

SHADOW LIVES

The
FORGOTTEN
WOMEN
of the
WAR ON TERROR

VICTORIA
BRITAIN

Foreword
JOHN BERGER

Afterword
MARINA WARNER

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Shadow Lives

*For the young Palestinian women, Noor, Mariam, Laila,
Sarraa, Romaitha and Aisha, for your grace and bravery*

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Foreword

John Berger

Here is a book that contains its subject as the walls of a living room contain the lives of those who live in it. The walls don't argue, they bear witness and they listen. The lives involved here are those of Islamic women and men who have been rounded up and kept under surveillance by state officials and state bodies engaged in the so-called war on terror. The room is mostly in London and Guantanamo (Cuba) is in the basement.

What makes the book unforgettable and terrible is its demonstration of the extent of the human cruelty meted out by the (human) stupidity of those wielding power. Neither such cruelty nor such stupidity exist in the natural world without humankind.

Within the four walls of this living room we are forced to acknowledge that, although traditionally the Devil may be cunning, the humanly diabolic is, more often than not, crass, arm-twisting, overbearing and pointless.

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Introduction

*'You have to be very careful how you speak to these men – they've survived traumas they don't even tell about ... I see my husband struggling. The kids are struggling. It's hard ... it's hard, every single day.'*¹

Shadow Lives provides a glimpse into the world of a number of women who have had their lives shattered by the myths and fables generated by the war on terror and the new geopolitics. These myths and fables shape everyday perceptions about refugees and those displaced from countries such as Afghanistan, Egypt, Jordan and Palestine, and blind us to the injustice meted out under our anti-terrorist laws, in the name of our national security. Much of the background to their story begins in Afghanistan, a country of myth and fable for centuries, and a magnet for invaders from Alexander the Great in 330 BC, to the British imperial ambitions in the mid-nineteenth century, before the Soviet Union and the Americans took the same route.

Afghanistan has been devastated for its own Afghan people many times over, but worst of all in the most ideological and technological of wars that started as the opening salvo of the war on terror on 7 October 2001. It was a war based on a convenient myth of Afghan responsibility for 9/11. The real Afghanistan of the young shepherd boys, village wedding parties, grandmothers and babies, killed by US bombs, was invisible and dehumanised in a decade of its people being used for deadly experiments in enforcing Western power. Similarly, the devastated individual families in this book have been invisible here, mostly in Britain, dehumanised and expendable in cruel experiments in social control, which left some dead, others mentally or physically broken. Authorities at every level of government, the legal system and the media have failed to

see beyond myths of terrorist threats triggered by stereotypes of oppressed, angry or passive women, unknowable behind a black veil. Prejudice and manufactured fear has fed the cruelty and stupidity of the war on terror and scarred and changed British society itself.

Nothing has been changed more than Afghanistan ten years after the 2001 attack and the ambitious goal of President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair of re-making it into a different country. In 2012 the US was preparing for peace talks with a section of the Taliban, accelerating troop withdrawals from the quagmire of its 450 bases in the country and spending \$11 billion a year solely on training Afghanistan's own security forces. But at the same time, looking to the future shape of this unfinished US war, tens of millions of dollars were being poured into nearly 130 projects in Herat, Helmand and Kandahar for giant bases with clandestine drone facilities and a new special forces compound for black capture/kill operations.²

Afghanistan is just one element of the vast scope of the so-called war on terror, which in fact long pre-dated that coinage by President Bush after 9/11. It had its roots in decades of Western alliances with corrupt and repressive regimes across the Middle East and beyond. The key ones for this book are Egypt and Jordan, while Algeria, Libya, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan are also in the picture. The distortion of the politics and economies of their societies was to a great extent a by-product of decades of Western policy in the post-colonial world. In 2011 much of this house of cards collapsed, in the idealism, bravery and power struggles of the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt. The impact of the Arab Spring on some of the women in this book was an explosion of new dreams – of going home, of going to live in an Arab country or just of seeing a husband outside a prison visiting room. For others it was too late.

Egypt was the natural fulcrum of the 2011 upheaval. During the Arab nationalist heyday of Gamal Abdel Nasser in the new Republic of Egypt 60 years before, his imprisoning and torture

of Islamists who had been his early allies cast a shadow over his, and Egypt's, pre-eminence in the Middle East. After Nasser's death in 1970 his successor, President Anwar Sadat, soon lost that pre-eminence and greatly increased the regime's trial of strength with the Muslim Brotherhood and other opposition groups in Egypt, by transforming his country into a key US ally and recipient of massive US aid – much of it military.

Sadat's decision to make peace with Israel, with the first visit to Israel by an Arab leader in 1977, the Camp David negotiations of 1978 and the opening of full diplomatic relations with Israel in 1980, cut Egypt off from the rest of the Middle East. And cut the regime off from its people. The Arab summit in Khartoum in 1967, in the wake of the June Arab/Israeli war, which so scarred the Arab world, had declared: no recognition of the Jewish state, no negotiations, no peace treaties. Except for Egypt, the Arab regimes stuck to it. For the Arab street then it was an unchallengeable act of faith to stand for Palestinian rights.

The Egyptian regime's consequent political isolation in the Middle East was particularly striking against the background of the momentous upheaval elsewhere in the Muslim world in 1979. A key pole of American, British and Israeli interests in the region collapsed with the popular revolution against another long-standing US strategic ally, the Shah of Iran, and his replacement by an Islamic state. Just such an Islamic state was the dream that half a century before lay behind the creation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt by Hassan al-Banna. The Iranian revolution of 1979 electrified the whole of the Muslim world and was a major strategic and political setback for the West.³

Less than two years later, the US was humiliated again in Iran with the abortive US raid in the summer of 1980 to rescue 52 US hostages held in the Tehran embassy. President Sadat allowed Egypt to be used as the springboard for this initiative. It was a decision that enraged his own people and further deepened his international isolation – except from the US.⁴

That same year, the US under President Jimmy Carter was setting in motion a strategic initiative which dwarfed events in Iran – the drawing of the Soviet Union into what his security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, called ‘giving the USSR its Vietnam war’. The US began secret funding of the *mujahedeen* fighters against the pro-Soviet, nationalist government in Kabul.⁵ Six months later the Soviets fell into ‘the Afghan trap’ and entered Afghanistan for the nearly ten years of war, which combined with internal factors to contribute to the break-up of the Soviet Union.

To the US administration, that secret funding had been ‘an excellent idea’. For the national security adviser, looking back 20 years later, there were no regrets. ‘What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban, or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?’⁶ Brzezinski’s throw-away line completely under-estimated the impact of the decision he had been part of in entering Afghanistan’s civil war. In fact the blow-back it would bring to the US was not far in the future as he spoke.

The response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 was that tens of thousands of Muslims, bankrolled by the US and Saudi Arabia, were drawn into a religious war in East Asia. This migration of men and their families from a great variety of countries started another thread of this story of the war on terror, and had a direct effect on many of the families in this book. And in particular, the women from Chapters 1, 2 and 4 were part of this migration. Sabah taught at an international school in Pakistan and was deeply happy, Zinnira looked after her babies in Afghanistan, while Hamda described her time living in Pakistan as, ‘sitting on hot coals all the time – I couldn’t wait for him to finish so we could get home to Jordan’.⁷

For decades, the Cold War and the perceived threat of nuclear war with the Soviet Union had held US governments, and their people, in thrall to the fear of communism. Part of the

US response to a perceived spread of communism was secretly funded wars, using proxies – just as with the *mujahedeen* in Afghanistan – in South and Central America and in Southern Africa.⁸ As in Afghanistan, the US attempted to contain nationalist movements – allied with Cuba or the Soviet Union. The results in countries such as Angola and El Salvador were utterly devastating, as in Afghanistan a few years later.

Yet in that different media age these were largely invisible wars, and they had little or no echo beyond their geographic area. Those US wars, which for those who saw them close up seemed ambitious attempts to change the character of the society at the time, are dwarfed by the scale of death and destruction that has grown out of just one of them today – Afghanistan. And touching the emotions of the billion and a half followers of the world's largest religion produced something on another scale entirely.

In a decade the anti-Soviet *jihad* in Afghanistan transformed to an anti-Saudi *jihad*, and then to an anti-American *jihad*. The defeat and humiliation of one superpower fired many of the individual foot-soldiers involved to believe the second could be similarly vulnerable. The end of the Soviet/Afghan war meant that the US lost interest in the area, the government of Pakistan no longer wanted tens of thousands of Arabs and other foreign Muslims on its soil, and the great majority set off back home. The *jihad* soon had a dozen faces.

That moment of the early 1990s saw the Middle East transformed by acute tension over the first Gulf War as the US sought Middle East allies for its coalition to attack Saddam Hussein in Iraq with Operation Desert Storm, which was deeply unpopular in much of the region. Returnees from the Afghan war were looked on with suspicion by the Westernised regimes of a number of Middle East and North African countries, especially those allied to the US, and several of the families in this book were among those who successfully sought asylum in Britain. Dina told me, 'We left in a hurry, everyone did, suddenly the Pakistan government was having a problem

with Arab people ... I don't even know why we came here to England, my husband never discussed it with me. I suppose it was because his friends were coming.⁹

Meanwhile, in the 1990s, local wars in Algeria, Bosnia and Chechnya involved a jigsaw that included many fighters who had been in Afghanistan. All of these wars, however different politically, also had a profound wake-up effect on many other far away Muslim communities – in Britain for one. Twenty years on, across a wide political spectrum, British Muslims, who had been in their teens and twenties, would say unhesitatingly that Bosnia changed their lives. Bosnian fighters visited Britain, spoke eloquently in mosques and universities of how much they needed help against the Serb war machine's brutal power.

Young Muslims were horrified and moved to action by films of atrocities and by the stories of Bosnian refugees who were sheltered in many British mosques.¹⁰ Some young men drove aid convoys, some enlisted as fighters. This part of their lives would later, after 9/11 2001 in New York or 7/7 2005 in London, make some of them targets of the vast US intelligence fishing net, which saw Bosnia's foreign sympathisers as linked to Al Qaeda and a danger to the US. But nothing illustrated this more graphically than the fate of the six Algerian/Bosnians, then settled in the fragile post-war Bosnian state, who were rendered by the US to Guantanamo Bay prison, after flimsy charges of plotting to attack the US and British embassies in Sarajevo had been dismissed by the Bosnian courts. The 'plot' evaporated and the six men found themselves being interrogated for years about Arabs and other foreign Muslims, who might have had links to Al Qaeda, in Bosnia during the war in which the US had given tacit support to Bosnia against the Serbs.¹¹ One such man was Babar Ahmed from South London whom many men from Britain in Guantanamo were questioned about (see Chapter 6).

In the 1930s, hundreds of young British men and women from a variety of leftist backgrounds went to volunteer in the

International Brigades as fighters, medics or aid workers, in defence of the Spanish Republican government. They were moved, like the young foreign Muslims in Bosnia, by a mixture of political and human solidarity instincts. The experience changed their lives. Forty years later, thousands more British men and women were involved for decades in supporting the liberation wars in Southern Africa. A small number, mainly young communists, from Britain were recruited by the exiled African National Congress and South African Communist Party leadership for clandestine propaganda and underground resistance work inside apartheid South Africa.¹² None of these war zones, though, had the extra dynamic – which made Bosnia and then Chechnya and then Afghanistan such a magnet – of it being a requirement of their faith to support other Muslims under threat.

In Algeria in 1991, an ossified single party state, which had grown out of the liberation war against France, unexpectedly faced losing power to an Islamist party in elections. It could perhaps have been predicted, with the death in 1978 of President Houari Boumediene, the subsequent loss of authority by the party, its corruption and blatant privileges, the changes in the constitution in the 1980s, plus the unsolved structural problems of the economy making everyday life increasingly difficult. For the ten years before, at least, a time bomb of unemployed youth, disadvantaged by a badly managed and abrupt change from French to Arabic in education, was getting ready to explode. The elections were cancelled, a military government took over, thousands of supporters of the Islamist party disappeared into prison camps in the Sahara, and a civil war with splintering opposition groups and black operations by the government brought untold suffering to Algerians, especially in the rural areas.¹³

Young Algerian men fled for safety to Europe, including Britain, in droves in the mid-1990s, believing they could not make a life in Algeria. Some of them went to live in Afghanistan during those years, seeing it, under the Taliban, as a young

Islamic country, where they could make a contribution with their education and skills, and a place that seemed to offer a more peaceful civilian life than what they had fled from. 'Afghanistan seemed like Utopia – it was the most beautiful place I ever saw, when I woke the first morning after crossing the border at night', one man who made that choice explained many years later, when he was living in Britain on deportation bail, with a 22-hour curfew, after spending seven years in UK prisons on secret evidence, without a trial (see Chapter 8).

Another focus of the time was Chechnya's two wars for independence from Russia where half a million people were displaced, unknown tens of thousands killed and the capital Grozny flattened in 1995. These were David and Goliath struggles between Islam and a communist regime, which attracted some of those who had fought the Soviets in Afghanistan, and many others who had seen that war up close or been deeply stirred by Bosnia. London became a hub of support for the little-known Chechen resistance against Russia (see Chapter 6).

Somewhat aside from active solidarity in these wars was a sophisticated Muslim intellectual world of struggle. London was already 'a hub of sorts for Islamist politics in the 1990s ... the dominant image of political Islam was the bloody record of the Egyptian insurgency, the Algerian civil war and the ascent of Mr Bin Laden ... but no less seismic was the shift underway within currents inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood'.¹⁴ The *New York Times* reporter, Anthony Shadid, traced this story of political Islam's evolution in Britain in a key decade, in a series of interviews with the exiled Tunisian Said Ferjani, who was one of many who returned in 2011 after 20 years in London. Most important was the influence of the exiled Tunisian leader, Sheikh Rashid Ghannouchi, who had concluded – since before his first imprisonment by President Bourgiba in the 1980s and based on his own *shariah* studies – that for Islamists to work with other groups such as social democrats or leftist trade unions was correct. The Algerian Islamists followed him with

their participation in the 1991 elections, which they won and had stolen. But they then moved away from his line into the civil war following, as he put it, 'the punishment of the Islamic victors in the Tunisian and Algerian elections'. Tunisia's En Nahdha party, however, maintained Ghannouchi's liberal path despite their election also being hijacked and followed by torture, killings, repression and arrests.¹⁵

Back in Afghanistan, what Anthony Shadid called 'the Manichean view of the world of Mr Bin Laden'¹⁶ produced a piece of paper that changed history. In Osama Bin Laden's camp in February 1998, a declaration of an 'International Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders' was signed by Mr Bin Laden, individually, not in the name of Al Qaeda, and by his Egyptian ally, Ayman Zawahiri, also as an individual.

The group that would become Al Qaeda had had some stunning early failures. The 1993 New York bombing of the World Trade Center, which killed six people and injured 100, did not quite have an Al Qaeda address. Although its authors included Ramzi Yousef, the nephew of Al Qaeda's Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Yousef was not, according to his uncle later, an Al Qaeda member, and the others involved were more prominently linked to Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) in the person of the blind Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman. Then there was the first airline plot 'Bojinka', hatched in Asia by Ramzi Yousef and his uncle.¹⁷ It would have used ten planes with explosives left on board by the bombers who would themselves leave the planes during stop-overs on flights from Asia to the US. The plot was discovered by a chance fire in an apartment during bomb making preparations in 1995.

The US embassy bombings in East Africa in the summer of 1998 were the devastating successful opening move by Al Qaeda, which would lead to 9/11. More than 200 people were killed, including 12 Americans in Nairobi, in an attack timed for the eighth anniversary of the arrival of US troops in Saudi Arabia – one of the key US strategic decisions that set Bin Laden on his course.