

MOAZZAM BEGG: When were you arrested? On what grounds were you held? Were there any charges made against you?

ANWAR AL-AWLAKI: Bismillahir-Rahmanir-Raheem[i]. I was arrested in mid-2006. Initially I was held because I entered as an arbitrator in a local issue here, a tribal issue. I was an arbitrator in that issue and I was arrested until that issue... because the government wanted to solve that issue rather than have it solved tribally.

MB: Right.

AA: After that, they began asking me questions about my local Islamic activities here, and later on it was becoming clear that I was being held due to the request of the US government. That was what they were telling me here, and that the Americans wanted to meet me.

MB: Subhan Allah[ii]. Well, that's something that we can share together. I've also been held at the request of the Americans for quite some time.

The other question is that the media reported that your incarceration was due to having some knowledge, or some people who were involved in 9/11 at your sermons. Could you clarify any of this at all?

AA: That was one of the issues that the Americans asked about but I don't know if I was held because of that, or because of the other issues that they presented. But it was one of the issues that they enquired about.

MB: Can you describe a little bit about what your prison conditions were like? What was your individual cell was like?

AA: For the first nine months, I was in solitary confinement in an underground cell. I would say that the cell was about 8 feet by 4. It was about 12 feet high. It was clean. No interaction with any other prisoner was allowed for the entire nine months. After that, they moved me to the upper floor. The same thing, it was solitary confinement, although the restrictions were less, and the room was larger, it was about, maybe three times the size of the initial room, the initial cell. I spent there the remainder of my period, which was one and a half a years.

I was allowed for the last month and a half... they moved another person into this room, for the last month and a half. So for a year and a half, minus this month and a half, I was in solitary confinement, with the exception of the last month and a half.

MB: Subhan Allah. Did they place any restrictions on you in terms of what you were allowed to have in your cell, how you were allowed to interact with other prisoners, or in any way, other than you have already stated?

AA: When I was in the underground cell, there were restrictions on family visits, restrictions on any food that my family would send me, there were restrictions on books. I was not allowed pen and paper, and no exercise whatsoever. I hadn't seen the sun for the entire period. What else... No interaction at all with any person except with the prison guards.

Later on, when I moved to the upper level, even though I was still in solitary confinement, but the restrictions were less. Visits from the family were more frequent. They would allow me food from home twice a week, and I was allowed more books. So things were better during the last period of the time I spent in detention... I don't want to say sentence, because there wasn't any sentence.

MB: That's one of the questions I was meant to ask you. You were never charged with a crime, is that correct, and you were never put through any legal system?

AA: I wasn't charged with anything. I was held for interrogation. When interrogation was over, I was released.

MB: Did any foreign interrogation take place? Did any Americans or any other foreign nationals interrogate you?

AA: Yes, the US did interrogate me. Officials from the US.

MB: And do you know if that was the FBI? Did they identify themselves as FBI, CIA, NSA or anything?

AA: Yes. They were FBI.

MB: Okay. And how was their attitude towards you... how did they deal with you as a person, how did they regard you?

AA: There was some pressure, which I refused to accept and that led to a conflict that occurred between me and them, because I felt that it was improper behaviour from their behalf. That led to an issue between me and them during the interrogation. That was solved however, later on, and they apologised.

MB: Al Hamdulillah[iii]. Were you able to have contact with your family at all, during the imprisonment, of course you've already said that they restricted from you letters, phone calls, and so forth, for the first nine months, I think you said. But afterwards, did they allow you this contact?

AA: Yes, towards the latter period of my imprisonment, I was allowed visits from my family, once a week.

MB: How often were you interrogated, by either local officials or foreign officials? Was it something regular, or was it something sporadic?

AA: The interrogation was on and off for a year.

MB: Is there any truth in the rumour that you were placed under house arrest prior to this and that you were banned from speaking in public?

AA: No, no that's not true. I haven't been placed under house arrest, nor have I been banned from speaking publicly.

MB: There was also something that said that you were being punished in prison because you were teaching some of the other prisoners. Is this true also, or could you elaborate on that?

AA: No, I didn't have a chance to deliver any lectures because I was in solitary confinement for the entire period except the last month, which was only me and another person, so I wasn't in touch with other prisoners.

MB: Are you allowed to travel outside the Yemen? Obviously, many people want you to come to the United Kingdom and elsewhere, to come and give lectures, and you've only been out a few days! I think this is based on a question from a lot of your supporters, subhan Allah. Are you allowed to travel outside the Yemen to give lectures?

AA: Well, I would like to travel. However, not until the US drops whatever unknown charges it has against me.

MB: Yes, and that would be my advice to anybody who would be in that sort of situation is to be aware of that.

Can you tell us any of the lessons that you've learnt from being incarcerated that you would like to share?

AA: In sha'Allah[iv] this is something that I plan to do in a lecture or more, and I would leave it to that point.

MB: In sha'Allah... and is that one of your plans for the future? Do you have any other plans for the future that you'd care to elaborate upon, or is it something that you'd wish to wait and see how time evolves?

AA: You mean, in terms of lectures?

MB: Lectures, and just life in general. Not just lectures but generally, in the future – what does the future hold?

AA: I have a few opportunities open at the moment and I haven't chosen yet among them. I'm still sort of studying the situation at the time being.

MB: What was your response to the outpouring of support and concern, the campaigns, petitions, Facebook groups and the messages that you've received since your release – what was your response to this? How do you feel?

AA: Al Hamdulillah, it was very moving to know that there were brothers and sisters out there who were making du'a[v] for me. Al Hamdulillah Rabbil-Alameen[vi]. I believe that I was released due to the du'a of a certain righteous person who was making du'a for me, because RasulAllah (salla Allahu alayhi was-salam)[vii] says that when a person makes du'a for his fellow brother, an angel makes du'a for him, and RasulAllah (salla Allahu alayhi was-salam) says that the du'a for your brother Muslim is an accepted du'a. So I believe that it was due to these people, who were making dua for me, that I have been released, and I would like to thank them very much and say jazaakum Allahu khairan.[viii]

MB: In sha'Allah, and I pray that the du'a that they made for you is also made for all the other Muslim prisoners around the world, in sha'Allah, and that they will all be released.

Could you please give some words of advice, to the other prisoners and the prisoners' families in terms of your experience, and how they might benefit from your words?

AA: My advice to them is the saying of Allah, azza wa jall[ix], "You might dislike something but there is a lot of good in it for you".[x] And the hadith[xi] of RasulAllah (salla Allahu 'alayhi was-salam), Whatever decree Allah has decreed for the believer it is good for him. So if Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala[xii] has decreed that a certain person should be in prison, and that if Allah azza wa jall has decreed for a certain family that one of their members is in prison, we, as believers should believe that this decree is good and there is a hikmah, there is wisdom in it, and we should all have the trust and faith in whatever Allah azza wa jall has destined for us; because RasulAllah (salla Allahu 'alayhi was-salam) used to say, in the du'a, 'As'aluka ridha fil-Qadhaa', I ask You to make me satisfied and happy with what you have decreed for me. This is the first word of advice.

The second word of advice is this is a test for your sabr, patience; and patience is the one deed in which Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala has promised an open reward. "Only those who are patient shall receive their reward in full, without reckoning."[xiii] There is no limit on their reward that Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala gives for the Sabireen, the patient.

Finally, one should always believe that the strongest weapon that they have is du'a. They should never underestimate the power of du'a. 'Umar ibn Al-Khattab[xiv] used to say, I'm not worried about Allah not accepting my prayers but I am worried about the way I pray to Allah azza wa jall. Allah will accept the du'a, Allah will respond to the it, it's just that we have to do it properly, with sincerity.

MB: SubhanAllah, jazaakAllahu khair. One of the things that we used to do in Guantanamo, one of the things that I learnt, was Surat Yusuf[xv] used to be the most often, the most resonating surah that I used to read, and contemplate on, simply because Yusuf ('alayhis-salam) was thrown in prison for something he didn't do. And when I read that, in prison, it was totally different, my attitude towards it, and I began to cry in a way that I never would have thought was possible. Did you feel any particular verses from the Qur'an, any particular aayaat[xvi] or sahaba[xvii] stories, were relevant to how you were faring your time in prison?

AA: Well, the feeling I had when I was reading Qur'an – every surah, every ayah was totally different when I was reading it in the cell, compared to when I was reading it when I was outside.

MB: Yes, absolutely, ma sha'Allah[xviii].

AA: That was particularly true with Surat Yusuf but I can say that this has been the case with every single ayah and every surah in Qur'an. It was in a totally different light when I was reading it in prison.

MB: It's quite amazing, because in prison, for us, in Guantanamo, they took everything away from us, our clothes, our families, our food, our life, everything and the only thing that we had that was familiar to us was the Qur'an, even though it was a different version or a different print, but it was the only thing that we could look at that was familiar. Everything else – the land, the area, the prisons, even the accents of the people that were speaking were totally unfamiliar except the word of Allah.

AA: Subhan Allah, and because they took everything away and gave the Qur'an, that is why the Qur'an had this different meaning. 'Uthman ibn 'Affan[xix] used to say that if our hearts were clean and pure we would never satisfy our thirst from Qur'an. It is because of the distractions that are going around us, that we don't get the most benefit from Qur'an. But when a person is in that solitary environment, all of the distractions are taken away and his heart is fixed on the word of Allah azza wa jall, the ayaat of Qur'an open into a completely different – they give a completely different meaning.

MB: Absolutely. Do you have or have you had interaction with people who have been in Guantanamo, in prison or after release, have you been able to speak to them or see how they've fared since their release at all?

AA: There were some brothers who were brought from Guantanamo and handed over to the Yemeni government and spent time in the PSL prison where I was but I didn't have a chance to interact with them. I heard that they passed through while I was there. However, I never had a chance to interact with any of them yet.

MB: In sha'Allah may you interact with them in jannah[xx], insha'Allah

AA: In sha'Allah... I would really like to know how it was over there.

MB: In sha'Allah. Finally, I suppose it's a question for Cageprisoners. Do you have any words about your feelings towards organisations like Cageprisoners are; what you think of our work, good or bad?

AA: The brothers and sisters at Cageprisoners are fulfilling the order of RasulAllah (salla Allahu 'alayhi was-salam) which was stated in Bukhari[xxi], 'Seek the release of the prisoner', and they are at the forefront of fulfilling this command of RasulAllah (salla Allahu 'alayhi was-salam) so I ask Allah azza wa jall to reward them and assist them in their efforts.

MB: Barak Allahu feek[xxii]. JazaakAllahu khairan, ya Shaykh.

AA: Wa iyyakum.[xxiii]

[i] Bismillahir-Rahmanir-Raheem: In the Name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Beneficent

[ii] Subhan Allah: Glory be to Allah

[iii] Al Hamdulillah: All Praise is due to Allah

[iv] In sha'Allah: If Allah wills

[v] Du'a: Supplications

[vi] Al Hamdulillah Rabbil-Alameen: All Praise is due to Allah, Lord of the Worlds

[vii] RasulAllah (salla Allahu 'alayhi was-salam): The Messenger of Allah, the Prophet Muhammad, may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him.

[viii] JazaakAllahu khaira: May Allah reward you with good.

[ix] Azza wa jall: the Mighty and Majestic

[x] Imam Anwar quotes the Qur'anic verse, 4:19, *فعسى أن تكرهوا شيئا و يجعل الله فيه خيرا كثيرا*

[xi] Hadith: referring to the collections recording the sayings, and actions of the Prophet Muhammad.

[xii] Subhanahu wa ta'ala: Glory be to Him (Allah), may He be Exalted

[xiii] Imam Anwar quotes the Qur'anic verse, 39:10, *إنما يوفى الصابرون أجرهم بغير حساب*

[xiv] Umar ibn Al Khattab, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad, the second Caliph of Islam and one of the ten promised Paradise.

[xv] Moazzam Begg is referring to the 12th Qur'anic Chapter, Yusuf – the story of the Prophet Joseph and his imprisonment.

[xvi] Aayaat: The plural of aayah, a verse of the Qur'an

[xvii] Sahaba: The Companions of the Prophet Muhammed, mayAllah be pleased with them all.

[xviii] Ma sha' Allah: What Allah wills

[xix] Uthman ibn Affan, a companion of the Prophet Muhammed, the third caliph of Islam and one of the ten promised Paradise.

[xx] Jannah: Paradise

[xxi] Bukhari: Saheeh Bukhari is one of the two most authentic collections of hadith, the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad.

[xxii] Barak Allahu feek: May Allah bless you.

[xxiii] Wa iyyakum: And you