

WAR CRIMES AND TORTURE: Guantánamo and back: an interview with Moazzam Begg

By [Jane Kinninmont](#)

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Editor's Note

On May 7, Moazzam Begg presented an important testimony on the practice of torture in Guantanamo to the Kuala Lumpur War Crimes Tribunal.

The following 2006 article by Jane Kinninmont is presented as a backgrounder to the coverage of the proceedings and evidence provided at the Tribunal hearings.

Michel Chossudovsky, Kuala Lumpur, May 8, 2012

British Muslim Moazzam Begg was arrested by the United States and detained without trial for three years, much of it at Guantánamo Bay. A year on he is ready to tell his story and Jane Kinninmont listens.

Former Guantánamo Bay detainee Moazzam Begg is devastatingly reasonable. He is calm, well-spoken, highly articulate, and small; when imprisoned by the US army in Afghanistan, he says, his hands were small enough to slip out of their cuffs when the guards were absent.

Begg was imprisoned for three years without charge or trial. A British citizen, he was picked up by US intelligence officials in Pakistan in January 2002; they accused him of being a member of al-Qaida, which he denies.

At first, Begg was taken to the Bagram detention centre in Afghanistan, where, he says, he went a year without seeing sunlight. From January 2003, he was moved to Guantánamo Bay. Most of his time there was spent in solitary confinement.

Click [here](#) [12] to read an extract from Moazzam Begg's book *Enemy Combatant*

The British government brought him back to the UK in January 2005, along with three other British detainees. They were all taken in for questioning at Paddington Green police station – and released within 24 hours. No charges have ever been brought against them.

Today, Begg is releasing a book, *Enemy Combatant: A British Muslim's Journey To Guantánamo And Back*, about his experiences. This happens – by chance, he says – to coincide with the release of Michael Winterbottom's new film, [The Road to Guantánamo](#) [12], about the three other British detainees, the "Tipton Three". The timing seems good: criticism of the Guantánamo detention centre is intensifying within the US, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel has called for it to be [closed](#) [12], and UK Prime Minister Tony Blair called it an "anomaly" that would have to be "dealt with sooner or later", after one of his

ministers backed [Merkel's call](#) [12]. So, might the detention centre be closed?

"I don't think so. Closing it would be a huge embarrassment to the US, after almost five years of telling the whole world that these dangerous people need to be kept there," said Begg, speaking in London last night. "It would be such a PR disaster for them. Many guards told me 'We've gone so far with this, we just have to follow it through, for better or for worse'.

And they just don't know what else to do with some of the people. There are Chinese Uighurs there who have been deemed not to be al-Qaida or any threat to the US, but they can't send them back to China where they would probably be executed. They're building a sixth camp at Guantánamo now, after finishing Camp Five. These are state-of-the-art camps, intended to be permanent."

Life as an "enemy combatant"

Begg says he was aware of people being sent from Guantánamo to prisons in other countries. "They themselves told me that people were being sent to Egypt. They told me of Ibn al-Sheikh al-Liby, who they said was a high-ranking member of al-Qaida, who said under torture in Egypt that al-Qaida had links to Saddam Hussein, totally unreliable evidence of course. When I was being tortured in Guantánamo, they threatened me with the same treatment."

Begg is now pursuing legal action against the British government, arguing that the Foreign Office was complicit in illegal interrogation techniques, though he is not holding up much hope for a positive outcome.

The former inmate describes his experiences in a calm, quietly impassioned manner which makes his testimony all the more powerful. He speaks of the ways he tried to keep himself entertained, or at least sane, in solitary confinement: doing hundreds of sit-ups, running on the spot, writing poetry when he could get paper. "I cracked up a couple of times, and smashed my cell up, but that only happened twice in three years," he said. He is even able to laugh at some of the absurd details, like his reading material while in detention - *Wuthering Heights* and old National Geographics with all the maps torn out.

One of the most interesting elements of Begg's book is that he has positive words about some of the US guards he met in Guantánamo. While in solitary confinement, the only people he could talk to were the American troops, ranging from young Los Angeles gangsters to southern rednecks and an aging Vietnam veteran. How did he keep an open mind towards them? And would he ever go to the US?

"I have never wanted to go to the US as it seems to me to have little history or culture. So I learnt more about the US at Guantánamo than at any other time, talking to the guards about the war of independence, the civil war, slavery, Vietnam ... My conclusion is that it is the most violent nation on earth, at least in modern history. But the guards I met were individuals and I was not going to tar them all with the same brush. That would simply have reciprocated the mistake the US government makes when it assumes all Islamists are hostile."

Begg says he found many of the guards resentful about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. What would he say to a young American thinking of joining the army?

“I would want to know why, first of all. Most of those I met were weekend warriors – National Guards and reservists who wanted their college fees paid and never expected to be sent abroad. If someone was joining out of conviction, I would say they need to be prepared to die or be injured. And I would ask why they felt that attacking Iraq or Afghanistan was preserving their freedom. This terminology is nonsense. They have been the victim of terrorist attacks, but they are still free.”

And what about those soldiers who believed that they were bringing freedom to Afghanistan, liberating the country from the Taliban?

“Many I met were idealistic in the early days. In fact, that helped them justify some of the atrocious abuses that took place. But as time went on, they found it harder to see us as terrorists. Increasingly, people are realising that only a very small proportion of the prisoners there have been involved with terrorism.”

Back in Britain

Begg had left the UK well before 9/11. Did he find the British Muslim community, or communities, much changed on his return? “It had changed a great deal since 9/11, with new laws and people being held in Belmarsh. Since 7/7, it has changed even more, with the ban on glorifying terrorism and the frightening shoot-to-kill policy. And most British Muslim organisations have been [afraid](#) [12] of campaigning on behalf of Guantánamo detainees in case they really are terrorists.’

Begg is deeply cynical about the anti-terror laws, saying at a recent London talk, “I don’t go in for conspiracy theories, but 7/7 was exactly what they wanted. Terrorism makes people like Bush and Blair stronger.”

Yet at the same talk, I was astonished to hear some of his positive comments on Britain and Britishness. He referred to “the tradition of civil liberties that put the Great in Great Britain”, and praised the House of Lords for defending this. He quoted a Daniel Defoe [poem](#) [12] about Englishness, then Jeremy Paxman’s line “Never underestimate the British ability to back the underdog”. And he even had some praise for the government: “I am in a privileged position as a British former detainee. Many other countries with citizens detained have done nothing to help them.”

Speaking last night, Begg said “Britain’s [multiculturalism](#) [26] is probably the best example in Europe and perhaps the world, even since 7/7”. He even remembers feeling proud when hearing from a Guantánamo Bay guard that a million people had marched in London against the Iraq war. “But there are still many parts of the UK, even my own city, where I feel that I stand out and do not belong.”

Has the [furore](#) [27] over the Danish cartoons of the prophet Mohammed had a detrimental effect on community relations in Britain? “Actually, the press response has been a credit to this country. Apart from the initial protests, where there were certainly overreactions by some Muslims, there has been a great deal of respect between the Muslim community and the press.”

What does he think of the cartoons themselves? “Caricatures can do a great deal. In Bagram, the guards made orange t-shirts depicting the prisoners as slaves in chains. In Guantánamo, they drew pictures of us as rats. That’s all fine and dandy until someone dies.

I saw two prisoners beaten to death at Bagram, and the caricatures were all part of the dehumanisation process.”

Begg’s new book is as much about British multiculturalism as it is about the “war on terror”. Begg describes it as “My complete autobiography to date, looking not just at my time in detention, but my life as a second generation Muslim growing up in Britain amongst a variety of cultures. I attended faith schools – first a Jewish school, then a Christian school, while being brought up as a liberal Muslim. It’s also about how the first Gulf war and the Balkans conflict shaped my political outlook and even my identity.”

What does he hope the book will achieve? “I want to give people an idea about why some people feel strongly about certain things” – a rather diplomatic answer by which he seems to mean, why many Muslims are angry with western policies – “but not to tar everyone with the same brush, as the US is doing, which just incurs more animosity.”

And what does he think people in Britain should be doing, at a grassroots level? “People need to push the government to talk to extremist organisations. The Irish example is very important. The IRA campaign was vicious, but the government and the IRA realised they couldn’t defeat each other militarily, so they had to negotiate.” Perhaps more [dialogue](#) [12] with Islamists will happen as a result of the election success of Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Does Begg think it is likely? “I don’t know. But it has to happen if we are to avoid a spiral of further violence.” Whatever happens, Moazzam Begg will continue to make his soft voice heard.

Click [here](#) [12] to read an extract from Moazzam Begg’s book *Enemy Combatant*

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