Transcript of interview with Moazzam Begg, October 7, 2008

Tell me about your arrest.

MB: Well first of all I think it is important to say it wasn't an arrest because arrest has a connotation of police and a due legal process and so forth and I wasn't arrested. I was kidnapped. When I say that I mean that I opened the door, I had several people walk into my house, barge into the house, one put a gun right to my head, another one had an electric stun gun cracking right in the background. I was forced to the ground. My legs had shackles behind my back, a hood placed over my head, carried out of my house in front of my children and wife who were woken up by the whole affair. And they had me taken away. They didn't tell me what I had done. They didn't even identify themselves. They didn't say who they were. They didn't ask me who I was. They didn't search me. And when I was taken away to a secret location they said, and I say they meaning these Pakistani guys who I didn't know who they were, I asked who they were and they said it's better for me that I don't know, and they said you have been illegally detained. I said what does that mean? And they said, "Well your detention, our holding you here is illegal, it's against the law. But who is going to do anything about it? Can you see anybody here who is going to do anything about it?" So that is the actual term they used, they actually said you have been illegally detained. That's why I say than when you think of an arrest you think of a person who is told you are arrested under this particular piece of legislation and so forth but that wasn't the case.

At the time did you know what might be happening or were you completely confused?

MB: At the initial stage of it I felt that these people are gangsters, I really thought they were gangsters the way that they operated, and that they had taken me away for a bounty or for a ransom. When Americans made themselves present of course I assumed I think correctly that they were CIA agents, and one of the things the Americans said to me was you can either answer our questions here in Pakistan or you can answer them in Kandahar and Guantanamo. So then I was quite clear as to what this was all about, who they were. I didn't know what they wanted me for because they asked me questions that didn't make sense, like, "We know that you operate a shop somewhere in Islamabad," and I've never owned a shop in Islamabad, I wasn't there long enough to own a shop or to run a business like that. I was totally confused about that and then they never asked me about that again. So I wasn't sure whether I was the person that they wanted or whether they stumbled across me, I don't know. I still don't know to this day exactly what the process was. I simply know that they did take me and that Americans were present and then a few days later British intelligence were also present. And then of course I knew my own government was involved in the whole affair.

They never clearly stated a charge against you?

MB: No. No, there was no clear statement of charge. Over a period of time there were accusations and allegations and if you can imagine over three years there would be all

sorts of things that people would say but there was never a charge. There was never a crime that they pointed out that I was involved in.

You did not immediately go to Guantanamo?

MB: That is right. I was held in Pakistan for the first couple of weeks. Then I was taken to Kandahar, the American detention base there. Then from Kandahar after six weeks I was taken to Bagram and I was held in Bagram for about 11 months and then at the beginning of 2003 I was taken to Guantanamo where I remained in Guantanamo for two years mostly in solitary confinement.

Once you realized you were going to Guantanamo what was your reaction? What did people in detention understand about Guantanamo at the time?

MB: I think by the time I was going to Guantanamo I was looking forward to it.

Really?

MB: Yeah. Because I had been in Bagram for 11 months and the Bagram detention facility was much worse than anything I could have imagined. I saw two people beaten to death. One of those deaths has been featured in a film called *Taxi to the Dark Side* that won the Oscar for best documentary just this year. But the situation there was so bleak. There was no natural light, no darkness, there were no hot meals, there were no fresh fruits or vegetables, there was no getting up, you couldn't walk, you couldn't talk. Lights were on 24 hours a day powered by noisy generators. If you broke any of the rules you would be taken to the front of your cell, your hands were tied above your head to the top of a cage, you were left suspended there with a hood placed over it. I saw people being punched and kicked to the point that they were unconscious there and as I said led to some their deaths. I was threatened with even further torture, they threatened to send me to Egypt to be tortured, they had me in a room hog-tied with my hands behind my back being punched and kicked and spat at. At the same time they waved pictures of my wife and children in front of me, simultaneously having the sound of a woman screaming next door, which they led me to believe was my wife. They asked me, or they pretended that my wife and children were in custody being tortured. After all of this I said "Yeah, I am happy, I am glad to go to Guantanamo."

How were you coping in your 11 months at Bagram? Did you have opportunities to speak with family and friends, or any form of solace?

MB: No. there were phone calls, no visits, no access to any current affairs information, nothing. There was no commucations. The only communications I did get were sporadic letters that came heavily censored from my family, many many months after I was taken into custody. So that's the only way that I knew they were okay. But as far as communications with anybody, the only people there to talk to, the only people you were allowed to talk to were interrogators and soldiers and [unintelligible]. So as I said

Bagram was a place that I was happy to leave and I thought going to Guantanamo has to be better than this.

Was it in any respect better, or was it worse?

MB: As far as the physical treatment was concerned it was better. I wasn't beaten in Guantanamo, I wasn't stripped naked and punched and spat at or made to lie naked on the floor with dogs barking over me or being photographed naked in the way that Abu Ghraib I supposed happened. That didn't happen in Guantanamo but it did happen in Bagram, and it did happen in Khandahar. All of that processing, being shaved, being stripped naked, being made fun of by the guards, that was all done in US custody in Afghanistan.

These things, being beaten, stripped, photographed, all happened to you?

MB: Oh yes. Of course you have to remember that I was taken into custody at the end of January 2002, and it was quite relatively not too far away from September the 11th. So if the things that happened in Iraq happened a year and a half or two years after that, then imagine how the fervor must have been amongst American soldiers pretty close to the time when they had come to Afghanistan after September the 11th. They felt that all their behavior, that hadn't still come to light yet in the way that Abu Ghraib has, was justified. And in that way, as I said, not only was I stripped naked, that was the process. The processing was that you were thrown onto the ground, somebody takes a knife and they sit on top of you, on your head and on your legs, and they rip your clothes off. You can feel the cold blade of the steel as it glides against your skin slicing off those clothes and then you're spat at, shackled so tightly that you can't feel your arms and legs any more and then you're photographed in this way and shaved and then photographed unshaved. And then dogs are brought and then people are taking photographs of you, trophy photographs, and then you are taken and dragged off into a tent where you are interrogated naked by FBI agents and by CIA and military intelligence agents. And only after that are you reclothed again and then thrown into a converted barn that is covered by concertina razor wire and there you remain for weeks on end until your interrogation.

Did you think the purpose was to shame, as well as to terrify?

MB: Yeah, it was to humiliate and it was to terrify. I remember one of the things that they did when they shaved off our hair and our beards was to say "This is the part that we like best." You could see grown Afghan men crying, these same grown men who probably fought against the Soviets, who had lost a leg or an arm, and were quite brave men who lived in an environment that most people couldn't even imagine. And yet here is this brave person crying that somebody has shaved off his beard, because it is the religious symbol of his manhood or his purity and so forth and it's been taken off in a flash so that if he were to look in a mirror he wouldn't even know who he was. He wouldn't be able to recognize himself. And all of these sorts of things that happened were done to humiliate, and they were done to terrify and that was precisely what the purpose was. It was called, I think in American military terminology it's called "shock and awe" tactics, so that you

frighten a person to the point that he's so compliant that he'll give you anything in those early stages of incarceration.

At this point did Guantanamo have a reputation as a place where people would be treated more humanely or did it just seem like a way to get out of Bagram?

MB: [laughs] By the time the whole process was over for me in Bagram and Khandahar, it's not that Guantanamo had a good reputation, I heard already from some soldiers that there had been thirty suicide attempts at Guantanamo bay, that the place was very bleak, that the cells that were in Guantanamo measured eight foot by six so you couldn't take more than three steps in either direction, that Guantanamo was the end of the road, there is nowhere else that you go after Guantanamo. Of course when I was still a free man when I had seen the pictures of camp X-ray beamed around the world, and it was very frightening to see that that's how men were being treated, in fact the whole world was quite outraged. But nevertheless after the Bagram experience, after all of those things that happened, as I said when they told me I was going to Guantanamo bay I thought, well it's closer to America, perhaps that means closer to justice. But I suppose I was wrong.

Tell me about the treatment that you experienced at Guantanamo. You were in solitary for some time?

MB: Yeah, when I arrived in Guantanamo of course the journey was so excruciating and painful, being shackled to a chair with my hands and legs tied right down including my waist to a chair, my face was covered with a face mask, my ears blocked with earmuffs and my eyes blacked out with goggles and hood over my head. So I begged them to give me some sort of sedative, and they put an injection in me and by the time I arrived at Guantanamo after this 36 hour journey I was in a daze, I was still not completely conscious. So I was in and out of consciousness until the first clear memory I have is walking through some sort of gravel dirt road that led up to a set of steps which took me to my cell. And the cell was inside a room, a tiny little cell, eight foot by six, it was made of meshed cage metal and that became my home then for the next two years. I wasn't going to see anything other than this type of cell for the next two years.

Were you alone in the cell?

MB: I was completely alone in the cell. The cell was inside a [unintelligible], and on the opposite side of the room away from the cell at any given time was a soldier whose duty it was to watch me or to be around. But other than that there was no other prisoners.

Did you see other people at mealtimes or to take showers?

MB: No, no no. only the soldiers and that's it.

Were you allowed time out of the cell to exercise or walk around?

MB: They had what is called “recreation” and that meant going into a yard that was very close to the cell where nothing else is visible other than the gravel on the ground, and there were huge barriers all around the recreation yard so that you couldn’t see outside. The size of the recreation yard was about fifteen foot by fifteen foot and I’d be taken in there after a whole process, and that process involved me being completely shackled up, hands and legs and a waist chain, two gaurds on either side, another guard behind me with a handgun pointed towards me, and then as I went out there would be what’s known as the military working dog with its handler just I case I escaped. And then around the fenced area was the infantry patrol with a Humvee with a mounted machine gun and two soldiers walking around. So all that process had to happen before I could go out into the recreation yard. And in the initial stages the recreation yard I was only allowed fifteen minutes twice a week. That increased later to half an hour a day and then eventually they raised my time to an hour a day. But that was how the kind of incremental process of recreation began.

So the rest of the day you were alone in the cell — what were you allowed to do?

MB: Well, I don't think they could stop me from doing anything inside the confines of my own cell but because you can’t really do much in a cell that's so tiny, I could pace up and down it but pacing up and down simply meant taking three steps one way and then turning right back and three steps the other way. There wasn’t really much I could do in the cell. They gave me a copy of the Quran which I memorized huge chunks of. Sometimes I was given a pen and paper to write either letters home or just generally write because I wanted to write. And other than that there was nothing to do. nothing at all to do.

Could you receive letters from family or read books other than the Quran?

MB: I did receive letters from family sporadically and over the last year they became more and more frequent and that was something that I looked forward to, but to give you an example I could write a letter in January and receive a reply in December. That's not because it took so long for them to do so it's simply that that was the method sometimes that they would employ to [unintelligible] this person doesn't matter and he can get his letters much much later. Or sometimes the letters were so heavily censored I couldn’t read the letter properly, even from my six or seven year old daughter who had written a letter to her father. They on several occasions blacked out, completely scribbled out, more than half of what she had written. But still they were welcome. And yes, I did get books other than the Quran after the initial stage of having no library books for a year almost they did start bringing books. They were mostly 19th century English classics.

What was this treatment and isolation doing to you psychologically?

MB: Well, I’ve never in my life ever required a psychiatrist, never felt that I needed to see one. I was a completely sane and normal person before I was at Guantanamo. But on a few occasions I lost my ability to control myself after pacing up and down and and up and down for hours on end and praying and hoping for a way out. I started smacking my

head against the wall, punching and kicking and swearing and crying and screaming. And the reaction of the military administrators was to call in psychiatrists, who of course were military psychiatrists. So their job wasn't primarily to see to my psychiatric needs. Rather it was to see how much information they may be able to ween out of me because it was a psychological operation. And one of the psychiatrists, they weren't all bad, but one of them actually suggested a method to me to commit suicide. She said, have I ever thought of taking my trousers off, putting them around my neck so that it could make a noose around it, threading the trousers with a sheet and then tying that sheet to the top corner of my cell and then just jumping down from a ledge to kill myself? And I said no, I had never thought about doing that until you put the idea in my head! The really really disturbing thing about this is that four people died in Guantanamo Bay, all of them allegedly from the exact same method as was suggested to me.

Why do you think she said this?

I don't know whether she was being malicious or whether she was just being stupid. All I know is that I never had never had such an idea in my mind until she put it into it.

Can you tell me about your mental state most of the time in this situation? What were you feeling most of the time?

MB: I think it fluctuated. It was sometimes very depressed, sometimes hopeless, sometimes I did get some hope. I have to say, it's important to say, that there were some decent guards, decent American soldiers who would come along and say things that did give me hope. So it varied. It varied sometimes. If there was a soldier that I liked to talk to, that I liked to see, then I was happy in their presence and I think vice versa. And those soldiers did give me hope and I am very grateful to those soldiers because they didn't have to. And in some cases those soldiers went over and above what was required and then got themselves thrown out of the Army for "fraternizing with the enemy" as they call it. So I think that's an important point, I think, to recognize that they were individuals as opposed to the system. As far as the system was concerned, it was designed to break all the detainees there, to make them into people who are completely reliant upon people like interrogators who don't have their interests at hand.

How well were you able to resist this?

MB: I think in the initial stages, I have to say when I was first taken into custody in Kandahar and Bagram, then I would say that the tactics of terror produced exactly that, they terrified me. I was terrified most of the time of one thing or another. Every time I was taken into interrogation I used to pray to God that this won't be the worst one, that I'll be safe, and I'd make all sorts of prayers. By the time I was in Guantanamo, that had worn off. I wasn't afraid any more. In fact, even though the interrogations were still adversarial, most of the time now I was the one becoming the adversary. I was the one who was talking back to the interrogators, being sarcastic with them, and even needling them sometimes, saying I really don't care what you do. I don't care if I stay here for the rest of my life, I'm not going to talk to you and I'm sick of your games and I'm sick of

being held in this place without knowing what crime I have committed against you, for which I am paying the ultimate price, which is my freedom, and my family is suffering as a result. So by that time it had become, as far as the interrogators were concerned, it was antipathy. But with the guards, as I said, a lot of the guards were very decent and I think they started recognizing what was happening, too.

Even at this late point you still had not been charged with a specific crime?

MB: No, I was never charged with a crime. I was never charged with anything. And in the end there were no charges. So I don't know what it is that I'm supposed to have done to the United States of America. I say often, people ask me, "Would you ever go back to the United States?" And I would say to them, well that's under the assumption that I'd ever been there. I've never been to the United States; the United States came to me. I've never in my life been involved in hurting any United States citizen, or conspiring to do so, or funding people to do so, or having prior knowledge of anybody who's going to do so. I've never done any of that at all. But it must said, the United States government has done everything to hurt me, my family, and people around me.

Can you tell me about the emotional effect it had on you of being held without any charges being explained to you, and without a chance to defend yourself against those charges?

MB: Well, you know, the things that they would say to me I couldn't understand. They would say that you supported the Bosnians, you supported the Kashmiris, therefore you are a terrorist. And I would say, okay, even if I did do that, what in the hell has that got to do with you? How did I harm you in my support of these people in places where they are being oppressed and tortured and murdered and butchered? How does that affect you? When did you come into the picture? So that was one of the most frustrating things to talk to these people about, because as far as they were concerned if you helped somebody else and if you did it because you are a Muslim and feel like helping other Muslims, then therefore you are a prime candidate, you are a terrorist. And I thought, well, that means, what you are saying by this definition is that everybody is a terrorist. You've got to have a million Guantanamos if that's the case. And it was probably one of the most frustrating things, not knowing, or speaking to people who simply didn't't have a clue about the world that they were a part of. They knew how to deal with drug dealers in the streets of San Francisco but these guys are talking about coming to places where they couldn't even pronounce the name properly of places and then expecting us to think that they are doing justice all because of the name of September the 11th. That was one of the hardest things for me to comprehend. I condemned September the 11th, I never agreed with it in any way at all. But for them then to chase me and to say that somehow, some way you bear some of the responsibility for what took place on September the 11th, I never understood that.

Did you feel that they didn't really know what they were speaking about?

MB: I think it's quite clear, it was absolutely clear, they've released over 500 detainees from Guantanamo Bay. If they had felt that these people had been involved, or had knowledge of, September the 11th then seriously, after seven years of being interrogated with no holds barred, with "kid gloves off," as they call it, without the application of the Geneva Conventions, they still haven't convicted anybody after seven years in Guantanamo of having anything to do with September the 11th, then I think the proof there is in the pudding really. I think it demonstrates quite clearly that they didn't have a clue what they were doing, and it's simply to tell the rest of the world and American in particular, "We've got them, we got the guys from September the 11th." The answer of course is that they didn't. And what they did after Guantanamo was to make other people who didn't have a clear position on the United States of America have a clear position now that the United States of America, the government today carries out torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

Tell me more about interrogation conditions at Guantanamo? Was it the same as at Bagram?

MB: No, they varied. I think in Guantanamo they were less adversarial, at least for me and that is because if you can imagine in Bagram most of the interrogations would take place with armed soldiers present, with armed FBI agents or armed CIA agents present, so you could hear the sound of the rounds being chambered when you were in the room and somebody was pointing that gun towards your head. So it is much more frightening when somebody puts a gun to your head and you know there is a bullet in it and the only thing between you and death is the pulling of the trigger and the release of the safety catch. In Guantanamo it wasn't like that. You were still shackled, you were tied to the ground, but you didn't feel that people are going to try to hurt you. And that's why I thought that we're physically closer to America, there must be a little bit more accountability here than there is in Bagram. And the fact that eventually lawyers were given access to Guantanamo detainees, which continues to this day. Now Guantanamo is much more of a psychologically draining place than it is a physically torturous place.

Were you given legal counsel? If so, did you feel that the legal counsel was helpful or adequete?

My position with the legal counsel, I have spoken since with many of them, but particularly at that time was initially one of joy, of elation, of a feeling that now I'm finally going to get some justice. But once I had first spoken to them—and I had studied law in the past myself, I was a law student when I was in my teens—I've never seen a situation where there can be a client-attorney relationship like there is in Guantanamo, so that anything that is said to the lawyer has to be cleared, and anything that the lawyer brings in has to be cleared first. So that even if there is a letter that I have written, I can't see it ever again. The lawyer can't bring that letter back in to me to quote, because it has to go through censorship. And I think all of those sorts of things completely destroyed any lawyer-client privileges, and by extension the ability for a client to have faith in his lawyer. And in most of the cases of course we didn't appoint our lawyers, the lawyers were appointed on our behalf by relatives, so we couldn't actually choose. We couldn't

say okay, I want to have this lawyer act on my behalf because we certainly didn't have the option to choose. But even when the lawyers did come, they were quite clear, most of them were honest enough to say that you could be technically sitting here for many years on end, and my presence here as far as the legal process is concerned can do very little—all I can do is start to document your case and advocate on behalf of your case. The reality is a Supreme Court decision was passed in 2004 for detainees to be given the rights of habeus corpus. That didn't't translate into any detainee ever being presented to a US court and being released. Nobody's been released as a result of any legal proceeding in Guantanamo. So after all of these years, one has to ask questions: Lawyers are present, but are they allowed to apply the law? And the answer of course is no.

What happened when you learned that you were being released?

MB: Near the end of my time in Guantanamo I was moved to the "blocks" and for the first time I was put with other detainees, so I could actually speak to and see other detainees and that included the guy called Hamdan who is supposedly allegedly Osama bin Laden's driver. It included the Australian guy David Hicks and a couple of other guys. So I stayed in a block with these guys up until I was removed and taken back to solitary confinement at Camp Echo where then I was told that I was going to be released. So my first reaction was of disbelief. I didn't believe the person who told me. I thought, yeah, yeah that's right, it's another ploy. But then I heard from some other guards who I did trust, who confirmed for me and were very happy to tell me that I was going to be released. And then finally to hammer it home one of the lawyers came along and said that I was going to be released. Eventually I was put on a British aircraft with three other British detainees and we returned home to Londonm where were were taken first of all to a police station, questioned and then released to where our families were waiting for us.

You weren't in British custody for any long period of time?

MB: No.

What it was like to return home?
MB: The last time I had seen my wife and children was in the middle of the night when I was taken away at gunpoint and I hadn't seen them since then. I didn't know what they were going to be like, I didn't know how I was going to be like. And of course one of the hardest things was that I was now a free man. I could actually walk in a room and not worry about being shackled, not worry about having a wall in front of me after three paces. That itself was difficult.

Why was that difficult?

MB: Because I had been in a tiny little cell for so long and I was used to it. I was used to being in a tiny cell. I could almost close my eyes and walk three steps forward and three steps back without hitting the wall. Now all this space, it seemed—it was frightening. It was scary. It was almost having agoraphobia. And then on top of that, there were all these people around me, my father, my brothers, my wife, my children. And of course the

hardest thing about the children was that six months after I was taken into custody my wife gave birth to my youngest son. I had never seen him before in my life. he didn't know who I was and I didn't know who he was, and now he's my child. And I hadn't seen a child for three years. I don't know what it's like to look at a child any more even though I'm a father. And my children, my eldest daughter, she was about six years old the last time I had seen her, I could still pick her up in the air and throw her and catch her and play with her. Now she was close to ten. I couldn't do that with her anymore. And so I saw all of these faces that were familiar and yet they had grown so much and were unfamiliar. The only faces that were really familiar of course was my wife and my father, people who were older, and they were all crying. But I couldn't cry any more. I couldn't. I couldn't cry. My tears had dried up. and part of my tools for survival in Guantanamo was to try to forget about my family, to forget that I was a son, forget that I was a husband, or a father or a brother. Because the more I thought about these things the harder it would be. So as time went on I started to forget things.

Did you feel you had to forget them because you were worried you would never see them again, or just to undo the pain of thinking about them everyday?

MB: Both. For both of those reasons. I even wrote a letter to my wife to say that she's free to do what she wishes and I don't wish to keep her tied to me in the knowledge of being held in limbo, that she is free to continue her life, to get married again, do whatever she has to do and that she shouldn't feel obliged to stay with me because I can't give her any assurance as to how long I'm going to be here. So that's how psychologically I prepared myself.

You had difficulty with those emotions—had you deadened them on purpose?

MB: Yeah, as I said the emotions, they were there but I kept them subdued because that was my method of dealing with it. My father told me that both his brother and his sister had died when I was in Guantanamo. Now these two people I knew very well, they were very close to me and had brought me up as children. Even then I didn't break down. So by the time I eventually returned home with my wife and kids and so forth, I tried to put myself in a frame of mind that I'll deal with each day as it comes, but at the same time, I'm going to have some great difficulty readjusting back to normal life. I didn't't have an rehabilitation program, I didn't have any counseling. It was just, that's it, three years in isolation and straight the next day back home. You deal with it, you deal with the reality, that's your problem. It's got nothing to do with us. The British government didn't't offer me anything of counseling and so forth. And I didn't want it from them to be honest. I dealt with it in the way that I can. I have my faith, I have my family, that's enough for me. And so the day that I returned home I remember the very day I returned home the gas heater downstairs wasn't working so I got to work on it straightaway. I asked where the screwdrivers are and tried to fix it. [laughs] I couldn't fix it.

It was a way of dealing with one thing at a time?

MG: Yeah. I was back home, I was looking at things, I thought, oh this needs a coat of paint, something else needs a screw here, something else needs to be hammered back in, I don't like the way that this room has been set up. I'm thinking of everything as if I was here just yesterday.

You returned to your own home with your wife and children—they were living in the same place?

MB: Yes.

Do you know much about how your wife and family explained to your children what was happening to you?

MB: My wife did an amazing job of trying to keep my memory alive in the minds of the children. She constantly asked them to write to me and they did so and vice versa. They were always very very aware of who their father was and what type of a person he was and she never let them forget about that. But of course for her it was, for them it was a very great testing time too. Often that isn't told, but she had to become so much more independent without me being there. She had to become the father and the mother simultaneously and had to do all of those things for the young children, particularly with the youngest one who was just a baby, born just six months after I was taken into custody. But she had family around her and she had friends around her and that was a bonus which helped her.

Even though you wrote to urge her to move on with her life, and remarry if she wanted, that's not what she wanted?

MB: No, no, she wouldn't even entertain the idea. The thought did come into her mind had it been a lot longer—I know that she told me that once it had been put in the UK press that all those people who were going to be designated for trial by the [unintelligible] commission, which included me at least in the early early stages, of what they said they wanted to do, meant that the sentences if people were convicted could carry the death penalty. She said to me that, when I heard that, for three days I couldn't move. I was stuck to the ground. I couldn't eat, I couldn't walk, I couldn't talk, I couldn't look after the kids, I was paralyzed with fear and shock. And that was of course all over the newspapers that that may happen. But other than that I think she was strong and she managed.

How did you reaquaint yourself with your kids, especially because they were so little when you were taken?

MB: It's been a hard process and I have to say it's not easy and it's still not over. The hardest process I think was with my youngest son because he didn't know me and I didn't know him. He has no memory, neither of us have, of one another. So we are new people, new entities to one another. And I remember when I came home he used to be sleeping in the bed with my wife, and so when I came home I chucked him out. [laughs] He was a bit

bitter about that. But on a serious note, it is hard, because there's things that adults won't understand let alone children. Children, there are things that they won't understand at all. And to have been gone for such a long time, in a sense it's like being a new person into the house. Everything that existed so many years ago now is all changed. Except for my wife it's not new, but for the children it was new. They'd entered into a phase where they got used to being without a father and now all of the sudden their father is back, which is a great bonus for them because now I can go out and do those cool things that mom couldn't do and they look forward to it and they appreciate it and I do, too. I can do all those things that I planned to do. I used to write letters to my wife saying, please buy them this toy, or get them on this educational program, or get them to learn about this. I was sending all sorts of things to her to try to get her to do them with the kids, because I've got the time to think about it. And so a lot of those things that I thought about myself and I tried to do myself with the kids.

Now are you able to do some of those things?

MB: Yeah, I am able to do some of those things, I've done a lot of those things as well. But part of the price that I have to pay I suppose is that Guantanamo almost defined who I am for the forseeable future and it's my choice since my return I've become the spokesman for Caged Prisoners, I've become probably the most vocal advocate from the former detainees of Guantanamo detainees rights. But there is a price I have to pay for that in my personal life and that is being away from home a lot. That is, not being able to turn off, not being able to switch off, that it's constant. There is no shutoff point, there is no point where I can say okay, I am going to put this aside. But at the same time I do try to make more time for my family than I used to before, if that makes any sense. When I do say that I'm going to take the family out together or we are going to do something together, that takes precedence. But for the most part this has consumed my life now.

Tell me about the process of deciding to write a book and become an advocate. Why do you feel it is important to publicly speak about your detention instead of returning to private life?

MB: I say this without any conceited way at all, but it's because I know in myself that I am a bridge between many worlds. I'm a fluent Urdu speaker so from the Asian subcontinent, I have that whole world in my grasp. I am an Arabic speaker so I have the world of the Arabic speakers in my grasp. And I am an English speaker and I am British so everybody wants to hear the story and they want to hear it first and foremost in English. If I was to tell you this story in Arabic or Pashtun or Farsi or any of the others, our conversation probably would have ended right at the beginning. So I think that is part of it. The part that I can do, the part that—and I think Guantanamo made this happen, is that I sat and thought and thought for years, formulating my thoughts, sometimes on paper, sometimes in my head, almost in an internal filing system of what I am going to do and how I am going to do it when I return. And part of that for me is accountability, it's trying to bring people who have done what they have done to accounts, without letting them get off scott-free. And at the same time, advocating for those people who don't have a voice. The majority of people at Guantanamo, whether those released or those who are

still there really don't have much of a voice in comparison to somebody like me, being British and being able to articulate my point of view in a manner that most people understand.

Is having to speak about this over and over making you relive the pain or is it a way of handling the pain because you make it public and you can think about how you feel about it?

MB: In all honesty, by this time it's not draining, but I really wanted to move on by now. It's almost four years since I've returned. I wrote a book with the intention of trying to cover that whole part of it, if people want to know in-depth details then they can refer to the book. I have done literally, and I don't exaggerate when I say this, hundreds perhaps even thousands of interviews since my return with the media, with academics, whether it is film, television, radio. I have written many pieces in different newspapers myself as editorials and I spent most of my time up and down the United Kingdom giving lectures almost on a daily basis, or every couple of days, advocating for detainees' rights. But it's given me the ability to talk about other issues than just Guantanamo, about issues surrounding community relations, attitudes towards Muslim communities, the Muslim community itself and how it [unintelligible] in some way, the war on terror, war in general, torture, incarceration without charge and trial, history and the lessons of history regarding these things. So all the things that I suppose I wanted to do perhaps while I was thinking in Guantanamo I have been able to do so using the Guantanamo experience as a platform to be able to do that.

Is this now your form of employment?

MB: [laughs] I'm afraid so.

If you hadn't done this, do you think you might have had difficulty finding employment once you came back?

MB: I don't know. The answer to that is difficult to say. I think it varies from person to person and how they are. I like to believe that I don't think I would have had a huge problem, perhaps I would have worked for a law firm or something like that and they would have understood. I think whichever job I would have taken would have probably gone in one direction or another towards the human rights field and that is because the experience and so forth and because, as I said, I studied the law before. But had that not been what I wanted to do, then I think finding a job would have been difficult, it would have been a hard process, and I say that based upon the knowledge of the other people who have returned who haven't taken the road that I have and have decided to have a completely secluded life or separate life from that of their past in Guantanamo and have struggled. Some have changed their names, others have been attacked, others have actively been refused work because of their time in Guantanamo. So I am very acutely aware of what may have happened and I suppose Guantanamo in that sense, I suppose it was a blessing in disguise without me realizing it.

There is no reintegration or counseling program for detainees once they are released?

MB: No. there are individuals, there are organizations, who have taken it upon themselves to try to help from their own volunteer background, but there is nothing official as far as the government is concerned and never has been.

What other problems do returning detainees face?
MB: Well, just if I give you the cross-section of people who have returned here to the United Kingdom I can tell you several of them, specifically those who don't have British citizenship but have been long-term residents, are still struggling, even on the very basic necessities of life. Most of them want to work, they want to get a job to provide for their families but they can't do so because their residency has been revoked and they are waiting on it being re-established, and that is because they were out of the country for so long that any documents that they needed to sign over that period they couldn't do. So because they were forcibly out of the United Kingdom and they couldn't find them. So now these guys, they can't work, they can't receive any welfare benefits, they can't in effect be men in their houses where their children are depending on them. So in a sense they are like an addition to the household where the mother has to work and the man just has to sit around doing pretty much nothing. In other cases for those guys who weren't married and are trying to find a wife, trying to get someone to marry them in the traditional sort of Islamic way, they are finding difficulty also because of the sigma that is attached to being a former Guantanamo detainee and all of the connotations and the stigma attached to it. So there are those problems. And then there are the problems of society in general. What happens if you go to apply for a job and somebody sees your name and they see a gap in the last time you worked up until now and they say, "Well where were you for these past few years?" and the moment you say "Guantanamo Bay" they say, "Well, thank you and don't call us we'll call you." And there are all sorts of things surrounding that problem of the return that they continue to face for which there is no clear cut solution other than the existence of organizations that have been formed to support the Guantanamo detainees, to help them financially and in other ways. Had it not been for these organizations, these guys would be in worse, more dire situations than they are already.

Are people dealing with emotional side effects?
MB: Yes, I know of at least a couple. One would refuse even if he went to a restaurant to sit with his back to the door because he was paranoid that the CIA or the MI-5 or any other intelligence agency would fly in and literally kidnap him and extraordinarily render him to a location where he'd be there for quite some time. And another one in particular has become so reclusive that he refuses to speak to anybody. And since his return of course he returned to a tiny little flat which he lives in, which is only a little bit bigger than his cell in Guantanamo, and he remains there all by himself. He feels that everybody's abandoned him, he feels that he's got nobody here, and he frankly just misses Guantanamo.

Really?

MB: Yeah. And so there are all sorts of cases of people who have been effected in terrible ways.

Were you able to adjust? You mentioned before difficulty dealing with big spaces and lots of people. Did you adjust to that or are you still struggling?

MB: I think probably one of the things that I'm still struggling with most is the desire to be alone more than necessary. I find myself sometimes wanting to be alone when there is no need to do so, when I sort of turn people away, including family and children, and ask them to leave me alone when there should be no need to do that. And I think that a lot of that has to do with the experience of solitary confinement. I do speak at functions sometimes where there are thousands of people, and other events and so forth, but I really cherish my time alone now more than I ever used to do before and I think a little more than necessary which may be to the detriment of other people.

Are there things you prefer not to speak about with your family or children?

MB: There are of course things that I don't want to speak about and I don't speak about them, and those things only ever manifest themselves at points of great tension. So that it all sort of explodes at a point and everybody knows why that happened, because there are things that are being kept quiet and not spoken of, or if they have been spoken of they have not been spoken of in the home. But yeah of course those are things that I don't like to speak about. Even people when they do hear it and I am speaking about it don't know how to react, they don't know how to take it, they don't know what to do, and I don't expect there is anything they can do other than just listen.

Some people find comfort by telling their story over and over to the ones they love, and some people would feel that they're burdening someone else.

MB: Yeah. For example now even when I am talking right now, sometimes I work from home, so I am at home most of the time. If it's an interview I am doing people will know about it. Just two days ago I was filming with National Geographic. So the family is involved in one way or another. The kids are there and they are part of what is happening. So I don't need to tell them, they already hear it from me, from what I speak to somebody else. If I do a lecture sometimes I'll take one or two of the kids or maybe my wife with me, and they'll come along, they've heard it all before. So I haven't told them directly but they know the story because I've told others.

Has your religious faith changed as a result of your experiences in detention?

MB: Well I believe that faith is something that fluctuates, and it fluctuates with the ability to do good or not. And in Guantanamo and Bagram my faith fluctuated. Sometimes it as at its lowest point. When I used to question myself I would say is this happening to me because of my faith? And if my faith was strong, why am I not finding any deliverance? But then at the same time I would question my doubt, and say why am I so weak and why do I not accept that things happen in life which you can't determine the cause of or the

course of? And that you have to accept those things, and your ability to accept that makes you a stronger believer. And I think the latter overcame the former and my faith became stronger as time went on after the initial test and since my return, again, it fluctuated, but I think it gets stronger. It gets stronger from many different directions. It gets stronger from the experiences of other people, it gets stronger from looking at other women, for example, whose husbands were detained and seeing how they coped including my own wife. It gets stronger from looking at the reactions of people who I think are in worse situations than me. I don't believe that Guantanamo by any means is the worst prison in the world, it's only the most notorious one. And having looked at all of those situations, then I get stronger and think how would I have fared had it been even worse at Guantanamo or Bagram or elsewhere?

Has anything given you solace, both at Guantánamo and afterward?
MB: Yeah, there's always been one consistent comfort point for me and it never ever changed whether it was before, during or after Guantanamo, and that for me was simply the Quran, the book that I have read, that I knew from before my incarceration, was the same book that was bought to me in Kandahar and Bagram and in Guantanamo. My clothes were changed, my face was changed, my hair was shaved off, my environment was changed, my very person, my being was changed, but that book that I often used to read and refer to for some sort of guidance and health and sustenance never changed. It was the same, every letter of it. And I memorized huge chunks of it in the Arabic language and referred to it for own faith and my ability to comprehend my surroundings. I think that was probably the thing that was most important to me.

How has the experience has altered who you are and who you are going to be in your life?

How it's altered who I am, as I say this is perhaps something that the American administration didn't expect or want as a result of it, but I have become a stronger individual as a result of this. Perhaps they thought that it's going to produce a weakened, broken man who is only a sad reflection of what he was formerly, but no. If I thought I was strong before I am a hundred times stronger now. And I have to I suppose in a sense thank the CIA and the FBI and the military intelligence for putting me through all of that hardship and then coming through it stronger. So I think that's part of it. I am more focused, whereas before I think in many things I did in my life I drifted. I drifted from one thing to another. Now at least for the foreseeable future I am quite focused on what I want to do and what I intend to do and how I intend to do it. So I think that is part of what I've become. Guantanamo has helped to shape me as I am as a person today. But that's not necessarily a bad thing, I think. One of the reasons I think I ended up in Guantanamo in a general sense is because of my desire to help people. To help people I think are being oppressed. That hasn't changed at all. For me as a person I still am helping people I think are oppressed, but this time around I am doing it with a whole wealth of knowledge and experience that I never had in the past.

Can this be said in general of all detainees who have come back, that they are stronger and more focused, or have their difficulties undermined the US's interest in having economic stability and stable communities in the Middle East?

MB: I think, on the one hand, I don't want people to become reactionary and to hate just because they hear about my experience, but neither am I going to water down my experience in order for people not to react in a particular way. I am not trying to provoke a reaction, I am simply trying to find a way to get justice. I think part of the problem, and I think I have to say this quite clearly, as far as American foreign policy is concerned and the attitudes towards people in the Middle East and the Muslim world in general, then I totally oppose it and it has to be challenged and that is also part of what I do. The reason why I do it is because of this Guantanamo experience. But also to let people understand that the wrong way of going about it hasn't made America a safer place or Americans safer in general around the world. In fact it's done the opposite. And those who are in power need to recognize that, and I think they should be brought to account. All the detainees I think pretty much feel that way and all the detainees have said to me quite clearly, the ones that I've spoken to, that you're our voice, you're our spokesman, you can say what we all believe and what we want. And if there is anything ever that I say that is wrong or have made a mistake, then they quickly correct me. They say, I don't think you should have done this or should have done that and so forth. But I think my relationship with most of them is such that they know what I do is on their behalf and that I am accountable for what I say on their behalf, that they hold me accountable for it.

Do you think it is true that Guantanamo is breeding Jihad, that it's hardening attitudes towards America around the world?

MB: Well, Guantanamo as I said, it's not the worst prison in the world but it's the most well recognized one. I have to say that the United States administration only has itself to blame for that. They knew exactly what they were doing when they did it and they continue to do it, so it hasn't changed. Guantanamo Bay has become an ultimate symbol of injustice around the world, not just for Muslims but for people all around the world. It's a term that's used everywhere in the West. British politicians today will come on TV and say we don't want to "Guantanamize" Britain with its anti-terror legislation. So it has become a symbol of injustice. You can see that for example just a couple of years ago that in Iraq people were dressed in orange suits before they were going to be executed and in some cases were executed, so you can see that it's included in every kind of literature of all sorts of people who oppose the war, whether that's left-wing socialist activists, or the extreme or hardcore jihadists, whether it's moderate Muslims who want change and reform. Whoever it is, everybody quotes Guantanamo. And they are right to do so. They're not incorrect in quoting Guantanamo to be a place of injustice, they are absolutely correct.

Has it changed the world's view of America as a country that upholds justice and honors the law?

MB: Well I don't think it's just Guantanamo by itself. I mean Guantanamo didn't come in and of itself. Guantanamo came as a result of the invasion of Afghanistan and the fallout from it, the people who were captured and were taken to Guantanamo. Now I know today that the politicians of the United States of America and elsewhere argue that Afghanistan is the right war and Iraq was the wrong war, and all of this sort of stuff, but even Iraq was invaded directly as a result of things forged or created by the same administration that entered Iraq. And we saw the result of that at Abu Ghraib and so forth. So if you add all of that together, then the attitudes of people towards the United States for being a place recognized for justice and freedom and democracy and so forth, a place where millions of people from the Muslim world would go to to escape, whether it's social deprivation, poverty or political repression, now has become a place where people feel that they may well be subject to these things by the United States government itself. And of course Guantanamo is the epitome of that.

What you think governments could be doing better to help detainees who are still there and who have been released, in terms of their legal and re-integration needs?

MB: Well, I think it varies from place to place. Different countries have different programs in terms of rehabilitation of their citizens to those countries. But I think first and foremost, the most important thing is that Guantanamo itself must be closed and by extension therefore those people who are in Guantanamo must be returned to their various countries. If there is evidence or enough evidence against a person that they may have committed a crime, then that needs to be presented in a court of law, and open, transparent court of law and let justice be done. But for the majority of the cases, they are not going to be facing charges for crimes and they should be returned and released home. For those people who can't be because they are dissidents from their countries like the Libyans, Chinese, Algerians and others, and Tunisians, then they should rightfully be given refuge in countries where they will be safe, where communities of those detainees live, so they can be integrated if not by the society itself than at least by those within their own community. And in all honesty, if a person hasn't committed a crime, if a person has done nothing to harm the United States of America, then really in all honesty these people should be compensated, not for the sake of money but they should be given something, even an apology for what they have had to suffer and endure. It is completely wrong and outragous that after all of this time, they are simply told "Ok, well you can go back home now, after seven years of your life have been ruined and your life is destroyed." I know people who have lost relatives, mothers, fathers, and in some cases children, have died whilst waiting for their father in Guantanamo. How are you going to replace that? And if that isn't done, if this sort of attitude isn't brought into fruition very soon, I think that the response will get even worse, because with time grows bitterness. And that means more fear for Americans abroad.

Has the fact that you were never offered an apology or compensation affected you personally?

MB: Well, I have my fight on that. I have taken it on. I have taken on everything that I possibly can, from speaking sometimes with junior American ministers or neocons, people who advocate the war on terror, I have taken that position on, allowing that's

where my fight lies, with the media work and so forth that I do, that's my challenge. At the same time I have pending cases against the British government for complicity in my own torture which I think will then open doors towards the same thing against the United States administration for being involved in what took place.

This is a legal case?

MB: Yes, it's a legal battle. But I don't expect apologies to be honest. I don't expect them in the way that they should have come across, and that's by an unapologetic, unashamed government which argues that extraordinary rendition, the war on terror, that the whole attitude displayed by the United States administration after September the 11th, is completely justified. I don't expect them to budge. I don't expect them to turn around and say, "We've got it all wrong, we're sorry." I think with anything else, a time will have to come when the likes of President Bush and Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, perhaps when they are travelling across from one country to another might be indicted on their way, or when there is an indictment against them perhaps in Europe or somewhere, in the way that Pinochet of Chile was indicted when he tried to become an escapee.

For released detainees, is there still a cloud of doubt that hangs over people because they were never officially cleared?

MB: Yeah, yeah, of course. And you obviously recur with questions. People often ask me, "Okay, well perhaps you weren't guilty but there must be somebody there who was guilty." And I say, well, okay, how can people be so unbelievably narrow-minded by asking if somebody was guilty when they can't even say guilty of what! If they can tell me, "Okay, did somebody do this?" and then say do you think that they were guilty of having done this, I'd say fine. But you can't even articulate to me what crime it is that they are supposed to have done. Because if the questioner is asking me, "Is there anybody in Guantanamo who is responsible for September the 11th?" then I could answer yes or no. But most of the time that question is not even asked. It's simply "Is there anybody guilty?" Yeah, well there is somebody there who is guilty of being a Chinese dissident, somebody guilty there of being an Algerian dissident, somebody who is guilty there of distributing leaflets against the oppression of a totalitarian regime in their country, they are guilty of that, but if you asking is there somebody guilty of a crime then I say for goodness sake, my friend, you live in a democracy where a person's innocence or guilt isn't determined by the newspapers or by the president, it's determined in a court of law!

What would you like Americans to understand about Guantánamo?
MB: The message is a very very simple one, that the face of the United States of America has changed irreparably at present and it's going to take a lot of work for it to come back, for the United States to become a place where people used to say, at one time, "That's a country I love." My wife spent time in the United States when she was a teenager, and I remember recently she said to me, "You know, I remember a time when everybody loved America." She said that to me and she's Palestinian! And I said to myself, yeah, you what, I think I can remember a time like that. Even though I've never been to America, I remember liking American things. And I don't think that's beyond the American people. I

think American people, from what I've come across, are just as good and bad as anywhere else, and they are easily likeable people. But that is gone in the general regard of the world, and the people in the United States of America need to bring that back, and the only way they can do that is by introducing some justice. Not Bush-style American-style justice as he calls it, but traditional, gentleman-style justice, which means that there should be fair play, and people should be treated fairly. And if they're going to bullied around, then they can expect repercussions, because everybody is the same.

You have strongly advocated for accountability and compensation; do you feel you can ever be made whole again?

MB: I don't look at it that way. Guantanamo is part of what I am. It makes me whole. The experience hasn't made me any less. And I don't think it should make anybody any less. It's just now become part of our experience and part of that experience means being able not just to put it aside, but to be able to continue life despite it. And I don't think, I put this in terms of experience, I am 40 years old now. I have been for 37 years of my life a free man. Out of those years three years I wasn't a free man. So the majority of those years will take over the minority of the years quite easily I think. And although it has defined what I do, it hasn't defined who I am. I am still Moazzam Begg.

Have you had any health effects from your period of confinement?

MB: Health effects? Yeah, there have been issues regarding my back. I have had continual back pain from sleeping on the metal bunks we used in Guantanamo and that's not changed. I also there has been an inflammation in my ear for which I have required surgery since my return, which developed in Guantanamo and that was something that required some pretty painful surgery I had to have. And that's part of my complaint against the government of the united kingdom and the United States of America eventually for what took place there.

Is your claim that you weren't given proper medical treatment?

MB: Yeah, it's part of the inclusion, the medical report that has been compiled has included what happened there.

Is there anything else you'd like to add about your experience re-integrating with British society and moving forward with your life?

MB: No, I think that is pretty much it. The only thing I would say is that there has been a great response since my return of people who attend my lectures and listen to what I have to say, a great deal of interaction from people even when I write something in the newspaper. A lot of that gives me hope that things can change and that I tend to think that the good that exists within people will eventually override, overshadow the bad that exists in them.

Is there a hunger to know your story?

MB: Yeah, there is a hunger to know it and then I think there is also a hunger that follows on from it, that if somebody doesn't like what they've heard, they want to oppose what's happening. And as long as that exists within people then I have continued hope.