THE GUANTÁNAMO BAY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Moazzam Begg

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Moazzam Begg conducted by Ronald J. Grele and Kanishk Tharoor on May 30, 2011. This interview is part of the Guantánamo Bay Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

3PM | Session One

Interviewee: Moazzam Begg | Location: London, United Kingdom

Interviewer: Ronald J. Grele and Kanishk Tharoor | Date: May 30, 2011

Q: This is an interview for the Columbia University Oral History Research Office with Moazzam Begg. The interview is being conducted in London. Today's date is May 30, 2011. This is an interview for the Columbia Oral History Research Office.

Begg: My name is Moazzam Begg, I am a former Guantánamo prisoner and the director of the human rights organization Cageprisoners.

Q: In the last chapter and the epilogue of the book, you talk about coming home from Guantánamo, and talk about the reception and plans for the future. How would you rewrite those chapters today?

Begg: I do not know that I would rewrite the chapters about the epilogue in my book. I finish off saying that American justice in Guantánamo is an oxymoron. There are two conflicting concepts. The concept of justice in Guantánamo, I believe, has not been administered to any of the prisoners there – not the ones that have been released, not the ones who have habeas corpus petitions pending in the U.S. courts, nor the ones facing the U.S. military commissions. There would not be a great deal, after six years, to rewrite.

Q: What would justice look like then for those who have been released, for instance?

Begg: What happens when a person has been falsely imprisoned, tortured, abused, and their basic human rights violated? In any other circumstance, the people who did it are prosecuted.

They are compensated. They are given access to medical and psychological treatment and there is a recognition in the world that what happened to these people was wrong. That has not happened with the Guantánamo cases, in any of the cases. Every fight has been a fight to the death, in metaphorical terms. Nobody has given an inch, in terms of the governments that were involved complicitly, like the British government, or directly, like the U.S. government. We, as the former Guantánamo prisoners, still carry the stigma of being Guantánamo prisoners.

Q: President Obama in 2009, as one of his first acts since coming into power, decided to sign the order with the aim of closing Guantánamo Bay. What was your reaction at the time? Were you hopeful?

Begg: I remember the time when Obama came into power and had actually made the statements that he would close down Guantánamo, that he would stop the secret detention sites and he would put an end to torture. I was actually touring the UK at the time, with a former Guantánamo soldier, a guard, who had once served there. Both of us took this reaction, to say that it was too little, too late. Meaning that we had already seen, on both sides of the wire, as it were, the effects of the Bush policy. To say that he was going to close it was only reiterating what Bush himself had said several times, “I would like to see the place close.” It was nothing new. It was, as they say, old wine in new bottles. What we saw, and what we have seen thus far in the difference between Obama and Bush is that Bush was the president who ordered extra-judicial detention. Obama is the president who has ordered extra-judicial killing and maintained the extra-judicial detentions. Nothing has changed greatly. Very few numbers, relatively speaking, have been released under Obama. There are still 171 prisoners there with no foreseeable end to their plight.

Q: On a more personal level, you talk about being away from your family. How were you able to re-knit or were you able to re-knit your relationships with your family?

Begg: In reality, Guantánamo has destroyed the relationships that existed between family members. That is putting it bluntly, as much as possible without going into too much personal detail. I think that has happened across the board. It happened in my case. It happened in the case of many other people. Relationships that have been built upon absolutely no communication, built upon fear, and hope, and sadness, and tears, and then to come home to see children that I have never seen, in some cases, to see other children who have grown up to the point that they are no longer those young children, to step into the family where your position is no longer recognized, because those roles have been filled. There never has been a system, by the British government or the U.S. government that has recognized this aspect of human life. That has simply shattered the relationships between people, men, women, children, and simply said, "You were in Guantánamo, now you're back home, pick up your life, that's your problem now." Not even a "Sorry."

Q: How did you do that?

Begg: For me, and I think for a lot of the prisoners, we did not have the support mechanisms that people had. I remember in Guantánamo, for example, the American soldiers had combat stress, which we found sort of a bit laughable, because there was no combat there. But there was plenty of stress. But we were not getting the counseling. The soldiers were getting the counseling. We returned home to face life as it is. In addition to being returned as free men, we were returned to a post 9-11 world, a post 7-7 world in which Islamophobia was a key factor and remains a key factor. We are now regarded as a fifth column — people born and raised in this country, more

English than the English people themselves, have now become this pariah community. In the face and the light of all of that, in addition to being Guantánamo detainees who by definition and default are terrorism suspects, and then try to build a family life around that, with the children being attacked at school, sometimes being called names, sons of terrorists, children of terrorists. How does one pick up that? Who trains you for this? Who teaches you how to deal with this? Nobody.

The only thing that we had as former Guantánamo prisoners is our faith. That is what helped us in Guantánamo, that is what helped us through torture, it is what helped us in solitary confinement, and it is what helps us now, even in a world where Islam is seen as the most radicalizing factor, the key that sparks off all acts of terrorism. This is a time when our Islam is becoming stronger and stronger. We reject this idea that Islam turns people towards terrorism, but at the same time what is happening right now is that we are being pushed into a situation where we find that is our only refuge.

Q: Perhaps we can go back a little bit. In your book you write quite a bit about your involvement with the Lynx Gang in Birmingham. I wonder if I could draw you to talk a little bit about what it was like to grow up in a multicultural setting plagued by the politics of racism and far right movements. Perhaps compare that moment to what you see now in the UK.

Begg: Interestingly, my father sent me to a Jewish school as a Muslim kid, so I was a minority in the school that I went to. I grew up learning Hebrew and reading from the Torah, celebrating Hanukkah, Pesach, and Purim and so forth. That was odd at the time, but it opened a door to me, which was one that helped me to recognize other communities. It helped me to recognize early on the concept of persecuted or criminalized communities. I had friends who were not only

Jewish, but in the neighborhood where we lived in, there were also a lot of Irish people. They, during the time when I was growing up, were the suspect criminalized, terrorized community, because of what was happening in the north of Ireland.

Growing up in Britain during that time — when there was an influx of immigrants from the South Asian sub-continent — had its own difficulties and we were regarded by many from the far right at the time as people unwelcome. We were attacked in the streets, we were beaten and we were punched and kicked and abused. We formed little groups to defend ourselves and one of them was called the Lynx in Birmingham. It was a multi-ethnic group which consisted of young black, Asian, Arab and Irish kids who simply wanted to be teenagers together, form themselves into a gang, do no good but at least defend themselves against racists. We did everything else that any other gang member does, which is not something to be proud of. But I think the one aspect of pride that we did have, and still have to this day, is that we fought off the racists.

Q: You talked about Islamophobia today and you talk about your experiences growing up as a Pakistani in England. What happens to young Pakistani kids today in England, with that change of Islamophobia added to it?

Begg: When I was growing up, it was clear that it was not simply us, the Pakistani Islamic community, it was clear that many other communities were being attacked. The Afro-Caribbean

community was being attacked, the Irish community was being attacked, and the South Asian community was being attacked, but just for being foreigners, for being different. What is specific now, those same neo-Nazi organizations have grown their hair, put on suits, entered politics call themselves nationalists organizations, and are campaigning for the removal of people from this country of any ethnic origin. Specifically, if you listen to their mantra now, they will say clearly, "We are okay with other ethnic groups, other religions. The problem is Islam."

Q: Can you tease that out for me a little more?

Begg: Yes.

Q: Are you working with younger people now in Cageprisoners?

Begg: There were groups during when I was growing up who were identified as different ethnic groups and different multi-ethnic groups from the Afro- Caribbean, from the Irish, and from the Asian communities who were foreign. The disdain against them was based upon the fact that they were foreigners. Xenophobia was palpable. What is different now today is that you have got organizations who, on the basis of nationalism, ultra-nationalism, will say that we accept these other groups of people as long as they are integrated and assimilated. Groups like the Muslims – and they have specified the Muslim community – cannot, by definition, assimilate, cannot become the same as "us," in a robotic fashion. Therefore they are seen as a threat. If you add to this the mix of foreign policy, if you add to it the mix of statements from the media and politicians in relation to Muslim dress, Muslim eating habits, Muslim prayer rituals, and so forth, then the atmosphere has been created where it is open season on all things Muslim. What we find now is that they will say things like "not all Muslims are terrorists but every terrorist is a

Muslim." Which of course is a lie and not factually true but it feeds into the sort of anti-Islamic statements that are being made all around the world.

Q: Ron asked you about what it was like to come back, and you talked about the difficulty in repairing family relationships and your personal life when you came back. What pushed you into deciding to enter public life and to write the book?

Begg: Guantánamo did. In essence, Guantánamo pushed me into wanting to talk about these issues. I realized from my discussions, or rather the interrogations from the American interrogators, that with the greatest of respect, a lot of these people really did not know what they were doing, or what world they were dealing with. They had perhaps been involved in dealing with drug dealers in New York or elsewhere in the United States of America but now they had come to countries whose names they could not pronounce and talked to people in languages they did not know existed, and then suggest somehow that they understood the psyche, and the mentality, and the history, and the heritage, and the knowledge of these people where you had the cradles of civilization. It seemed bizarre to me that these people were now physically, and attempting to psychologically dictate how the politics and the future of this region will turn out.

I think that having seen what they felt they were doing in comparison to what they really were doing, it was important for me to start to talk about and try to explain things. My process of trying to explain, my process of campaigning began in Guantánamo. It began in solitary confinement. It began in Bagram with the interrogators, with the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], and with the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigations], and military intelligence. Also in

trying to advocate – for the short period of time that I was able to do so, when I was not in solitary confinement – the rights of other prisoners. The worst thing that a person has to endure, in addition to or perhaps even more than his own torture, is witnessing the abuse and torture of another person in front of you and remaining silent or impotent to do anything about it. That was for me the reason to campaign.

Also, accountability. We are living in a world where everybody wants to hold everybody else to account and point fingers. We had plenty of fingers pointed at us, as former prisoners. I was accused of hundreds of things, all sorts of statements. Because there was no access to any legal recourse, people could say whatever they wanted. One's detention would be based upon what another person said, not on evidence. So people often say, after my return, "Do you think that MI5 and the intelligence services are watching you?" I turn around and say, "Actually I don't care, because I'm watching them."

That is part of our job. Part of the job of Cageprisoners is to record, is to document, and then present to the legal authorities, to the judicial authorities and to the police, the actions of British intelligence in the torture and the complicity of torture of their own citizens.

Q: What was the reception of the book?

Begg: I received a very good reception of the book, both nationally and internationally, from the quarters where I expected it to be received well. Traditional left wing, middle of the road press reported well on it. The right wing, the far right, reported on it in the way that I expected them to — "He doesn't say anything about what the Americans say. This is completely contrary to the American interrogators' version of events," and so forth.

But I think that the people who have read my book – and it has been translated into several different languages – often give me feed back, saying, “Are you going to do another sequel to it?” I say, “Well, that all depends on if I get taken back to Guantánamo again!”

Q: What was your reception in the Muslim community?

Begg: As I expected, the Muslim community has been extremely sympathetic. It has been widely and well received in the Muslim community. I received a couple of years ago something that was called the Muslim Writers Award for Best Published Writer. In the great scheme of things, it does not really matter to me about these things. But I think what I managed to do with it was, I knew that what I had to tell was important, and I knew that lots of people would listen. My book was not really geared to gain sympathy from the Muslim community. I knew the Muslim community would be sympathetic by default. It was geared to introduce a world that was not just about Guantánamo. It was all of the processes that led to me being taken to Guantánamo, and then afterwards. Guantánamo was simply three years of my life, but I was forty years old by the time I wrote the book. I felt it was important in my little way to tell the story of one person's experience.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about how you came to be involved with Cageprisoners, and your early involvement with the organization, and how you came to take this role that you are in now?

Begg: One good thing that I hear about now is that the prisoners in Guantánamo, they know about Cageprisoners. They will often talk about and send messages through the lawyers, and themselves, direct to us, about us. But when I was in Guantánamo I did not know about

Cageprisoners. At that time Cageprisoners was simply a website. It was a portal, an information portal exclusively documenting the cases of the Guantánamo prisoners.

When I returned from Guantánamo, I found myself looking at the site every day. It was being updated, in terms of its news and content. I wanted to find out about the latest information about the prisoners that I left behind. There is a sense of guilt, of course, for anyone who is freed from a place like that, that you are free. You go and meet children of prisoners who are still held there, and you cannot tell them anything. You cannot explain why you are free and why their father is not.

I felt a sense of guilt. I felt a sense of importance, that it was an important task for me, because I could do it. I know that I can speak and give the voice lots of people would like to get out. I have been entrusted by a lot of the prisoners. If I felt that I was doing something wrong, I think they would tell me. But I meet prisoners, former prisoners, all around the world who endorse what I do. That gives me hope and support. They are my advisory council, all these prisoners from around the world. They are my advisory council. I seek their consultation in what I do.

What I do is to help this organization, Cageprisoners, become well known, become an authority, become respected, and become a voice for those prisoners who have none.

Q: What, logistically, did Cageprisoners look like from the inside when you joined?

Q: Or did you join? What was the mechanism of your joining Cageprisoners?

Begg: I was regularly being contacted by the organization to speak at their events, to talk about some of the experiences I had seen and others, and being contacted by them about other prisoners, about lawyers, and networking. I also built up a prisoner network of people who were not in Guantánamo but in Bagram and secret detentions, even here in the UK. So I had a lot of close contact with prisoners, for example, here in the UK who were held either under control orders, or under deportation orders, extradition orders, or were held, without charge in UK prisons. All those who were, I believe, unjustifiably convicted or given extraordinarily long sentences for crimes that were not crimes just a couple of years ago.

All that was part of how I got involved in the organization, talking about their cases. Then eventually, after being so involved in the mechanics of the organization, I was asked to officially join it officially by its board members.

The organization was small when I joined it. It was, as I said, it was just a website, and every now and then they did a few protests. They did some events and some meetings, which used to take place in people's houses.

Q: Who were the figures who were involved in it? As an American I do not know much about it.

Begg: At the time there were volunteers. There was one woman who was a central figure of it, who is no longer with the organization. But she was a very central figure in terms of uploading the content, in terms of being almost an oracle of information. There was Asim Qureshi who was a junior researcher at the time. There were a couple of doctors and a couple of lawyers who had helped to set up the organization. But after I joined, it really moved into the public arena. It

became more of a campaign organization, and has moved along now to something that is closer to a think tank than just a campaign organization. But it is both.

Q: What were some of the early projects that you were involved with once you moved more centrally into the functioning of Cageprisoners?

Begg: Well, there were investigations taking place into the disappeared. One of the early reports that Asim Qureshi, for example, had written, was about the ghost prisoners. About people who had been unfortunate enough, or fortunate enough — depending on how you look at it — not to be sent to Guantánamo, and were held in secret detention sites. So trying to locate them became for me a personal matter. Some of them I had known, or known of, and had met the families and had subsequently been in contact with them. I am still trying to, in some cases, locate these disappeared individuals, of whom many were reportedly captured by the Americans have captured but now have disappeared into black holes, literally. So that was an important issue.

Also there was the issue regarding the United Kingdom. People approached me and said, "We know you're talking about Guantánamo, and we realize how difficult that issue is. But please also remember us here in the UK, because there are very close similarities." One thing that was very important is that a lot of my work took me to Northern Ireland to meet with former prisoners there, primarily Republican prisoners, but also some Loyalists, to talk to them about internment, get feedback and information, and be involved in seminars which made comparisons between the experience of the Irish and the Muslim community. Since that time until now, I have some very close Irish Republican friends.

Q: Do you remember a particular conversation with any of these Republicans or Loyalists that you talked to?

Begg: Absolutely. There is one I know that is often said by a lot of the Republican prisoners. They say, "You know, Moazzam, at least they had to wait until we spoke and then they could hear our accents. But with you guys, they see you coming off a mile away." I said, "Of course that's true. Unless you happen to be an indigenous Irish Muslim. Then you're really screwed."

Q: As criminalized communities, what difference do you see between the experience of the Irish and the experience of Muslims in Britain now? Or equally, what continuities?

Begg: It is funny you say that, because there is a group called the Continuity IRA. But that is a different matter. The reality of the two experiences was put to me quite succinctly by my lawyer, Gareth Peirce, in 1998, when she said to me, "Moazzam, it was the turn of the Irish for a period. But you're next." Meaning the Muslim community. She was right. She had predicted something. 1998 was the year of the Omagh bombing, which was carried out by the Real or the Continuity IRA. But also it was the year of the Tanzania and Kenya bombings by Al-Qaeda. She was looking at these experiences and seeing the debris from this and where that was spreading to. But she foresaw that it was coming for the Muslims, and she was right.

The parallels are clear. The word terrorist at that time, I remember, became synonymous with Irish Republicans, even though Loyalists were carrying it out, too. The word terrorist today is synonymous with Muslims and jihad, in particular, as a concept. So we are told that we are a terrorist community because of these concepts in our faith. Or we are one that sympathizes with

terrorism, or we are a conveyor belt for terrorism, or we are Trojan horses of terrorism. All these sorts of statements are being put to us.

What we hear from a lot of the Irish Republican prisoners now who are part of the peace process is that they hate the word terrorism. They do not use it in their discussions. They do not even call the Loyalists terrorists. They have all sorts of other names for them because this word "terrorist" is meaningless. The most famous man on the planet, Nelson Mandela, is a convicted terrorist. So what does that do in terms of the usage of language?

The mujahideen in Afghanistan were called terrorists, when they were fighting against the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union called them terrorists, but the West, and America in particular after making films like Rambo 3 about them, lionized them and called them freedom fighters. So these terminologies are not lightly used in communities like the Irish community. They will talk about legitimate struggle, they will talk about armed struggle, and they will talk about illegitimate struggle. They will talk about occupation forces and so forth. Their language will be entirely different.

If you want to get to the end of this problem, they will talk about an all-inclusive dialogue, which includes talking to the most unpalatable sections of the conflict. That is the lesson of Northern Ireland. The proof of that is that you have Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, the deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, who was an IRA leader. It would be futile to use these types of terms, like terrorist, when you are talking about peace process.

Q: You talked about, when you first came to Cageprisoners, building networks. One of those networks was a network of lawyers. How did you go about building that? Were those contacts you had? How did you find them?

Begg: The network of lawyers was really important. The lawyers are the lifeline between the Guantánamo prisoners and the free world. The lawyers, despite the ridiculous restrictions placed upon them in terms of client-attorney privilege that would not apply anywhere else on Earth, have managed to do quite an amazing job in terms of getting the cases of the prisoners out there.

So sometimes this is through personal contact. Many of them even now will personally contact me or other prisoners, and ask in relation to their clients what information we can give them. They will ask if we know anybody else who could help them in relation to their clients' cases. Several people, like Clive Stafford Smith, are themselves almost a magnet of lawyers and activism in relation to the Guantánamo cases. But also the Center for Constitutional Rights, which first represented me when I was in Guantánamo, and the American Civil Liberties Union, which is still fighting on the cases with us.

The independent lawyers, the unsung heroes, often, they do quite amazing jobs in terms of trying to get the stories of the prisoners out. Some do it through the legal process. Others do it through the campaigning and political process. All of them, I believe, have been instrumental in bringing the case of the Guantánamo prisoners to the public fore.

Q: Are you still in contact with lawyers for cases down in Guantánamo?

Begg: I am constantly in contact with lawyers. Constantly in contact with lawyers, both civilian lawyers, military commissions lawyers, right across the board. People who do not agree with or believe in the system but who are part of it and have been dealt the cards that they have, often contact me and other prisons to find a way, any way, out for their clients. By no means do they rely solely or even partially on the legal process. Because they know that does not work.

Q: Was there ever any internal debate within Cageprisoners about the direction of the organization in terms of its going towards, as you said, a more campaigning direction? Or on the other hand, taking a more legalistic approach. Was that a big subject of discussion?

Begg: We had many discussions in terms of strategy and in terms of remit also. Even though there are three lawyers in Cageprisoners, we have not taken any legal actions as an organization. I think there are plenty and enough organizations doing that. What we do is support them in that. The closest working relationships we have are with, for example, Reprieve and the Center for Constitutional Rights, with Gareth Peirce and with other lawyers here in the UK and outside in the United States of America.

We feel comfortable in doing that. We feel comfortable in being an information portal and conduit. We have sources on the ground like nobody else does. We know the prisoners. We know their families. We are the prisoners. Several of the prisoners are either working for Cageprisoners or are a part of the official advisory board. What we bring to the table are the people themselves.

Q: You mentioned working with the families. What are some of the problems you faced with the families and what kinds of resources do you bring to help the families?

Begg: These are some of the most acute cases. There is one family whose husband, father has been disappeared in a U.S. – well, we believe it was a U.S. – prison, and then it is now a Syrian prison, that he was handed over by the U.S. to the Syrians, to a secret prison. That family has had no communication at all whatsoever with their loved one. That is probably the most extreme case that we have.

What we try to do for them is arrange or get financial support, get contacts with members of the Syrian human rights community, with other human rights organizations, with embassies of different countries, and to help to investigate. We have been involved in and have actually located this woman's loved one in a Syrian prison, and found exactly where he is. Sometimes that is done with great risk to some of our workers and some of our people. But we do it because we have a duty to do it and also we have the ability to do it.

In other cases, there are families, for example, whose loved ones are still in Guantánamo. We are trying to either seek, through a resettlement process, with the help of other organizations like Amnesty and Reprieve and the Center for Constitutional Rights, resettlement for these people, countries where they can go back to or go to because of fear of being tortured in their own countries.

The great thing that has happened now that I again am happy to have had some part in, is being involved in discussions regarding the resettlement of people who want to go back to countries

like Tunisia and Egypt after the revolutions that have happened there. Some momentous things are taking place and it is a great joy that people who, for example, were sentenced in absentia or feared torture when returning to these countries, now will be welcomed back as heroes in a sense.

Closer to home, there is an organization — a sister organization — called HHUGS, which is Helping Households Under Great Stress. That is set up mostly by women and some young men to arrange things like activity days for children of parents who have been held under anti-terror legislation, to taking people to go and visit their family members, or taking food to people who are unable to cook for themselves, and are suffering very physical, very practical issues. But for us as a campaign organization, we try to bring some hope through the experiences of the individuals in Cageprisoners itself. Because that is the one thing that we know from our experience, is that once that is gone, there is little left.

Q: Do you have family therapy? Any kind of therapeutic outreach program?

Begg: As Cageprisoners, we do not have any therapy done ourselves, but we have close involvement with the Helen Bamber Foundation, for example, who have worked closely with the Guantánamo prisoners and others. The Medical Foundation for the Victims of Torture. We work closely with both organizations.

Q: I ask because in your book you said you reached out to a therapist.

Begg: Well, yes, it is true. I have reached out to several therapists and have been asked by them to come and speak to them. It is not that they are seeking therapy for me, but it is that they are certainly trying to learn and help in the way that they can.

There were two particular incidents in Guantánamo, I remember, where a psychiatrist was brought to me after I had an anxiety attack. I remember one of the cases, this psychiatrist actually suggested a method of suicide to me, and asked me, “Had I ever thought about taking off my trousers, threading them with my sheet, tying the trouser part as a noose that would fit around my neck, tying it to the corner of the cell and jumping off?”

I said, “No, it had never crossed my mind until she put the thought into my head.” There were all sorts of games being played in Guantánamo by psychotherapists.

Q: To return to Cageprisoners, one of the many striking things about the organization is the great geographic scope of the cases you are involved with. How do you manage that scope, given that Cageprisoners is still a fairly small organization?

Begg: It is difficult. The reality is that we do not manage it. It manages itself. The people that are involved on the ground manage themselves and they seek assistance from us and we give them that assistance. For example, we have people we work with closely in Pakistan and in Kenya and other places, where they take from our experience, we take from theirs. It is a symbiotic relationship. We provide people who have gone through the experiences of the prisoners, people who can give some tangible links as to where they could go next.

But in all essence, the reality of the prisoner's situation is that it keeps building, it does not get smaller. I had thought always that, once this is over, I am going to go into something completely different. But it does not seem like there is an end. There is this War on Terror and its peripheries keep opening up new doors. For example, when I was in Kenya just a few months ago, under what they call the new section of the War on Terror, where it is linked with Somalia, detention

was happening almost on a weekly basis. People were being detained and rendered. Rendition is still taking place. British intelligence and American intelligence are still involved on the ground. The same is true in Pakistan, of course. So it does not seem to me that this is going to end anytime shortly.

Q: Liz [C. Grefrath] and I attended a seminar at the Center for Constitutional Rights last Tuesday where Gita [S. Gutierrez] talked. She raised exactly the issue you raised about once this is over. Her argument is that we have to recognize that this is a permanent state. That it is not a temporary state. That we have moved into some kind of a state of permanency with the "war on terror."

Is that too bleak a picture? Do you see it differently?

Begg: I think the reality is that President [Barack H.] Obama was in that position, to let us know exactly what is going to happen next, and he has shown very, very clearly, unequivocally, that the state of the War on Terror, even though the term itself is defunct, de facto it is going on. It will continue. It will expand and it has expanded. I think even in relation to the Arab Spring we will see the War on Terror extend there once it settles down. Gaddafi, and the Syrian regime have used the Al-Qaeda specter in an effort to try to delegitimize these revolutions. Once the revolutions are successful in both these countries, I believe we will see the rise of Islamic parties, as we have seen in Tunisia, as we have seen in Egypt. The West's reluctance to engage with or to recognize either of those groups of people is dispiriting. Again, if they do not do this, they will

begin a new War on Terror. I think this permanent state of hostility is going to remain as long as the attitudes that allow them to persist remain.

Q: Why do you think that the United States, the UK, the EU are unable to make that opening?

Begg: They are unable to make that opening because I think they know very, very well that the psychology of the Arab and Muslim person is not as amnesiac as they would like it to be. They know that, for example, when the Iranian revolution took place, even though it was a Shia one, Saddam Hussein was backed and supported to invade Iran and to kill millions of Iranians as a result of their policy. We know through history that whatever it is that has the veneer of Islam on it will be regarded as suspect.

You can see, for example, the refusal to engage with the Muslim Brotherhood, even though they were the most legitimate opposition group during Hosni Mubarak's time. This has only fomented a dislike for the United States. You can ask anybody in Egypt from the Brotherhood. They do not like the United States. It does not mean they want to be in a state of war with them, but they have a memory. They remember what happened. They remember that Mubarak was supported by the Americans and the West at a time when their members were thrown into prison and tortured and beaten, to death in some cases. Even though the Brotherhood did not take up the violent methodology of other Islamic groups, they still will remember that they were abandoned and these regimes were backed by the West.

I believe the same will be true to a lesser degree in Tunisia. I think the real test will be Libya. I will give you an example. I have met former Guantánamo prisoners in Libya who are now fighting with the rebels. I have met prisoners who were here in the UK who were held under

anti-terror legislation or put under United Nations sanctions because they were regarded as part of terrorist organizations simply because they opposed Gaddafi at the time that Tony Blair and the west in general had sided with Gaddafi and accepted the memoranda of understanding that the governments of Libya and others had set.

Tony Blair, and the West in general, had made their peace with Gaddafi after he had said that he will no longer be part of the nuclear arms race. He was the new boy on the block again. He was being greeted by the West. You can see that the cannon fodder in all of this were these Libyan dissidents, people who had opposed him. They were from the Islamic movements but they were solely involved in opposing Gaddafi and removing him. These people became the pawns in this game and were put on control orders, financial sanctions, and detained without charge in some cases.

Now, those same people — I have met them in Libya, the same people who were detained in the UK — are now in Libya, supported by British forces, supported by British aircraft, fighting against the Gaddafi regime. These people, they will not forget. They know that there are interests. It is in their interest to be protected by American and British bombs, and they welcome that. But they are no friends of the West. One thing also is known in Libya, is that parts of the east produced some of the people who went to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan. All of this is in the psyche of the people. That is why you can see on the streets of Libya, in Benghazi, it says in Arabic and in English, it says “No to Al-Qaeda!” and it says “No to foreign troops!” We do not want either.

Q: I believe you were recently in Benghazi. Could you talk a little bit about the experience of that trip, being there in this time of great turmoil and change?

Begg: I went to Egypt recently with the view to visit Libya. On my way I met with a few former Guantánamo prisoners, a few former Brotherhood prisoners. Really, the purpose of it was primarily the case of Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi. He was a Libyan man who I had been held with around the same time in 2001 I Bagram. It was said that he was the most senior Al-Qaeda captive to date. When the CIA interrogated me and threatened to send me to Egypt in Bagram, they said that, "If you do not cooperate with us we will do to you what we did to Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi." What they told me they did to him was that they sent him to Egypt. I thought they were bluffing at the time, and later when I was released I realized the case of Ibn al-Shaykh was huge, that he had been sent to Egypt, that he was tortured under the auspices of Omar Suleiman, who is now under house arrest.

But during that torture he confessed to working with Saddam Hussein on obtaining weapons of mass destruction to kill Americans. That statement was used by Colin Powell in 2003 to try to justify the case of war against Iraq. Ibn al-Shaykh's statement was accepted a year later as a fabrication. He was then, after being sent to a series of eastern European prisons and elsewhere, sent to the one place where he feared the most, Libya, because we was a Libyan. There he remained until 2008 in May when he allegedly turned up in his prison cell dead because of hanging himself.

I met with two prisoners in Benghazi who had spent the last years of their life with him, the last days of his life with him. They both told me, quite categorically — one of them was a former Guantánamo prisoner, the other had been held in Gaddafi's prisons for twenty-two years — and

both told me that it was not a suicide, that he had been either killed directly or as a result of neglect, that it was something he suffered after having razor blades slashed across his chest and his body and being left to bleed for ages, and apparently contracting some blood diseases, and becoming weak and dying in a state.

What was interesting was that they told me that he was being interrogated in Libyan custody by U.S. intelligence until the last days of his death. One must recognize how bizarre the history and these events are, that this man who had served in prison for twenty-two years for being an opponent of Gaddafi was now seen to be one of the spiritual heads of the movement supported by America.

Q: If we could move back to Cageprisoners. How large is the organization? How many people work here? How is it structured?

Begg: Cageprisoners is a relatively small organization. This is our first major office that we have here in London. We have – I think, now we have just taken on one more person — four full-time workers, four and a half full-time workers. One person who, part-time, works on the Arabic section. We have myself as a Director, Asim Qureshi as an Executive Director. We had the Guantánamo expert, Andy Worthington, who has just left the organization now. We have another former Guantánamo prisoner and a former control order detainee, as well as other interns who have their specialist fields, working in our organization.

What is really amazing about it is that we attract a lot of people. A lot of people from the human rights community, who want to be involved, want to do internships in our organization. We have

had several Americans, non-Muslims, who have produced some quite amazing work for us. So the organization, in that sense, it punches above its weight category.

In terms of the structure, we have the board. We have our patrons, and they include Victoria Brittain, and Yvonne Ridley, and Lauren Booth, who is Tony Blair's sister-in-law. She thinks it is so funny. And Sami al-Hajj, the former Guantánamo prisoner and Al Jazeera cameraman. We are constantly receiving support from all walks of life.

We are constantly being attacked, it must be said, in the media, and in the right-wing press in particular, for our associations or our links with people who are regarded as terrorism suspects. For our defending their rights and fighting for them, and advocating for them. It is true, we tread on eggshells. Sometimes we produce work that people do not like to see or do not like to hear. But that is, I think, where we gain a great deal of our legitimacy, in terms of the people we represent.

Q: Obviously one of the major cases that has been brought up in the right-wing press not too long ago, was your supposed association with Anwar al-Awlaki. Could you talk about what was said of you and how you responded to that?

Begg: My first encounter with al-Awlaki was an interview I did with him over the telephone shortly after his release from a prison cell in Yemen. He made it clear that there were things that he did not want to talk about when I asked him about his treatment and what had actually happened to him in terms of any abuses. It is my personal belief, after having read and heard what people said of him, that he was hugely popular in the English-speaking world. It is really

important just to get this point clarified. Because al-Awlaki is not hugely popular in the Arabic speaking world because he is relatively young. In the Arabic speaking world, there are scholars of much higher standing than al-Awlaki. This is, again, something we do in the West. If he speaks English, he has got to be big. The reality is that he is not in the Arab world. There are much bigger people than him. The suggestion, for example, that he will now take Al-Qaeda's leadership has only been happening in the English-speaking world. It has not been happening in the Arabic-speaking world.

We have this American dual citizen who is a Yemeni, who at one point condemned openly the Twin Towers attack, who was cleared by security in the United States to visit the Pentagon and all of these things, has now all of a sudden done a U-turn. When does he do it? He does it straight after his interrogation in which he says that American intelligence were present. What happened there, what transpired, what is it that made him say those things? I do not know. Because when I interviewed him he had not really taken a really radical position. Umar Abdulmutallab and Nidal Hasan – those cases had not come to the fore at the time.

Our campaigning for him, therefore, was as somebody who had been detained, somebody who had been a prominent figure, and somebody who had had the U.S. War on Terror mechanism affect him. We campaign for him even more now so, in the sense that he is somebody who has been targeted for assassination by the U.S. president. We see that as something extrajudicial. We would have campaigned for Osama bin Laden, had he been detained, and we would have fought for his rights just as we have fought for the rights of Abu Qatada or Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. We make no apologies about that.

That is because we believe, and I believe, that anybody who stands accused of crimes has to have his day in court. I do not think that is too much to ask for anybody, considering we are nations of people who gave those rights to people who committed much greater atrocities at the end of the Second World War. We are even attempting now to give them to Ratko Mladić, Slobodan Milošević, the past, and others. I was in Bosnia when these things happened, and I know that these massacres were on a massive scale in comparison to what these people stand accused of.

Q: I was going to ask you about what your reaction would have been to Mladić's arrest, so I am glad you touched on it. Because as you say, it does beg the comparison with this other aspect of your book, on extra-judicial killings. If I may tilt back to what Cageprisoners is doing in Pakistan, could you talk a little bit more about the Pakistan Project, the question of dealing with disappearances versus dealing with detention. When you are working on the grain of these different cases, what are the differences?

Begg: Clearly what you can see is that Pakistan was never a country that was known for its human rights or its great development. But something that was not known in Pakistan was disappearance. People did not disappear in Pakistan. They would have to be kidnapped for a ransom by some northern tribesman and returned. But there was nothing in terms of state-sponsored disappearances. It did not happen until the War on Terror began, until the United States gave the green light to [Pervez] Musharraf and others to begin this policy.

I know, because I was disappeared during that time. For a period, I was actually disappeared. Nobody knew where I was, other than the people who had taken me. The fact that a state did it does not mean it is any less reprehensible. In fact, it is worse. We worked closely with Defence for Human Rights and Amina Masood Janjua, who herself is suffering the great trauma of having

her own husband disappeared. She has launched numerous cases in the Pakistan courts and fought and campaigned and single-handedly tried to bring all of these cases in together, whether it is the Pakistanis held in Bagram, or it is the Pakistanis held in Guantánamo, or whether it is the ones that have been disappeared. The War on Terror or Baloch nationalists, it does not really matter for her.

We have a joint working relationship with the Defence for Human Rights group and are regularly updated by them, and regularly try to place pressure on the Pakistani government, through the testimony of individuals that we have, in order that we can have at least these people recognized and at least they can be in communication with their families. The fact that this has happened in Pakistan — because there are so many other traumas taking place simultaneously in Pakistan — it often seems like Amina Masood and the little help that we give her are fighting an uphill battle all on our own. But the one amazing thing is that everybody in Pakistan knows her. Hers is a name that if you mention to any Pakistani, they know the name. In that sense, she has done an amazing job as a woman who is suffering through this trauma. Not just to be concerned by the disappearance of her own husband, but to be concerned by the disappearance of other people, that takes great strength.

Q: Do you think this model of involvement with an organization like hers in Pakistan could be replicable to other countries in other parts of the world, say in East Africa or elsewhere?

Begg: I think so. I think it is possible. I think the dynamics are slightly different in different places. But we have attempted to do something similar in Kenya. Kenya has proved to be a little more difficult, in that even the human rights workers who are not even Muslims that have

worked there on these cases have sometimes been deported either from Uganda or deported from Kenya, and have been interrogated and frightened by intelligence officers operating there.

I spoke in the largest mosque in East Africa to a congregation of 12,000 people about standing up as a community, about fighting for the rights of their own citizens, about the ideas of citizens of their country who have been rendered and handed over to another country to be interrogated by British or American intelligence officers. I told them that if they do not do this, then they could very easily be next. That has been our experience here in the UK, where initially we found a great deal of apathy and fear. Now everybody knows Cageprisoners in the Muslim community. They know it because what we said transpired. Which is that if you do not take the bull by the horns now, when they come for you, in whatever way they do, whether it is Schedule 7 airport stops, or whether it is stop-and-search, or whether it is detention without trial, whether it is anti-terror legislation, you will have nobody to blame but yourself if you do not take a position now.

Q: Recognizing the variety of the Muslim community in Britain, what are your relationships in the community? You mentioned everyone recognizes Cageprisoners. That means that somehow you have a pulse, or you have some kind of feeling for the community.

Begg: It is important to say, first of all, that the Muslim community is not homogeneous. It is not one single monolithic community. Generally we can say that — and it is a very general term, broadly said — the Muslim community, through various organizations that seem to be in the public fore, speak with us. We talk together often. We are present at their invitations. We are recognized by them for the work we do.

Even though before in the past there was a great deal of fear, “Oh, Cageprisoners, need to stay away from these guys because they're terrorism-related stuff and we don't want to see our funding cut by our association with them.” All that sort of stuff does happen. But there is no escaping the message. There is no escaping what we are talking about. There is no escaping the experiences of the Guantánamo prisoners or the UK prisoners or detention without trial, the control orders. There is no escaping any of this. It is a reality. In the end, you will have to somehow come and communicate with the people who know about it like no one else does.

Q: I have worked with a number of groups where that kind of existential situation has not happened. In which the debate within the group is always over the line. But this strikes me that the situation on the ground is so radical itself that a debate over the line is superfluous. Is that fair?

Begg: You are right. It is. The debate over the line, whatever it is, it is well beyond that. As far as Cageprisoners is concerned, I think some people would see us, that our discussions are beyond the line. We will talk about things that other NGOs will not talk about. But we feel that we are in a position to talk about these things. Even if it is at the cost sometimes of other organizations saying, “We don't really want to be associated with you in this regard.” They are not feeling it. With the greatest of respect to all the organizations, and without wanting to seem to be playing the victim card, they are not feeling it on a day-to-day basis. They go home and they sleep it off and it does not mean anything. We go home and it is in our face. We go home, we expect a knock on the door. All of us do. It does not matter who we are. We see a police car behind us, we think it is coming for us. We are at the airports, we get stopped. We get interrogated. We get questioned.

So we do the work. The people who are affected by this attitude and legislation here in Cageprisoners do the work. In the other organizations, they do not. That is not their fault. Nobody is blaming them for it. But there is a difference between something that affects you directly, personally, and that something that is your job.

Q: In the current political and discursive climate in the UK have you sought any political allies? Or given the campaigning ambitions of Cageprisoners, what kind of mark can you make on the political playing field?

Begg: Yes, we do. We constantly seek dialogue and discussion with people in power, and have been in discussions with ministers of this government. The last government was not so easy, but this government, yes. We have been involved, at least as individuals, in discussions with ministers and senior ministers about different issues. We have been involved with people who are reviewers of terrorism, as appointed by the government. We have put forward our grievances, our recognition of the situation, and our analysis of the situation. We have engaged with politicians who will engage with us. We have sought alliance with groups who would seek alliance with us. But we have not bent over backwards, trying our best to accommodate everybody simply to get into their good books. We have seen so much of that. In the end we feel that that type of behavior simply undermines your own credibility.

We try to remain true to our goals and our principles. We are not sectarian. We are not primarily a religious organization. We have religious ethos, in terms of being Muslims, but we are not a religious proselytizing organization. We believe in the rule of law and we advocate for that, for

all communities and for everyone. If that is something that, in terms of how we do our job, is not what everybody wants to be involved with, we do not impose ourselves on anyone.

Q: I am intrigued that it is easier to work with this government than the previous government. My old Lefty background says, "Why?"

Begg: Well, in terms of the politics, then we would have said that the more left-wing government would be easier to work with. But the politics of New Labour and the new government have changed so much so it is almost unrecognizable. The politics of Tony Blair were more right-wing than the right-wing of today. It is blurred. It is very, very blurred. The discussions we have had with the new government, suggest — at least in word if not in deed — that they want to show themselves to be part of the process that helps to rectify the most unpopular war in the history of Britain, against which over two million British people marched. British people do not march in great numbers for anything. So the fact that they did this shows it was not just the Muslims getting radicalized, it was the entire nation.

But in addition to this, they have attempted to engage with some of us, in terms of what has happened regarding the abuses of the Guantánamo prisoners and the allegations of British intelligence involved in the torture of British citizens. It has shaken the government. Our engagement has been through the civil legal process, but also through the criminal process. We are talking to the police about actual British intelligence. So we are talking across the board to a whole lot of people who probably we would not have before in the past.

Q: But your political activities would be limited by your charter. There is certain things politically that you cannot do as an organization?

Begg: That is right. We are not involved in any campaigning for any organization or any political party. We are not affiliated with any political party, neither do we take any position on any groups that are campaigning. Our simple work is our remit, which is to campaign and fight for the rights of people who have been detained without charge or trial or people who have been subjected to anti-terror legislation that is not fitting for the crime that they are accused of.

Q: We have skirted around the edges of this issue. But could you talk a little bit, maybe in detail, about your reaction to the news of Osama bin Laden's death?

Begg: To be honest with you, when I hear about the death of any Muslim, my personal reaction is to say, “From Allah we came, and unto Allah we return.” Allah will deal with whomever, however he wishes. Of course, Osama bin Laden was dealt with in this world, and in this world I believe there are rules and regulations that are supposed to be followed. I cannot support what the Americans have done because the Americans took me in Islamabad with a gun to my head in the middle of the night in front of my family. It was just that movement, that movement between me and death. So how could I support this? How could I say that it was okay for them to do this?

If they believe he is responsible for a crime, then why did they not capture him and take him? Then the stories put out make it even worse in terms of how I perceived this. They said that his wife was placed in front of him as a shield, which turned out to be a lie. They said that he was armed, that turned out to be a lie. All of the lies that have been put forward, contrasted to the jubilation clearly that is available in America in terms of the death of Osama bin Laden. I do not believe justice has been done in any way, shape, or form with his assassination. The only way to

describe it is the assassination of Osama bin Laden. Along with, of course, the other people who were killed. It is as if they do not count. These other people are simply peripheral. To shoot a person in front of his child? I was taken at gunpoint in front of my children. How could I accept this for anybody else?

My reaction is that Osama bin Laden, in the great scheme of things, other than a symbol, will not make a great deal of difference. The War on Terror will continue. As we have seen in Pakistan and Afghanistan over the past week or two is that scores of people are being killed. Is it worth it? Is this the direction which we want to go in? If they captured bin Laden and prosecuted them and showed that yes, he really did commit these crimes, or was there something else hidden? Were there things that they did not want to be materialized? Were there things like with Saddam Hussein's case that would have come into public purview, that at some point, somebody would have had to say, "Who supported him when he gassed the Iranians?" Is it that sort of information that people do not want coming out? Otherwise why would you allow these sorts of things to take place? I remain exceedingly, exceedingly skeptical.

Q: It is quite different from the Nuremberg example of an international tribunal.

Begg: There is no comparison at all. This is an extra-judicial killing. This is Obama. Obama is the president of extra-judicial killing, as Bush was the president of extra-judicial detention.

Q: When you look back on Cageprisoners, what do you think your greatest achievement has been so far?

Begg: Our greatest achievement thus far?

Q: Staying alive probably?

Begg: I think our greatest achievement thus far has been moving from an organization that was obscure and nobody knew to a point that it is now being mentioned by people in power in the world, who know it, who have seen its work. I have presented directly to some of the leaders of the world, and told them that this organization campaigns for people who are in the world's most notorious prison.

I think we can see real tangible achievement in the responses we get from family members, from children, from wives, from people like that who say, “We are so pleased that Cageprisoners is fighting our cause and our case because nobody else is.” That, to me, is an achievement, in that it has helped to empower a community that has become very frightened and very apprehensive. That is one of our aims and objectives.

Q: Conversely, what would you feel is your greatest failure?

Begg: Greatest failure? We still have four people working at the organization. We should be much bigger by now. I think our greatest failure really probably has been in not being able to take on all the cases that we should, and to campaign adequately for all the cases that deserve our attention, and not being able to do so because of lack of resources.

Q: We were talking a few moments ago, informally, about your international travels. I wonder if you can talk a few more minutes about that. Libya, Iran.

Begg: One of the recent visits I had in Libya, had me and a group of people go and meet with some former prisoners in a prison in Benghazi. They toured us around this prison that had been

captured now by the rebels and it had been burnt out and destroyed and they took us into the interrogation cells. One place they took me to was a place where they told me that a woman, who now lives in the UK, a Libyan woman, had been abused and tortured. They showed me the cell. To walk into it seemed very bizarre. It seemed like an ordinary place. It seemed like a house that had been burnt down, it just seemed very ordinary. But then they took me into these holding cells and showed me these rows of cells.

The block reminded me of Guantánamo. But the difference was that these were concrete structures and they were tiny. It was impossible for somebody as short as me to lie down in this cell. I do not know how people could have slept there, except to curl up in a fetal position and lie down in this horrific cell. What was also amazing is that there were still drawings in there that had been made by pencil, Koranic verses that talk about patience at the time of adversity, verses that spoke about the story of the profit Joseph or Yusuf, who was thrown into prison, according to the Bible and the Koran, for a crime that he did not commit.

There were also drawings of freedom. Of trees, of the sea, of children, cars, that were still very visible. All of the thoughts of your own incarceration, of course, come rushing back to your head. But the people who were telling me about this have themselves spent a great deal of time in this prison, and also in the prison that is still, as we speak, run by Gaddafi in Tripoli, the prison where Ibn al-Sheikh al-Libi died, Abu Salim prison.

Q: What about Iran?

Begg: Iran, I went for a conference recently to discuss terrorism and the concept of terrorism. During this conference, amongst other people, we met the president. I delivered a speech, in

front of the president, in which I talked about the concept of terrorism, and how this term, as had been explained by one of my Irish friends who was also present at the conference, is one that people should not necessarily use simply because it is being used in the West. People need to come up with terms, not only just to accuse others of being this, but to try to deconstruct it and to see a way forward. Because what we have seen through the experience of quote, unquote "terrorism" is that once you have labeled somebody a terrorist, it is very hard to get into an engagement with them. To talk to them. To legitimize them.

This is the problem that I know that the United States is facing in Afghanistan, for example, with talking to the Taliban. How can you talk to an organization that is all but human? It is sub-human. When then you try to humanize people — I think one of the people who did this, even though he is the head of the anti-Bin Laden unit at a time, was Michael Scheuer, who spoke about in his book on Osama bin Laden. He says that the mistakes that the West has made is in the failure to recognize, for example, Osama's piety, his integrity, his personal bravery, his egalitarianism and things like this. If you do that to your enemy, even though you want to capture and kill him — and Scheuer says that we wanted to capture and kill him — then at least you have humanized them. Then at least you are not talking about an animal or a monster. That is what happened in the de-humanization processes on both sides.

When we were de-humanized it was done because of the differences that people were told that we had, and therefore it was easy to torture us. But when you humanize somebody it becomes much harder to do all the things that you do to them. Then it is easier, if you humanize them, to also bring them into an engagement process so that you can bring an end to the conflict.

Q: You were suggesting earlier, essentially, a conceptual failure, a failure in language. How does one go about changing that language? Does Cageprisoners have a role to play in that task?

Begg: We often took about language. We often talk about the use, the misuse and the manipulation of language for all sorts of purposes. One of the things we will say, for example, the word "terrorism," how did it ever enter the English language? It came into the use of the English language from "La Grande Terreur," which is French for "The Great Terror." That was the revolution. As far as the elite of Europe were concerned, the introduction of democracy in Europe was terrorism. It was the beheading of the aristocrats and the French Revolution.

If you look at the New American Heritage Dictionary, you will see that the word "terrorism" is used to describe individuals and organizations, but does not mention states, whereas previous ones mention states are or can be involved in terrorism. The redefining of language by interested sources is something we need to challenge.

The greatest example for us, as Muslims, is the word "jihad." You can go to the average American and he will say, "Jihad is terrorism. Anybody who believes in jihad is a terrorist." We will not say that we will have this argument to say, "Jihad only means the internal spiritual struggle." It does not mean that. It means so many things. But the greatest evidence of the hypocrisy and the manipulation of language is in itself as to how the West, particularly the United States, has dealt with this issue.

You can see, "mujahideen" during the 1980s, was a word that was synonymous with the people who fought against the Soviet Union. They were glorified. They were given Stinger anti-aircraft weapons and presidents would descend onto Pakistan and try to meet with the tribesmen there.

Yet today the word “jihad” – it is as if that whole period did not exist. So it is very difficult for us, as a community, to try to take this on, when we think that there is a concept of self-defense that is ennobled within the Muslim faith has now become demonized because of the use and the manipulation of language. Somebody can say, “That person is a jihadist.” That is an Arabic word that has an English suffix. It does not make any sense.

Q: Beyond language, I know that you have written poetry as well. I think on the Cageprisoners website, amongst the many things that people can do, there is the suggestion that writing poetry and writing and creating art is an avenue. I believe you recently were judging a writing award. Can you talk a little bit about poetry, what it did for you?

Begg: Just a word also to be said on art, is that in 2008 Cageprisoners did an art exhibition called "Interned: The Art of the Imprisoned." This was something that was primarily done by prisoners here in the UK, prisoners held on extradition, deportation and control orders. It was amazing art work that they produced. They have made mosques and ships and boxes and jewelry boxes out of little match sticks. In prison. This reminded me of some of the things that I had seen in the Northern Ireland prison, in museums. People who wanted to preserve some of the heritage of their story of prison. There was pottery, beautiful pots, plant pots and urns made by the prisoners.

It showed a side of these people that of course the authorities do not want you to see — that they can create, that they can think, that they have families behind that they have made these things for their loved ones. They have not made it for the exhibition. They made it for their loved ones. They have a heart. That heart is broken because of the situation that they are put in. Their

children's hearts are broken. Their letters and their poems have all been displayed in this exhibition.

Some of my own poetry, and other people's poetry, was also displayed. For me, poetry was something that helped to not just give my voice to the people I wanted to hear it, but to myself also. I am talking to myself, I am having a conversation with myself, as crazy as that may sound. But I understand me. I wanted my captors to see it. I knew that when I would send these poems, it would have to go through censorship. In the small chance that the person who is censoring these poems, might even understand a little bit of it, it was worth the effort.

Q: Actually, I think this is a nice place to stop. In the small chance, that someone in the future will see this as part of the conversation. Thank you very much.

Begg: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]