

SHADOW  
LIVES

The  
FORGOTTEN  
WOMEN  
*of the*  
WAR ON TERROR

VICTORIA  
BRITTAİN

Foreword  
JOHN BERGER

Preface  
MARINA WARNER

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Shadow Lives



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# SHADOW LIVES

The Forgotten Women of the War on Terror

Victoria Brittain

Foreword by John Berger

Afterword by Marina Warner



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



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## Foreword

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*John Berger*

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

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

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



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# Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In retaliation for the embassy bombings the US bombed targets in both Sudan and Afghanistan, though they were not, as it turned out, Al Qaeda targets. Eighteen months later 17 American servicemen were killed and 40 wounded in an Al Qaeda attack on the USS Cole in harbour in Aden – a suicide attack from a small boat, which blew a 30-foot by 30-foot hole in the ship, organised by Abd al Rahim al Nashiri.<sup>18</sup> That attack, like many of the pre-9/11 attacks, was conducted from Yemen, which, like Somalia, was seen by Al Qaeda as the strategic key to choking Western supply lines to Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup>

The key architects of that written pact of 1998 in Afghanistan came out of the very different worlds of opposition politics in Egypt and a life of ease in Saudi Arabia. Ayman Zawahiri was scarred by one of the harshest of political experiences in the Middle East. He was a veteran of years of prisons and torture, under the regime of Sadat, and then of President Hosni Mubarak after Sadat's assassination in 1981. He left Egypt to work as a doctor in Saudi Arabia. He then became a close associate of Bin Laden, the soft spoken, millionaire Saudi, product of a Jeddah elite private school with British teachers, where he became part of an after-school Islamic group run by an exiled Syrian PE teacher with Muslim Brotherhood ideas.<sup>20</sup> Zawahiri would later have a price on his head of \$25 million.

Zawahiri brought to Afghanistan the factionalised and secretive world of Egyptian Islamic opposition politics in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Offshoots of the 50-year-old Muslim Brotherhood – a legitimate non-violent opposition party – the Islamic Group (IG) and EIJ sought the violent overthrow of Sadat and Mubarak's governments. Like the Muslim Brotherhood leaders and tens of thousands of its activists, these small groups' members paid a horrendous price of years of torture and imprisonment. They were composed of cells of highly educated professionals – doctors, engineers, soldiers and lawyers, like Zawahiri and Adel Abdul Bary. The Egyptians' own organisations had had more than 20 years of life in political struggle before Al Qaeda was born, and were

built on half a century of the Muslim Brotherhood culture of political Islam.

However, by the mid-1990s EIJ and IG had been broken inside Egypt, and many members were in prison or in exile, like the lawyer Adel Abdul Bary, whose wife, Ragaa, had found her first years of happiness in her marriage in a country, Britain, where she could not speak the language (see Chapter 5).

A number of individuals from these organisations were with Zawahiri in the Bin Laden entourage in Peshawar, then in Sudan, then in Afghanistan. Zawahiri's signing of the 1998 document produced furious email exchanges and declarations denouncing him, by EIJ members and former members. It took EIJ far away from their goal of political change in Egypt, and into Bin Laden's wholly different area of targeting US interests. The IG leader, Rifai Taha, was forced by his members to withdraw his signature.<sup>21</sup>

The thinking behind the 1998 declaration of global *jihad* against the US and its allies was a miscalculation with fatal consequences for Muslim countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq, Pakistan and Yemen, and countless individual Muslims, on a scale of destruction few foresaw. The Abdul Bary family's peaceful life in London was one Egyptian casualty that illustrates how far the collateral damage struck, when the US targeted him for extradition as they lumped together Al Qaeda and EIJ/IG.

The massive case of *USA v. Usama Bin Laden et al.* – and Abdul Bary's extradition case of 1999 – depended on the anonymous testimony of a man called 'Confidential Source number 1' – the first Al Qaeda traitor, described as the Rosetta Stone by US investigators. But years later the man emerged as a Sudanese, Jamal Ahmed al Fadl.<sup>22</sup> He appeared in court as a witness against other people, was much written about, and there were many questions about how knowledgeable he really was about Al Qaeda's affairs. He certainly left because he stole \$110,000, which Bin Laden told him to return.<sup>23</sup> He never met Abdul Bary, nor mentioned him in his evidence

about the supposed organisational link between Al Qaeda and the Egyptian Islamist groups. The US prosecutors, however, used this to implicate automatically individual members or ex-members without any proven link between the individuals concerned.

Al Fadl's new life in a witness protection programme in the US, with his family brought over from Sudan, cost the US taxpayer millions of dollars and used countless hours, weeks and months of the lives of the FBI minders who took care of him over several years and gave him the nickname 'Junior' due to his adolescent behaviour. Besides the lack of credibility of this sole witness, there were serious questions over the conduct of the prosecutors. Long after the initial case began, it emerged that 18 video-conferences between Al Fadl and New York prosecutors were taped, and lawyers maintained that they showed Al Fadl being moulded and manipulated. All this was withheld from the defence team and British officials.

One man who, back in 2001, did make just such a forecast of disaster for his own country from Bin Laden's actions was Abdul Salam Zaeef, Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, who wept when he saw the Al Qaeda attack that made the Twin Towers fall in 2001. He made the parallel with the US use of nuclear bombs on Japan in retaliation for Pearl Harbour, and wept for the disaster that would befall his country. After consulting with the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, by telephone, Zaeef dictated the Taliban press release condemning 9/11 and saying those responsible should be brought to justice.<sup>24</sup> The offer was ignored and Zaeef spent four years in prison in Guantanamo Bay, before he wrote his book of memoirs, translated from Pashto.

The attack of 9/11 came on the watch of one of the most ideological of teams ever in the White House. And President Bush himself had close relations with a British Prime Minister equally ready to see the response to terrorist attacks not in terms of preparing court cases, but in terms of his and Bush's personal responsibility to launch a revenge war. As Bush put

it, 'our war on terror begins with Al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated ... Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have seen.'<sup>25</sup>

Already, in 1996, President Bill Clinton had urged the passage of the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, which foreshadowed post 9/11 legislation such as the USA PATRIOT Act. Although its genesis was the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing carried out by Timothy McVeigh, in fact only people of Arab descent were subjected to the secret detention provision of the act.<sup>26</sup>

After 9/11, Blair and Bush stoked fear in their core constituencies at home and launched what was effectively an anti-Muslim crusade, at home as well as abroad. The PATRIOT Act and subsequent legislation gave the US government extraordinarily wide powers including the Attorney General's right to arrest, indefinitely detain or deport anyone, even if they had committed no crime, massive surveillance of mosques and Muslim Americans, a new regime of selective enforcement of immigration laws, prohibition of legal and other 'material support' to a wide number of groups deemed 'terrorist', and data mining on a massive scale. Guantanamo was the centrepiece of the reaction to 9/11, and remains the symbol of how half a century of international conventions on torture, prisoners' rights, rendition and other aspects of international law were simply over-ridden by the US government and its allies.

This was the context in which in the US after 9/11 at least 1200 people, mostly Arab, South Asian and Muslim citizens and non-citizens, were arrested, often held in solitary confinement and many deported, although not one of them was ever linked to the events of 9/11.<sup>27</sup>

In a vast fishing expedition across the Middle East, Pakistan and Afghanistan, and from Bosnia to Gambia, thousands more – many of them entirely innocent – were captured or turned in for \$5,000 bounties. The Geneva Conventions were set aside,



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