False Positives

Does counterterrorism produce terrorists?

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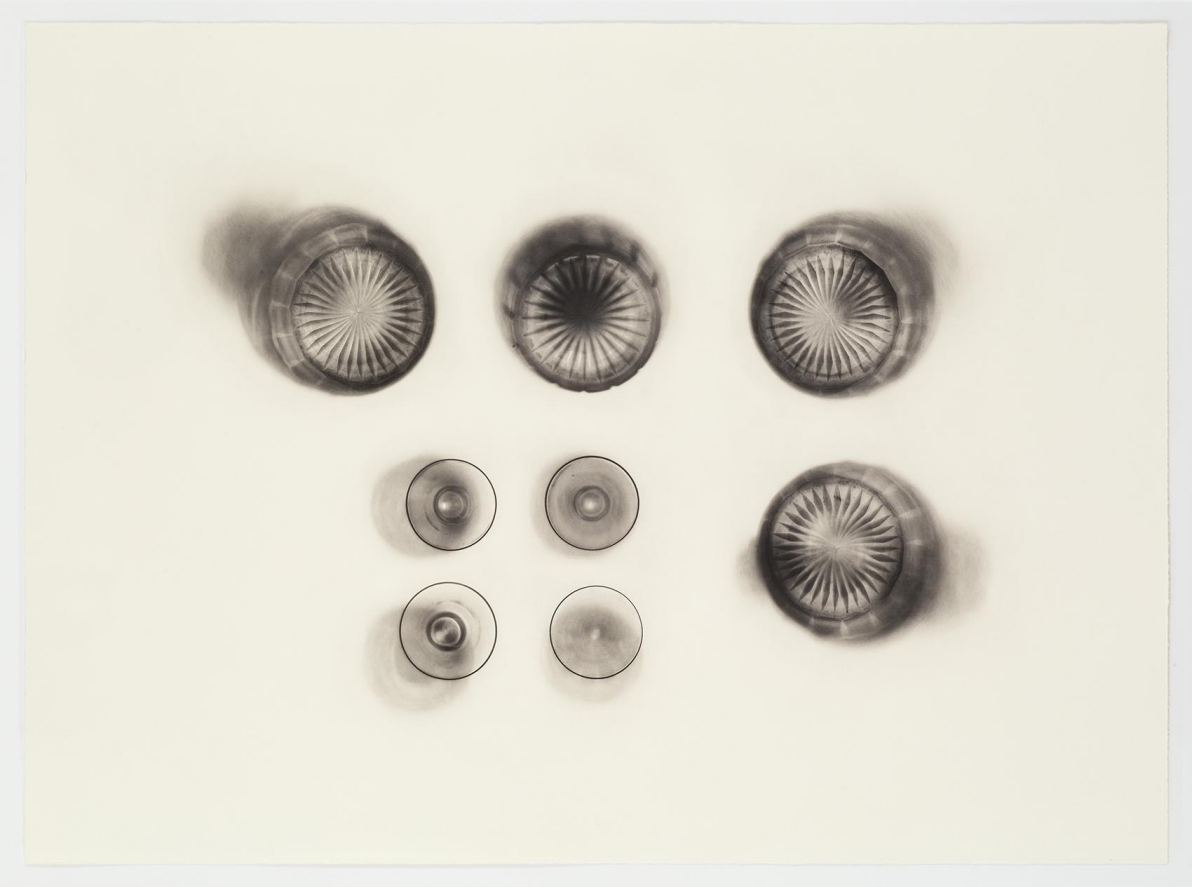

Cornelia Parker, *Fox Talbot's Articles of Glass (bottoms up)*. 2016, polymer photogravure etching. 22.2 × 30.4". Courtesy of the artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London. © Cornelia Parker, 2017.

ONE AFTERNOON two summers ago, during Ramadan, Moazzam Begg and his daughter drove to London from their home in Birmingham. The traffic was heavy. It was twilight by the time they reached Malet Street Gardens, a sunken park in Bloomsbury, where a Muslim charity had set up a tent and invited all comers to break the fast. More than a hundred people sat cross-legged on plastic tarps, passing bowls of dates and steaming boxes of rice and lamb. The charity had billed the gathering as apolitical, but this was complicated by the choice of Begg as speaker. He had spent nearly two years in the US prison camp at Guantánamo Bay before being released without charge. He is 47 years old, trim and wiry, with a gray-streaked beard. On that day he dressed casually, in an untucked button-down shirt and slip-on shoes. Some see Begg as a persecuted victim, others as a jihadi propagandist whose left-wing sympathizers are naive dupes. Begg's own rhetoric resists easy binaries. He took the microphone and said, "As you're breaking your fast, just remember, there are brothers and sisters imprisoned in prisons and dungeons across the globe. Whether they're

Muslims or not. Held without charge or trial. What happened to the core British value of believing in the rule of law? You can understand that governments of third-world despotic regimes have been doing this. But how is it that Britain and America have been doing this?"

Political Islam is seen as a problem by the neoliberal West. The norm of multicultural tolerance demands empathy and accommodation for newcomers, in exchange for an implicit promise not to engage in overly disruptive politics and to confine religious practices to the private sphere. Many Muslims, however, see their religion as an inherently political practice and are unwilling to trade it away. This is especially true in Western Europe, where, compared with their American counterparts, Muslim immigrants tend to arrive with fewer financial resources and greater religious devotion. In Britain, Muslim communities are prone to forming enclaves, partly in reaction to the reluctance of their new homeland to fully assimilate them. Looming over them are centuries of accumulated grievances, the destruction caused by the Iraq War, the legal atrocities of Guantánamo, and the cloud of suspicion that any young man from one of these communities could turn into a suicide bomber. The British government has spent more than a decade putting these young men under intense surveillance. To identify publicly with any jihadist cause is now liable to trigger an escalating regime of legal sanctions, from surprise visits by intelligence agents to intensive airport searches to house arrest. Security is the imperative used to justify these measures, but it is unclear whether they have accomplished much beyond creating a permanent class of angry and unassimilable young men.

Two years after his release from Guantánamo, Begg wrote a memoir entitled Enemy Combatant. The book recalls his first visit to a jihadi training camp, in the mountains of Kashmir. "To me, jihad is like a drug I'm allowed to take, and I always come back for more," Begg recalls the camp's emir telling him. This was in 1993, before the Taliban took Kabul, before the September 11 attacks, before the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and before the lower-intensity guerrilla warfare that continues to smolder in the present landscape of drone strikes, suicide bombings, and mass shootings. In 1993, jihad was not such a dirty word. "People went to Bosnia or Afghanistan," says Saghir Hussain, a lawyer who works with Begg. "They died, or they didn't. The ones who didn't came back."

Since his release from Guantánamo, in 2005, Begg has devoted himself to what he calls "the jihad of the tongue," pushing back on the notion that Western governments have superior values to match their superior weaponry. He makes his case like a gentleman. Instead of pounding the table, he asks unsettling questions. Through appearances at university debating societies, town councils, and on the BBC, Begg has built a bridge between two British constituencies, antiwar liberals and the pro-jihad wing of British Islam. John Rees, one of the leaders of Britain's Stop the War Coalition, told me that he was impressed by Begg's "moral authority, from having been locked up at such a hideous place and having not been proven to have committed a crime. His composure and selfpossession come across to anyone who meets him."

Begg works closely with Cage, a British advocacy group. "People say that we represent terrorists, which we do," says Asim Qureshi, research director for Cage. "Terrorists, as in people who have participated in acts of political violence or who have been promoting them, and so forth. There is no one who we won't represent, if they have been subjected to a lack of due process." For Begg, Cage's role is to stand up for the rights of an oppressed religious minority. "The Shining Path, the Tamil Tigers, the Michigan Militia, the Unabomber — I'd like to see them all in Guantánamo," he told me. "But none of them are. It's only Muslims in Guantánamo. Why? Very clearly the war on terror is a war against Islam, in the minds of some people."

After dinner, Begg sang the call to prayer, gave another talk, and spent a few minutes chatting with a crowd of admirers. Begg is a compelling speaker, but in smaller groups he is reserved, almost cold. When he does speak, he prefers to talk about history, foreign policy, and Islam, not himself. At Guantánamo, he writes in his memoir, detainees did not probe into the circumstances of one another's capture.

We were a few blocks away from Tavistock Square, where, during the morning commute of July 7, 2005, Hasib Hussain, an 18-year-old student from Leeds, detonated a bomb on a bus, killing himself and thirteen passengers. Years later, the country was still dealing with a steady drumbeat of threats. "Jihadis 'Staying in UK to Plot Attacks,'" read a recent headline from the Evening Standard. ISISfriendly Twitter accounts were posting images of ball bearings, nails, and bomblike packages with the hashtag #LondonAttacks. Several hundred people had gone to Syria to join ISIS. In late June 2015, more than a thousand British police participated in an exercise called Strong Tower, a simulated Charlie Hebdo–style mass shooting. David Cameron, then the prime minister, was pushing measures that would expand counterterrorism into "counter-extremism," by cracking down on Muslim groups that pushed an antigovernment line. "The root cause of this threat is the poisonous ideology of extremism itself," he said in 2015, three days after ISIS carried out a coordinated attack at the Bataclan and other public spaces in Paris. "Those who promote extremist views — even if nonviolent themselves — are providing succor to those who want to commit or get others to commit violence." Cameron wanted more surveillance, more airport detentions, more authority for the government to sanction a wider group of people with less of an evidentiary predicate. Cameron singled out Cage by name and attempted to pass an Extremism Bill that would have given the government the authority to issue Banning Orders effectively outlawing certain groups, as well as Extremism Disruption Orders to ban individuals from using the internet. The bill failed, due in part to how hard it is to codify a working definition of extremism.

Britain's troubles would continue through the end of Cameron's term. This past May, an attacker detonated a homemade bomb that used nails and screws as shrapnel at a pop concert in Manchester. Twenty-two people died. Ten of the dead had not yet turned 20; the youngest was 8 years old. Fourteen more died during two vehicular attacks in London, one in March and another in June. Immediately after the Manchester attacks Britain raised its official "threat level" to "critical." The Conservative prime minister,

Theresa May, gave some prescriptions that sounded a lot like Cameron's — harsher sentences, greater authorities, a crackdown on both suspicious conduct and "extremist" ideology, an emphasis on plainclothes informants over official community liaisons, a new four-point plan. Much of her strategy amounted to shrinking the middle ground occupied by Begg and Cage. If Muslims wanted to display any jihadist sympathies in public, they would face increasing sanctions. "We cannot and must not pretend that things can continue as they are," May said. The Manchester bomber had died in the attack, so the authorities focused on hunting down and punishing the dead bomber's "network" of associates. Within a week there were fourteen reported arrests.

In the wake of a terrorist attack, political leaders feel they have no choice but to call for ever-harder measures. But after Manchester, many asked whether it was even possible to turn up the dial on a counterterrorism system that's long been running at its maximum capacity. The British government has many existing tools for spying on and poking at its own citizens to try to sort out which are the future terrorists. The government is authorized to hold its own citizens at the airport for several hours without cause, search their electronic devices, and, in certain cases, strip them of their citizenship. A broader program, known as the Prevent strategy, seeks to identify and track those perceived to be possible future terrorists, at a cost of some £40 million each year. Prevent requires many government employees to report anyone they come into contact with who displays terrorist inclinations, including a requirement that teachers report on their pupils. In some cases, Muslim schoolchildren were referred to Prevent after expressing their views about events in the Middle East. One 4-year-old boy was referred to Prevent for drawing what he called a "cucumber." His teacher misheard it as "cooker bomb" and referred him to a deradicalization program. In another case, a Prevent-trained university official spotted a Muslim graduate student reading a book called Terrorism Studies in the library and proceeded to question him about his views on al Qaeda and ISIS. The book turned out to be part of the student's coursework in counterterrorism.

One of the men who carried out the June 2017 attacks in London, Khuram Butt, reportedly had a brother who worked with Prevent. His brother, Saad Butt, was paid by the government to consult with members of Gordon Brown's Labour government as part of the Young Muslim Advisory Group. This was at a time when he and Khuram lived with their mother in the same house. Salman Abedi, the Manchester suicide bomber, had come to the attention of the authorities long before he became a murderer. In May 2015, one of the men who carried out a mass shooting in Garland, Texas, was in touch with an FBI agent ten days before the attack, and an undercover FBI agent was present at the scene. One of the Boston Marathon bombers also had prior contact with an FBI agent, who interviewed him as part of a threat assessment. In all four cases, as well as many others, the counterterrorism regime failed to stop the evolution of suspected terrorists into actual killers. Might it not, in some cases, also be responsible for accelerating that process?

THE PROBLEM OF HOW to defend against terrorism has some things in common with Britain's radar defense during World War II, the Chain Home System. Like surveillance, radar is essentially a listening system. It works by transmitting radio waves and then detecting an echo, or "return," when those waves are reflected off an enemy plane or ship. During the war's early period, the inventors of radar strove to build radar systems that would detect the faintest possible return. They called this quality "sensitivity." A highly sensitive radar system could detect enemy forces at a greater distance and minimize the probability that a German bomber could slip through undetected. But as radar advanced, British engineers discovered that returns could also be caused by birds, weather, and meteorological events. They grouped these nonenemy returns together as "noise" or "false alarms."

Sensitivity, the engineers realized, had a built-in trade-off. The more sensitive the system, the more false alarms it would generate. A radar system with low sensitivity was undesirable — it would leave the country undefended. But one with high sensitivity also had its drawbacks. The true positives would be overwhelmed by a glut of false positives.

There are, of course, many essential differences between radar and counterterrorism. First is the time that passes between the defender's decision about whether to intervene and the consequences of that decision. For radar, it's a matter of minutes, allowing for quick feedback and rapid improvement. In the case of a possible terrorist, whose identity takes shape over the course of years if not decades, it is often impossible to be sure whether or not the system made the right call.

The second difference is the ratio between the true positives (bombers, terrorists) and the rest of the population (geese, innocent people). During World War II, the German Luftwaffe would often launch dozens of airborne sorties in a single day. If the Chain Home System detected a return, there was a pretty good chance that it came from a German plane. Those planes almost always attacked in groups, further reducing uncertainty by generating multiple returns.

But in the case of terrorism, the ratio between true positives and the rest of the population is extremely low. It would be something on the order of one in a million if every ISIS fighter who has returned to Europe or North America were classified as a bona fide terrorist. (The actual number of terrorists is considerably lower.) The population ratio is so low, in fact, that the ratio of true positives to false positives is also quite low. Even if counterterrorism experts wrongly accused an innocent person in just 1 percent of all cases, that would still mean 650,000 wrongly accused people out of a population of 65 million. Those 650,000 false positives would be generated in the process of identifying 65 true positives. The disparity is caused by a search for a very low number of targets across a very large population.

This is more than a thought experiment. In 2007, the Department of Homeland Security began allowing watch-listed people to follow up with the agency and clear their names through a "redress process." According to a 2009 report by the DHS Inspector General, 99 percent of those who contacted the agency had never actually been flagged

to begin with. The No Fly List contains fewer than 100,000 names; nevertheless, one major airline told DHS that it and other watch lists were generating 9,000 false positives a day — more than 3 million a year. According to a recent lawsuit filed by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, one of the names on the No Fly List belongs to a 7-month-old baby. This result is bad from a civil-liberties perspective, of course, but it may also be undesirable from a harder-nosed angle. What if, in one of every thousand cases, the experience of being watch-listed pushes a suspect over the line into committing an act of terrorism?

In Britain's case, assuming 99 percent accuracy, that would mean that the counterterrorism regime is generating 650 new terrorists in the process of trying to find 65. But 99 percent accuracy is an absurdly high number when it comes to counterterrorism. Figuring out the future intentions of millions of people based on their associations, travel patterns, and phone metadata is much harder than figuring out whether a radar return is bouncing off a plane or a bird. So, in the counterterrorism case, the proportion of false positives will be much higher.

Between 2009 and 2013, the US received more than 1.5 million "nominations" for new individuals to be entered into the Terrorist Screening database, a US watch list that is shared with foreign governments. Fewer than 1 percent of these nominations were rejected; fewer than 0.1 percent were later determined by the Terrorist Screening Center, which administers the list, to be in error. That watch list currently contains more than 1 million names. After the Islamic State's November 2015 attack on Paris, French police reportedly raided more than two thousand homes. They detained more than two hundred. They charged fewer than ten. Compared to the precision of radar, surveillance-driven counterterrorism is an incredibly blunt instrument. Nevertheless, the policy of the US and Britain continues to be maximum sensitivity at all costs. In effect, this means aggregating massive databases that are almost entirely constituted of false positives. And those false positives could be aggravating the very problem that mass surveillance is intended to solve.

The idea that surveillance itself has a potentially radicalizing effect is distasteful to politicians, but it is not at all new. It is a version of what criminologists call "labeling theory," the idea that rather than reforming criminals, the stigma of the penal system can encourage further deviant behavior. It parallels US counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan, which recognized (at least officially) that home raids and civilian casualties carry a strategic cost, and should not, for reasons of security, be undertaken in excess. Compared with the experience of Pashtun civilians in the tribal regions of Afghanistan, being a watch-listed citizen in the US or Britain is a relatively mild form of sanction. But many in the Muslim community say that even the watch-listing experience — and the interrogations, pressure to inform, detention, and travel restrictions that often follow from it — increase the likelihood of a person one day becoming a terrorist. This possibility needs to be taken seriously, if only for statistical reasons. The watch lists are large enough that even the smallest effect constitutes a major problem.

The careers of individual terrorists resist any linear narrative. Individual cases emerge suddenly or slowly, each manifesting around a messy tributary of possible causes. "Our research found no single pathway to extremism," reads a restricted internal report authored by MI5, Britain's intelligence service. The document was written in 2008; short excerpts originally appeared in the Guardian. The authors concluded that stereotypes of terrorists as deeply religious, mentally ill, and sexually frustrated were all inaccurate. "Although it is popular to assume that people who become terrorists are passively 'brainwashed' into extremism," the report found, "individuals in fact make active choices. . . . When considering ways of intervening in the process, or persuading someone to give up a life of terrorism, they must not only be persuaded that terrorism is bad, but also that choices exist and there are attractive alternative options." Among these options are "opportunities to engage in meaningful non-violent political/religious activity." Yet some of this activity is exactly what Cameron and May have sought to criminalize.

I brought up the muddiness of causal narratives with Robert Verkaik, a British journalist and the author of Jihadi John: The Making of a Terrorist, the definitive biography of masked Islamic State spokesman Mohammed Emwazi. Before he fled to Syria, Emwazi had extensive interactions with British authorities, who repeatedly asked him to turn informant and prevented him, at one point, from traveling to Kuwait in order to get married. Verkaik met Emwazi in person on two occasions, and corresponded with him over a period of months. After Emwazi was identified, Verkaik interviewed a member of his immediate family and some of the British government agents tasked with surveilling terrorism subjects. "You can't say that because he was subjected to attention from the security services, and his life was disrupted, that that was the defining factor in his turn toward violent Islamism," he told me. "But it was a factor." The collateral effects of counterterrorism, Verkaik went on, are larger than the sum of the individual targets. "You're affecting the whole family," he said. "The siblings, the parents, the friends. It ripples through."

IN 1996, THE TALIBAN took Kabul and began enforcing a strict interpretation of Islamic law across Afghanistan. Their victory excited militant Sunni Muslim groups around the world. They hoped that Taliban-ruled Afghanistan could become a base from which they could export jihad to other parts of the globe. In England, translated copies of the Taliban's newsletter, Shield of the Believer, began turning up in some conservative mosques. Islamic bookstores circulated the writings of Osama bin Laden's chief theologian, Abdullah Azzam. One of these bookstores, the Maktabah al-Ansar, in Birmingham, was owned in part by Moazzam Begg. Begg's ancestors were Indian Muslims; his parents fled to

Pakistan during the violence that followed Partition. After immigrating to Britain, Begg's father, Azmat, worked as a banker and sent his children to good schools. As a teenager, Begg became part of a South Asian street gang before joining his father in the real estate business. They later opened a restaurant together called the Sultan. In his late teens, he toyed with the idea of enlisting in the British army and made

personal trips to Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. His memoir focuses on the culture, the language, and the beauty of the Hindu Kush. "It was a holiday I felt I just couldn't get enough of," he wrote.

Begg's bookstore was located in Birmingham's "balti belt," a neighborhood named for the curry cooked by the Pakistani families who lived there. "We produced some of our own publications, usually translated from Arabic, which is something I quite enjoyed doing," Begg wrote. "Our books were in various sections that includes the Koran . . . politics, jihad, inter-faith dialogue." Its online store, Maktabah.net, had a jihad section, as well as a five-CD lecture series by Abdullah Azzam. In March 2000, the police and intelligence raided Begg's store under the authority of Britain's Prevention of Terrorism Act.

The following year, Begg moved his wife and family to Afghanistan. "I wanted to live in an Islamic state," he wrote. "One that was free from the corruption and despotism of the rest of the Muslim world." After the attacks of September 11, the US bombed Kabul, and Begg and his family fled across the border to Islamabad. He periodically returned to Kabul to "check on our house, buy food, and get news." He recalled visiting the Taliban's front lines and, during one of his return trips, taking a mountain route used by Taliban fighters and probably al Qaeda as well. In November 2001, a journalist from the Guardian reported that Begg's name was found on a money-transfer order from London to Karachi, discovered at an al Qaeda training camp, where, US intelligence would later claim, he had been an instructor. On January 31, 2002, Pakistani antiterror police accompanied by FBI agents arrested Begg at what he says was a temporary refuge. The CIA has called it an al Qaeda safe house.

The Pakistanis handed Begg off to the Americans, who took him to Bagram Air Base. Begg's university education, native English, and cordial manners made an impression on his captors. According to the Times, US interrogators called him Hemingway, because he reminded them of the idealistic volunteers who had fought against the fascists in the Spanish Civil War. From Bagram, Begg was flown in shackles and blacked-out goggles to Guantánamo, where he spent the next twenty-three months. "One Thousand Days and Nights of Torture," a brief released during his detention by Clive Stafford Smith, one of Begg's British lawyers, states that Begg was repeatedly beaten and threatened with his own death and that of his family, and that he witnessed his captors murder two prisoners at Bagram. These allegations were treated skeptically at the time: the Times of London initially put quotes around the word torture. But most of Begg's allegations, including the killings at Bagram and accounts of stress positions, isolation, bright lights, sleep deprivation, and noise, have since been corroborated.

Shortly after Begg's arrival at Guantánamo, he signed a confession in which he admitted to being a member of al Qaeda. Smith, his lawyer, wrote that the signature was coerced, under threat of life imprisonment and possible execution; a British intelligence agent told Begg that "the more guilty he made himself seem, the quicker he would come home." The worst torture was the uncertainty. "I spent countless nights

praying, crying, thinking . . . and regretting certain decisions in my life," Begg wrote. Later, he told the FBI's inspector general that his interrogators had threatened to send him to Egypt and waved pictures of his wife and children. "Its effect on me was complete and utter dejection," he said. "Had they said to me, 'Sign a document now to say that I'd killed Kennedy,' I would have done so."

As the CIA tried to squeeze useful intelligence out of the men held at Guantánamo, a coalition was forming to lobby for their release. Alasra.org, an Arabic-language website, compiled the first list of prisoners in mid-2002. The site — the very first to speak up for the rights of those held at Guantánamo — was unapologetically pro-jihad. It represented the men as holy warriors and called the September 11 attacks "a blessed battle." A group of British citizens translated the Alasra.org list of prisoners into English and posted it on the English-language website PrisonerofWest.org. As news of Guantánamo spread, the families of nine British detainees made their cause known to members of the media, many of whom rallied around them, criticizing the Bush Administration for applying its rough-and-ready justice to their countrymen. Prime Minister Tony Blair began lobbying President George W. Bush to release the British captives, and in January 2005, Begg came home. In exchange for agreeing not to sue the British government, he received a settlement reported to be well into the hundreds of thousands of pounds. By that time, PrisonerofWest.org had rebranded itself as CagePrisoners.com. In 2014, it became Cage. When I asked Adnan Siddiqui, Cage's founder, about the original domain name, he compared it to "embarrassing photos from my youth."

Now reunited with his family in Birmingham, Begg joined Cage's leadership. His celebrity raised the group's profile and cemented its relationship with the British anti-war movement. He told me that it was his confinement that pushed him toward political activism. "I had my on-the-job training from these guys," he said, meaning his jailers. "They're the ones who made me the expert on the US military, the CIA, rendition, torture. I knew that I could speak, write, articulate myself. I knew I could convince a lot of people." Begg went on a speaking tour. He wrote his memoir. He penned op-eds for British dailies and for the Washington Post. He traveled across Europe, urging foreign governments to accept former Guantánamo detainees for resettlement. "Begg is doing our work for us," a leaked US diplomatic cable reads. "His articulate, reasoned presentation makes for a convincing argument."

In 2003, the British government launched a new counterterrorism strategy called CONTEST, which had four prongs: Pursue, Protect, Prepare, and Prevent. In some ways, Prevent strengthened Cage's hand. The group had long claimed that the scope of counterterrorism was so large that there was an entire "suspect community." Prevent seemed to shore up this argument, and drove centrist elements of Britain's Muslim community into Cage's corner. As the war on terror dragged on, revelations about torture, black sites, drone strikes, and mass surveillance continued to broaden Cage's appeal. Begg worked closely with the actress Vanessa Redgrave and, for a time, with Amnesty International. A Quaker charity gave Cage tens of thousands of pounds a

year. At the group's annual charity auction, donors would often return their prizes so Cage could sell them again. A decade after September 11, Cage had matured from a lone-crusading website into an established fixture on the British left. Then came the war in Syria, and ISIS.

CAGE HAS AN OFFICE in Whitechapel, down the street from the East London Mosque, in a building shared with Muslim travel agencies and charities. Britain's largest Arabic-language newspaper has an office in the neighborhood, as do Muslim political organizations with ties to nearly every corner of the Arab world. Whitechapel is one of the largest Muslim nodes to have sprung up around the city over the past twenty years; skittish nativists call it Londonistan. On one wall of Cage's conference room hangs a graffiti-style painting in Guantánamo orange with an upraised fist clutching a strand of barbed wire. Beneath is an Arabic quote — My brother, you are free, despite the chains — from Sayyid Qutb, the theorist and advocate of 20th-century jihad. Half-erased writing on a whiteboard appeared to be part of Cage's communications strategy: Rebuild brand reputation. Flank British press by working with overseas media.

One night during Ramadan, in an alleyway running behind Cage's office building, worshippers queued up to break the fast with milky tea and spiced hamburgers. Most passed by Cage's table, which bore branded wristbands, mugs, and a variety of literature, including My Life with the Taliban, a memoir by one of its founders. "Behind the Headlines," a portfolio of Cage's work, contained praise from a Guardian editor and an Al Jazeera producer, as well as a reference to the 2011 "assassination" of Osama bin Laden. For a ten-pound donation, Cage offered black T-shirts with a picture of a drone and the words come down from the skies and fight like men!

"Empty your pockets, brothers!" a Cage volunteer named Faisal cried. The son of Bangladeshi immigrants, he had just graduated from university. The first generation, he told me, spends most of its energy establishing an economic toehold; it falls to their children to make their mark in the political sphere. His manner was mellow and accommodating; his Twitter account mingles video of a Taliban flag-raising with gripes about his soccer team, Arsenal.

Most of the bazaar-goers walked by; a few dropped a coin into an orange Cage thermos. One man paused to scan the books and T-shirts. Like Faisal, he wore a white shalwar kameez, but his was topped with an Adidas varsity-style jacket. He seemed to be lingering on a stack of know your rights flyers, which offered advice on what to do if stopped and questioned at the airport. Faisal said that he was welcome to take one.

"Nah, bro, it's cool," the man said. "I respect what you're doing. But I don't need to be part of it."

"What happens when it's you who gets locked up, bro?" Faisal asked. "Who's going to come and get you out?"

The man declined again, and walked away. Others soon took his place, slipping donations into the thermos, browsing the merchandise, and leaving with flyers, leaflets, and wristbands. One man, BMW keys jangling from his hand, produced a roll of

banknotes and peeled off ten twenty-pound bills. Another took Faisal aside to ask for help. He believed that he was under surveillance — was there anything that Cage could do? Faisal suggested that he come back during office hours to arrange a meeting with a caseworker.

It was a similar encounter, between three young Londoners and a Cage caseworker, that led to the organization's greatest crisis. In May 2009, Qureshi received what seemed like a routine piece of casework. A young man called and said he was having trouble with British security. He asked to meet Qureshi in person, near a small mosque in Greenwich. When Qureshi showed up, he found that the young man had brought along two friends.

Qureshi is a third-generation Briton with roots in Pakistan. He has a shaved head, thick-rimmed Ray-Ban glasses, and a faint mark on his forehead from bowing during daily prayers. He studied at an elite school in the London suburbs, where he remembers watching his fellow students leave in Bentleys and Aston Martins through the window of the bus. After university he studied law, thinking he might become a corporate lawyer. His voice has a kind of muscular civility, a belief in its own reasonableness.

Qureshi told me that the Greenwich group struck him as "lads . . . a little rough around the edges. They were quite, you know — they quite obviously weren't public school boys." He used a Dictaphone to record the initial interview. Taleb, the leader, had an accent inflected by Jamaican patois. Omar was a German citizen who had converted to Islam. Mohammed was the youngest, quiet and deferential, a tall Arab with large, deep-set eyes.

They told Qureshi that they had been trying to take a safari holiday in Tanzania. It was Taleb's idea. He had proposed it to a larger group of friends who gathered each week to play football. The only volunteers were Omar, who had been laid off from his job doing translation work for a security company, and Mohammed, who had recently graduated from the University of Westminster.

Mohammed stuttered from apparent nervousness: "And so, you know, we just — we thought, you know, I just finished uni . . . we should go out on a little holiday, you know?"

Qureshi did not probe further about their intentions. "We'll skip to the main point," he said. "What happened as soon as you arrived there?"

At the airport in Dar es Salaam, the men said, immigration refused to give them a visa. The head of security ordered them to board another plane, which would take them back to Amsterdam. The men refused, and demanded to see their ambassadors. "We fully legit," Taleb said. "We didn't do nothing wrong."

They spent the night on the floor of a jail cell. The next morning, they were taken back to the airport, where they were met by a British diplomat. He told them that Tanzania had a right to control its borders and advised them to go back to the UK. On landing in Amsterdam, and again in London, they were separated, and questioned: Why had they gone to Tanzania? Were they aware that there was a civil war raging a few hundred miles away, in Somalia? Had they planned to join al-Shabaab, the radical

Islamist guerrilla force? If not, why had they brought such a small amount of money? Why hadn't they told their parents and spouses about the trip?

Mohammed sounded especially offended. "How can I get treated like this?" he asked Qureshi. "My government is threatening me and throwing allegations toward me." One interrogator asked why he'd packed an olive-drab field jacket. Mohammed called it "a proper safari jacket" and noted that he'd also brought "a stylish Rocawear jumper."

Mohammed's words resonate with a passage from Begg's memoir, in which he writes about a planned trip from Birmingham to Istanbul to the front lines of the conflict of Muslim separatists in Chechnya. "I was ready to help in whatever way I could, fight if I had to," he wrote. "There was a possibility I might not return alive." When security stopped and questioned him at the Birmingham airport, Begg was irate. "I'm not running drugs or weapons," he said. "I'm just going for a holiday to Turkey and Georgia." Ten years later, defending the purposes of his safari trip to Qureshi, Mohammed echoed Begg's words. "I don't know no one in Tanzania," he said. "When you go on holiday, you don't have to know someone. It's a holiday. Whatever you do on the holiday stays on the holiday."

Qureshi spent the next two years counseling Mohammed, mostly by email, with occasional meetings in person as his legal troubles deepened. Mohammed wanted to emigrate to Kuwait, where he had a job, close family, and a potential spouse waiting for him, he told Qureshi. But British security stopped him at Heathrow and refused to allow him to get on a plane. Qureshi introduced him to a lawyer and a journalist, Verkaik, neither of whom could resolve the situation. Mohammed said that he was being followed and harassed by security agents who wanted to make him their informant. "I'll take as many pills as I can so that I can sleep forever," he wrote to Qureshi. "I just want to get away from these people!" By January 2011, Qureshi felt there was nothing more that he and Cage could do. He told Mohammed to contact his member of Parliament.

One night in February 2015, Begg was at home with his family in Birmingham when he received a phone call from Qureshi. In a few hours, Qureshi said, the media would break a story that would provoke a great controversy, with Cage at its center. He did not want to discuss details by phone. Begg got in his car and set out for London, reaching Cage's Whitechapel office around midnight. Qureshi explained that, earlier that week, Souad Mekhennet, a journalist from the Washington Post, had asked Qureshi about one of the three young men he had met in Greenwich. Two days later, Qureshi and Mekhennet met again. She opened a laptop and played one of ISIS's most graphic videos. On-screen a row of camouflaged men held knives to the necks of kneeling captives, identified in the video as soldiers from the Syrian Army. At their center, a man in black waved his knife and made an address to President Obama, whom he called "the dog of Rome." He then knelt down and began sawing through his captive's neck. His comrades did the same with their captives. A close-up showed pools of blood forming on the sand. Halfway through, the man in black looked up at the camera, wide-eyed. Mekhennet paused the video. She asked Qureshi whether this young man could be Mohammed. The voice was different — bolder and more

confident — but Qureshi thought the eyes looked familiar. He told Mekhennet that the resemblance was strong.

Qureshi spent the next two days wrestling with his memories of Mohammed Emwazi, now known as Jihadi John. Qureshi still considered him a Cage client. He was the only Westerner outside Emwazi's own family who knew him personally and could speak on his behalf. In their discussions, Begg warned Qureshi against attributing Emwazi's transformation to his troubles with British security.

In February 2015, Mekhennet published the results of her investigation. Qureshi arrived late to the press conference, joining John Rees, the antiwar activist, and another Cage spokesperson, Cerie Bullivant, behind a long table. Qureshi began with the Tanzania trip, moving briskly through what he knew of the chronology. He called the investigation of the men a "fishing expedition," intended to recruit informants. Emwazi, "a man who really knows himself," turned the approach down. He said that Britain seemed to be telling young Muslims that "you're not allowed to be part of it. You don't have the same rights as everyone else."

After fifteen minutes, he paused, adjusted the bridge of his eyeglasses, and turned to the matter of the beheading videos. He sighed and looked up at the ceiling. "You know, he's such . . ." Qureshi said, and trailed off. He looked down at the table. The room was crowded with media, with a row of video cameras in back and a line of crouching photographers spread across the floor. BBC and CNN World were carrying the conference live. "I'm really sorry," Qureshi said. His eyes were wet. "I didn't expect. He's — he was — such a beautiful young man. Really."

Though Qureshi barely knew Emwazi, he had spoken as though he were eulogizing a friend. The backlash was immediate. Qureshi and his family received death threats. The Daily Mail called the conference "extraordinary and nauseating," and dubbed Qureshi Jihadi John's "apologist." The prime minister, foreign secretary, and mayor of London soon followed with their own condemnations.

Qureshi's gaffe came at an especially vulnerable moment for Cage. Begg had gone to Syria in the early days of the war, ostensibly to do research on the Assad regime, and had wound up establishing a training camp for rebel forces. He had met with Abu Omar al-Shishani, a Chechen jihadi who would go on to join the military leadership of ISIS. The British government imprisoned Begg on his return and then released him six months later without charge. Soon after, Cage's bank closed the group's account, citing sanctions against Begg under the Terrorist Asset Freezing Act.

Qureshi went on talk shows to defend himself. When asked whether he condemned ISIS, he refused to answer the question. The more he hedged, the more the media demanded an answer. Of course he was against ISIS, he told me later, but this was a private matter, not a public one. To publicly condemn them, he said, would be submitting to the notion that ISIS was connected to the Islam practiced by ordinary Muslims. "Why should I have to condemn something that has nothing to do with me?" he asked.

Unlike Qureshi, Begg does not hesitate to condemn ISIS, or Jihadi John. "Jihadi John is a butcher," he told me. "He's a murderer. He didn't just learn to cut heads in one day. I believe he honed his skills on Muslim captives from different rebel groups. I'm sure he did, because ISIS has declared them all to be apostates. I have no sympathy for him. What he's done, he's responsible for."

After Emwazi's identification, his family went into hiding, and he stopped appearing in ISIS videos. For a time, his whereabouts were unknown. "If we knew exactly where he was, he probably wouldn't be there for much longer," a US intelligence official told me. A few months later, on November 12, 2015, Emwazi was killed in Raqqa by a British drone. Officials at the time told ABC News that the strike was "flawless . . . a clean hit." Emwazi had "evaporated."

IN NOVEMBER 2015, less than a week after the Paris attacks, Parliament's Home Affairs Select Committee asked Siddiqui why Cage had not yet issued a public statement on the attacks.

"Dr. Siddiqui, you presumably condemn what happened in Paris," Keith Vaz, the committee's chair, said.

"Absolutely."

"And your organization has put out a statement to that effect."

"I don't think we have."

"Why is that?"

"People expect us to condemn," Siddiqui said. "We don't actually value their opinion. Because there will be another thing they want us to condemn."

"But if you don't condemn, there is an assumption that you condone."

"No, not at all."

"So today you are saying very clearly that you condemn what happened."

"Absolutely."

"Why not condemn religious fascism and mass murder publicly?"

"Our remit is clear. We deal with abuses in the war on terror."

A few months earlier, I'd had dinner with Siddiqui at the home of another Cage director, in a suburb an hour south of London. As we passed around take-out curry, flatbread, and rice, Siddiqui tried to explain Cage's position on ISIS. He said that condemnations could actually increase ISIS's appeal to rebellious youth. He said that Cage made decisions based on the Koranic shura model of an evolving consensus, one that had to embody not just his opinions and Begg's, but those of the younger generation as well. He said that questions about ISIS were themselves offensive to Cage, as though Muslims could not speak publicly unless they first qualified themselves as categorical opponents of ISIS, and also of jihad in all its forms. He said that he would be willing to be lectured about jihad by Quakers, but not by a militarized superpower. With pride and some irony, Siddiqui called himself an "uppity Muslim," educated, privileged, and unafraid of the majority. "I don't have to prove anything to people who are labeling us," he said.

"You say you were too busy" to condemn the Paris attacks, said a young MP at the hearing, addressing Siddiqui.

Siddiqui parried with his credentials as a physician. "Those who call me a fifth columnist do not know what I do in my day job," he said. "I deal with every member of the public. I don't have to have a condemn-athon."

Gradually, the subtleties of Siddiqui's position came into focus. He was in favor of a caliphate, but not a global one; against ISIS, but not willing to call them apostates; personally willing to condemn the attack in Paris, but not in isolation from other atrocities that had occurred, he said, in Beirut as well as Baghdad. These were not the answers his questioners were looking for.

"Jihadi John's father described him as a dog, an animal, a terrorist," another member said. "Would you agree that every civilized person has a duty to utterly condemn his barbaric behavior?"

"How many times do you want me to say that?"

"I'd just like you to answer the question."

"I've answered the question."

"Do you agree that in order to counter radicalization, groups like yours, which seek publicity for your views, have an absolute duty to condemn terrorist atrocities utterly?"

Siddiqui looked at the ceiling and then back at the member, a chestnut-haired, fair-skinned young man. He wore an expression of pained incredulity. Siddiqui smiled. "I'll take that on board," he said.

THE DAY AFTER Begg's speech in Bloomsbury, he and his teenage daughter Maryam went to the British Library to see Magna Carta: Law, Liberty, Legacy, an exhibition celebrating the document's 800th anniversary. It was a cool, bright day. Gusts of wind lifted paper cups and napkins from an outdoor café and sent them wheeling toward the maroon roundels set into the building's south wall. Like so much in Britain — the rosette-like poppy pins, the cross-topped obelisks, the archbishop-led coronations — they gave quiet testimony to the Christian patterns that permeate the country's secular fabric.

A few pieces of the Magna Carta are still part of English law today:

> No freeman shall be taken or imprisoned . . . or be outlawed, or exiled, or any other wise destroyed; nor will we pass upon him, nor condemn him, but by lawful judgment of his peers, or by the law of the land . . . we will not deny or defer to any man either justice or right.

When Begg was imprisoned in Guantánamo, his lawyers referenced this passage in writs of habeas corpus. For three years, the British government deferred their filings. More recently, Britons had been stripped of their citizenship and killed, by drone, in Somalia. One of Begg's closest friends, Shaker Aamer, a British national, was still locked up at Guantánamo. He was reported to be among the leaders of a three-year hunger strike, which had led the military to strap some detainees to gurneys and force-feed them liquid meals through nasal tubes. "Things are getting worse," Gareth Pierce,

one of Begg's lawyers, told me. "It's an ongoing experiment of executive measures that wouldn't disgrace any dictatorship."

In a dim room at the British Library, a disembodied voice spoke about the Magna Carta's provenance as images of parchment flashed across a screen. Begg walked over to a massive copper statue of Geoffrey de Mandeville, one of the escorts of King John. It was John who was forced by a gang of mutinous barons to relinquish some of his powers. The deal they struck was memorialized by the Magna Carta. Originally intended to transfer authority from the king to the peerage, it is remembered as the beginning of a peaceful succession from the state to the people.

Begg pointed out that the Crusades overlapped with the creation of the Magna Carta: "You had a period of time where Islam and Christianity really clashed, and that clash continues to this day." While the exhibition displayed history as an orderly pageant culminating in the brokering of the Magna Carta, Begg was focused on the broader context of a hard-fought foreign war. He brought up one of his heroes from the other side, Saladin, the sultan who brought peace to much of the Arabian peninsula, fought the crusaders under the 12th-century caliphate, and ultimately succeeded in keeping Jerusalem in Muslim hands. Early in the Arab Spring, Begg had spoken hopefully of a caliphate, one that differed from the present Islamic State. Begg's caliphate, which he described as a "united Islamic bloc," would be a Middle Eastern cousin of the European Union, under Ottomanstyle Islamic law.

When Begg was at Guantánamo, a visiting MI5 officer brought him a copy of The English: A Portrait of a People, by Jeremy Paxman. Begg read it five times. The book argued that the English liked to back the underdog. I asked whether he had ever felt like he was fully part of Britain.

"I don't know," he said. "My grandfather and great-grandfather fought for the British in India. But I don't know if I've been necessarily comfortable with that. My heritage isn't English. I probably know more about English heritage than a lot of ordinary English people. But that doesn't make me English.

"Margaret Thatcher used to call Nelson Mandela a terrorist," Begg said, examining one of Mandela's speeches. He had met with some of Mandela's comrades in South Africa, he said. "They were adamant that what they'd done, which included laying bombs on railways and attacking the apartheid regime, was noble. The term terrorist meant nothing to them."

But what did it mean to Begg? His memoir contains a long debate with another detainee, a member of al Qaeda, who tries to justify the September 11 attacks by arguing that they were no less indiscriminate than the US response. Begg takes the other side, maintaining that Islam prohibits targeting women, children, or "uninvolved civilians." Elsewhere, he wrote that "the best jihad is to say a word of truth in front of an oppressive ruler." Surely there was a contradiction here. Either terrorism was justifiable or it was not. But the contradiction was no greater than that of the contemporary Magna Carta. Rights could not be both universal and subject to selective revocation. Guantánamo embodied both of these contradictions.

On the far wall of the library hung a row of political cartoons referencing the war on terror. Beside them, under glass, a law book was open to Boumediene v. Bush, a 2008 decision in which the Supreme Court, citing the Magna Carta, ruled that Guantánamo prisoners were in fact entitled to habeas corpus protections. Boumediene, the plaintiff in the case, was transferred to France a few months later, but the ruling did little for the other detainees. When district courts began granting habeas corpus petitions to detainees, the Department of Justice pushed back, appeals courts overturned their rulings, and the Supreme Court declined to intervene. "The Supreme Court passed several decisions in favor of the detainees," Begg said. "Hamdan. Rasul v. Bush. Hamdi. All favored the prisoners. But it didn't mean anything in real terms, so what's the point? You've established something in law, but the law doesn't apply."

Today, more than twenty-six "forever prisoners" will likely continue to be held without charge or trial; Donald Trump has spoken in favor of adding to their number. In 2015, the US transferred Shaker Aamer, Begg's friend, with whom he'd spent time in Afghanistan, to Britain. By then Aamer had spent almost thirteen years in US custody. He had been cleared for transfer in 2007. It took another eight years for the US and UK to work out the conditions of his release.

Maryam had wandered off, and Begg met up with her again in the atrium. They walked upstairs to look at Magna Carta (An Embroidery), a work by the artist Cornelia Parker, who had assembled a giant hand-stitched tapestry of the Magna Carta's Wikipedia page, including the search bar, links, and images. Parker had asked Begg to stitch the words held without charge, and he agreed. "I did it so people understand my connection to these principles," Begg said. "One is that no man will be denied justice. Well, here's an example of somebody who it was denied to. And that same person continues now, to point out the hundreds of others to whom it is denied." The actual stitching was hard, he said, so he got Maryam to help. "I did the whole thing," she said, laughing. "You tried to do the h and you failed."

Begg looked over the huge piece of cloth. A list of contributors ran down a wall at the far end. Many of the images were stitched as part of Fine Cell Work, a vocational-rehabilitation program for British prisoners. One prisoner had left the words habeas corpus out of his section; Parker had them filled in by a judge. Alongside the contributors' names were those of a former minister, an Irishman who had been wrongfully imprisoned for sixteen years, Brian Eno, Edward Snowden, and Julian Assange. "Mine is the only Muslim name on here," Begg said, as if to point out how many Muslims had been excluded, both from Parker's artwork and from the Magna Carta's protections. "No, wait," he said. "I am just now seeing another one."

WHEN THE POLICE raided Begg's bookstore back in 2000, they found an invoice for 5,000 copies of The Army of Madinah in Kashmir, an account of the ongoing jihadi campaign against India to reclaim disputed territory for Pakistan. Begg had published the book in 1999. Written under a pseudonym, "Esa al-Hindi," it called for "worldwide jihad."

Like many jihadi texts of that era, it has since become obscure. There are no copies available for purchase online or through university collections. But a few weeks after I spoke to Begg at the Magna Carta exhibition, a friend of mine tracked down a scan of it on a file-sharing website. The Army of Madinah begins with an overview of the Kashmir conflict, a "defensive jihad" to retake lands it argues were stolen from the Muslim government of Pakistan, first by the British Raj, then by India. It offers advice on training, platoon formations, and what fighters should carry in their backpacks. It quotes the Koran's famous "Sword Verse," with its charge to "kill the mushrikun" — the idolators or pagans. Preceding the Sword Verse in The Army of Madinah is this passage:

> The bloodiest war is yet to come . . . in the face of such an adversary [America] the solution may only be 'flank protection' to be carried out upon the soil of all interfering nations . . . to create a big enough problem on their home front, one that is destabilizing enough to force them to sway their glances away from the Eastern Muslim world . . . the most favorable target would be the national economy of the western block . . . great stealth is required. To attempt to bring any one of these interfering nations to its knees is a major task . . . do not be disheartened by those who would dare to brand you as terrorists for perhaps you may be proactive only as a show of power, minus civilian casualties.

The author Esa al-Hindi's real name was Dhiren Barot, and his affinity for terrorism appeared to be more than talk. The year after Begg's bookstore published his book, Barot traveled to New York and Washington. At the behest of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who had already begun to plan the September 11 attacks in earnest, Barot used a video camera to case potential targets. In one of Barot's reconnaissance videos, the camera zooms in on the World Trade Center as a voice in the background says "kaboom." Barot was arrested in 2004 at a barbershop in London.

I sought out the damning passage from The Army of Madinah, paradoxically, because I wanted to write a sympathetic profile of Begg — one that took seriously his claim that jihadism and terrorism are not necessarily identical. In order to do this, I felt I would need to clear away any lingering suspicions that Begg was some kind of terrorist or al-Qaeda sympathizer. That passage from The Army in Madinah seemed to be the strongest piece of evidence against him, and in order to acquit Begg (so my thinking went) I would first need to confront him with it. Begg always qualified his endorsement of jihad with condemnations of violence against civilians, so I expected him to willingly jettison his old identity, just as Siddiqui had when he compared Cage's old domain name to "embarrassing photos from my youth." Begg had been prompt and courteous with me on email, so I expected a quick reply. My initial queries were general. I asked Begg how the book fit in with the bookstore's overall mission and the evolution of his thought since then. Receiving no reply, and no answer to my phone calls, I sharpened the query:

> On my reading, pages 116 and 117 explicitly call for terrorist attacks to be carried out against civilian targets in the West. My understanding is that your bookstore published this book. I really do need some kind of comment from you on it.

Like the members of parliament in the hearing, I was demanding reassurance that Begg was on my side. Begg replied with silence. He would not disavow what I wanted him to disavow.

Mattathias Schwartz
False Positives
Does counterterrorism produce terrorists?
Fall 2017

n+1, Issue 29: Bottoms Up, Fall 2017.
<nplusonemag.com/issue-29/politics/false-positives>
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