

Why they took my passport

Moazzam Begg

Shortly before he was arrested in February 2014 on terrorism charges, Moazzam Begg published this article on the website of CAGE, an advocacy organisation he founded after his return from detention at Guantanamo. In it he revisits extraordinary rendition and the torture of victims, which is why he had travelled to Syria. These matters have long been of concern to The Spokesman (see nos. 89 and 101).

In summer 2012, I wrote about the first of my two visits to Syria to investigate leads into cases of British and American complicity in the rendition of terrorism suspects to the regime of Bashar al-Asad.

This followed on from something I learned first-hand from CIA and US military intelligence agents who threatened to send me to Egypt or Syria if I failed to co-operate with them during my time in the Bagram prison in Afghanistan. I made British MI5/MI6 agents, who were present at every leg of my unlawful imprisonment, fully aware of these threats. Their response was that I had to co-operate with their US counterparts.

On my eventual return to the UK from Guantanamo, along with three other British citizens, I received a letter from the Home Office informing me that my ability to apply for a passport had been restricted by the Home Secretary under the powers of the ‘Royal Prerogative’.

Having returned from three years of separation from my loved ones, spent mostly in solitary confinement, and after suffering the effects of regular human rights violations, I didn’t challenge the decision immediately. Instead, I tried to rebuild my lost connection to a traumatised family, including a son I’d never seen.

UK torture complicity

As part of my work for CagePrisoners, I soon began campaigning for prisoners detained at Guantanamo and others held at secret detention sites, or those who had disappeared after being rendered to countries such as Libya, Egypt, and Syria. We conducted numerous investigations into

recurrent reports of extreme torture carried out by the Syrian regime, and discovered the complicity of the governments of the US, Canada, France, Sweden, Germany, Denmark and Britain.

I was also constantly being invited to speak all over the world about issues pertaining to Guantanamo, torture, the rule of law and the war on terror. Thus, in 2009, I mounted a successful challenge to get my passport back. My subsequent extensive travel abroad was greeted simultaneously by meetings with people in power – including unexpected praise from US ambassadors in Luxembourg – to armed police escorting me off planes in order to deny me entry to Canada (where I'd gone to meet with Canadian rendition victims sent to Syria).

Returning to the UK, airports were often an ordeal in their own right as I would be stopped almost every time and questioned under Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act 2000. This happened even on visits to Brussels where I was invited to speak at the European Parliament by British MEPs, as well as trips to Malaysia where I had been giving evidence in war crimes tribunals set up by the former prime minister. Often, British police would ask me if I had gone to these places to further my claims about British complicity in torture.

During this period three very important things happened, from which I believe the British intelligence services have been unable to recover:

1. A major civil action was taken by 16 former Guantanamo prisoners against the British government and intelligence services for complicity in torture and false imprisonment.
2. Prime Minister David Cameron ordered a judge-led inquiry to be launched into allegations that the UK was complicit in torture.
3. The Metropolitan police began a criminal investigation against British intelligence services into recurrent allegations of complicity in kidnap, torture and false imprisonment.

In 2010, we won an out-of-court settlement against the government after it was compelled to hand over documents that showed how British government ministers had decided we should be consigned to Guantanamo, despite evidence of mistreatment.

At the end of the discussions with the government, the then Justice Minister, Kenneth Clarke QC, sat with us and listened. Several of the world's supposedly most dangerous terrorists sat in a room with a senior Tory minister discussing the previous government's wrongs. I handed Clarke a copy of my book, hoping there might be some proper understanding after this, but, all the while, the government was preparing the Justice and Security Bill – which passed into law earlier this year – that

would ensure damaging and embarrassing civil actions such as ours would henceforth be heard in secret under cover of ‘national security concerns’.

The inquiry into torture by Sir Peter Gibson was recently shelved in favour of the Intelligence and Security Committee, but in his interim report Gibson concluded that MI5 had at best ‘turned a blind eye’ to our abuse.

The criminal investigation is still going on. I have sat for hours with the Metropolitan Police giving testimony to them about what happened in Bagram and Guantanamo, and they have gone to meet with rendition victims in Libya, and continue to investigate the claims of Shaker Aamer who has been held in Guantanamo without charge for twelve years.

Last year, several former Guantanamo prisoners, including me, met with Asa Hutchinson, who had served as US Undersecretary for Homeland Security while we were captives. In a report by the Constitution Project’s Task Force on Detainee Treatment, which included him and two former senior US generals, the practice of torture by the US administration was described as ‘indisputable’. The report also stated bluntly that our treatment and indefinite detention were ‘abhorrent and intolerable’. There was also no escaping the fact that the British government had colluded in sending and keeping us there.

Visiting Syria

Following the uprisings of the ‘Arab spring’, I was able to make several visits to the Arab world and follow up cases of rendition, including the shocking case of a man whose tortured false testimony was used as a justification by both the US and UK to invade Iraq.

In July 2012, I visited Syria where I met numerous former prisoners who had been held by the Assad regime, as well as a few victims of US and UK rendition. One of the men, a Libyan who had resided in Syria, had been rendered to Libya after a phone call by a British Libyan dissident had been intercepted by MI5 and its contents disclosed to Assad’s *mukhabarat*. Documents found in the headquarters of Gaddafi’s *mukhabarat*, after the fall of Tripoli, clearly prove British involvement.

A few months later, in October 2012, I was called by an MI5 officer who said they wanted to talk to me about my views on the situation in Syria after having read my article. I told them that they must be aware that I was investigating several leads regarding British and American complicity in rendition and torture in Syria. They called back after consulting with their lawyers and said they understood that and would still like to meet. I agreed to speak to them and meet at a hotel in East London. Both MI5 and I had our lawyers present. MI5 was concerned about the possibility of Britons in

Syria being radicalised and returning to pose a potential threat to national security. I told them that Britain had nothing to worry about, especially since British foreign policy, at the time, seemed in favour of the rebels. At the end of the meeting I was assured by MI5 that my proposed return to Syria to continue my work would not be hindered, and it wasn't.

Subsequently, I travelled to Syria without incident. I spent much time accumulating testimony and information for a report on the situation of the current prisoners as well as the accounts of those who had been detained and tortured in the past. I witnessed the squalid refugee camps, I visited the wounded, young and old, some of whom I buried; I saw the carnage of Assad's killing machine, and I saw the beautiful young faces of children aged beyond their years. I witnessed the harsh winter and saw farmers chop down their olive trees to warm themselves, and I heard the horror stories of torture under the rule of both Bashar and Hafiz al-Assad. However, I also saw aid coming in from all over the Muslim world, which included British ambulances, British fire engines, British waste disposal trucks, British aid centres and hospitals with British doctors (one of whom was killed saving lives a few months ago), and volunteers from Britain's Muslim community. And yes, there were some British fighters, too. I do not believe any of them posed any kind of threat to the UK.

I returned home without hindrance, except for the customary schedule 7 stop. I was briefly questioned about my visit by border police and returned home shortly after. I came back 'radicalised' enough to speak at numerous events for various charities working out in Syria. I also conducted interviews with people on the ground who are close to the fighters to answer questions about any tangible threat to the UK to help allay the fears of the British public and intelligence services.

Schedule 7 stops

Since then I have been 'randomly' stopped more times than I can recall under schedule 7, several times while travelling. The last time this happened, in January 2014, I was *en route* to a conference in Turkey about the mass imprisonments and torture occurring in Egypt following the military coup. British police suggested that I might be going to Syria, despite showing them details of my itinerary and return flights for the following weekend. I was made to miss my flight, but the police were prepared to re-book me for the next available one, meaning that they were neither preventing me from going to Turkey, nor even potentially to Syria. I refused their offer as I would have had missed the conference by then and opted to return home. However, they took possession of my iPad and

phone and kept them for a week. Both items contained sensitive information and documents pertaining to CagePrisoners' investigations on both complicity in torture and responses to the British government's measures in tackling extremism.

In anticipation of future harassment at airports I began legal proceedings to challenge the constant harassment at airports under schedule 7 and informed the Home Office, the border police and British airports about my intended travel via my lawyers. We received a response from their lawyers, which acknowledged the letter but did little else.

Change of language

The language and attitude of the British government has steadily changed towards the Syrian opposition, especially since much of it has openly chosen an Islamic path, something with which the west has been unwilling to engage, and unprepared to accept. In 2003, Britain went to war based on the falsehood that Iraq may have possessed weapons of mass destruction. Clear evidence of the use of chemical weapons, in addition to over 120,000 dead through the use of conventional ones in Syria, has not elicited any such response, and most people are grateful for it. No one wants to see British involvement in Syria, especially the Syrians, who know well what happened next door in Iraq.

As a result, the Assad regime is now regarded as the better of the two choices. That is why the decision to stop even non-lethal aid for western-backed factions in Syria was taken by Britain. But, despite there being no evidence of a tangible threat from British fighters returning from Syria (the contrary, in fact), and certainly not the type that might have been posed from the same in Iraq or Afghanistan because of the presence of British troops, the government now wants to remove not just the passport but the nationality of Britons suspected of being involved in fighting in Syria. The government's myopic insistence on this point cannot fathom that this is simply about Syria, not Britain. The counterterrorism industry, it seems, has too many vested interests for the language to be tempered with reason.

Instead of easing the arduous journeys for the numerous convoys leaving with aid from Britain for Syria every month, border authorities detain the aid workers for hours on end – both on exit from and re-entry to the UK. On several occasions volunteers have been turned back, vehicles confiscated, and money and goods, which have been collected by the community for the beleaguered Syrian people, seized.

Britain has refused to take any Syrian refugees, despite the unprecedented crisis facing millions fleeing the war. It also did next to

nothing for the British Muslim, Dr Abbas Khan and has been heavily criticised for shirking its duty regarding one of its own citizens while he was horrifically tortured.

Simply speaking, the British government has lost all touch with the reality on the ground and the enormous sentiments in the Muslim community, and beyond, regarding the Syrian conflict.

Losing my passport – again

After a recent trip to South Africa – which coincided with the funeral of Nelson Mandela – where I spoke extensively about the complicity of the British government in rendition and torture, I was met upon arrival at Heathrow by officials who served me with a notice to seize my passport under the ‘Royal Prerogative’, stating that it was assessed my previous visits to Syria had constituted involvement in terrorism. No explanation other than that was given.

I am certain that the only reason I am being continually harassed – something that began long before any visit to Syria – is because CagePrisoners and I are at the forefront of investigations and assertions based on hard evidence that British governments, past and present, have been wilfully complicit in torture.

How logical is it to stop me from travelling anywhere in the world simply because they want to prevent me from going to Syria? Numerous British citizens have been prevented from entering Turkey (the key entry point to Syria) at the behest of the British authorities. They could have done the same with me.

It is these government-shaking issues that are the real reason why I have been continually harassed and targeted by the authorities in this country. I am not and never have been in any way a threat to them, unless words seeking accountability are a threat.

At a time when Islam and the Muslim community face an unprecedented attack via politicians, the media and, ultimately, some sections of the public susceptible to this onslaught, it has been the aim of CagePrisoners and myself in trying to empower the community that is being purposefully undermined.

The struggle for reason and justice is clearly a longer one than I once imagined, but since our aim is a good and just one, I do not believe our detractors will succeed.