

By Daniel A. Medina

From [CNN](#) | Original Article



Illustrations are artist's renderings based on military and court records.

(CNN) Nearly two decades ago, in the aftermath of the [September 11th attacks](#), a man named Mohammed al-Qahtani was captured on the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Saudi national, US authorities alleged, was an al-Qaeda operative who was supposed to have been the "20th hijacker" but he failed to board United Airlines Flight 93, which crashed in rural Pennsylvania. After his capture, al-Qahtani was imprisoned, tortured by the US government and -- when charges against him were dropped in 2008 -- left to languish behind bars with no end in sight. Today, he sits in an isolated cell at Camp 6 in [Guantanamo Bay](#), Cuba, where he is one of only 39 detainees left in a facility that once housed approximately 680 so-called enemy combatants, a Department of Defense spokesperson confirmed to CNN. His attorneys have

waged a protracted legal battle for al-Qahtani's repatriation to Saudi Arabia.

His quest for freedom is forcing the Biden administration to consider whether to release the 45-year-old man whose attorneys say is severely mentally ill battling schizophrenia, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of his torture or seek to hold him indefinitely without charging him with a crime.

Al-Qahtani's case, experts say, stands as a litmus test for whether

[President Joe Biden](#)

is committed to his pledge to shutter the controversial facility -- an enduring symbol of the George W. Bush administration's global "war on terror" that persisted through the Barack Obama and Donald Trump presidencies. And, they say, the case has troubling implications for the humane treatment of other prisoners of war, including any US servicemembers who may be captured in future conflicts.

The challenge facing the Biden administration's legal team is how to balance the merits of al-Qahtani's case with the larger political realities at play, said Stephen I. Vladeck, a professor at the University of Texas School of Law who follows Guantanamo litigation. While there will be those who urge the President to side with the severely mentally ill detainee as part of the process of closing down Guantanamo, said Vladeck, others within the White House may advise Biden to consider the political drawbacks of any decision that may help set free a man who allegedly aspired to take part in the worst terrorist attack on US soil.

"As much as the administration may wish to show compassion toward al-Qahtani, any broader effort to effectuate his release and that of the other 38 men still in detention there would require political capital that the administration is either unable or unwilling to spend," said Vladeck, who is a CNN legal analyst.

Efforts to keep al-Qahtani in custody, however, have their own potential downsides. Biden has staked his foreign policy agenda on improving relations with US allies and changing America's image abroad. He has sold his decisions to end combat missions in Afghanistan and Iraq as moving the country forward from the perpetual "war on terror" footing it has operated on for nearly two decades. Keeping al-Qahtani in custody and Guantanamo open would not align with those stated goals, said Eric M. Freedman, a professor of constitutional law at Hofstra University who has long been critical of detentions at Guantanamo.

"The saga of this individual clearly exemplifies the layer upon layer of outrage that the entire Guantanamo venture has represented since its inception," Freedman said. "If President Biden wants to adhere to his campaign promises to bring America back, freeing this man would be an excellent place to start."

Mental illness, extremism and capture



The Pakistani army captured al-Qahtani in December 2001 as he traveled with other suspected al-Qaeda fighters from remote Tora Bora in eastern Afghanistan to cross into Pakistan. Al-Qahtani's long history of mental illness began at age eight when he was in a serious car accident and thrown from the vehicle, suffering a traumatic brain injury, according to Dr. Emily Keram, a court-appointed psychiatrist hired at the request of defense attorneys to evaluate their client. Keram, who reviewed al-Qahtani's Saudi medical records, said the injury impaired his ability to read and concentrate, which worsened with two more car accidents in later years. In the years that followed, al-Qahtani experienced "episodes of extreme behavioral dyscontrol," according to Keram, who has interviewed al-Qahtani multiple times, including during two trips to Guantanamo Bay, since 2015. She also interviewed an older brother of al-Qahtani, one of 12 children in his family.

At some point in his early 20s, al-Qahtani was found by Riyadh police naked in a garbage dumpster, Keram noted in her report. A few years later, police in the holy city of Mecca arrested al-Qahtani after he hurled himself into oncoming traffic, Keram said.

That incident resulted in his involuntary commitment to the psychiatric unit of the city's King Abdul Aziz Hospital for four days where doctors determined he was delusional and suicidal, according to Keram, who also said he suffered from schizophrenia prior to entering US custody.

Six months after leaving King Abdul Aziz Hospital, al-Qahtani started embracing a more extreme version of Islam and later attended an al-Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan, US authorities allege.

Al-Qahtani's "psychological and cognitive deficits would be recognized by others, leading him to be vulnerable to manipulation and coercion," Keram wrote in a June 2016 assessment of al-Qahtani.

At the camp, according to US military records, al-Qahtani met al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and swore his loyalty to him. Bin Laden personally selected him to take part in the 9/11 attacks, the records claim.

On August 4, 2001, al-Qahtani landed in Orlando, Florida, with a one-way ticket and \$4,000 in cash, which made immigration officials [suspicious](#)

. They questioned him for 90 minutes before sending him back to Dubai. While military records allege that he was in Orlando to meet al-Qaeda member Mohamed Atta, one of the September 11 hijackers, they also note that al-Qahtani later told interrogators he didn't know the purpose of the meet up. By the end of that month, al-Qahtani had returned to Afghanistan.

Weeks later, in the wake of the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration embarked on a global manhunt to find the perpetrators that extended to the far reaches of Afghanistan's remote eastern frontier.

In December, as al-Qahtani traveled with other suspected al-Qaeda fighters from remote Tora Bora in eastern Afghanistan to cross into Pakistan, he was captured by the Pakistani army at the border and transferred to US custody roughly two weeks later, military records show.

Washington moved al-Qahtani to Guantanamo Bay on February 13, 2002, one of the first wave of detainees that arrived at the new facility.

He became known as Detainee 063.

Military dogs, strangling and beatings



Mohammed al-Qahtani, known as Detainee 063, was tortured over a roughly 50-day period between November 2002 and January 2003 at Camp X-Ray in the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp.

For approximately 39 hours in May 2015, Keram met with al-Qahtani in a bare interrogation room at Camp Echo, a former CIA black site in the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp.

She was there to evaluate the overall state of his mental health after more than 13 years of detention and whether he was receiving adequate medical and psychiatric care.

When their conversations turned to his torture at Guantanamo, al-Qahtani often wept as he relived the ordeal.

According to the government's interrogation logs, which describe the torture in detail and were leaked to

[Time Magazine](#)

in 2005, al-Qahtani experienced some of the most severe "enhanced interrogation" techniques approved by former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld under his authorized "First Special Interrogation Plan." Rumsfeld infamously scribbled a note in the margins of a memo suggesting even harsher techniques.

Over a roughly 50-day period between November 2002 and January 2003, al-Qahtani was subjected to a long list of brutal methods -- including sleep deprivation, extreme temperature and noise exposure, sexual humiliation, beatings and strangling, according to Keram's report. At times, in apparent protest at his treatment, al-Qahtani refused to eat or drink water.

Dehydrated, doctors would occasionally forcibly administer an IV, the logs show. In one instance, al-Qahtani bit an IV tube in two before he was restrained.

Al-Qahtani's interrogators also threatened him with military dogs and tied a leash to his shackles, led him around the room and forced him to perform a series of dog tricks. At times, they would not allow him to use the bathroom, resulting in him urinating on himself repeatedly, according to military records.

Al-Qahtani told Keram that during his torture he experienced hallucinatory episodes. In one, he believed he was dead and seeing ghosts before an imaginary bird assured him that he was still alive. He told her that he wanted to end his life to stop the torture.





AP/WIDE WORLD © AP Images. Photo by Alberto Hierz for CNN. Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, July 2006. A detainee sits on a bench in his cell, covering his face with his hands. He is one of only 39 detainees left at Guantanamo. Once tortured, prisoner's case is a test of larger