

The forgotten detainees

Victoria Brittain describes the mental distress inflicted by the British state on Muslim men held without charge.

We were arrested in December 2001 and taken straight to Belmarsh prison. We know that the police in this country have enormous powers to investigate suspected terrorists. Why did no one ever speak to us? Why were we never asked a single question before being locked up as terrorists? We have never had a trial. We were found guilty without one. We are imprisoned indefinitely and probably forever. We have no idea why. We have not been told what the evidence is against us. We are here. Speak to us. Listen to us. Tell us what you think and why. If you did, you would no longer believe we were a threat to this country. You would think perhaps that there was not the emergency you have imagined here. Everyone is giving their opinion about us. Why not think of coming to us first, rather than locking us up and never speaking to us?

(The Forgotten Detainees, Letter to the Guardian, 26 February 2004)

The men who wrote that open letter are still, five years later, in the same situation of being bypassed by British justice, as they were then. Instead of Belmarsh, they are in Long Lartin, under house arrest or in a mental hospital. I have been visiting some of them and their families over several years.

The letter writers were among a dozen Arab and Algerian foreign nationals – refugees – living in Britain mostly since the 1990s, who were arrested in December 2001. They were detained in Belmarsh prison in south London, as a ‘risk to national security’. They were never questioned by police or security services, and all were astonished

at their abrupt change of fortune from living happily in Britain. Some single men, some with families, they came from Algeria, Jordan, Libya and Tunisia, and none could be sent home because they faced the threat of arrest, torture or even death. Their experiences since their arrests show British racism and Islamophobia at the official level, encouraged across the media, and have served as a form of social control of the Muslim community in general. Fear of these people has been deliberately stoked, by their being bracketed together and branded as terrorists.

Myths about them have mushroomed, as they have remained unknown, shadowy ‘others’. It is symbolic of their ‘unknown’ status that they are almost all referred to only by an initial, such as Mr X, by court order. Such internment of foreigners was ruled unlawful by the House of Lords in December 2004, and the men were released, but under control orders, which amounted to house arrest, although the rules varied for each individual. They remained suspected of terrorism links, but the evidence was kept secret from them and from their lawyers. Hence, they do not even know what they are alleged to have done.

After the 7 July bombings in London in 2005, carried out by British Muslims, these refugees were rearrested. The British government then sought memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with the various governments, which would allow their deportation under the cover of assurances that they would not be tortured. Legal battles against their deportations, on the grounds of the worthlessness of such MOUs, have continued ever since, in court hearings which have gone from the Special Immigration Appeals Tribunal

(SIAC), through the Court of Appeal, as high as the House of Lords, and in some cases to the European Court of Human Rights. Lawyers finally got some of the men released on deportation bail under which the conditions are similar to control orders, though often more draconian. One man, Mr U, was held on 24-hour house arrest before being returned to prison by SIAC.

The arbitrary arrests of the men, the secret evidence against them, the shock of injustice, humiliation and sudden loss of control over their lives in Britain, have caused deep and lasting trauma and, by re-running old experiences of arbitrary violence by authorities, reawakened symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The failure of the law to protect them, or help them to challenge successfully many aspects of what British authorities have done to them, despite dozens of court appeals and judicial reviews, has been one of the most painful and difficult psychological burdens they have had to try to adjust to.

These Muslim opponents and victims of repressive and corrupt Arab regimes allied to the West – who had sought and found sanctuary in Britain – became targeted as terrorist threats to Britain. It was a fundamental misconception, or cynical opportunism by the British authorities. Many were previously well known to British intelligence officials, who had found them useful sources and go-betweens. But, in the changed climate post 9/11, that was over-ridden by new allegations about them and demands for their return, from the intelligence services of the regimes they opposed – regimes like Egypt and Jordan whose leaders were close to the UK and anxious to be seen as allies in the ‘war on terror’. Yet the truth was that these people had sought only safety in the UK, and their political focus (if at all) was in the countries they had fled. They lived parallel lives to the rest of Britain, rarely intersecting socially, politically, linguistically.

In a climate of fear stoked by the authorities, these families became convenient scapegoats – unknown, and easily demonised. Moreover, in the post-9/11 atmosphere, and with a

well-founded fear of guilt by association, few people from the Muslim community wanted to break through the isolation imposed on these families by the British authorities.

Everyone in these families, including children, has lost the ability to trust. All feel betrayed by the authorities, and many know they have also been betrayed by former friends and colleagues. They have experienced a state of personal siege that mirrors the psychological impact of the Palestinian experience. This is such an important part of the mental landscape for most of them, though their everyday lives in Britain painfully lacks the reinforcement of the lived communal experience of Palestine. Bail and control order conditions which prohibit virtually all social interaction reinforce the fear of breaking the rules inadvertently by speaking to people met on the street or in the mosque, and intensify feelings of isolation.

One measure of the interior drama that has transformed these men is that, of the 12 arrested on 19 December 2001, eight have been driven into mental illness and four into florid psychosis. More than half were assessed as already suffering mental health problems associated with their torture and/or prison experience at home. Other Muslim men of foreign origin arrested as far back as 1998, and as recently as 2005, have also suffered mental breakdown, leading to stays in Broadmoor Secure Mental Hospital and subsequent dependence on medication to function. Moreover, they come from backgrounds where such mental illness is a real stigma and therefore almost impossible to acknowledge.

Manifestations of mental illness have ranged across the spectrum, from repeated suicide attempts and mental breakdowns, to depression and acute anxiety, and include wives, and children, where bed-wetting and withdrawn behaviour

are common. Children are also frequently re-traumatised by the constant reminder of their father's vulnerability, through repeated court appearances or unannounced police visits to the home, often while they are sleeping. Such visits are a routine condition of control orders and deportation bail, which also mean unannounced visits from the private company responsible for their subjects' electronic tags and the special telephone that the men have to use up to five times a day, including during the night, to confirm their presence and whenever they leave the house or return. Acute anxiety never lets up as the tags malfunction repeatedly and fail to register at the company's central control. So, a man sleeping quietly or playing with his children can be arrested, taken to court and accused of having broken his bail conditions. A breach of the conditions can mean a five-year jail sentence.

Fathers/husbands suffer a huge psychological burden from feeling their place as the provider and head of the household undermined by their situation, robbing them of dignity before their wives and children. Older children, especially boys, are sometimes casualties in UK society. They are 'lost' to drugs, gambling on machines, petty stealing, to the despair of their mothers. The loss of the father's effective influence has been catastrophic, leaving them undisciplined and without role models, and this is probably irreversible, as they have done so poorly in school that their chances of employment are slim.

The lasting impact of British policy and the actions of the myopic officials who have administered the collective punishment of these families, is incalculable. No outsider can convey the depths of grief, the sheer fear of the unknown, the sleepless nights of wives left to manage households and children in a hostile society where they had no

resource to turn to, and often little English. The terrors they had fled came back to haunt them, their health broke down. Britain, which had been the place of safety their husbands chose for them, became a place of mental torture. And many men are consumed with guilt and anger at the misjudgment of the country that they had made, and the strain on their families who have paid for it daily. Quite simply, their lives have been ruined by Britain.

However, something miraculously positive happened, too, in this small community, kept as isolated as British bureaucracy could devise – people learned each other's stories, wives met while waiting for prison visits or through the prison fellowship of husbands who, in the special Muslim wing, cooked communal food, helped each other with artwork, discussed books and families, forged bonds of intimacy and respect. Many of these men should have been recognised as leaders of the Muslim community in Britain; their strong wives and many children's extraordinarily brilliant school achievements, role models for others. It is Britain's loss that, instead, they were rejected.

Many of the wives speak of their dream of living somewhere, anywhere else, where their families would be free, quiet and peaceful – as they had dreamed Britain would be. But the twenty-first century appeared unlikely to provide any such haven for this handful of victims of the 'war on terror'. These families, with their unheard call for justice, are a shame that the powerful in our society refuse to see. ■

Victoria Brittain is a journalist and writer. She has been a foreign correspondent from many countries in Africa, Vietnam and Washington, and for many years was on *The Guardian* foreign staff. Her main current focus is civil liberties in Britain and Europe, and Palestine.

References

The Forgotten Detainees (2004), *Guardian*, letters page, 26 February.