

THE GUANTÁNAMO BAY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Asim Qureshi

Columbia Center for Oral History

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## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Asim Qureshi 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: Asim Qureshi

Location: London, United Kingdom

Interviewer: Ronald J. Grele and Kanishk Tharoor

Date: May 30, 2011

Qureshi: Who is leading the questions?

Q: As I said, for the first part, we want to ask you about your early life. Who are you? Where are you from? Maybe not back to five years old, but around there, if you could tell us a bit about yourself.

Qureshi: My name is Asim Qureshi. I am the Executive Director of Cageprisoners. In terms of my background, it depends on how far you want me to go back. I originally come from a Pakistani background. Both my parents are Pakistani. My dad was from a city called Faisalabad, what during colonialism was known as Lyallpur, after the colonialists. My mother was from one of the major cities, Lahore.

My dad came here somewhere in the 1970s along with the rest of his family. The whole of my dad's side of the family have lived in the UK [United Kingdom] for many years. They are first generation immigrants. My mother came here when she married my father. They have been in the UK for quite some time.

Q: What particular area? What particular city?

Qureshi: They moved to Chelsea when they first came here, so that was where they were based. My grandfather was a barrister in Pakistan, but he gave that up in order to give his children a better life here in the UK. Unfortunately, he was not able to practice law over here, so he opened up a green grocer's. He was a shopkeeper. But he was happy with that. He worked very, very hard in order to get my dad, my other uncles, and my aunt educated here. That is really where our story in the UK begins anyway.

As I said, my parents got married. They used to live in a place called Walton-on-Thames in Kingston. I have two older brothers. One is now a doctor and the other one is a teacher. Then myself, and I have two younger brothers as well.

Q: What was it like to grow up in Chelsea as a young man in a Muslim family?

Qureshi: I did not. But obviously my dad and my uncles did. They faced a lot of racism during those years. It was only because they were exceptionally good at sports that they managed to find a way through it.

One of my own uncles — the youngest out of all the uncles, actually — was so good at football he was actually scouted by Fulham Football Club in order to play. But in our culture, sports are not the done thing, so my grandfather said, "Thank you, but no. My son is going to become an accountant. Please be on your way." In the end he became an architect, but that was his rebellion against his father, but it was not really the done thing. Right now, he would obviously be laughing, from a financial perspective, having taken that up at the time.

What was amazing is that it was his football that helped him transcend the racism that he experienced in those years. Similarly, with my other uncles, they were very, very good at cricket. My dad was the only one who was not particularly sporty, but the other two uncles were. They played cricket at a very, very high level. Similarly, they were accepted because of it. What for me, from a social perspective, was interesting is that even when they were accepted, they were all given English names. One's name is Shahid, and the other one's Sajid. But they were known as Sid and Pete for some reason. That was how they were accepted as being allowed to come in within that community.

From an identity perspective, right from the start of them as being first generation Muslims of Pakistani origin here in the UK, at least within my family, there were quite clear cultural identity issues that they had to get around.

Q: When did you become aware of that?

Qureshi: That is much later in life, when I started questioning about where we came from, so probably in my teens when I started asking my dad questions about what our family's background is, what our history is. I have always been a big reader, and so I was interested in finding out more about things and trying to find out who we really are.

Even myself and my brothers, growing up here in the UK, you go through some very, very strange cultural, religious, political, and social identity issues. It happens to you almost on a daily

basis. Are you more Pakistani than you are English? Are you British or are you English? Do I have that kind of hatred for Scots and Welsh and Irish that many English people do? I do not, but do I identify myself as being British more than I do English? I do not know as well.

You are struggling with these things. Then of course, you couple that with being a Muslim, which is in and of itself an identity that in some ways transcends all other identities. Then that is another question. Then, of course, I support Pakistan's cricket team over the English cricket team because that is what we do. It is part of being part of our community. So does that mean that I subscribe to being a Pakistani more than I do say, a British person, when all of my concepts regarding queuing in lines and being polite to people in a mixed environment, and my humor is so particularly British? Does that mean I am still more Pakistani, that I am British, or not?

There are all sorts of the things that — I know my parents in some ways, they struggled with those things, but maybe not to the same extent that we did because for my parents, and for my uncles, and my aunt, and obviously my grandparents it was more about the economics. They came here for a very, very specific reason. They wanted to make more money. They wanted to give themselves a better life. They wanted to have opportunities. That was my granddad's entire goal.

You think of all these stories about my uncles carrying sacks of coal up apartment blocks in order to help with the family business. They would be going to schools and universities but waking up very early to do all of this stuff, and then coming home and doing all of these things again. Your parents always put you through guilt trips about these kinds of things. They will say,

“One of your uncles used to study underneath the street light in order to revise for exams!” I do not know how true that is necessarily, but it is the family guilt that is put upon you — “They worked so hard in order to give you what you have right now. Do not abuse that trust.”

Q: So when you and your brothers were growing up, did you go back to Pakistan very often? What were you told about Pakistan?

Qureshi: We did not until many years, simply because my parents could not afford it. There were quite a few of us, so going back to Pakistan was not feasible. I do not have really any memories of going back to Pakistan until I was thirteen years old. That was the first time I actually remember going. I know I have been before then, but I was a very, very small child and I do not actually have any real memories of being there.

It never really featured in our lives, other than knowing that our identity was Pakistani. That was really the kind of emphasis in our lives from a certain perspective that culturally we knew that we were. You did not necessarily know exactly what that meant, but you knew that it meant you could not have girlfriends, for example. You did not necessarily know even that was because you were a Muslim as much as it was that you were a Pakistani.

There are certain things that you are brought up with as a British-born Pakistani. For instance, you cannot eat pork. We knew that was a Muslim thing. There were certain things that, as you are growing up, you become more and more aware of where they come from the older you grow. In fact, there are certain things that you would then reject.

For example, in our weddings, my brothers and I, we have rejected certain parts of Pakistani culture that we know come from Hinduism because we say that is not part of our religious rites. But we know that Pakistanis as a culture, they have taken those Hindu rituals into their own culture. But we said, “No, we don't want that aspect because we don't believe that it's part of the religious ceremony.”

Q: Can you give me an example of that?

Qureshi: So, for example there is a ceremony called the Mehndi. I do not know what the religious significance is in Hinduism, but effectively this henna is brought and it is put on the forehead and stuff. Pakistanis have started doing this as well now for many, many years. Now it is almost accepted that that must happen now as part of your traditional Pakistani wedding.

My brothers and I, because we have educated ourselves in respect to the religion, we know what is what, and what is not. We say, “Our identity is as Muslims first.” We do reject those aspects of Pakistani culture and Pakistani society that we do not think fit in with what we believe to be correct from a religious perspective. I think that is part and parcel of an education process.

Now, my parents and my uncles did not have that opportunity because they were working so hard day and night to make their place within UK society. We grew up in an era where my parents worked very hard to send us to one of the best schools in the UK. It was a very expensive school, but fortunately with some government assistance, we were able to go there. We grew up

in an environment where everything then was purely about the academics. There was not any kind of expectation that we would do paper rounds in the morning or carry sacks of coal. The entire environment behind how we were able to find our identity is completely different to our parents. They knew they were Pakistani because they were born there, but we did not know exactly what we were. We knew we were Muslim. We knew that we came from a Pakistani background. But where did those lines blur? When we go to the park and play with the other kids in the park, we are just playing football with anybody else. There was no kind of differentiation in that way.

Our house was on a hill. I do not live there anymore. I live with my wife now. But we lived in an area that was very, very nice. It was a middle class, suburban area in the south of London. But on the other side of the hill, there were all these council estates, which were full of skinheads, the National Front, which was effectively a racist movement that started to try and kick immigrants out of the UK. It has been around for quite some time.

Growing up in the 1980s, I was used to those kids coming up to the park when we were playing there, and effectively trying to start fights with us and to really kick us out. We were abused by them quite a lot as young children.

Eventually, of course, with what is colloquially referred to as “white flight” taking place, where white people move out of an area because they worry that too many of another ethnicity are moving in. As more Pakistanis moved into white areas, as more black people moved in to our area, demographically, we just overran them, and they were not able to then come up to that area

in the same way. What we found actually that you had a much more multicultural mix taking place. We had Italians, we had blacks, and we had Pakistanis all playing in the same park without any of those problems taking place.

The experience that I had of say, the late 1980s and the early 1990s, of that kind of racism did go away for me for many years until seven, eight, nine years ago when the War on Terror started. My wife has now suffered a couple of rounds of racist abuse in the streets where we live. When she told me about it, I said, "You don't know because you lived in Wales all your life." But that is how we grew up.

It is now reverting back to that, except now, instead of my black friend and me being chased down the street it is just me by myself, because Muslims are the only other now from many perspectives. We are the easy target in some ways. That is not to say that racism does not exist in the UK for other communities. It definitely does, but not to the same kind of hysteria that it does with Muslims. I tried to explain to her that unfortunately, this is part and parcel of the kind of struggles that we have to deal with. But of course it is quite horrible to see a battle that you thought you had won all those years ago has now come back to haunt you again in somewhat of a different way.

Q: You mentioned going to these, I gather, very prestigious schools. Can we talk about your schooling, your education?

Qureshi: The school that I went to is called Whitgift School. It is a very expensive private school. This is for the years between eleven and sixteen. It is one of those schools that has every single facility available. I did not necessarily, from an academic perspective, take the best advantage of it.

Q: What were the other students like?

Qureshi: Every single student who goes to that school is expected to come up with straight As. That is the kind of place it is. But what was interesting is how, even within that school, we formed a ghetto very, very quickly amongst our ethnicities because, even though these kids came from very well-off families, they still had an intense level of racism. Especially the rugby lads, who were known to be extremely racist because they were built like tanks, all of them. Us small Asians, five foot nothing, really would not stand a chance against them. We were cricket players and squash players, not really into the whole rugby scene.

We formed cliques very quickly. The Chinese, the blacks, the Pakistanis, and the Indians, we would all be together in the same crowds. We would move around in the same circles. What was interesting is that we would come from the same areas of London as well. If you think of the Whitgift School being in the very south of London, all of the white kids —not all of them, of course, but many of them — would be coming from very, very rich, affluent areas, and we would be taking the bus. Their parents would be picking them up in their Bentleys, and their Rolls-Royces, and their Aston Martins from the front of the school. We would be going to bus stop at the back of the school and going back down to our area, which was not so affluent, shall we say.

In fact, there was a bus stop in Croydon, which is on our way back home. We used to call this bus stop “Terminal Three.” In Heathrow Airport, Terminal Three is the terminal that all the ethnic minorities take to go back to their countries of origin. That was why we used to refer to this bus stop as being Terminal Three because it was taking us back to where we came from. It was quite an amusing time.

We recognized it for what it was, which is effectively that this is the status quo. These are not just race issues — there are also class issues that are taking place. You are surprised at how quickly, from a very young age, you understand that. But also you understand the need to revert in an introspective way back into the communities that you feel comfortable with, and how you identify then with other ethnic minorities, whether they be Chinese, or black, and how they then identify back with you.

Once again, sports was one of the things that helped get me through in many ways. I played squash at a county level. Squash is a very, very Pakistani thing to do. We ruled the sport for about twenty-five years. See, I referred to it as a “we.” That in itself is interesting, right? But as Pakistanis, it is a sport that we have always been very, very good at. I tried to take it to quite a high level. I did not necessarily make it, but that was the thing that I was really focused on in school for many years. Just generally sports, in particular cricket, was a big part of my life as well for many years.

Q: Then after the Whitgift School, what was your next —

Qureshi: That was interesting because my parents could not afford to send me there anymore, so I had to leave. I did do the next years, the two years of what's known as A levels. But my parents could not afford it anymore because my brothers had left, so the subsidies that we would get for having multiple children were gone.

They sent me to a grammar school called Wilson's School. Again, it is one of the best grammar schools in the UK. It is a free school, but it is an excellent school. When I turned up, I came with the same kind of anti-white racist attitude that I had developed in Whitgift because I felt that all white people must be like this. What was amazing is how that was broken down completely. For the first time in my life I had white friends. These people were from very humble backgrounds, very well educated still, came from good families, very polite people. But they used to say to me, "Why are you so against us?" If you had been through my experience where effectively you are a minority all the time, then you do not get that option. You have to set up a defense mechanism against what you perceive to be somebody who is going to potentially abuse you. I am not saying it was like the civil rights movement in America where people were being lynched all the time. Sometimes racism is more subtle than others, maybe, and not necessarily as aggressive, but you felt like the other growing up. There was no doubt about that.

But for the first time in my life up until that point, I felt I could relate to white people. I felt really happy about it as well, in my head. That is the whole point, it did not become a white, black, Asian issue anymore at all. It was just purely about who you were friendly with, what you enjoyed doing together, what types of music you enjoyed, what types of sports you liked to play, so that really became the emphasis behind relationships.

Q: What kind of a student were you?

Qureshi: I was a very, very lazy student, but I was an avid reader. That was my one saving grace through my schooling career.

I did not like the sciences at all. But as a British-born Pakistani, my parents expected me to fit a certain stereotype. I was supposed to be a dentist. That was my life. One of my older brothers was supposed to be a doctor. He became one in the end. The other one was supposed to be a dentist, and unfortunately, he did not make it. But I was supposed to be a dentist or a pharmacist, at the very minimum, because my dad is a pharmacist himself. It was like, “Well, that is still respectable enough.”

There was only certain respectable degrees that we as British-born Pakistanis, at least within the kind of communities that are concerned with education. People say to me sometimes, “How does the Muslim community feel about such and such thing, or as somebody from the Muslim community in the UK.” I say, “Hold on a second. I come from a very, very privileged, middle class background. Don't ask me about the factory communities in the north who have real problems with poverty and class and lack of being able to get access to all the various institutions and opportunities that life has to offer. You're asking the wrong person if you want to know what the majority of Muslims in the UK are thinking because that's not me.” I can tell you about my background and what I have been through, but that represents maybe one percent of Muslim experience in the UK.

So you ask me the question about how I responded as a student. Unfortunately, I did not take the best advantage of it. From a sporting perspective I definitely tried, but not necessarily from an academic perspective. But reading from a very, very young age, it was the one thing I was obsessed with. It did not matter what else was going on my life, I was reading.

Q: What were you reading?

Qureshi: Everything and anything that came my way. I read everything from Stephen King to Dostoevsky. Really, that is how diverse it was. It did not matter for me. If it was a book and it was in my house, I would read it. That is how it came out. One of my aunts was an avid reader, and she got married. She went to Pakistan, so she left her entire library to me and my brothers, and so we were introduced to Terry Brooks. I do not know if you have ever heard of him –

Q: *The Sword of Shannara*.

Qureshi: Yes, *The Sword of Shannara*, right. Even till today, I still read Terry Brooks. My wife says, “You're somebody who works in this field. You come across all this stuff about these people all time, and you're sitting there reading a book about fantasy fiction, what's wrong with you?” I said, “If you knew my childhood you would understand.” There was another series called *Redwall* by a guy named Brian Jacques, and up until very recently, I was still reading his books, even though they were made for children. But when you grow up with something, you cannot help but love it and have appreciation for it.

I read *The Sword of Shannara* a million times. It was our favorite book. When I found out that it was a rip-off of *The Lord of the Rings*, that was a whole different world for me then. Then I went on to *The Silmarillion* and I am reading all of these different things, and it is just being engrossed in different worlds, really.

Even though my parents felt that I should have become a dentist, and I took math and chemistry during my A levels in order to please them, but I fought to do English literature. I literally said, "Look, I will do dentistry, but give me this one thing. I love literature more than anything else. I need to do this for myself." They said, "You can still do dentistry. You know what? Universities like it when they see a little bit of roundedness. They don't like somebody who is just purely into the sciences, so we'll let you do that."

Despite having private tuition in both math and chemistry, I did not do well at all in either subject. In English, because I was being private tutored so much in the other two subjects, I did not have any time to revise for it, but I still did really well in it, all the same. That sent a clear message to my parents that I am more in the humanities side of things than I am the sciences.

Q: Did you make that break at the university?

Qureshi: Yes, just before I started my university. I thought, "Here's my chance." I put it to my mum, "I'm thinking I did well at English literature during my A levels, maybe I could do English literature for my degree." No way, that was not going to happen. They said, "You could do law

because law is something that you can get a decent job out of it. It's something still very respectable.” It is accepted in our community as a decent degree because law has a very, very high place because the founding father of Pakistan, [Muhammad Ali] Jinnah, was a lawyer himself, who was a member of Lincoln's Inn here in the UK, and studied in the UK, and there is a whole history. My grandfather of course was a barrister himself. There was a nobility that was attached to it that was acceptable from a cultural perspective.

It was just providence that I really loved law once I started it. For me it was using the same kind of brain processes that you use in literature. When you try to analyze a text, when you try to analyze a problem, figuring your way around. It is the kind of lateral thinking that really appealed to me in the same way.

I will, by the way for the record, come back to do a master's in literature at some point or another, but everything in its time. But I really did love law, I absolutely loved it. I started in 2000. That was when I started my law degree. I finished in 2003. So it was during that period that the War on Terror began. It was a year into my second year of law that the War on Terror began. That informed the kind of choices I would make later.

Q: Where were you studying?

Qureshi: Unfortunately, because I did not do very well on my A level, I went to a university just around the corner from here called London Guildhall University. It is not a great university, but I did enjoy my time there.

Q: What kind of a lawyer did you think you would be?

Qureshi: Corporate lawyer. When I started that was the idea, and that was the plan if I am going to do this. I was good at corporate law. I genuinely did very well on my corporate law subjects. I felt it was something that I could do. My mother was particularly keen because it is the place where you are going to get the most amount of money. I still remember my application for my master's had down Japanese corporate law, corporate law, Arab comparative commercial law, and corporate insolvency. Those were the four subjects I was supposed to specialize in during my master's year. The program was an intercollegiate program, so you would study at Kings University, University College London, and the School of Oriental and African Studies at the same time. You would get the opportunity to study at all three of these three red brick institutions. I was quite excited about doing that, but as I said the War on Terror changed things quite considerably for me.

Q: Can you plot that out a bit?

Qureshi: I did not know if I was going too fast for you.

Q: No, it is a perfect segue into it.

Qureshi: So 9/11 happens September, 2001. This is just at the beginning of the second year, just before the beginning of the academic year. By this time I had already started to choose an

Islamic identity for myself as well. I had read a lot about Islam. Law, for me, represented something that I found to be in some ways innately Islamic, and that was why I appreciated it so much. There are concepts such as due process, habeas corpus, the Magna Carta. For me, these things were as Islamic as you could possibly get because they were about providing process to people and providing justice.

God tells Muslims in the Koran, "Be just, that's closest to God." He also says, "Be just even if it goes against yourself." These concepts really appeal to me very, very strongly. I had always been very much interested in social justice issues. My older brothers have always been involved in the community, in social work. My parents as well have always encouraged us from a very young age to help others, and to be involved with the community, and help people in need. I grew up with that.

Even during the Bosnian conflict, even when the rest of the western world was refusing to accept that anything was going on, we knew about the genocide that was taking place in Kosovo right from the start. We knew what was taking place in Bosnia right from the start. We grew up with this identity that there are things taking place against the Muslim world that were very bad, and this happened because they are Muslims. That gave us a sense of interest about social justice. I was too young to do anything. Some people that I knew went and fought in Bosnia, for example. They were given permission by the UK government. They turned up at immigration. "Where you off to?"

"I'm going to go and fight in Bosnia."

“OK, you have our blessings. Hope you return safely.” That was the attitude at the time because of what was taking place there. The governments were not getting involved because of bureaucracy and so this all leads up to my understanding of the law and also at the same time, my understanding of Islam, where they intersected with one another one and how that then relates later.

In fact, in 2000 I was commissioned by a mosque to give a series of lectures regarding the importance of studying law to young students. I disagreed with the old school attitude of “English law isn't the law of God, so there must be something wrong about it, that as Muslims we shouldn't be judging our lives by anything other than the law of God,” which is a very common and much debated theological position. What I said is, “How about looking at it from this perspective, which is that habeas corpus in and of itself is an extremely Islamic principle? The rule against torture is an extremely Islamic principle.” I gave all the evidences from the Islamic perspective as well, that this is the reason why a proper justice system has all the elements of what we understand to be justice from an Islamic perspective as well. There are certain things in terms of the minutiae that we might not necessarily agree with. For example, we might not necessarily agree with succession laws in various aspects, but that is the minutiae. What we are talking about here is something very, very basic, which is the right to a fair trial.

I do not like using the word radicalize because I do not think being radical is a bad thing, but I was effectively radicalized by Guantánamo. For a start, seeing a war taking place against a sovereign state of Afghanistan because of non-state actors for me did not make any sense. You

are going to attack an entire country because of what some individual has done? Especially when the government of the other country is saying, “We will hand him over to you, just show us the evidence for doing so.” It really did not make much sense to me.

When I saw the images from Guantánamo it really hit a nerve because we have grown up with a certain conception that the western world provides justice. What was interesting to me later for my work is when I spoke to released Guantánamo detainees. They always said, “When we heard the Americans were about to take us next from whoever picked us up initially, we were always relieved, ‘Phew, thank God for that,’ because at least now we have the opportunity of somebody hearing us out and giving us some semblance of justice.” There has always been this perception for many of us that the Americans and the British are the beacons of human rights and due process, and to some extent we need to trust in that and take advantage of it for the sake of trying to fix problems even within our own countries. But unfortunately, what I saw was the world's leading superpower effectively sending the message to the rest of the world that behavior like this is acceptable.

That was effectively what made me change my mind about what I would eventually end up doing. I changed my entire subjects to those relating to the laws of armed conflict and the use of force, foreign relations, and even Islamic law. That was what I did. I did my master's dissertation on unlawful combatants, finding out what its historical development is, where did the term come from, enemy combatant, and has it ever existed in legal history? That was how I got involved in the whole Guantánamo issue.

Q: I think we will go on from here eventually to talk about Cageprisoners, but I was struck by, when you said, that around 2001, around the time of the 9/11 attacks, you had begun to come into an Islamic sense of identity. I wondered if you could talk a little bit more about that process and what instigated it. Was it gradual?

Qureshi: My parents, not from when I was born, but from when I was quite young, decided themselves that they wanted to be religious. They looked at the society around them. They looked at themselves. They read the Koran again and they thought to themselves that, “There is another place after this Earth and we believe that Islam is the correct religion,” so they raised us in an Islamic household.

My parents never forced us to do anything. They encouraged us to pray, but if we did not, they would not try and catch us out about it. They would just ask us, “Did you pray?” Or they would not even ask us at all. For many years, I know my parents did not even ask me whether or not I prayed. They did not put any pressure on us.

Because my dad, who came from a little bit of a socialist background when he was younger, actually made that decision for himself, I think he wanted to give us the opportunity to make that decision for ourselves as well. Growing up there was not any kind of pressure for us to be religious, but my dad would take us to study circles with various religious figures and we grew up around a lot of religious people. We were learning about the religion all the time, but not necessarily in a strict, strict way. We were never beaten about things. It was not like that.

Going into my teens, I think religion really unfortunately left part of my life. I would say up until my late teens, I did not even consider myself a Muslim during those years. I did not practice the religion in any way, other than a kind of cultural sense of what it was. Even though I knew a lot, I had read a lot about it. I had gone to a lot of study circles. I was around people all the time. But for me, it was still all very, very, very cultural, that my parents are saying it. I was more, especially from sixteen to eighteen, very, very much into hardcore hip hop. That was my entire scene. I would listen to all sorts of music, from Tupac to the Wu-Tang Clan. This was my world, and I would spend all of my money, and unfortunately sometimes money that was not even mine.

Q: Frankly, it is hard for me to imagine you as you are now then as you must have been.

Qureshi: Exactly, right? My wife says the same thing to me as well. It was interesting because after I got married, literally a couple of days later, I am walking with my wife around our local area. The area is nice, but as the years went by, it sunk in its class standing a little bit. The boys I grew up with were street kids. That was where I got a lot of my influences from.

We used to speak a fair amount of patois, various street patois, rather than any actual proper Jamaican patois. We bump into an old friend of mine when we are walking around the area, and all of a sudden I break out in this brogue. So he is talking to me now, “What a gwan, boy? Where ya been, man? Long time no see. Hit me. Yeah?” Like that.

My wife, as we walk away, she says, “What the hell was that?” I said, “That's how we speak around here to one another. We don't speak like this.” She says, “I've always seen you at events,

or on the TV, and you're always really well spoken. I would never have imagined for the life of me that you were that kid.” But that is how you grow up in the circumstances.

I was growing up with all these street kids, but at the same time I was going to this private school. Those kind of influences come at you in different ways. So, obviously it is difficult because who do you want to be? The enjoyment side of things is coming from one side, whereas the “protect your future” is from another side. You are always trying to balance that out.

Those are my influences. Honestly I think Tupac Shakur probably had more influence. I recently wrote a blog article about him, because I was in a shop one day and I heard one of his songs. It took me back to my youth. But it reminded me of all sorts of things, which actually relate to our work in terms of race issues, in terms of class issues. I think that had a massive impact.

I'm not saying that I was any kind of gangster or anything, but those were my influences because you either identified with a kind of white sense of identity or you identified with a black sense of identity. No Pakistani boy wanted to associate themselves with being a Pakistani in reality. You were a Pakistani, but only as far as cricket went. We were definitely behind the team, there is only one team to support if you are a Pakistani boy, and that is Pakistan, the cricket team. We all play cricket and we love it.

But do I want to be listening to Indian music? Do I want to be into the whole Bollywood scene? No, I would rather watch Hollywood, and I rather would listen to hip hop because that was far more cool. All of our black friends listened to all of that kind of stuff and it was much more of a

cool culture. Many of us opted to take that identity on as our own. I think that is a large part of where I come from.

Also, the sense of being a victim community, a criminalized community, and being the Other cemented that whole view in your life. I used to listen to people like NWA — Niggaz With Attitude — and songs like "Fuck the Police" and "Cop Killer," and all of these things, these strong influences that are coming at you your entire life, you cannot help but be affected by it.

It was interesting that even my mother said that when I started practicing the religion and I actually gave up listening to music completely that my entire attitude changed. I actually became far calmer. I used to be a very, very angry child. I would get angry very quickly, and my brothers will attest to that, to the extent that I would get a little bit violent. But even now my wife says, "I cannot imagine that about you because you have never shouted at me before. You have never insulted me in any way. You have never lost your patience with me." I am married four years now. She says, "I have never seen that side of you." I say to her that that is what religion gave me at least, anyway, that I chose one day after reading.

You get to a point where effectively you are an atheist or an agnostic. Reading all the different kinds of stuff that were out there, for me, I felt that Islam was the logical solution. I wanted to make that my life and my identity, and I wanted to learn more about it. That was how I came to that.

In a very, very long winded way to answer your question, but it came from somewhere, which is effectively a whole range of identity issues that come. To add into all the mix about what your identity is, I had to throw in black culture as well, which came from the East and West coast of America, of all places. That was me, really, it was. You would look down upon the kids that used to listen to soft rock, and to grunge music, and you would get into fights with people over it. This was part of our reality.

Q: Obviously when you finished law school, you were a different person.

Qureshi: A little bit. I think by the time I started my law degree, I was fairly different than before. Obviously certain things carry over, and music was the hardest thing for me to give up because it was such a strong feature of my life. I was the kind of person who would buy music from America before it even came out in the UK because I wanted to be the first person that listened to it, or had it, or to discover, effectively, a new type of sound that the UK had not heard before. That was how obsessed I was. I was so obsessed with music that literally, I would buy music from America on import in order to be the first to have it. I remember Wu-Tang Clan had many members. So affiliates like Cappadonna and Killarmy, the kind of people that the average person street would never have heard of, and I was just obsessed with having to buy all their music and every single individual member — Wu-Tang Clan's RZA, GZA, ODB, all these guys — having to have each one of their separate albums, and their entire back catalog if I had not had it already. That was the kind of obsessive compulsive I was about it.

But religion, it did change that for me. It changed my character. You were asking about how that whole transition phase came about. I think it came about initially because I felt like I had been a failure for much of my life, both in terms of my identity, and also in terms of my education. Not in an arrogant way, but I knew that I was smarter than the grades I had. At each stage, I was not performing. People had always said things to me like, "He's very, very clever, he just doesn't apply himself." I was thinking to myself, "Maybe there is some truth in that." I knew I read a lot and I knew I loved to write, and that my writing was of a decent standard.

I think it got to a stage where I thought I have something to prove to myself. I reflected on the things that I thought were negative in my life, and when I really sat down and thought about it, I realized that the types of music I was listening to were particularly negative.

I am not condemning the entirety of rap music. There are some aspects of it that are still really, really wonderful. In terms of social commentary they have provided an amazing resource. When you think about Public Enemy, they have provided such a source of inspiration for so many people. Chuck D's book, *Fight the Power*, is an unbelievable testament to the positive impact that music can have from a political perspective, from a social perspective. Even in some ways, some of the music that Tupac produced, however negative it might be from a certain perspective, had positive influences.

But I think for me personally, because of the messaging that was coming out, it had a detrimental effect my life. Maybe for other people it does not. But at least for me, I felt it did. When I was looking at the various options that I had in front of me, I felt, "There has got to be more than just

achieving things.” I did not have any other way of putting it really. “Just the achieving for the sake of what though? What is the purpose of my life?” You look around you. Everything has a purpose. A cup has a purpose. My chair has a purpose. Everything, even ornamental pieces have an aesthetic purpose to their existence.

I just felt that there had to be something more in my life than simply just existing and achieving. Achievement in itself for me was not enough. There had to be something that was there at the end of it. Not just for money's sake either. Yes, achieving education will eventually get you a good job, which will get you money, which la de da. But I did not feel that that is a goal to be achieved, that is just something, part of how you did your life effectively. It is part of trying to make the most out of your life. It is not about what the end goal is.

With these kind of thought processes I decided to look at the various different religions out there. There are certain religions that I did not really look into that much, because I did not feel that they were relevant to the discovery that I was on. The Abrahamic faiths were ones that really interested me, and I felt that they had a lot to say for themselves. But in the end, I chose Islam.

Q: What were the others that you considered as places to look?

Qureshi: To some extent Buddhism and Hinduism. I did not feel that they spoke to me enough. That is why I concentrated on the Abrahamic faiths more. Out of them, I felt Islam gave me something that the other two did not. I guess when you are coming from a situation where you have been free to do whatever you like, there is a certain freedom that comes in a prescriptive

religion of knowing what the right thing to do is at any given moment in time. Some people do not understand how beautiful that prescription can be. So to be in any circumstance feel to yourself that, “I know what my religion tells me to do is right and wrong here. I can just get on with that.” It is liberating in many ways, and I felt that really helped my life a lot.

Q: When you left law school, before we get on to Cageprisoners, you talked about Guantánamo and your growing awareness of the War on Terror, did you become at all aware of, or interested in, or hear of, the whole campaign against the Irish?

Qureshi: Yes, I had been aware of that for many years. I grew up on movies like *In the Name of the Father*, those kinds of movies. They were very, very much part of my life. I remember the very first movie that I ever watched, that really, really had a big impact on me from a political perspective was *Cry Freedom*. It had a huge, huge impact on me. I do not know how many hundreds of times I watched that movie and *The Color Purple*. Those two movies had an immense impact on me and my brothers, the three of us, really. *The Color Purple*, it is almost impossible for me to even think about how many times I have seen that movie, over and over and over again.

We loved it from every single perspective, maybe because we were identifying ourselves with that black culture a little bit, and we felt the racism that was going on against them, and the difficulties that the various characters go through in the movie. It is just an amazing testament to the human spirit in many ways. We loved it. *Cry Freedom*, just the intensity of the character that is portrayed as Steve Biko. Some people say that it is factually a little bit inaccurate and

whatever else, but just the whole thing about standing up yourself against an entire system. Even from a religious perspective, the greatest jihad is correcting an unjust ruler. That is the highest, that is the pinnacle of jihad for a Muslim, to stand before an unjust ruler, because effectively he could chop you down there and then, and to say, "You are incorrect in what you are doing." For me, those kinds of things, they have always been in the background of my life. I was aware of them to some extent. Not to the extent that I am now, where I do read a lot about the experience of the Irish, and I do try my hardest to learn from the things that they did right, the things they did wrong, because as a criminalized community we are going through very similar things.

That similarly goes for South Africa as well. I have been to South Africa twice now, and I have always found an amazing kindred with South Africans, especially those who are colored. It is almost like it is a shared experience when you are speaking to them, and finding out what they have been through. You feel that here are people who actually understand what it means to be a victim community. So it helps. It helps knowing that people have been through something, and that they came through on the other side. That is the important thing. Not completely. Not completely, of course, and they are still struggling every single day from various perspectives. But knowing that, and even the Irish are, but knowing that there is a shared experience there really does help a lot.

I remember being in Bosnia in 2007 and in my hotel, I saw these Irish guys sitting there. They had big E I R E tattoos all over their arms and stuff. We started having a conversation, and one of them says, "You Muslims better f-ing wake up right now." He was quite brutal about it. "We've been through all of this. We see what's happening with your community. You need to wake up

now and realize that you have to learn from everything that we've been through before, and see what it is," that it is what it is, which is effectively you being turned into a criminalized, suspect community. That was quite a telling moment actually for me. I knew that was the kind of thing that had happened before. I guess what I was not ready for is the extent to which it would go global. That became very, very difficult at certain times, to comprehend just the sheer volume and extent of the revenge — and I have no other way of putting it other than revenge — that has taken place for 9/11.

Q: Can we talk about you move from your master's to Cageprisoners? What was your route to Cageprisoners?

Qureshi: What was my route to Cageprisoners? I got in touch with them during my master's because I was researching my dissertation on unlawful combatants. I remember going on Google and just typing up Geneva Conventions, unlawful combatants, that kind of thing, and their website came up. I e-mailed them, I said, "Look, I'm doing a dissertation on unlawful combatants, my name is such and such, I'd really like it you could maybe give me a hand in terms of pointing me in the right direction, in terms of who I should be looking at."

I got an e-mail back saying, "You idiot. It's us, your friends from south London. You could probably give us a hand if you are researching into this stuff." It turned out that some friends of mine who have been involved in humanitarian work for many, many years — doctors and lawyers, and whatever else — and they were involved in a number of conflicts, doing a lot of particularly medical assistance abroad. They had decided to set this NGO up. Well, it was not an

NGO at the time. It was just a website, in order to give a Muslim perspective on everything that was going on because the War on Terror and 9/11 brought with it a climate of fear that the Muslim community has never experienced before in the western world. Effectively overnight, we became an 'Other' and that is the first time that happened to us in that way, as a suspect community in a way that we could never have imagined.

What you found was organizations who should have taken the lead on issues regarding Guantánamo, particularly here in the UK since we had a number of British guys who were in Guantánamo, refused to say anything, because they said, "There is no smoke without fire." That was the automatic response that came from the community — "If they are there, they must have done something wrong. The Americans would not pick up somebody just like that, so they must have been part of Al-Qaeda." That was the reaction from the community at large.

The founders of Cageprisoners said, "As Muslims, we believe in due process and we thought these countries did as well. It's our responsibility to, at the very minimum, campaign for these guys to get a fair trial. Yes, they might have been involved in something, and if they are, they should be brought before a court. But the reality is, is that until they are tried with a crime, they should be released." That was where the whole thing came from.

During my master's I was already researching all these articles in relation to Guantánamo and the Geneva Conventions, I was just feeding them articles. Everything that I came across, I gave it to them. I would write a few pieces for myself, just opinion editorials, just pieces of analysis I would just pass it on to them. That was really where that came from.

At the end of my master's, I was taught the laws of armed conflict by a former colonel in the British Army. He was a legal advisor during the First Gulf War. His name is Charles Garraway, a really amazing individual. He taught me the essence of international humanitarian law, the Geneva Conventions, and why they are so important. I think the most important thing is he taught me the morality behind them. As somebody had been studying a lot about Islam, what I found is that the laws regarding jihad were very, very similar to the Geneva Conventions in terms of not attacking non-combatants, not attacking civilians, about not having disproportionate targeting, about limiting collateral damage, and all of these things.

In fact, in many ways Islam goes somewhat further. In traditional Islamic rule, you are not allowed to use fire in order to attack the enemy. You are not allowed to mutilate bodies. There were all these rules and regulations regarding the conduct of hostilities, which really appealed to me.

I immersed myself quite heavily in talking to my professor about all of these different aspects. Then I remember speaking to him one day and just asking his advice about how I could take this further and really get immersed in the field, and he said to me, "One of the things you have to do is go and visit an occupied territory for yourself. Go and see how people who live under an occupation actually live their lives. That will teach you the value of the law. I've been in conflicts scenarios. I've seen what happens when countries become occupiers and I've see what happens when the Geneva Conventions aren't respected." He was very, very critical of the U.S. during this whole period of time, because Guantánamo was going on and he was extremely critical of

what they were doing and said that is completely unlawful. His one piece of advice to me was go and see for yourself what the value of the Geneva Conventions are and the value of international humanitarian law.

Even before my masters had ended, I went for two weeks to travel around the West Bank of Palestine. Being in that kind of scenario where you are seeing how people are having their lives made very, very difficult for them when the Geneva Conventions are not being applied, when international humanitarian or international human rights laws are not being applied correctly, what the reality, the physical impact of that is, it was a real eye-opener for me. Unfortunately when I got back, I only had ten days till my first exam, and so I had to unfortunately forget about everything that I had seen and immerse myself in revising. But it was great. I did pretty well at the end of my masters. Fortunately, I finally started studying during my law degree and my master's, and I did one in both. That for me made a massive impact, in terms of my ability to understand what the value of international human rights and humanitarian laws and in fact how that related to my own religious sense of justice.

Q: Can you draw out one of your experiences in the West Bank? It will illuminate what you are talking about.

Qureshi: Yes, I think, one of the nights with a group of people who had gone there we were in a restaurant in a town called Birzeit, and we were eating dinner.

[INTERRUPTION]

Qureshi: *The Sword of Shannara*, what an awesome, awesome book. It is interesting, I once had a conversation with somebody at a conference in South Africa who used to be from American intelligence. He did not say where from exactly, but he was very, very standoffish with me initially. He was quite critical of Cageprisoners and what we do, and he kept accusing me of being a jihadist during the course of the conference, and a number of things. We were forced, because it was quite a cozy affair, to talk to different people. Then he was sitting at the same table as me, and we started talking about literature and I started going on about some of these and how I had grown up reading them. It was amazing how it changed his perceptions completely by the end of the conference, about what my identity actually is.

Because this whole thing about “you can only be one thing or the other” is false and lacks nuance. Even my own experiences in America taught me that obviously it does not work just one way. From the other side when you feel like you are a victim from a certain perspective, it can entrench you a little bit. Sorry, there is all this going on, I am sure it will turn out at some point or the other.

Q: You were talking about an experience on the West Bank.

Qureshi: The group of people that I was with in that town, Birzeit was in a restaurant one night and all of the sudden, the owner of the restaurant he puts out the lights, they shut all the curtains, they close the doors, and everybody goes quiet. The Palestinians that we were with were telling us, “Just keep quiet, keep quiet, keep quiet, keep it down.”

You heard this really loud thundering rumble coming through, and passed through the town. It was a convoy of tanks. There was a megaphone. These names kept on being shouted out over the microphone. I could not understand it. At that time I did not know Arabic at all. There were some other words along with the names that were being spoken. Then there were all these loud explosions taking place. We thought that there was actually some kind of shelling or bombing going on outside.

So afterwards, we said to the Palestinians, “What was that?”

“Those are the names of all the kids that live in this area and those were sound bombs. They are not explosions.”

It was effectively a method of taunting kids to come out at them. To think that adults would use those kinds of tactics to taunt children is quite horrible. It is quite horrific to think that children are being teased in that way. It was not a particularly nice moment, but it spoke to the difficulties that they have on a daily basis, alongside things like checkpoints, being one of the obvious things.

The town of Birzeit is right next to Ramallah, which is one of the main cities in the West Bank. So kids, when they want to come to the university in Birzeit, have to get past a certain road by six o'clock in the morning because a checkpoint is established every day, except the Israeli army do not say when they are going to start this checkpoint. Sometimes they do it at six o'clock in the morning, sometimes at seven, sometimes eight, sometimes nine, ten, three o'clock in the

afternoon. In order to get to your classes, you have to cross that road at or before six o'clock in the morning, otherwise you do not know whether or not you are going to be stopped from going to your classes later on in the day.

That kind of frustration of living your life and seeing them live through that was quite horrible. I know stuff like that happens. You have read about it and I have read a lot about Palestine. During the course of my master's we had studied it as an example of occupation. As a Muslim, I studied it from a religious perspective, but nothing will ever prepare you for what you see with your own eyes.

Quoting an example from the Abrahamic fates from the Muslim perspective, Moses is told by God that his people are worshipping a golden calf. He gets angry about it, but he does not get really angry until he sees it with his own eyes. Seeing is definitely worse than being told something. It is when he sees it with his own eyes when he throws the tablets down and gets really upset about it. But when he was told by God, "Something is happening," you should believe it when that has happened. No, it was not until he saw it with his own eyes that he got really upset. You cannot help it. When you see those things is when they make a difference.

Q: So after you were in the West Bank, presumably you returned to the UK. Just tell us more about how you got involved in Cageprisoners.

Qureshi: I took a year out. A friend of mine has asked me to teach English in a school that he had established in the south of London, in Croydon. He wanted me to teach English to these young

kids who came from all sorts of different backgrounds within the Muslim community. It was an enjoyable year from many perspectives. The one thing I really enjoyed was putting the school library together because it gave me a chance to kind of rediscover children's fiction over again.

I was reading books like *Inkheart* and *Inkspell*, and all of these new children's books, Philip Pullman's books, the *Northern Lights* trilogy and *Harry Potter*. It was just an excuse for me to read kid's fiction and it was wonderful.

I really enjoyed that aspect of it. I do not think I am the best teacher in the world when it comes to children. I do not think I have got the required patience to do that, unfortunately. I would have loved to have been able to. The kids are amazing. They have a way of bringing out sides of you that you do not even know, in terms of how much fun you can have with them. But at the same time, I guess in my heart I always knew I was going to go back to international humanitarian human rights law. I was never able to really fully immerse myself. But what I did do is, during the spring break, the Easter break, I took three weeks off in order to travel to Pakistan. I set up, with the contacts that I have over there, a tour of the Taliban and Afghan refugee camps in the north of Pakistan. I was only later to find out that other westerners, without their contacts, who were traveling around were getting picked up and being shipped off to Guantánamo. When I am doing my work, I think, "Oh my God, I was in that place at that time the guy was picked up." But I went through my family's police and security agency connections. They helped to set up all of these interviews and meetings. It was amazing. For me what was even more amazing was how culturally insensitive I was despite being from the Pakistani community.

I turned up here to the northwest of Pakistan in jeans that I had rolled up because it was hot to about three-quarter length and a bright red T-shirt. I think about this now, and I cannot even imagine that I would have done so something so patently stupid. When my hosts picked me up, they said, “We need to take you to a bazaar right now and get you into some kind of shalwar kameez,” which is the traditional Pakistani dress for the region, because I stood out like a sore thumb. It was not appropriate.

That really helped my work later in terms of understanding how you approach clients, how you approach new cultures and societies. You do try and make things as easy for them as you possibly can. Speaking to these guys, I was fortunate in that, because I had already taken on this Islamic identity by then, so I was able to speak the language of religion.

The language of religion is its own language. Two people could be Muslim. One is religious and one is not. You will immediately recognize one from the other because they know how to speak a certain way or not. For example, when I sat down with them for the first time I started with a salutation upon the prophet, which they recognized immediately. It meant that this is somebody who knows what the etiquettes and customs are of religious people. I knew that gave me then an entry point in terms of trust. I think that is one of the reasons why organizations like the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] and Reprieve and others ask for my help when it comes to consultancy work, especially in Pakistan, because there is an automatic rapport that we are able to establish just from a few words.

It can sometimes be that simple. You say, [phonetic] which in Arabic means, “I send praise upon God, the Lord of the worlds, and I send peace and blessings upon his noble messenger Muhammad.” Not something very, very difficult, but it is the etiquette and the custom of the people to start off a conversation like that. What I found is that opened them up to me.

I asked them everything. I asked them about girl schools — “Why didn't you establish girl schools in Afghanistan?” “Why did you hide Osama bin Laden?” “What are your opinions about 9/11?” What really amazed me are the kind of frank and honest answers I received. This is one of the answers to the question about the school. “We're a patriarchal society. We're a society where, even if we didn't have religion, we've only ever known our men to do things. So if we've got a problem in terms of an education system, who are we going to educate first? Are we going to educate men or women?” I received those kinds of answers.

Yes, fine, we might not accept them as being valid or legitimate, but it showed a thought process. I asked about women not being able to travel around by themselves. They similarly said, “Prior to the Taliban arriving, there were gang rapes in the streets of Afghanistan every single day. All we did was institute a policy to say that, if you're going to go out, you go out with a male, a complement in order to give you some level of protection.”

Once again, coming from a westerner's perspective, and for all intents and purposes, I am a westerner, it seems a bit odd that you would still limit somebody's ability to move about. But when you consider it from the context from which they were speaking, that if there were gang

rapes in the streets every single day, and from my sources I found out that that was not factually inaccurate, at least, then a policy decision like that seems to make some level of sense.

For me, what happened is that it put a human face on it, even if I did not agree with some of the answers that they were giving me. What it gave me was the opportunity to see these people as human beings outside of the bias, the really intense bile that was coming out against all Afghans and against all people from a certain perspective. These were human beings. They made mistakes, yes. like all human beings do. Should they be shipped off to Guantánamo and abused and tortured because of it? No, I do not think so. I know that is not the case because these are rational human beings that you can rationalize with when you speak to them and have dialogue with them. It was good for me to have that experience because I think it helped really inform the way that I would proceed with this work, which is always to come down the line of, “You stand up for yourself always” but dialogue has got to be the only way forward. It can be the only way forward.

I think that is the legacy that we are trying to leave at Cageprisoners, which is that identity is important. You have to protect your identity. You have to protect yourself and who you are without compromising. But at the same time, if you do not have dialogue, you are never, ever, ever going to be able to make a difference in any kind of conflict scenario. I think we learned that from Ireland, we have learned that from South Africa. That lesson has to be learned here. The Americans are finally learning it by talking to the Taliban.

Q: When did you come on board?

Qureshi: Let me see, I finished my master's in 2004. In 2004 to 2005, I was doing the schooling. It was the summer of 2005 when I came on board.

Q: When you had come back from Pakistan?

Qureshi: No.

Q: Before?

Qureshi: I had finished the rest of the academic year because I was on Easter. So then I finished the rest of the academic year out at the school. Then that summer I was supposed to start it about the beginning of September, 2005.

Q: How did it happen that they said, "Why don't you come in?"

Qureshi: That was my idea, really, because I really respected the work that Cageprisoners were doing. I knew I wanted to get back into the international human rights field and humanitarian law field. I went to the guys who founded it. I said, "You guys are all doctors and lawyers."

Q: Who were?

Qureshi: People like Dr. Adnan Siddiqui and Saghir Hussain who are our directors. This is a time when Moazzam was still in prison. He was in Guantánamo. He came on board later. I said to them, “Look, you guys are all fairly wealthy. You've got wealthy friends. Let's put together whatever money we can. Whatever you guys give me as a wage, I'll take that and we'll just get on with things. Let's form this as an NGO.” I put together a whole proposal about formalizing ourselves as an actual NGO, because, up until this point, families were coming to us. The whole modus operandi of Cageprisoners was to be a Muslim organization that dealt with due process issues in the context of the War on Terror. We catalogued, at least, due process issues in the War on Terror.

What we found is that families of Guantánamo detainees were coming to us because they trusted us because we were Muslim, and saying, “Look, I've got such and such family member. I'm based in this country. Can you help?” We were able to say things like, “Well, look, we know a guy named Zachary Katznelson at Reprieve. Yes, his name sounds Jewish, but don't worry. We've worked with this guy very, very closely. He's a great guy. He's going to help you out.” Or the guys at CCR [Center for Constitutional Rights]. We know Gitanjali Gutierrez or Barbara Olshansky. “They are going to help you out.”

Q: You had met them? Or other people?

Qureshi: Well, we knew some of the people online. Clive and his group in the UK we knew personally. We had met them a few times. But these guys, we were getting to know them more and more. Over the years I have pretty much met everybody now who is involved in this field.

Because of that kind of interaction we were having with the families, we thought to ourselves that we are in a position to actually help them, so why do we not formalize as an NGO and actually start helping them in much more of a practical way? That was really where Cageprisoners the NGO as a campaigning and research-based organization came from to investigate and highlight the cases of individuals who had been detained or killed arbitrarily.

Q: Was it at all difficult to do that?

Qureshi: No, not really. We set the whole process up pretty easily. I think the difficult part was stabilizing ourselves as a group, as an NGO. Funding is obviously always an issue. We worked virtually. Everybody worked from their homes. I was not married at the time. I was still living in my parents' home. I was just working from a little room with a computer, just typing away stuff, researching stuff, traveling around. But it was an interesting time. We were able to manage because we did not have many overheads except for the very little wage that I was receiving at the time.

Q: Can you remember one of the early cases that you worked on?

Qureshi: The very first case I ever worked on was Aafia Siddiqui's. I know that for a fact.

Q: The what?

Qureshi: Aafia Siddiqui. There was not any work being done in this case at the time. My colleague and I came across this random news article. We thought that it was an interesting case. This woman has just gone missing. What that started was three years of constant hounding. That one case stayed with me. Other cases have come and gone and even have maybe been left by the wayside a little bit. But hers was consistently one that I was always interested, the one that was always bringing up more problems, in terms of her disappearance, in terms of the detention story, than it was solutions. Maybe we can go into that at a bit more detail as we progress.

Whenever I could, I was trying my hardest to find out whatever information I could about her, speaking to family members, contacts in the security agencies in Pakistan, speaking to other people who were held in various detention sites. When Moazzam was released, I remember we were sitting down together. He said, "When I was detained in Bagram I heard the screams of a woman. A contact of mine at the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] told me that that woman's prisoner number is 650."

So we started trying to match up the dates between 650 and Aafia Siddiqui in terms of her disappearance. These were the only two women we knew were being detained. We thought, "Maybe they are the same woman." The link was a little bit strained, I will be honest with you. But we decided that based on other evidence that we had mainly from the prisoners who escaped from Bagram, Abu Yahia al-Libi and others. They talked about a Pakistani woman who they saw with their own eyes being held in Bagram. With all of these connections being made, we put together a very short report about this. We sent out one of our patrons, Yvonne Ridley, a woman who was detained by the Taliban herself, and later became Muslim. We sent her to Pakistan

along with one of our board members Saghir Hussain. Imran Khan, the former cricketer, now pretend politician, hosted the press conference. This was in the beginning of July 2008.

Now, we did not think anything necessarily was going to come of it. But we were not prepared for the fact that it actually caused a massive media storm. It went absolutely viral. People were talking about it everywhere. In Pakistan itself, every single newspaper and news channel was hounding the government over this. Four weeks later, the Americans admitted to having Aafia Siddiqui in their custody.

I have seen a lot of coincidences in the course of my work, but this will always strike me as being one of the most obvious ones. We have our own theories behind why that might be the case and this is not necessarily the forum to go through them. But the reality is that four weeks after that press conference, the Americans admitted that they had got Aafia Siddiqui in their custody, and these were the circumstances behind how she was detained. We, ourselves, through our research, denied the narrative that had been presented by the Americans. Of course they have their own narrative and we have ours. We are constantly trying to campaign in order to get the truth out.

But a woman and her three children were kidnapped and detained as part of this War on Terror. That will always remain with me. I remember when I received the news, I was at my in-laws' place in Cardiff. Emotionally, it really broke me down because it had been the first case I ever worked on. It was one that I invested a lot of time and energy in. My wife saw me literally break

down right in front of her because it just meant so much that she was found alive. That was the most amazing thing in the world because we had assumed that she was probably dead by now.

Q: I interviewed Charles Swift, but we never got to that case. That is the next session with him when we go back to him.

Qureshi: That will be interesting.

Q: What were some of the other earlier cases you worked on?

Qureshi: From the start, all the British guys who still had not returned from Guantánamo, people like Moazzam, Feroz Abbasi — both of whom work in our office now — Shaker Aamer who is still over there right now.

Q: What kind of role did you play? Liaison between the families and the lawyers?

Qureshi: The role I played was primarily as somebody with a legal background, as an investigator, as a researcher, trying do interviews with the families, trying to effectively put together the primary research and investigation required in order to highlight what was going on in these cases because we had access in a way that other NGOs did not have to the families. Also, it was to be a liaison for the families. Sometimes families would come to us complaining that their lawyers were not doing anything. We would have to explain the process to them,

“Look, things don't happen overnight. It's a very, very long protracted process.” That is really how that happened.

I think the first real project that I worked on was looking into the Anglo-British complicity in renditions and torture. That was really the first major project I ever undertook. That involved a lot of investigation work. We were looking into the flight logs, how often were rendition flights coming through the UK. We were looking at the testimonies of those who had been formerly detained and what they say about British involvement.

We have got this torture inquiry going on right now here in the UK. Since 2006, we were talking about this angle, that the British security agencies were complicit, and we presented all sorts of evidence at that time in relation to them. We are still using that evidence now in relation to this inquiry to say that we have got all this documented, that this did take place, and this is a historical record of that fact.

Q: This is pertaining to your book, but you begin the story of the War on Terror from 1998 from what happened in East Africa. One of the striking things about Cageprisoners is that you embrace cases from all sorts of places. Could you talk a little about the scope and maybe particularly about East Africa and its role in the work you have been doing?

Qureshi: The reason I wrote the book *Rules of the Game* was I wanted to present the War on Terror as being a more complete picture. People are affected by control orders here in the UK, deportation orders in Canada, from security certificates in Bosnia, from enforced disappearances

in Pakistan, all sorts of things. On American soil, there are the Patriot Act, various forms of draconian legislation there, then you have got Guantánamo.

If you look at each one of these things singularly, you might not think it is necessarily so bad from the perspective of security. What I wanted to show people is that when you look at all of them at the same time as being part of the same phenomenon. When we remove due process and we will remove what we know to be the rule of law for the sake of our own security, then the picture becomes quite bleak because it shows the level to which countries around the world have been willing to sacrifice the things that have actually protected us most over the years, the things that made the western world so strong, that made people from the Muslim world and the Arab world flee to the western world in order to gain that protection. The very, very thing that gave it its security has now been destroyed. That is the point of it really, to get that across. Our remit as an organization was to look initially at Guantánamo, but that soon became anything to do with enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention, extradition killings within the context of the War on Terror, effectively when due process has been removed within the context of the War on Terror. Unfortunately, we thought initially that it would not take us too far. We are a small organization. Let us keep the remit small. We did not realize how far ranging it would be, from Australia to the west coast of America. It literally spans the entire world. It affects China. It affects Sudan. It affects the UK, France, Italy, and Germany. You could just go on. It even affects South America. There are cases that we have dealt with in South America as well. The saddest thing is that this thing has gone global, what was supposed to be a very, very, very narrow remit to help us keep a semblance of sanity within the context of our work, because we

knew we were small, unfortunately has become something so huge that it is difficult for us to stay on top of it.

Q: So how do you deal with that scope? Do you have partners in other countries?

Qureshi: We do work with other people and because we do not legally represent anybody, it helps. But what we also have is a policy that sometimes we need to use certain cases in order to highlight a wider class of case. That is an unfortunate reality. We deal with every single case, but not necessarily every single case will have the same level of detailed attention as others will. One case may be so detailed because it raised all the various issues that relate to that country or to that issue itself.

For example, over here we had a guy named Faraj Hassan who was put through every single piece of counterterrorism legislation policy that the UK government could throw at him. In the end, he was acquitted. He fought since 2002 up until 2010 for his freedom. They tried to deport him out of the country. They tried to extradite him out of the country. They tried to put him in a control order. Every single time, the courts cleared him saying to the government, "What the hell are you playing at? You've got nothing on this guy." Unfortunately, the saddest thing is that only a few months after he was acquitted, he died in a car accident. But here is a man who really did fight for his whole life. Because he was a Libyan, he was put through that entire process at a time when Tony Blair was being best friends with [Muammar] Gaddafi. Had he lived right now in this period, none of this would have ever have happened to him. What is even worse is that with

these Libyan guys, when they first came to the UK, and they turned up at immigration, and the immigration said, "Why you are you here?"

"We're distanced from Libya, we are here to politically work against Colonel Gaddafi."

They were told at that time, "You're welcome to do that activity here from the UK. We understand why you need to do so." Except when the War on Terror started, all of a sudden, the thinking was, "Well, Gaddafi's our ally now. Unfortunately, this is no longer acceptable, this kind of activity, and so we have to deport you back to your country." So politics has such a huge impact. Now, Faraj has left behind a wife and three beautiful, amazing children. They fought their whole lives to have their father free of anything, and now they do not have him anymore. That is the reality they face on a daily basis.

Q: Part of your work seems to be social work in a sense, dealing with the families. What kind of work do you do with them.

Qureshi: Initially I probably had a lot more contact. I still do when it comes to a search. But what we also did was that with friends of ours, we helped set up a sister organization called HHUGS [Helping Households Under Great Stress]. The purpose of HHUGS is to effectively give those families who had been affected by counterterrorism policies both financial, emotional, and spiritual support for what they are going through. It is separate to our work. They are a charity. We are not. We keep the work separate from one another because that is purely about social

welfare whereas ours is more about research. It is about trying to investigate and help people more in a campaigning way.

Q: There would be reasons under the law for doing this?

Qureshi: Of course, yes, very much so. We want to keep those separate as well. But we very much still see HHUGS as our sister organization. In a similar way, they do us. They see us the same as well. It is an important organization, and in many ways, it is much more important that what we do because it provides practical support to families on a daily basis. Sometimes some of these families are gone for years, almost a decade in some cases.

The experience of one family in particular, that of Adel Abdel Bary, is striking. Since 1998, he has been in detention without charge, facing extradition to the U.S. He has never been charged with a single crime, and he is still in prison today. That family has grown up without their father. I think there are quite a few kids. I cannot remember how many exactly. But there were a number of children. I think more than five or six. They have grown up without their father. It is impossible for him to make a life with them now.

We see this over and over again. With Guantánamo, Adel Algazzar, who was sent to Slovakia, his family lived in Egypt. He cannot go back to Egypt, or he was not able to until recently anyway because of [Hosni] Mubarak and the threat that he might be tortured or killed if he was to go back there. But when he was taken his family was very, very young. He is now getting to know his teenage children by Skype. Skype is doing real humanitarian work these days. But he is

learning about them. He is finding out about them. He is trying to act like a father figure from Slovakia to his kids. "How was your day? Were you good?" Even if they have done something wrong, as a father how do you admonish your children from so many thousands away over Internet chat, when you know they cannot get to you? Slovakia will not let them come to him. They do not want any more of that type in their country. He cannot go back to Egypt. You have got this really bizarre scenario for this man who is trying to learn about his family who he has not met in ten years. People sometimes forget the human tragedy that goes alongside Guantánamo. Yes, it is bad when they are there. But imagine if you have never met your child. Moazzam had not met his child because his wife was pregnant when he left. Shaker Aamer, who is the last British resident in Guantánamo right now, his wife was pregnant when he left.

Q: Can we talk about that case?

Qureshi: Actually Moazzam is coming.

Q: So he is better?

Qureshi: Yes, because Moazzam and him were best friends. I will leave that case to Moazzam.

Q: I interviewed David Remes and we talked a bit about it. I am really interested in hearing about that.

Qureshi: The one thing that I always talk about is that the battle for Shaker really begins when he returns because he is going to see his children, particularly his youngest. His youngest is going to be introduced to a father that he has always told he has that's in Guantánamo that he has been campaigning for. They have no relationship whatsoever.

That level of trauma cannot be recompensed in any way. There is no amount of money that can deal with that level of trauma. These are the kind of battles that are fought after Guantánamo. It is not just Guantánamo itself. There is so much that goes alongside it as well. People forget that sometimes.

Q: Do you have particular publications that talk about that for a wider audience?

Qureshi: Yes, we do. Not specifically necessarily on that point, but organizations like the Medical Foundation for Victims of Torture, and the Helen Bamber Foundation. I know they produce some materials in relation to these things. They are excellent organizations that we work with quite closely in order to help these people.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about your own work now on the Pakistan Project, and this focus on disappearances in Pakistan?

Qureshi: Pakistan is an area that I have been working on right from the start. Since going there, every time I go there, I meet up with one lady. Her name is Amina Masood Janjua. Her husband

went missing in 2005 by the security agencies. He was picked up alongside a friend of his. They have been missing ever since then.

Now, Amina is an amazing woman. She set up her own NGO to deal with her husband's case, but not only that, to deal with all enforced disappearances in Pakistan. She helps 770 families right now. Some of these people come all the way from the most remote corners of Pakistan to Rawalpindi and to Islamabad just to meet with her so that she can help them. She provides all the service for free. She runs back and forth to the court for the family. She takes them into their home when they come. These people come from every single kind of social background. Sometimes among the kind of middle classes, there is a bit of snobbery, that "I don't want that person, they're too poor. They can go live somewhere else." But she has opened up her home and her heart and effectively neglected her children, who are the most amazing kids. You think that if you neglect children to that extent, they will turn bad. But they have just been a rock. They have really, really supported their mother through this. They have not been any kind of trouble to her. They have really supported her throughout this whole time.

Going back there so much, I realized that she is doing the work of Cageprisoners in Pakistan. What we are doing now is we have joined up together with them, joined hands with her, and we are helping to support her work in Pakistan. We are going to help them do some of the research, put together some of these profiles, and help to raise the profile about these Pakistani cases in the western world. It really needs to be done, so she has done a fantastic job doing it in Pakistan. It is time that somebody gave her a hand because she has got enough on her plate.

Q: What are the particular things you will do to help her research?

Qureshi: Well, really it is by giving them funding and logistical support in terms of help teaching them practically how to campaign more, teaching them how to work on case studies, teaching them how to follow up, take interviews, and go through the investigation in detail. There are two aspects of it which are helping to train her staff more, and also help them feed us that information so that we can raise the cases in a more effective way.

I could keep on going back to Pakistan without too much problem, but they are based there. It is so much easier for them to do that. For us it is an investment as well in the fact that they will establish an institution that will really be able to help so many people, but also they will be able to have some sense of longevity about their work beyond that. We do not know what has happened with Amana's husband. We can only hope for the best. But the reality is this is a woman who has given herself to a cause beyond that, which is amazing in itself. It really is.

Q: Perhaps maybe you could talk a little bit about the problem of disappearances in Pakistan itself and how it has been worsened by the conditions of the War on Terror.

Qureshi: Enforced disappearances have always been a feature of Pakistan, as they are with unfortunately so many third world countries. At the start, we knew that [Pervez] Musharraf quite soon was selling a lot of these detainees to America. He spoke about it in his own book. He quite brazenly mentions that fact. But it was a feature well beyond that.

We are talking about thousands of individuals who were picked up, detained without any charge, without any trial, and as I mentioned before, enforced disappearances in so many ways are among the worst aspects of all of this because it is the not knowing that will constantly cut at you and dig at you. People want to get on with their lives. Sometimes people just want to know for themselves if a person is dead or not.

For the case of Gul Rahman, when I was doing research in Pakistan a couple of years ago, I went and met his family. The family said to me, “Gul Rahman, he's my brother, he's the father of these two little girls, and he's missing since 2003. He was definitely picked up by the Pakistanis and the Americans in a joint raid in Islamabad on somebody else's house.”

He used to be the driver of a person called Dr. Ghairat Baheer. Ghairat Baheer had been quite a high target. Ghairat Baheer was in Bagram alongside the rest of the people in the house. He was released because they recognized that he is somebody who will be a power broker in the future and who will help to solve the problems of Afghanistan. They released him. But they had not released the driver, and the family are baffled. They said, “But the guy that they wanted, he's being released. Our brother, our father, he was just there out of consequence, so why is he not being returned?” It was only last year that the Associated Press did some investigative work through the Freedom of Information Act and they found that Gul Rahman had been murdered. He had been beaten to death by the Americans and left to die of hypothermia in Bagram

This was in 2003. Nobody had bothered to inform the family all those years that it had taken place. This is a man who was once upon a time just a driver. He was even out of service with Dr.

Ghairat Baheer by then anyway. That kind of thing, the enforced disappearance, that really kills the family.

When I found out I spoke to the family. I rang them. They were hearing the news for the first time from me that this was the case. It was an awful moment in my career to be the bearer of that kind of news. But it was worse for them because they just would not believe it. They said, “No, no, no. You can't be right about this. This must be somebody else. Gul Rahman is quite a common name.” But there was only one Gul Rahman that was picked up with Dr. Ghairat Baheer. I think they are still in some form of denial about it.

But what kind of impact does this have on the perception of America and what America does? When you look at documentaries like *Taxi to the Dark Side*, it really highlights the extent to which they have taken this too far. All of this is revenge. This is not about security. This is not about making the world a safer place. It only made the world a much more dangerous place through all the various actions that they have done. The current level of drones is increasing the extent of dissatisfaction with American foreign policy at an exponential rate. None of this has been about security. It has just been about revenge.

The perception is that something is being done in the name of countering terrorism, but the reality is that when you speak to people — in that same trip, I was interviewing a former Guantánamo detainee, Badar uz-Zaman. While we were sitting there, some members of the Pakistani Taliban entered, holding Kalashnikovs and everything. Badar said, “You're sitting here

interviewing me. We're finished now. Why don't you interview these guys, ask them some questions?"

I asked them straight up questions like, "Why are you killing your own citizens? Why are you bombing the citizens of Pakistan?"

They said, "Look, hold on a second, OK? We were only ever interested in one thing. We were going across the border in Afghanistan to get rid of the Americans. That was it. It was only when the American forced the Pakistani army to come after us that we had to send a message saying, leave us alone, that we want nothing to do with you."

I am not saying that I agree with their opinion. I do not. I think it is incorrect. It is wrong what they are doing. But it just shows how American foreign policy is having such a negative impact in that region. They are not right in what they are doing, but it comes from a place where effectively their ultimate goal is to remove an occupying force. That is how they see it. They now see Pakistan as being proxy occupied because the government keeps on just doing whatever the Americans ask. When these Wikileaks started coming out about the Pakistani government saying, behind the scenes, "Can you just increase your drone strikes to this area as well, please?" that just increases the paranoia and hatred and dissatisfaction that are already being felt. There is no opportunity then for somebody to turn around and say, "You know what? We actually will have to reconsider this position," because you have just confirmed to us everything we ever knew about you.

It is the same as the Abu Ghraib moment when Al-Qaeda turned around and said, “This is American justice. This is America for you. You can see for yourself what America is. This is sexual humiliation. It is about torturing people, and abusing them, and doing whatever you can. So much for the rule of law, so much for justice. It is a farce. It is a joke.” That in turn makes our work even more difficult.

Q: Unfortunately, we have gone for the two hours that you are signed up for, but maybe we can come back tomorrow or something. But maybe we could just end up on a different kind of note. We want to ask you about what your reactions are to the world today with the death of [Osama] bin Laden, what is going on in Egypt and Tunisia. Where do you think we are today? Where are we moving?

Qureshi: The world today unfortunately is no more of a safe place than it was yesterday. Things seem to be getting worse progressively. There have been moments of hope in terms of the Arab Spring, with so many countries choosing to exercise their right to self-determination. The question is though, to what extent will that take place?

America, the UK, and others are saying, “We should allow for self-determination to take place, for sure.” But what happens, for example, if tomorrow in Libya an Islamic party comes to power, or in Egypt an Islamic party comes to power? These are questions that need to be asked because the reality is that they are plausible scenarios.

My worry is that unless the root causes behind all of the problems that we have already seen in the War on Terror are dealt with through dialogue and through a way that is meaningful, these themes will keep on coming up over and over and over again. It will not make a difference who comes to power because the fundamental lack of understanding that exists, that underpins the entire way this war has been fought from both sides will continue to exist, with America saying, “We're in a state of national security right now and so we have to get rid of everything that we hold to be true about who we are in order to proceed against our enemy.”

Al-Qaeda is saying the same thing, which is, “We know about the laws of jihad, that we are allowed to do x y and z. Well, we need to put that aside because the Ummah – the Islamic community – is in a state of security right now, national security. We need to protect the Ummah. In order to do that, we need to fight this asymmetric warfare by putting aside those things that we hold to be true.”

The rationale is exactly the same, which is you remove the very thing that underpins what makes you great in the first place. With that, you lose the moral authority to actually be able to say that this is the way things should be. So until people recognize and understand that, and are willing to come together and say that we need to find a way through this, you are never going to have any change.

I am not saying for a second that I am a pacifist. I am not. I believe that people have the right to resist and people have the right to defend themselves, to defend their lands. As a Muslim, I believe that that is an inherent right that we have. But at the same time, I do not believe that is

the solution. That is just putting out fires. You have a right to defend yourself when an occupying force comes to you. But is that going to solve the problem? No, I do not think so. Until that dialogue is sought and is achieved, there is no chance that there is actually going to be any kind of meaningful peace. That is what we are looking for.

Sorry, I hope you do not mind me ending with this. I started this right before I was married and before I had any children. It was always about helping others, helping all these people. They are in such horrible and difficult circumstances and we need to help them. The day my son was born, my entire emphasis changed. It became about “Oh my God, we need to have a safer world for our next generation.”

The entire emphasis of my work changed that day because I realized I was doing this for more than helping people who are in trouble. Yes, it is still about that, but now it is about that I do not want Haytham or Adam, my boys, to grow up in this world. I want them to grow up in a world where they are not going to be called “effing Paki” when they are walking down the street, or Muslim extremist, or this, that, and the other.

I want them to be able to hold their opinions and have a very strong sense of self identity without fear of who they are. That is really my hope for all this.

Q: So perhaps you could talk a little bit about your reaction specifically when you heard about the news of the killing of Osama bin Laden?

Qureshi: The first reaction was, “Is it true?” Over the course of my work I have become so accustomed to the dissemination of lies that I am now used to being very, very cynical about anything from both sides. Is that really what has happened? Let us see. So throughout the whole day it was always a case of “Really? Have they actually got him? Or was it somebody who looked like him and they are just saying it in order to score political points?” All of these things are going through your head.

But the other side of it was, “But it doesn't make any difference.” That was the one consistent theme that was running through my head. “So what? You got Osama bin Laden. But Al-Qaeda and the sentiment that exists, the political grievance that exists was not Osama bin Laden. The grievance exists because of all of the issues that have been raised over the years. You cannot make that go away. As a good friend of mine, Scharlette Holman, will tell you that abuse and grievance and trauma are generational and they stay with you.

The people who say that as British-born Pakistani Muslims in the UK, we should have absolutely no gripes with colonialism whatsoever, completely fail to factor in the fact that it does. It does impact on us when we study about it, when we read about it, when we see our parents, and when we see the way they respond to things. We know it has had an impact on them, and so that in itself has an impact on us.

My dad says to me, “You are very, very fortunate that you never met your grandfather in some ways” – my paternal grandfather – “because he was a loyalist and you two would just never have gotten on. He appreciated the British Raj, and you would have probably have killed one another

had you actually met.” It is interesting that he chose to say that to me because my dad was very much against it as well. But my grandfather lived through those years.

He felt that, as a lawyer, he owed something to the UK for having welcomed him, whereas living here in the UK I do not feel that. I do not feel like I am under any kind of sense of obligation or sense of thankfulness for that respect. I am just a citizen of this country like anybody else who has a respect for those people around me. But that does not mean that dictates that I do not have any kind of sentiment towards what happened before. I am trying to bring it back to the point, which was?

Q: About bin Laden.

Qureshi: Yes, about bin Laden. The grievance as Scharlette says, the grievance is generational. It comes through various ways. Bin Laden was not it. This is not a case of cutting off the head of the beast and the beast falls. This was a case of you have got one person, but what does that do? How many other bin Ladens will it raise? Our point is that it will probably raise a few more. Every single time you kill civilians in the northwest or Pakistan, and through drone strikes, you are recruiting people to go ahead and do more.

When I met those members of the Pakistani Taliban, they said to me, “We've got people all the time coming to us saying we want to give our life. We want to give our life for this cause. We're not recruiting them. They're coming to us and saying that they want to go.”

I asked, “Why?”

They said, “Because of everything that they see going on around them. It doesn't require any kind of process of indoctrination. All they do is they see what's taking place to them on a daily basis, what's happening to their families, what's happening to their fathers, their sons, their husbands, and even their women and children. That's enough for them. They don't need to know anything else after that.”

That is why, in my view, whenever people go on about the ideological roots of Al Qaeda, Sayyid Qutb, Abdullah Azzam, and ibn Taymiyyah, for me that is all a red herring because these guys been writing for years. Ibn Taymiyyah has been around for hundreds of years in terms of his works, but it has never had that kind of impact ever. Why? Because this is not ideological. This is about grievance. This is about real and perceived grievance. These people yes, they wrote some of the most brilliant works that there are in relation to identity and about the jihad and various things. But they did not say, “Go out there and kill westerners using suicide bombings.” People have taken those books and whatever else and interpreted them in their own way, in order to find a way of seeking their own asymmetric way of fighting against what they see as imperialism and colonialism or occupation. That is how they view it.

If this was about ideology this would have been a much longer conflict in terms of temporary “right now” than it is. But it is not. It is about, as I said, perceived or real grievance that stems from people being hurt, people being abused. Maybe you can speak to Moazzam about this in more detail. When he was held in Bagram, each cell in Bagram had an incident related to an

instance with the Islamic world, so for example, East Africa bombings. The cells were named like that, so whether it was from Hizbollah or whether it was from Al-Qaeda it did not make a difference. Just every single incident, and if you know the nuances in the Islamic faith, you know that Shias and Sunnis do not really have anything to do with one another. But they were generationally linking the current War on Terror to every single incident of U.S. and Islamic conflict that took place before it. To claim then that this is somehow just about this current ideological war against Al-Qaeda is nonsense. This is generational as for Al-Qaeda and those who associate with that kind of tendency, as much as it is for the Americans. I am sure Moazzam will go to tell you about that in a much eloquent way than I could ever.

Q: In the book when it was published, I was struck by this sense of optimism in the book about the election of [Barack H.] Obama and the change perhaps with [J. Gordon] Brown. It catches a moment in time. What happened to that optimism?

Qureshi: During the primaries I was again at my in-laws' house, and I am considered the political guy in the house. "Let's ask Asim! He'll know what the answer is to these things. So, what do you reckon?"

"Barack Obama," I said, "I like look of him, yes, but America's not ready for a black president and never will be. It'll be many, many decades before that happens. So you're looking at [Hillary R.] Clinton as the next president. Might as well start talking in those terms now." What do I know, right?

So it was amazing. It was amazing for me. I remember being on the phone to my brothers. They are quite politically aware as well, and I speak about all sorts of things, but we thought, “This could be it. This could actually be the turning point that we're looking for. This guy's intelligent. He comes from a slightly more understanding left background. He's a Democrat He's black. Come on people, he's black. You can't get better than that really can you? He's got Hussein in his name as well. That's got to mean something, right?”

It was just one tragedy after the next. Of course, he closes Guantánamo, or signs the executive order to close it. I thought, “Oh my God, this is actually going in the right direction.” That has just fallen so far flat on its face it is just horrific to imagine. I have never, ever been so despondent about anything as I have about this in my work really.

The speech to the Middle East, once again, a wonderful, wonderful speech that had so much hope –

Q: This is the Cairo speech?

Qureshi: Yes, the Cairo speech that had so much hope in it in terms of actually understanding what this conflict is about and how to change it. But it is the same mistakes all over again. There is no difference. There is no difference in the policy. Yes, he does not torture people anymore, but now he just extra-judicially kills them. The essential due process element that everybody recognized is still missing.

What, you do not think Muslims in northwest Pakistan understand what it means to be killed extra-judicially? Of course they do. It is their lives. In fact, it is worse than torture. Moazzam, Feroz, Shaker — hopefully when he gets back — all of these guys will see their families again. However traumatic that will be, they will see their families. The person who is murdered does not get that opportunity. It is not just about the person. It is about the children as well who died in collateral damage. It is about their wives, their mother, their grandparents, it is everybody. They do not get that opportunity. They do not get that voice. What is the testament to Moazzam? It is the fact that his voice became known. It is the fact that he came out and he forgave, and he said, “Let's work towards actually solving this problem now.” Even the WikiLeaks from the ambassador to Luxembourg, the U.S. ambassador who is writing back to the State Department, saying, “Wow, this guy's doing our work for us. He's really brilliant. He's so forgiving and recognizes that this is the reality.” But unfortunately, people who are dead do not get that voice ever. They never get the opportunity to say that we were wronged. All it does is that those who are left behind get left with a hole in their hearts where that person used to be. They have to fill that with something. That something is more often than not revenge. They see it as fighting the occupier or whatever, but the reality is that most people will find whatever avenue they can in order to fill the gap that is left in their heart.

Q: Did you see any cause for optimism or hope when there was so much outcry against Brown's attempt to extend the number of the days of detention permissible without charge?

Qureshi: That for me was a complete red herring. It is like saying, “We're going to ask for ninety days,” but do they really want ninety days? Or maybe they wanted forty-two in the first place? If

you ask for something ridiculous the compromise would always seem like a moderate position. But the reality is that there is no other country that has anywhere the same number of days of pre-charge detention. Not even America has that many days. It is absolutely ridiculous to imagine that we had that. We had that.

People were patting each other on the back saying, "This is brilliant. We stopped ninety days getting through." Yes, but can you imagine the young Muslim male who has got a job at a very nice place and he gets picked up for twenty-eight days and for terrorism reasons his name has been plastered all over the written media. Do you honestly believe his life is still going to be there waiting for him when he returns? His employer is not just going to say, "Don't worry Abdul. It's okay. We understand that it was just a mistake and your faith community is criminalized." The only person here who will go through a process like that and keep his job is probably me.

Q: Talk about the young Pakistanis who gets arrested for ninety days. What happens to them?

Qureshi: The young Pakistani male who gets arrested for twenty-eight days, or whatever the latest number is, he has no opportunity to get his life back after that. Absolutely none whatsoever. His employer knows that he was arrested for reasons of terrorism. They do not care whether or not, for the most part, they were guilty or innocent. The allegation is enough. It is such a difficult thing for people to get their heads around. It is understandable why, but the problem is that you have established this circumstance in the first place which allowed for that person's life to be ruined.

I remember Tony Blair, talking about why seven days pre-charge detention was horrific prior to him become Prime Minister, as a junior, whatever his role was at the time. Can you imagine that the man goes from that — the man who brought in the single most important piece of human rights legislation this country has seen since the Magna Carta, the Human Rights Act of 1998, the man who brought that in — will never be remembered as a human rights-friendly Prime Minister. That is an awful legacy. Because it was. There is no piece of legislation more important than the Human Rights Act of 1998 and incorporation into the European Convention of Human Rights. Yet will anyone remember him for that? They will not. They will remember him as somebody who was involved in a “war on terror” where hundreds and thousands of people lost their lives, if not millions.

Q: Liz [Elizabeth C. Grefrath] and I attended a seminar at CCR [Center for Constitutional Rights] last Tuesday and Gita talked. Part of her presentation was that we, she and us, the audience, that we have to realize is that what we thought was temporary is permanent. Do you think that is too harsh?

Qureshi: No, I think Gita has hit the nail absolutely on the head. Gita is an absolute scholar in this field. When she says something like that, people should sit up and listen because there is nothing temporary about this. There is no group that can be identified, that can be killed or detained, or given a trial to end this. This is so much deeper than that. This is about so much hurt that you cannot simply just cleanse it through some kind of military action because it will keep on perpetuating itself.

If you look at cases like that of Roshonara Choudhry, the young girl who stabbed the minister here in the UK, where does that come from? It comes from – if obviously everything that they reported about it is correct – a place where somebody feels that they do not have any avenue left, other than to do that thing. It comes from intense marginalization and it is very difficult to bring people back from that, but that whole process of marginalization is not something that is just for the individual. It is for the entire community.

You have people of my parents' generation saying things like, “Don't get involved politically with these things.” Not my parents. My parents are very, very supportive of what I do. My mum still wanted me to be a corporate lawyer, and do this stuff part-time, that was her wish. But unfortunately, I could not do that. But I know so many people whose parents say to them, “Don't get involved with this, because if you do, then they're going to come after you next.” They are going to become a target, so do not get involved in any kind of politics.

So what happened? The community become introspective and does not voice itself. Frustration builds up. These young people, who have got no avenue to vent those frustrations, are going to come to a boiling point at some point or another. It is really important that people understand how the process of marginalization does not affect just the individual that has been harmed. It affects the entire community. Somebody across the street from me is put under a control order. Every single uncle and auntie within the community who lives on that street will think thereafter, “We have to ostracize that family now. Kids, you can't have anything to do with their kids anymore. Delete their numbers for your phone books.” I know examples of individuals who have

said to friends of mine, “Can you please delete my number from your phone book now?” That is what happens because people are so scared.

This climate of fears makes them frightened. What does that do? It means that that community will never be part of society. It has entrenched itself as a separate entity to the rest of society. It will always be the other. It has been seen as the Other, and it has confirmed its own identity as the other and that will just become a self-fulfilling prophecy. There is no way these people will then ever feel like they have anything valuable to add. You will see all sorts of horrible things go on.

Q: Off tape you talked about the ways in which the whole War on Terror has distorted the image of the Pakistani community and prevented the discussion of the real problems. I wanted to talk about those.

Qureshi: If you are going to put everything into its correct context, when they talk about the problem with the Muslim community in the UK, they are identifying the wrong thing. Our problems are not to do with terrorism. There have been very, very few examples of people who have actually done anything. Those examples can be understood from some perspectives related to grievance. But our real problems are related to poverty, class, opportunity, and drugs. We have the highest ratio by demographic in prison in the UK, particularly among British-born Pakistanis and British-born Bengalis. The highest number. That comes specifically from issues related to class opportunity and criminal activity.

If the government spent as much money on anti-drugs programs and providing access to universities and higher education as it does on anti-terrorism, a lot of their problems would go away. A lot of problems related to detention, a lot of problems relating to social inclusion, to cohesiveness, all of these problems would go away, because these people would come out of the status quo that they are forced to live through every single day. They are told, every single day of that lives, that because you are not particularly bright, you are more susceptible to extremism, and because you are more susceptible to extremism, we have to put in all these policies which effectively criminalize your entire community. All they hear is, "You're a terrorist." That is all they hear. It just entrenches the ghetto mentality even further.

That is an unacceptable situation. It is completely the wrong way to deal with things. If they want to deal with them, they have to provide access. They have to allow people to educate themselves, and to really make a difference within their own communities.

Q: The problem you have described seems to be true and growing in other parts of Europe as well, this problem of discourse. One of the goals of Cageprisoners, as a campaigning group, is to intervene in this discourse. What hope do you have in the future for building on the work that you have already done, and drawing from that in trying to change this discourse?

Qureshi: Discourse was somewhat incidental to our work. We never started off thinking about it. Our whole thing was due process. But what we realized is that until we can change people's perceptions about the narrative that is taking place, we are never going to be able to actually combat the real problems that are going on.

One of our board members, when we were discussing our remit and how we operate, gave the example of a man who is throwing babies down a river. Do you save the babies or do you stop the man who is throwing them? The obvious conclusion of that is that you have to do both at the same time, but the more important thing is to stop the man throwing the babes. Why? Because until you do that, those babies are coming down. They are going to be thrown, one by one and one and one, and it is just never going to end.

Part of stopping the entire process is to change the discourse. One of the things that we try to change the discourse about is jihad, as an example. It is something that I talk about in my book, that until there is a space for mosques and community centers up and down the country, to speak about what jihad is. People will only ever get that information from the Internet, or from individuals who are talking about these things in a clandestine way. That is the reality. The mosques are too scared. The climate of fear exists. "No, we can't speak about the 'j-word'. Because that's too scary. Because we will be criminalized. We'll be put in prison and that's it for us. We can't talk about Palestine in that way, we can't talk about Iraq in that way, we can't talk about Chechnya that way, or Afghanistan in that way, because if we do, that's it for us." That is the only avenue these people have to learn about what is right and what is wrong.

If our mosques do not teach them that, who is going to? They are concerned about it. They are worried about it. They want to know what the Islamic position is about what is going on in Iraq and Afghanistan right now. What is our responsibility as individuals living in the UK towards

that? Until you give them that, how are they going to learn? They are going to learn it through whatever means they can.

Unfortunately, more often than not, that would be the wrong way, the wrong message. There is no way of us figuring out how to change that though, other than opening up spaces for them to speak about these things. Not through government-funded initiatives, which will be completely counterproductive. To say, “We found some scholars who we think are really great, and they're going to teach all you darkies exactly how things should be. This is what Islam is, and this is how you should practice your religion.”

“Oh thank you, thank you. I never really knew what Islam was and I really, really appreciate you telling me. Except the problem is, that the scholars you identified are preaching to the converted.”

The only people who turn up are religious corporate lawyers and accountants and people who have already established themselves in the society and are not particularly interested in these kinds of things. They sit there and clap, “Yes, extremism is bad, and terrorism is bad, and yes, you've given a wonderful speech.”

The people who the message should be getting to look at the speaker list and think, “Yes, it's not my cup of tea, because I don't really think that guy's a Muslim, and I don't really think that guy's a Muslim and I don't really think that guy's a Muslim.” You have defeated the purpose behind

the initiative in the first place. But they pump millions and millions of pounds into these things to no avail at the end of the day.

You have got to remove the climate of fear that exists through the legislation that exists. Open up that freedom of expression. Give people the space to debate, really debate. Even allow those people you would find distasteful, to some extent obviously, to debate in the mosque, and just challenge them over it so that people can see for themselves what the truth of the situation is.

If you do not do that, then they are never going to learn and they are just going to find out what they can from whatever source they can. I was worried that this was going to come from the wrong perspective.

Q: Does Cageprisoners make a special attempt to reach youth?

Qureshi: We talk at universities and schools and society halls and mosques all over the country. Moazzam does, in particular, but I do as well. It is a very, very difficult message that we give actually. What we are saying is, "The U.S., the UK, Western countries generally, have targeted you as a community, and are saying that we are willing to put aside all of the things we hold dear in order to criminalize you. But you know what? You should still work within the system."

That is a very, very difficult sell, I tell you that now. The guy is sitting there thinking, "Are you messing with me? Are you serious? You just told us and we know ourselves already, that everything is pitched against us and you still want us to work within the system." But we have to

give that message. We have to sell them that message. That is why I always say that people doing the most amount of counter-terrorism work in the UK is us, and organizations like us, like the Islamic Human Rights Commission and others. They are the ones who are effectively giving the message, that “Look, there is still a space for us to make a difference, and you've got to use that space in order to change things.”

But they do not want to hear it. The government does not want to hear that. They just want to hear, “We've identified these groups of people that are going to go into the mosques, and they're going to make a real big difference by telling everybody how bad terrorists are.” Terrorists are really bad. But everybody in the UK knows that is the government's line.

Why are they bad, if they are bad at all? What is the difference between a terrorist and an insurgent and a person looking for self-determination? What are the differences and nuances between these things? That is really when you are going to get to them and actually teach them that there are differences of opinions here. Not just good and bad.

Q: Using your terms, the government is actively limiting their space, constantly make their space narrower and narrower.

Qureshi: That is the problem. The space has gone. There is no space. You speak about jihad, and you will be castigated as an extremist. That is the reality. There is no space to talk about this. It is interesting, because I do not really hold in my opinions. I give a lecture called “Jihad and Terrorism” at universities. I speak about nuances between the various things. People always say,

“But you are just trying to justify what terrorists do.” I say, “I’m not trying to justify, what I’m trying to do is make you understand that it exists within a place that can be talked to.”

Q: That is the kind of criticism from Amnesty International –

Qureshi: Of Amnesty's interaction with us. Amnesty has always been brilliant in terms of —

Q: What is her name?

Qureshi: Gita Sahgal. Gita effectively says that Cageprisoners is an Islamist group. She uses very pejorative terms which have no actual meaning in our Islamic history. She identifies us with terms that do not actually exist — “They are an Islamist organization that are against human rights and women's rights, and this, that and the other.” She makes all sorts of assumptions about us, without ever having spoken to us about what our opinions are, and claims that they are dangerous.

Okay, so speak to us! Ask us what our opinions are before you try and demonize us to the world. As Moazzam quite correctly identified, he was in Afghanistan specifically to set up a girls' school, even under the Taliban, when it was not permitted to do so. How is that indicative of him trying to abuse women's rights? People say to us, “Why don't you defend women's rights?” That is not what our organization does. We are not against it, in the same way I do not deal with pedophilia issues within various communities. I think it is a really big human rights problem, I think it is terrible, and I think it is tragic and I think child abuse is tragic and horrible, but I

cannot, our organization cannot, deal with everything. You cannot comment on everything in the world. You ask us our personal opinion about it? Yes I think it is very bad. I think women should have the right to do wear the hijab or not wear the hijab, if that is what they want to do.

But to say that somehow these are our opinions without even asking us in the first place, it is wrong. But of course, it comes from a certain sentiment which is out there to purposefully malign us. It is not difficult for them to do so, because of who we are, because of the people that we represent and what we are trying to do. But all we can do is really keep on working. I think Amnesty's consistent support in saying that "We will continue working with Cageprisoners," is a very, very strong indication that people recognize the work that we do, that it is about due process, it is about human rights and it is about trying to make a real difference

Q: Terrific.

Qureshi: Thank you.

Q: Thank you.

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