

Saudi engineer released from Guantanamo prison camp after 21 years

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Washington, March 10 (RHC)-- The United States has released a Saudi Arabian engineer who was imprisoned for more than 20 years at Guantanamo Bay military prison despite never being charged with suspected crimes following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States.

The U.S. Department of Defense said on Wednesday that Ghassan Al Sharbi, 48, was returned to Saudi Arabia after a review board determined in February 2022 that his detention “was no longer necessary to protect against a continuing significant threat to the national security of the United States.”

Al Sharbi was transferred to Saudi Arabia “subject to the implementation of a comprehensive set of security measures including monitoring, travel restrictions and continued information sharing,” the statement said.

The Pentagon's Periodic Review Board ruled in 2022 that Al Sharbi had no leadership or facilitator position in al-Qaeda and was compliant in detention. It also said he had unspecified "physical and mental health issues".

The U.S. said Al Sharbi had fled to Pakistan after the September 11 attacks and had received training in bomb-making. He was arrested there the next year, allegedly tortured in custody and sent to the Guantanamo prison camp.

The U.S. military had weighed charges against Al Sharbi and several others but dropped them in 2008. Though never charged with a crime, he was also not approved for release and the U.S. continued to hold Al Sharbi as an enemy fighter.

Al Sharbi was initially targeted because he had studied at an aeronautical university in Arizona and had attended flight school with two of the al-Qaeda hijackers involved in the 2001 attacks. He becomes at least the fourth Guantanamo detainee released and sent to another country so far this year.

The U.S. Navy's base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, held about 600 prisoners at its peak in 2003. With Al Sharbi's transfer, it now holds 31 detainees, including 17 people considered eligible for transfer if a stable country can be found to accept them, the defence department said.

Another three Guantanamo inmates are eligible for review, while nine are facing charges under military commissions and two have been convicted in such commissions.

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