

Witnessing the 20-year War on Terror Conference

*Organised by CAGE as part of the International Witness Campaign**

Note: Quotes by contributors are italicised and underlined. A short biography of the contributors is provided at the end of this document.

Welcome and Introduction

Asim Qureshi talks about the complexity of the War on Terror, and how it is so much more than the US and UK doing awful things in distant countries. He points out how Muslim-majority countries are also complicit, based on a narrative set by the US and its allies. He touches on the far-reaching and varied impacts of the War on Terror, and explains how Cage, together with the International Witness Campaign, have been pursuing justice and due process. *“There has to be another way out of the cycle of violence beyond simply locking people up, having systems of mass surveillance, having hot wars abroad and cold wars at home.”*

The historical context to the US reaction after the events of 9/11 by Darryl Li

Darryl Li provides historical context to the US reaction to 9/11. Even before 9/11, the US has always been *“a secular colonial state grounded in racial slavery and white supremacy, and a global hegemon with a history of raining untold violence down upon many parts of the world.”* He emphasises the importance of remembering this when thinking about the War on Terror. He explains that after the end of the Cold War, the US was left without an obvious rival or enemy to fuel the war machine, as well as less focus and determination. He mentions the proxy war waged in Afghanistan. He talks about the concept of jihad in the 90s as a way of responding to a crisis of the nation state (armed insurgencies in Algeria and Egypt) and a crisis of world order (Muslims travelling to help other Muslims where the Western-led international community was seen to have failed them, e.g. Bosnia, Kashmir and Chechnya). He identifies a third, hybrid concept of jihad whereby it was considered impossible to improve Muslim societies while their authoritarian regimes were sponsored by Western powers - a concept associated with Al Qaeda, despite predating it. This led to a shadow war in the 90s, with the US hunting down and disappearing activists in Croatia, Azerbaijan, Albania, etc. Even though Al Qaeda was targeting US embassies abroad, the US public remained largely indifferent. With 9/11, *“the US finally has the answer to the question. ‘What now after the Cold War?’”*

Authoritarianism & war: How America lost itself by Spencer Ackerman

Spencer Ackerman talks about how the War on Terror led to the rise of Trump and the far right. He says that the US is a “settler colonialist nation that enforces a racial caste system in the interests of capital,” which gives us a very clear picture of how such an entity, once it establishes global hegemony, is going to react to an atrocity like 9/11. Before 9/11, the worst terrorist attack in US history had been the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing carried out by white supremacist Timothy McVey. Through the reaction to this we can see the War on Terror in terms of who the War on Terror will not be enforced against. The popular narrative about who was responsible for this atrocity was Muslims! Before McVey took responsibility, people talked about how best to punish those responsible, including shooting people on sight. When they found out it was carried out by McVey, the narrow investigative focus was on McVey alone, not his community - because his community was the overclass. After 9/11, even though none of the perpetrators were Pakistani, the residents of Little Pakistan in Brooklyn started to get contacted by immigration authorities, FBI etc. This was in stark contrast to the experience of white communities after the Oklahoma City bombing. After 9/11 we saw a collective response, centering on not the perpetrators, but a very broad policy of civilisational vengeance and criminalisation by association, of punishing and seeking to challenge and prevent politics of solidarity. Inevitably, such an environment was destined to produce politicians like Trump, looking for civilisational explanations to rationalise all of this violence and the resulting disastrous wars. We are conditioned to see the US as exceptional and virtuous. *“We were taught that the US was virtuous, to judge the US by its character, not its actions.”*

Living the War on Terror: A conversation between Amina Janjua and Leena Al-Arian led by Asim Qureshi.

Amina Janjua talks about the events leading up to founding the Defence of Human Rights organization: the horror and heartbreak of losing contact with her husband, from whom she has heard nothing since 2005, when he was “disappeared.” She outlines her struggle to find answers within the judicial system of Pakistan. She describes encountering many other families with “disappeared” relatives during her legal battle, and her urge to help them, writing applications for all the families and fighting their cases in court. She talks about how case numbers grew, and how they faced crackdowns when they protested: tear gas was deployed, and her own children were beaten by police in front of her eyes. She outlines her tireless fight to support the families of disappeared relatives, visiting them, offering counselling and hope. She talks about touring Europe in her quest for justice, and how her visa to America was cancelled before her scheduled visit. She mentions a subsequent change in Pakistani law that legitimised the disappearances as part of the War on Terror, and says her husband’s case has now been buried. She insists that these forced disappearances are still used to stifle dissent and freedom of speech: vocal families of disappeared people are being disappeared too. *“I didn’t imagine that this war on terror would hurt me or my household. To this day, I don’t know if my husband is dead or alive.”*

For a full background, see recent interview with Amina Janjua:

<https://www.amaliah.com/post/63355/war-on-terror-human-rights-masood-ahmed-janjua-amina-pakistan>

Leena Al Arian says that after the Oklahoma City bombing, her father was the victim of a vicious smear campaign. She says that back in 1997, her uncle was arrested and held under secret evidence, and her father led the campaign against secret evidence. She talks about growing up under surveillance; all telephone conversations in their household were recorded. People would come in and out of their property, setting off alarms. The FBI raided her home when she was 10 years old. When her father was arrested, she was 17; they took everything, including her college computer. She talks about coming from a family of courageous, vocal activists: "silence was never an option in our household." Her family was ostracised after her father's arrest, alienated from the very community he had helped build. Her father was eventually released under house arrest, and later deported. She has never stopped fighting for the rights of others who have been impacted by the targeting of Muslim communities in the US, and is part of the same coalition for civil freedoms that her father co-founded. "Silence was never an option in my household. My father was an outspoken activist, but my inspiration to fight for justice was my mother"

Reflections on serving in the 'War on Terror' by Iraq war veterana Aaron Hughes

Aaron Hughes says the War on Terror is "based on dehumanisation, racism and islamophobia, rooted in the ideas of US exceptionalism and the myth of safety in militarism." He talks about how he joined the US military with idealistic expectations, which were brutally shattered after he was deployed to Iraq. He thought they were there to provide humanitarian relief, but "it became very clear we were there to establish military occupation and to reinforce the military infrastructure in Iraq." He realised they were not fighting terrorism, but fighting people in their homes: communities. His beliefs crumbled and he dealt with his existential crisis through art. He has since met with many veterans and survivors in his campaign to end war and seek reparations for the survivors.

The ever expanding war: What next?

Moazzam Begg starts by talking about Lawrence Wilkerson, who helped prepare a presentation that triggered the invasion of Iraq under false pretences, which he now deeply regrets. Wilkerson believes the state of Israel is responsible for the US narrative of Muslims being terrorists. Much of this happened pre-9/11. Moazzam points out that disappearances in Pakistan were all about the US War on Terror, including his own experience of being handed over to the CIA by the Pakistani government. "The law didn't mean anything, just as the law in Guantanamo meant nothing." He lists unlawful acts carried out by the US in the name of the War on Terror, from forced disappearances to drone strikes. "It's a state of lawlessness, created by the United States of America." America has jettisoned their entire belief system in terms of the moral high ground and the rule of law. Conservative estimates

place casualties of the War on Terror at 900 thousand - *“the equivalent of five hundred 9/11s”* - although the toll is probably much higher in reality. The last act of the US in Afghanistan was to fire a drone missile killing twelve members of a family, including five children under the age of 4. Any idea of being a world-renowned country that others aspire to in terms of moral uprightness has gone. Moazzam points out the complete lack of accountability for US war crimes. When the International Criminal Court began investigating US war crimes, the US imposed sanctions on the ICC. He talks about the road map he helped develop for the release of the remaining prisoners in Guantanamo Bay and its closure. He stresses the need for accountability for crimes committed in the name of the War on Terror.

Conclusion by Asim Qureshi

Asim Qureshi In his concluding remarks, Asim mentions that CAGE has many more events planned for the next few months, to launch a new report. He outlines CAGE's recommendations: 1) acknowledgement, 2) accountability, 3) restorative justice for victims and survivors, and 4) the complete dismantlement of the infrastructure that makes these crimes possible.

The recommendations and more about the International Witness Campaign can be found on: <https://www.20yearsofwar.com/>

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Contributor biographies:

Moazzam Begg - Former Guantanamo Detainee, Outreach Director (CAGE)

A British-born Muslim, Moazzam Begg is a former Guantanamo Bay prisoner and outreach director for CAGE. After his release, he became one of the most prominent public-speakers and Muslim advocates for justice and dialogue.

He is the author of the best-seller *Enemy Combatant* in which he recounts his experience as an innocent man detained and torture at Guantanamo, Bagram and Kandahar. The Muslim 500 listed him as one of the 500 “most influential Muslims” in the world. The New Statesman listed him in the top 50 “Heroes of our time”

He has travelled extensively to investigate state abuses and western complicity in torture including to Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Syria. A direct eye-witness to the conflicts in Bosnia, Afghanistan and Syria, his life has been recorded by the Columbia University Oral History project, and the BBC Storyville documentary, *The Confession*.

Leena al Arian - Coalition for Civil Freedoms

Leena Al-Arian is a Palestinian American mother and activist living in Boston, MA. She is the co-director of the Coalition for Civil Freedoms, an organization co-founded by her father, Sami Al-Arian, a former political prisoner in the U.S. who was deported in 2015. Leena has worked at a number of human rights and justice nonprofits including American Muslims for

Palestine, United Voices, and the Middle East Children's Alliance. She holds a master's degree in Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Chicago. She is a contributor to the volume, *Being Palestinian: Personal Reflections on Palestinian Identity in the Diaspora* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

Dr Asim Qureshi - Research Director, CAGE

Graduated in Law (LLB Hons) LLM, specialising in International Law and Islamic Law. He completed his PhD in International Conflict Analysis from the University of Kent. He is the Research Director at the advocacy group CAGE, and since 2003 has specialised in investigating the impact of counterterrorism practices worldwide. He has published a wide range of NGO reports, academic journals and articles. In 2009, he authored the book *Rules of the Game: Detention, Deportation, Disappearance* (Hurst, Columbia UP) a chapter in the 2017 book *What is Islamophobia?* (Pluto Press, Chicago UP) and in 2018 *A Virtue of Disobedience* (Unbound and ByLine Books). In 2020 the book *I Refuse to Condemn* was published by Manchester University Press (Dr Asim Qureshi Editor). Since 2010, he has been advising legal teams involved in defending terrorism trials in the US and at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Amina Masood - Chairperson Defence of Human Rights Pakistan

Amina is an activist known for her work against enforced disappearance in Pakistan. She is the chairperson of the rights group Defence of Human Rights Pakistan. Her career in activism started when her husband Masood Ahmed Janjua disappeared on 30 July 2005 and to date is still missing. Apart from enforced disappearances her work includes providing legal support to prisoners in foreign countries, arranging financial support to the families of victims of enforced disappearance and eradication of torture from jails and detention centres.

Aaron Hughes - Artist and Iraq Veteran

Aaron Hughes is an artist, curator, organizer, teacher, anti-war activist, and Iraq War veteran. Working through an interdisciplinary practice rooted in drawing and printmaking, he works collaboratively to create meaning out of trauma, transform systems of oppression, and seek liberation. Hughes works with a range of art and activist groups including About Face: Veterans Against the War, Justseeds Artists' Cooperative, emerging Veteran Art Movement, Prison + Neighborhood Arts/Education Project, and the Tea Project.

Spencer Ackerman - Journalist, Writer & Author of 'Reign of Terror'

Spencer Ackerman is a contributing editor at the Daily Beast. From 2017 to 2021, he was senior national security correspondent for The Daily Beast. He is the author of the forthcoming *REIGN OF TERROR: How The 9/11 Era Destabilized America and Produced Trump*. The former U.S. national security editor for the Guardian, Ackerman was part of the Pulitzer Prize-winning team reporting on Edward Snowden's surveillance revelations.