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Guantanamo inmate up for transfer lesser threat than swapped Taliban: hearing

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By Moriah Costa

ARLINGTON Va. (Reuters) - A Saudi inmate up for transfer from the Guantanamo Bay military prison is less dangerous than Taliban leaders swapped last month for a U.S. soldier, a representative for the prisoner told a parole-style hearing on Thursday.

The inmate, Muhammad Murdi Issa al-Zahrani, is suspected of fighting in Afghanistan for al Qaeda, according to a U.S. military profile submitted at the hearing of Guantanamo's Periodic Review Board.

But his military representative told the panel he should be given a second chance and transferred to a Saudi rehabilitation center. Al-Zahrani did not meet criteria as a significant threat to the United States, he said.

"This is especially true in light of mitigating factors put in places to enable the recent release of five Taliban detainees, who were all classified as higher threats than Mr al-Zahrani," his representative said.

Three weeks ago, the United States exchanged five senior Taliban figures held at the Guantanamo Bay U.S. Naval Base for U.S. Army Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, the last American prisoner of war in Afghanistan.

Bergdahl's release has drawn widespread criticism, in part from lawmakers who say the Taliban leaders could return to the fight.

The military profile read at Thursday's hearing said that al-Zahrani's connections to extremist leaders in Afghanistan could provide an avenue for him to rejoin al Qaeda. The hearing was carried via closed-circuit television to a viewing site near the Pentagon. Al-Zahrani declined to be represented by a lawyer and until this week had refused to participate in the hearing process, his representative said.

He appeared at the hearing dressed in a white shirt with a long beard and glasses, which he took on and off throughout the proceedings open to public viewing. The profile gave his age as 44 or 45, and he has been held at Guantanamo since August 2002.

In 1999 al-Zahrani traveled to Afghanistan from Saudi Arabia and received training from al Qaeda, according to the profile. He has presented few problems for guards while at the prison.

Al-Zahrani is the ninth detainee to go before the Periodic Review Board to determine if he should be held at Guantanamo or be transferred. The board was implemented by President Barack Obama to help close the prison, which holds 149 detainees.

(Additional reporting by [Ian Simpson](#); Editing by [Grant McCool](#))

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