



US citizen pleads guilty to Al-Qaeda connection to get out of solitary

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Civil rights activists claim that a Pakistani-born U.S. citizen may have been psychologically pressured into pleading guilty to helping Al Qaeda just before his trial in New York was to begin.

Fahad Hashmi agreed to accept a deal that involved one count of associating with

terrorists to end a stay in solitary confinement that has lasted more than three years.

He has been jailed since his arrest in London in 2006, but some experts believe that over two years' solitary confinement could have impeded his ability to participate in his own defense.

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Hashmi's loyal supporters have been demonstrating for months and say they are planning another demonstration on Monday. The case may be over but supporters say the fight for civil rights, human rights and due process will continue.

"If we don't stand up now, there will come a day when it will not be possible to stand up anymore," said Chris Hedges, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist.

More than just a fight to free Hashmi, supporters say their campaign is about preserving the civil rights, human rights and due process that they accuse the US government of violating in the Hashmi case.

Before his trial even began, Syed Hashmi, known as Fahad, spent more than two years in solitary confinement in a Manhattan prison. Special Administrative Measures were enforced against him by the Bush Administration and carried on by the Obama team. For nearly 1,000 days, Hashmi has spent 23 hours in a dark cell, prohibited from speaking with the press, his reading material limited to edited newspapers more than 30 days old. He was allowed two visitors per month and limited to writing on two sheets of paper per week.

Doctors, scholars and lawyers call the Special Administrative Measures, or SAMS, draconian and torturous. The conditions Hashmi has been subjected to have led some to call his case one of Guantanamo on US soil.

"I think it's pretty clear that what they're trying to do here is increase the psychological pressure to the point where he would cave in and just agree to a plea agreement and talk about everyone else he know in his political circles. [They are] using the psychological pressure as a way to gather information, just like what happened in Guantanamo," said Shayana Kadidal, a lawyer from the Center for Constitutional Rights.

The Pakistani-born US citizen was a vocal critic of US foreign policy and treatment of Muslims after 9/11. After graduating from Brooklyn College, he received his Master's at London's

Metropolitan University. In 2006, Hashmi became the first US citizen extradited from the UK on terrorism charges, which included four counts of supporting or aiding Al-Qaeda.

The 30-year-old spared himself a life sentence Tuesday by pleading guilty to one count. The deal was brokered after a federal judge ruled that Hashmi's fate would be decided by an anonymous jury. The Center for Constitutional Rights said that the deal was the final nail in Hashmi's coffin.

"They'll all be ferried in through some back entrance probably, and certainly by martials. You can imagine the kind of fear that might create in the jurors in the beginning of each day. And then they also won't be allowed to leave. They'll be kept together, surrounded by martials," explained Kadidal.

Hashmi's family accuses the US government of violating his basic rights.

"In terms of the government, they have carried on their oppressive policies, have maintained them and defended them in court – which has been utter torture for the past two-and-a-half years in America," said Fahsil Hashmi, Fahad's brother. *"All under the presumption of innocence."*

"There's never been a single academic study that showed anything but psychological problems emerging in everyone who was isolated for 90 days or longer," said Shayana Kadidal. *"And here this man has been in solitary confinement for well over two years waiting for trial – there's hardly any way that sort of thing can't produce serious psychological consequences and interfere with his ability to participate in his own defense."*

Hashmi faces up to 15 years in federal prison, but at least he will be free from isolation. Scheduling is sentenced for June 7.