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## The Tragic Tale of Guantanamo Detainee #684

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[Opinion](#)

## **The tragic tale of Guantanamo detainee #684**

**It's time for the US to release Mohammed Mattan, who has been languishing at Guantanamo for 11 years without charges.**

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Despite promises, President Obama has not yet mustered the political will to close Guantanamo [EPA] Guantanamo Internment Serial Number 684 is a compelling, peaceful and singularly gracious man.

Yet Mohammed Abdullah Taha Mattan has been caught up in a vortex of politics beyond his control. June 19 marks the somber 11th anniversary of Mattan's detention in the inhumane confines of Guantanamo Bay. (Full disclosure: with three other attorneys, I am co-counsel for Mattan.)

Despite his towering height, Mattan has always exuded a preternatural tranquility. Inexplicably, his gentle and dignified spirit has somehow survived the years of brutal physical and emotional torture, isolation, humiliation and despair. The extreme misfortune of having been in the wrong place, at the wrong time, in the pursuit of a peaceful and erudite life has cost Mattan more than 11 years of his life.

He has missed the milestones we all take for granted, from the marriage of his siblings to the birth of nephews and nieces. Lost to Mattan are the joys and tribulations of everyday life, from the sublime to the mundane.

Each day for the last 11 years, Mattan has awakened in a tiny, stark cell, alone, wishing desperately that somewhere in the unfortunate circumstances that led to his wrongful detention, some fortuitous chain of events had intervened and spared him and his family this harrowing tale.

### **From Palestine to Pakistan**

Mattan was born in the village of Burqa, a small enclave in the West Bank, on January 12, 1979, the second of 15 children. By nature a dutiful and intellectually curious child, Mattan passed his time reading, studying and assisting his parents with raising his 13 younger sisters and brothers.

Concerned about the prospects facing their children, Mattan's parents stressed that education was the key to escaping the grinding poverty and turmoil that made educational advancement and economic security unattainable dreams. As a devout Muslim, Mattan embraced the peaceful principles of the religion and

renounced violence.

Inspired by his faith, Mattan joined Tablighi Jamaat, an Islamic missionary movement whose members are committed to community service by spreading their faith in a peaceful and apolitical way. Focused on spirituality, Tablighis neither support nor participate in armed struggle against Israel or any other government or group.



Guantanamo talk: Closure promises rejected by detainees

Through his dedication to his family, his spirituality and his studies, Mattan evaded the trouble that plagued many of the discontent young men who faced a bleak future in the West Bank. Despite his aspirations to continue his education after he graduated from high school in 1997, the region's political strife made it impossible. With few other opportunities available to him, Mattan took work in construction, hoping to provide some meagre economic support to his struggling family.

When the second intifada erupted in 2000, Mattan was a 21-year-old young man with a dismal future in the West Bank. He made the hard decision to leave his beloved family to escape the violence and poverty that had engulfed his homeland. Encouraged by his fellow Tablighis, Mattan planned to study, pray and fulfill the mission required by his faith.

On September 28, 2001, Mattan started the fateful journey that he never could have imagined would descend into the nightmare in which he currently resides. Travelling to Pakistan, Mattan began missionary work at the Tablighi centre in Raiwind where he remained for four months, passing his time studying and praying. During this time, Mattan met several men who told him that despite the conflict in the region, they knew of places that enjoyed relative calm.

Mattan travelled west towards Afghanistan, hoping to settle into a life away from the violence that seemed to have followed him from the West Bank. Though delayed in his desire to immerse himself in the intellectual pursuits that captured his heart, he continued to pray and fulfill his spiritual mission removed from the violence he abhorred.

In Quetta, Pakistan, Mattan visited a mosque, where he met a man who advised him against travelling to Afghanistan because of escalating violence in the region, and warned him that his profile would lead authorities to suspect him of involvement in the fighting there. Concerned by this news, Mattan decided to return to Raiwind.

En route, with his financial resources depleted, Mattan encountered a man who told him of other aspiring Arab students residing in a guesthouse in nearby Faisalabad who might be able to advise him about how he could pursue his studies. Mattan headed to the guesthouse feeling a renewed sense of hope about his educational prospects, when the winds of fate struck him a terrible blow.

Shortly after his arrival, on March 28, 2002, Pakistani security services conducted a security sweep of the guesthouse. Though he was not the target of the raid, Mattan's mere presence in the guesthouse rendered

him a suspect and he was detained. The Pakistani authorities transferred Mattan to the custody of the US, who held him at Bagram Airbase in Afghanistan, and then transported him to Guantanamo, where he has been wrongfully detained ever since.

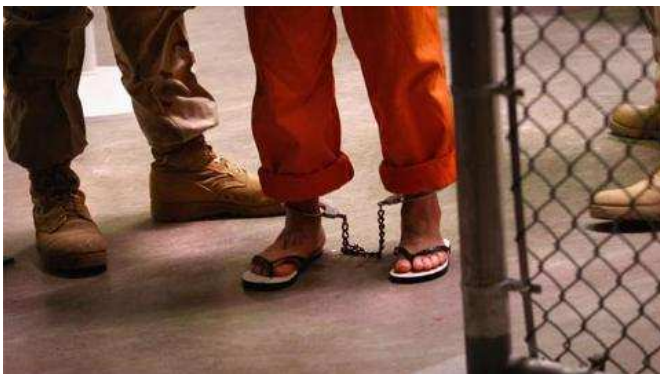
The US government has no evidence that Mattan has ever participated in subversive activity, nor that he was ever affiliated with any member of al-Qaeda, the Taliban, or any other terrorist organisation. The US possesses no evidence because there is none: Mattan has never condoned violence and maintains no connection with known or suspected terrorists.

The travesty of Guantanamo is that some of the men were rounded up not because of reasonable suspicions, but instead because areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan were blanketed with leaflets offering a bounty for "suspected terrorists", sparking a frenzy of lucrative but wrongful accusations.

### **Detainees held on the 'mosaic theory'**

Through widespread torture, US authorities and their allies extracted unreliable evidence against innocent men. Lacking any direct evidence, many detainees were held on the "mosaic theory" - concluding presumptions that connected unrelated and innocent circumstances that the US contorted into unreasonable suspicions of guilt.

Notably, in a time when the mere fact of being a young male Palestinian subjected one to scrutiny, both the Palestinian and Israeli authorities confirmed that Mattan was never questioned or wanted for his conduct. Rather than support violence, Mattan spent his youth trying to flee from it.



Inside Story Americas - Where are the Guantanamo legal files?

When the evidence against Mattan was finally reviewed by the Guantanamo Review Task Force, comprised of national security experts from all the US intelligence agencies, it deemed him suitable for transfer out of the facility to another country. But Congress encumbered the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) with provisions making it politically risky for President Obama to transfer the cleared men.

President Obama has not yet mustered the political will or courage to make good on the promise to close Guantanamo that he made during his first presidential campaign and reiterated during a recent speech. Transfers ground to a halt after the NDAA restrictions, and only a handful of detainees, with pre-existing agreements, were transferred during 2011 and 2012.

Mattan remains caught in the political gridlock that impedes his transfer from Guantanamo, where conditions are deteriorating and desperation is spreading. Though the terms of confinement for detainees initially improved somewhat under the Obama administration, the last four months have witnessed regressive and punitive treatment by the guards.

Detainees have been deprived of the very few comforts they enjoyed, including the companionship and

solidarity of their fellow detainees. Much-cherished calls to family and consultation with counsel have been effectively curtailed by the re-implementation of intrusive body searches, which the authorities know are culturally offensive to Muslims.

With little power over their lives, many of the detainees have launched a hunger strike, the only way for them to signal their growing desperation to the outside world. Aware of the serious political ramifications of detainee deaths, the US has instituted brutal force-feeding measures, though many men would prefer to die if life holds no future but the dismal four walls of their cells.

Mattan's dreams of books, learning and a family of his own have faded against a harsh reality that bears no resemblance to the life he set out to find 12 years ago. If the US acts now, perhaps Mattan can resurrect some normalcy, reunite with his loved ones, start a family, and find hope and solace in the rhythms of life and the laughter of children he has not heard in 11 long years.

The US can never restore to Mattan his youth, return his lost years, or make him whole for all he has suffered, but it can and must stop compounding this egregious mistake and move him out of Guantanamo without further delay.

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***The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial policy.***

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