

The Extraordinary Case of Aafia Siddiqui

By Mary Beaudoin

The new form of global warfare alleges to “protect” by preemptively preventing mass atrocities. Dr. Aafia Siddiqui, a U.S.-educated academic and mother, is caught in its web and now serving 86 years in a federal prison in Texas.



La Madre Infeliz! (The Unhappy mother!) from the series, Los Desastres de la Guerra (“The Disasters of War”).

Etching by Francisco Goya, 1863

She has become a symbol of the new form of global warfare that alleges it exists to preemptively prevent mass attacks and “protect” us from atrocities before they occur, but which operates without regard to borders or due process.

What do we know about Aafia Siddiqui? In photos and video she appears to be a healthy, bright-eyed, cheerful, young woman. She was a brilliant scholar at the top of her high school class in Karachi. In 1990, she moved to the U.S., studied at MIT, and received a doctorate in cognitive neuroscience from Brandeis University. Her principal interest was studying how children learn, and she particularly wanted to help children with dyslexic and other special needs.

As a student in Boston, she volunteered at the Martin Luther King School, and worked in community service and on charity projects. While living in Boston, she married a Pakistani doctor with whom she had three children—the first two were born in the U.S. and therefore American citizens. But the marriage was troubled, her husband was physically abusive, and she returned to her family in Pakistan, where she gave birth to her third child.

After 9/11, Pakistanis who traveled to and from the U.S. were considered suspect.

In March of 2003, the FBI issued alerts about Dr. Aafia Siddiqui. Based on alleged associations with some young Pakistanis who were detained and interrogated, she was sought for questioning about terrorist money-laundering. She was said to have had a second marriage to Amman Ali Balochi, the nephew of “9/11 Mastermind” Khalid Sheik Mohammed; she has denied even knowing him, much less being married to him. (1.) But the U.S. media was quick to spread allegations and label her “Lady al Qaeda.”

On March 30, she and her three very young children “disappeared” in Pakistan.

Nearly two months later, on May 26, 2003, Attorney General John Ashcroft and FBI Director Robert Mueller claimed that Al Qaeda was planning an attack on the U.S. Aafia was named as one of seven Al Qaeda members being sought.

In the years that followed, the FBI maintained that they didn’t know her whereabouts but that she was still being sought.

This assertion has been frequently contradicted. According to Victoria Brittain, former associate foreign editor for the Guardian, “The Pakistani media have always claimed that the ISI [Pakistani Inter-service Intelligence] was responsible for her disappearance and the Americans were involved, too.” (2.)

In their 30-plus page report, “Aafia Siddiqui: Just the Facts,” the International Justice Network states that “all available evidence indicates that Dr. Siddiqui, along with her three small children, were initially arrested in March 2003 with the knowledge and cooperation of local authorities in Karachi, Pakistan, and subsequently interrogated by Pakistani military intelligence (ISI) as well as U.S. intelligence agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).”

British investigative journalist Yvonne Ridley, who is with the organization CagePrisoners, commented: “The FBI put out a story at the time that she had, in fact, gone on a jihad to Afghanistan—it was a ludicrous tale without foundation and, as every mother of young children knows, a journey to the local corner shop with toddlers is a monumental challenge, so heading off to fight in Afghanistan with a pram, pushchair and toddler in hand is simply inconceivable.”

Human rights organizations, and Pakistani and international reporters believed that Aafia was being held in CIA secret prisons. A February 2008 Asia Human Rights Commission report states that Aafia had been brought to Karachi and severely tortured to secure her compliance as a government witness against Khalid Shiekh Mohammed.

In 2007 and 2008, awareness and outrage were building regarding Aafia’s disappearance and stories about her captivity and her children’s. Pakistani lawyers

filed a writ of habeas corpus (which means literally “you should have the body”), requiring a person under arrest be brought before a judge or into a court to ensure against unlawful detention.

Yvonne Ridley, dripping with sarcasm, described the following scene which took place on July 17, 2008, as a set up: “The FBI has now moved into the realms of fantasy land with the news that Dr. Siddiqui was ‘conveniently’ found outside the governor’s office in Ghazni, Afghanistan, with her 12-year-old son FIVE years after her disappearance in Karachi.” [She and her son had not seen each other before this from the time they were abducted when he was seven years old. They were reported not to even recognize each other.] “According to the FBI, she was in possession of ‘numerous documents describing the creation of explosives, as well as excerpts from the Anarchist’s Arsenal, descriptions of various landmarks in the United States, including in New York City’—you know, all the regular stuff a female terrorist would carry in her handbag.”



Aafia Siddiqui, the hopeful young woman, as she is remembered in Pakistan.



Aafia Siddiqui received her PhD. in cognitive neuroscience. Characterized as a chemical or biological terrorist capable of creating mass atrocities, her actual area of study was in how children learn, particularly children with special needs.



Aafia Siddiqui's suffering entered a new phase when she was brought to the United States for a show trial.

Aafia was taken into custody by the police in Ghazni, together with her son, with whom she had just been reunited in this bizarre setting. FBI agents, U.S. Army officers and Afghan interpreters appeared on the scene the following day. What happened next was just as bizarre. Aafia was held in a 300-foot square room with them in the Ghazni police station and was said to have picked up the three-foot-long rifle belonging to one of them, and attempted to murder one or more of them. However, none of them was shot, or even injured, and the frail, 100-pound woman was, herself, shot twice in the stomach at close range supposedly because the men needed to defend themselves against her. (3.)

In a Harpers Magazine article, "the Intelligence Factory" (November 2009), Petra Bartosiewicz gave an account of how Aafia, nearly dead, was then taken to Bagram Air Force Base, where she received surgery for her wounds. Here, she was interrogated while under sedation, all the while in four-point restraints. She was not allowed a lawyer and was flown to New York.

Bartosiewicz continued: "Siddiqui finally appeared before a judge in a Manhattan courtroom on August 5. Now, two weeks after her capture, she was bandaged and doubled over in a wheelchair, barely able to speak—she had been shot in the stomach by one of the very soldiers she stands accused of attempting to murder."

After her arraignment, Aafia was held without bail until her trial began in January of 2010.

She was never accused of or tried for terrorism, though throughout coverage of the trial, U.S. media irresponsibly persisted in insinuating or alleging that she was affiliated with Al Qaeda. She was tried only for the attempted murder of U.S. army personnel, a charge she denied. She also said she had been tortured in a secret prison, forced to copy incriminating pages from a book under threat of her missing children being tortured, and that she was forced to carry a handbag stuffed with

contents. All of what she said was dismissed, but the copied notes were admitted as evidence against her in the trial.

Of the men who testified against her, only an Afghan interpreter, who immediately received a visa and green card and moved to New York, stated that she had actually shot off the rifle. No forensic evidence was ever produced in court. Nevertheless, she was convicted and sentenced to 86 years in a U.S. federal penitentiary in Fort Worth, Texas, where she remains in solitary confinement, which we know is another form of torture.

Senator Gravel, a former member of the U.S. Congress, subsequently traveled to Pakistan, as did former U.S. Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney, to advocate for Dr. Siddiqui's repatriation to that country. He stated that Dr Aafia's trial in the United States was illegal. He added that "the U.S. government had no moral or legal justification for their actions...Dr Siddiqui is not a U.S. citizen, so the U.S. government should not be left to determine her fate, she should be returned to Pakistan so that she can begin to recover from the horrible torture and abuse that she has suffered." (the Express Tribune, with the International Herald Tribune, September 19, 2012)

Former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark, who also went to Pakistan to advocate for Aafia's repatriation, said regarding Aafia's extradition, trial and sentencing, "I haven't witnessed such bare injustice in my entire career."

And what became of Aafia's children? Aafia's young daughter was found wandering on a street in Karachi with a tag around her neck stating who she was. She was returned to the extended family. Her son was also returned to the extended family, after being kept and interrogated following his mysterious sudden appearance with his mother in Afghanistan. The children spoke English with an American accent and were traumatized. They had been separated from each other and their mother and were believed to have been held in prisons for children for the years that they were disappeared. And they were American citizens! The youngest child, who was a baby at the time of Aafia's disappearance, is still missing and presumed dead.

Supporters in Pakistan number in the thousands in the general population, and include people in high-ranking government positions, but she continues to represent an unresolved political issue between it and the U.S. Prominent American activists groups— International Action Center, United National Antiwar Coalition, National Veterans for Peace, the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Code Pink have traveled to Pakistan to advocate for her repatriation.

An appeal of Aafia's case was filed, but her conviction and 86-year sentence were upheld by the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals on November 6, 2012. She remains in a U.S. federal penitentiary in solitary confinement, which we know is a form of torture. Hidden away as she is, she cannot be seen as living proof of the crimes perpetrated against her—crimes that existed within the context of war, crimes that

were the result of war—exacerbated further by terrible injustices and cruel mistreatment from a politicized “legal” system.

It’s horrifying to think of what has been done to this young woman and her children. In the continuing war of terror, how many more Aafias will there be? We need to use our civil liberties to free her and ourselves before we lose all of them. “See Page 7 “U.S. and Pakistan: Free Aafia!”

Mary Beaudoin is the editor of the Women Against Military Madness newsletter.

Footnotes:

(1.) On October 7, 2008, a delegation of Pakistani senators was sent by the parliament and Government of Pakistan to meet with Dr. Siddiqui where she was being held pending trial. During the visit, she denied even knowing Balochi, who was sent to Guantanamo. She also said she did not want retaliatory violence done for her incarceration. “Report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Meeting with Dr. Aafia Siddiqui. Carswell Federal Prison Medical Center, Fort Worth, Texas.” Aafia’s family also denies such a marriage.

(2.) Victoria Brittain, “the Siddiqui Case,” February 14, 2011, Counterpunch.

(3.) Yvonne Ridley went to the Ghazni to investigate the scene, and documented facts that demonstrate the U.S. government’s case against Aafia is unbelievable. Petra Bartosiewicz also attempted to recreate the scene of the alleged crime, as presented to the court, and found it impossible. Aafia denies shooting at anyone.

A few of many dozens of sources for this article:

Report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Meeting with Dr. Aafia Siddiqui. Carswell Federal Prison Medical Center, Fort Worth, Texas. October 7, 2008.

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International Action Center, iacenter.org; Free Aafia freeaafia.org

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War is a Crime warisacrime.org

Interview with Guardian journalist Victoria Brittain, "A Deeper Look," KBOO Radio, Portland, Oregon, April 14, 2011

"Aafia's Trial," Asia Pacific Forum. Guest: Tina Foster, International Justice Network. WBAI Radio, New York, New York. April 14, 2011

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