

Shadow Lives: How the War on Terror in England Became a War on Women and Children

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Once, as a reporter, I covered wars, conflicts, civil wars, and even a genocide in places like Vietnam, Angola, Eritrea, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, keeping away from official briefings and listening to the people who were living the war. In the years since the Bush administration launched its Global War on Terror, I've done the same thing without ever leaving home.

In the last decade, I didn't travel to distant refugee camps in Pakistan or destroyed villages in Afghanistan, nor did I spend time in besieged cities like Iraq's Fallujah or Libya's Misrata. I stayed in Great Britain. There, my government, in close conjunction with Washington, was pursuing its own version of what, whether anyone cared to say it or not, was essentially a war against Islam. Somehow, by a series of chance events, I found myself inside it, spending time with families transformed into enemies.

I hadn't planned to write about the war on terror, but driven by curiosity about lives most of us never see and a few lucky coincidences, I stumbled into a world of Muslim women in London, Manchester, and Birmingham. Some of them were British, others from Arab and African countries, but their husbands or sons had been swept up in Washington's war. Some were in Guantanamo, some were among the dozen Muslim foreigners who did not know each other, and who were surprised to find themselves imprisoned together in Britain on suspicion of links to al-Qaeda. Later, some of these families would find themselves under house arrest.

In the process, I came to know women and children who were living in almost complete isolation and with the stigma of a supposed link to terrorism. They had few friends, and were cut off from the wider world. Those with a husband under house arrest were allowed no visitors who had not been vetted for "security," nor could they have computers, even for their children to do their homework. Other lonely women had husbands or sons who had sometimes spent a decade or more in prison without charges in the United Kingdom, and were fighting deportation or extradition.

Gradually, they came to accept me into their isolated lives and talked to me about their children, their mothers, their childhoods — but seldom, at first, about the grim situations of their husbands, which seemed too intimate, too raw, too frightening, too unknowable to be put into words.

In the early years, it was a steep learning curve for me, spending time in homes where faith was the primary reality, Allah was constantly invoked, English was a second language, and privacy and reticence were givens. Facebook culture had not come to most of these

families. The reticence faded over the years, especially when the children were not there, or in the face of the kind of desolation that came from a failed court appeal to lift the restrictions on their lives, an unexpected police raid on the house, a husband's suicide attempt, or the coming of a new torture report from Washington's then-expanding global gulag of [black sites](#) and, of course, Guantanamo.

In these years, I met some of their husbands and sons as well. The first was a British man from Birmingham, Moazzam Begg. He had been held for three years in Washington's notorious offshore prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, only to be released without charges. When he came home, through his lawyer, he asked me to help write his memoir, the first to come out of Guantanamo. We worked long months on [Enemy Combatant](#). It was hard for him to relive his nightmare days and nights in American custody in Kandahar and in the U.S. prison at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan and then those limbo years in Cuba. It was even harder for him to visit the women whose absent husbands he had known in prison and who, unlike him, were still there.

Was My Husband Tortured?

In these homes he visited, there was always one great unspoken question: Was my husband or son tortured? It was the single question no one could bear to ask a survivor of that nightmare, even for reassurance. When working on his book, I deliberately left the chapter on his experiences in American hands in Bagram prison for last, as I sensed how difficult it would be for both of us to speak about the worst of the torture I knew he had experienced.

Through Moazzam, I met other men who had been swept up in the post-9/11 dragnet for Muslims in Great Britain, refugees who sought him out as an Arabic speaker and a British citizen to help them negotiate Britain's newly hostile atmosphere in the post-9/11 years. Soon, I began to visit some of their wives, too.

In time, I found myself deep inside a world of civilian women who were being warred upon (after a fashion) in my own country, which was how I came upon a locked-down hospital ward with a man determined to starve himself to death unless he was given refugee documents to leave Britain, children who cried in terror in response to a knock on the door, wives faced with a husband changed beyond words by prison.

I was halfway through working on Moazzam's book when London was struck by our 9/11, which we call 7/7. The July 7, 2005, suicide bombings, in three parts of the London underground and a bus, killed 52 civilians and injured more than 700. The four bombers were all young British men between 18 and 30, two of them married with children, and one of them a mentor at a primary school. In video statements left behind they described themselves as "soldiers" whose aim was to force the British government to pull its troops out of Iraq and Afghanistan. Just three weeks later, there were four more coordinated bomb attacks on the London subway system. (All failed to detonate.) The four men responsible, longterm British residents originally from the Horn of Africa, were captured, tried, and sentenced to life imprisonment. In this way, the whole country was traumatised in 2005, and that particularly includes the various strands of the Muslim community in Great Britain.

The British security services quickly returned to a post-9/11 stance on overdrive. The same MI5 intelligence agents who had interrogated Moazzam while he was in U.S. custody asked to meet him again to get his thoughts on who might be behind the attacks. However, three years in U.S. custody and five months at home occupied with his family and his book had

not made him a likely source of information on current strains of thought in the British Muslim community.

At the same time, the dozen foreign Muslim refugees detained in the aftermath of 9/11 and held without trial for two years before being released on the orders of the House of Lords were rearrested. In the summer of 2005, the government prepared to deport them to countries they had originally fled as refugees.

All of them had been made anonymous by court order and in legal documents were referred to as Mr. G, Mr. U, and so on. This was no doubt intended to safeguard their privacy, but in a sense it also condemned them. It made them faceless, inhuman, and their families experienced it just that way. "They even took my husband's name away, why?" one wife asked me.

The women I was meeting in these years were mostly from this small group, as well as the relatives of a handful of British residents — Arabs — who were not initially returned from Guantanamo with the nine British citizens that the Americans finally released without charges in 2004 and 2005.

Perhaps no one in the country was, in the end, more terrorised than them, thanks to the various terror plots by British nationals that followed. And they were right to be fearful. The pressure on them was overwhelming. Some of them simply gave up and went home voluntarily because they could not bear house arrest, though they risked being sent to prison in their native lands; others went through years of house arrest and court appeals against deportation, all of which continues to this day.

[Among the plots](#) that unnerved them were one in 2006 against transatlantic aircraft, for which a total of 12 Britons were jailed for life in 2009, and the 2007 attempt to blow up a London nightclub and Glasgow International Airport, in which one bomber died and the second was jailed for 32 years. In the post-9/11 decade, 237 people were convicted of terror-related offences in Britain.

Though all of this was going on, much of it remained remote from the world of the refugee women I came to know who, in the larger world, were mainly preoccupied with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that, with Palestinian developments, filled their TV screens tuned only to Arabic stations.

These women did not tend to dwell on their own private nightmares, but for anyone in their company there was no mistaking them: a wife prevented from taking her baby into the hospital to visit her hunger-striking husband and get him to eat before he starved to death; another, with several small children, turned back from a prison visit, despite a long journey, because her husband was being punished that day; children whose toys were taken in a police raid and never given back; midnight visits from a private security company to check on a man already electronically tagged.

Here was the texture of a hidden war of continual harassment against a largely helpless population. This was how some of the most vulnerable people in British society — often already traumatised refugees and torture survivors — were made permanent scapegoats for our post-9/11, and then post-7/7 fears.

So powerful is the stigma of "terrorism" today that, in the name of "our security," whether

in Great Britain or the United States, just about anything now goes, and ever fewer people ask questions about what that “anything” might actually be. Here in London, repeated attempts to get influential religious or political figures simply to visit one of these officially locked-down families and see these lives for themselves have failed. In the present political climate, such a personal, fact-finding visit proved to be anything but a priority for such people.

A Legal System of Secret Evidence, House Arrest, and Financial Sanctions

Against this captive population, in such an anything-goes atmosphere, all sorts of experimental perversions of the legal system were tried out. As a result, the British system of post-9/11 justice contains many features which should frighten us all but are completely unfamiliar to the vast majority of people in the United Kingdom.

Key aspects for the families I have been concerned with include the [use of secret evidence](#) in cases involving deportation, bail conditions, and imprisonment without trial. In addition, most of their cases have been heard in a special court known as the Special Immigration Appeals Commission or [SIAC](#), which is housed in an anonymous basement set of rooms in central London.

One of SIAC’s innovative features is the use of “special advocates,” senior barristers who have security clearance to see secret evidence on behalf of their clients, but without being allowed to disclose it or discuss it, even with the client or his or her own lawyer. The [resignation on principle](#) of a highly respected barrister, Ian Macdonald, as a special advocate in November 2004 exposed this process to the public for the first time — but almost no one took any interest.

And a sense of the injustice in this arcane system was never sufficiently sparked by such voices, which found little echo in the media. Nor was there a wide audience for reports from a [team of top psychiatrists](#) about the devastating psychological impact on the men and their families of indefinite detention without trial, and of a house-arrest system framed by “[control orders](#)” that allow the government to place restrictions of almost any sort on the lives of those it designates.

An even less noted aspect of the anti-terror legal system brought into existence after 9/11 was the financial sanctions that could freeze the assets of designated individuals. First [ordered by](#) the United Nations, the financial-sanctions regime was [consolidated here](#) through a European Union list of designated people. The few lawyers who specialized in this area were [scathing](#) about the draconian measures involved and the utter lack of transparency when it came to which governments had put which names on which list.

The effect on the listed families was draconian. Marriages collapsed under the strain. The listed men were barred from working and only allowed £10 a week for personal expenses. Their wives — often from conservative cultures where all dealings with the outside world had been left to husbands — suddenly were the families’ faces to the world, responsible for everything from shopping to accounting monthly to the government’s Home Office for every item the family purchased, right down to a bottle of milk or a pencil for a child. It was humiliating for the men, who lost their family role overnight, and exhausting and frustrating for the women, while in some cases the rest of their families shunned them because of the taint of alleged terrorism. Almost no one except specialist lawyers even knew that such financial sanctions existed in Britain.

In the country's [High Court](#), the [first judicial challenge](#) to the financial-sanctions regime was brought in 2008 by five British Muslim men known only as G, K, A, M, and Q. In response, Justice Andrew Collins said he found it "totally unacceptable" that, to take an especially absurd example, a man should have to get a license for legal advice about the sanctions from the very body that was imposing them. The man in question had waited three months for a "basic expense" license permitting funds for food and rent, and six months for a license to obtain legal advice about the situation he found himself in.

In a related case before the judicial committee of the House of Lords, Justice Leonard Hoffman expressed incredulity at the "meanness and squalor" of a regime that "monitored who had what for lunch." More recently, the United Kingdom's Supreme Court endorsed the comments of Lord Justice Stephen Sedley who described those subject to the regime as being akin to "prisoners of the state."

Among senior lawyers concerned about this hidden world of punishment was Ben Emmerson, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms While Countering Terrorism. He devoted one of his official U.N. reports to the financial sanctions issue. His recommendations included significantly more transparency from governments who put people on such a list, the explicit exclusion of evidence obtained by torture, and the obligation of governments to give reasons when they refuse to remove individuals from the list. Of course, no one who mattered was paying the slightest attention.

Against ideological governments obsessed by terrorism on both sides of the Atlantic and a culture numbed by violent anti-terrorist tales like "24" and *Zero Dark Thirty*, such complicated and technical initiatives on behalf of individuals who have been given the tag, implicitly if not explicitly, of "terrorist" stand little chance of getting attention.

"Each Time It's Worse"

Nearly a decade ago, at the New York opening night of *Guantanamo: Honour Bound to Defend Freedom*, the play Gillian Slovo and I wrote using only the words of the relatives of prisoners in that jail, their lawyers, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, an elderly man approached Moazzam Begg's father and me. He introduced himself as a former foreign policy adviser to President John Kennedy. "It could never have happened in our time," he said.

When the Global War on Terror was still relatively new, it was common for audiences to react similarly and with shock to a play in which fathers and brothers describe their bewilderment over the way their relation had disappeared into the [legal black hole](#) of Guantanamo Bay. In the years since, we have become numb to the destruction of lives, livelihoods, futures, childhoods, legal systems, and trust by Washington's and London's never-ending war on terror.

In that time, I have seen children grow from toddlers to teenagers locked inside this particular war machine. What they say today should startle us out of such numbness. Here, for instance, are the words of two teenagers, a girl and a boy whose fathers had been imprisoned or under house arrest in Britain for 10 years and whose lives in those same years were filled with indignities and humiliations:

"People seem to think that we get used to things being how they are for us, so we don't feel

the injustices so much now. They are quite wrong: it was painful the first time, more painful the second, even more so the third. In fact, each time it's worse, if you can believe that. There isn't a limit on how much pain you can feel."

The boy added this:

"There is never one day when I feel safe. It can be the authorities, it can be ordinary people, they can do something bad for us. Only like now when we are all in the house together can I stop worrying about my mum and my sisters, and even me, what might happen to us. On the tube [subway], in class at university, people look at my beard. I see them looking and I know they are thinking bad things about me. I would like to be a normal guy who no one looks at. You know, other boys, some of my friends, they cut corners, things like driving without a current license, everyone does it. But I can't, I can't ever, ever, take even a small risk. I have to always be cautious, be responsible... for my family."

These children have been brought up by women who, against all odds, have often preserved their dignity and kept at least a modicum of joy in their families' lives, and so, however despised, however unnoticed, however locked away, made themselves an inspiration to others. They are not victims to be pitied, but women our societies should embrace.

South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu's [response](#) to recent proposals that Washington establish a secret court to oversee the targeting of terrorist suspects for death-by-drone and President Obama's expanding executive power to kill, speak for the world beyond the West. They offer a different perspective on the war on terror that Washington and Great Britain continue to pursue with no end in sight:

"Do the United States and its people really want to tell those of us who live in the rest of the world that our lives are not of the same value as yours? That President Obama can sign off on a decision to kill us with less worry about judicial scrutiny than if the target is an American? Would your Supreme Court really want to tell humankind that we, like the slave Dred Scott in the nineteenth century, are not as human as you are? I cannot believe it. I used to say of apartheid that it dehumanized its perpetrators as much as, if not more than, its victims. Your response as a society to Osama bin Laden and his followers threatens to undermine your moral standards and your humanity."

Victoria Brittain, journalist and former editor at the Guardian, has authored or co-authored two plays and four books, including [Enemy Combatant with Moazzam Begg](#). Her latest book, [Shadow Lives: The Forgotten Women of the War on Terror](#) (Palgrave/Macmillan, 2013) has just been published.

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