, as does the temptation to return to his old life of jihad.

"The government hasn't done anything to help me," said Askari, his voice filled with bitterness.

Yemen's handling of former Guantanamo detainees and accused extremists in its own jails has raised fears that sending detainees back to this nation, the poorest in the Arab world, might only create more militants determined to attack America.

Disputes over the fates of 97 Yemeni detainees, roughly 40 percent of the current prison population at Guantanamo, are a key reason President Obama has given up on his promise to shut down the facility by January.

U.S. officials are also concerned about Yemen's lax supervision of accused terrorists. Many of those imprisoned for orchestrating the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole, which killed 17 American sailors in this coastal city, have escaped or been freed by Yemeni officials. The government has also refused to extradite two of the attack's alleged organizers to the United States to face murder charges.

But not returning eligible detainees to Yemen or delaying the closing of the prison in Guantanamo Bay, [Cuba](#), could spawn more anti-American anger and more radicalization in a failing nation with a growing al-Qaeda presence, said diplomats, Yemeni officials and analysts.

## A country in crisis

Yemen's government has demanded the repatriation of detainees, vowing to rehabilitate them. But U.S. officials have little faith in Yemen's ability to prevent former fighters from rejoining al-Qaeda.

"When they lose hope to live a good life, when they feel like they are dead, maybe this will encourage some to become suicide bombers, to seek revenge," said Khaled al-Ansi, executive director of HOOD, a Yemeni human rights group.

Yemen's weak central government is beset by multiple crises, including a secessionist movement in the south and a civil war against Shiite rebels in the north. Al-Qaeda is creating havens in the

south and east. High rates of illiteracy and unemployment and diminishing oil and water reserves compound the woes.

Since the Cole bombing, al-Qaeda militants have staged dozens of attacks, including a 2006 jailbreak from a central prison in the capital, Sanaa. The fugitives included Nasser al-Wahishi, who became leader of the Arabian Peninsula branch of al-Qaeda. Last year, his group orchestrated car bombings outside the U.S. Embassy, killing 16 people, including six attackers.

So far, 15 Yemenis have returned. All were released from Guantanamo because they were no longer considered a threat or there was insufficient evidence to try them on terrorism charges.

Askari said that he was a Taliban foot soldier in [Afghanistan](#) but that he had no links to al-Qaeda. U.S. soldiers captured him in [Pakistan](#) in late 2001 and sent him to Guantanamo.

In December 2007, he returned to Yemen. He was thrown in a government jail for 45 days and released only after a businessman agreed to sign a "guarantee" that Askari would not cause any problems. That voucher cost Askari's family 30,000 rials, or \$150, a princely sum here.

"It's easier to guarantee the release of a thief than someone who was in Guantanamo," said Askari, who is single and lives in Taizz, a southern city.

None of the detainees who have returned have joined al-Qaeda, say human rights groups and Yemeni intelligence officials. But the vast majority remain angry and disgruntled, unable to shake off the stigma of Guantanamo. Pressured by the United States, the Yemeni government closely monitors them.

The more their frustration builds, the greater the odds they could embrace extremism, human rights advocates say.

"If nothing is done to help them, some could rejoin al-Qaeda," Askari said.

Of the Yemenis who remain at Guantanamo, approximately 34 have been cleared for release by an interagency review team led by the Justice Department. However, several were cleared only for entry into a highly regarded rehabilitation program in [Saudi Arabia](#), said a U.S. official in Washington, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the diplomatic sensitivity of the issue.

But Saudi Arabia has balked at taking the Yemenis into the program. The prospect of a deal to transfer them to the kingdom is, "if not dead, on life support," the official said.

This year, Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh promised to build a rehabilitation center modeled after Saudi Arabia's. That hasn't happened yet, Western diplomats said.

Yemeni Foreign Minister Abu Bakr al-Qirbi said the United States and Europe need to provide more assistance. "Yemen should not be blamed when it does not get the support and resources it needs to deal with terrorism," he said.

## **A failed program**

Until 2005, Yemen had its own rehabilitation program. Today, it is widely considered to have been a failure. There was no follow-up support for graduates. Many went on to fight in [Iraq](#), Afghanistan or Somalia, according to human rights activists. Tortured and abused, others became radicalized in prison and joined al-Qaeda. Some were believed to have been involved in the U.S. Embassy bombing.

Some of the Yemeni detainees will almost certainly be repatriated, the U.S. official said. But the majority will likely continue to be held by the United States.

This could have repercussions in Yemen's mostly tribal society, where Guantanamo is viewed as a tool of U.S. repression and seeking revenge is a customary rite.

Uthman Abdul Rahim has been imprisoned at Guantanamo for nearly eight years. The United States says he is an al-Qaeda fighter with ties to two of the USS Cole attackers. His family said he went to Afghanistan to teach the Koran and has no links to al-Qaeda or the Taliban.

His brother Arif said he was confident that Obama would close Guantanamo next year.

If he doesn't, or if Uthman and other detainees are sent to a prison in the United States, many families would consider it an even greater betrayal, he said.

"The families, their friends, their tribesmen will have more hatred for the United States," Arif said. "And perhaps they will consider taking the same path as the extremists."

*Staff writer Peter Finn in Washington contributed to this report.*