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# A symbol of all that is wrong with the 'war on terror'

***Prisoner 345: My 2330 days in Guantánamo***, by Sami Alhaj. Doha, Qatar: Al Jazeera Media Network, 2019. 126 pages. No ISBN.

***The Refugee's Messenger: Lost Stories Retold***, edited by Tarek Cherkaoui. Istanbul, Turkey: TRT World Research Centre, 2019. 192 Pages. ISBN 9786059984287

A RECENT article in the *Mid-Adle East Eye* pilloried the United States' lack of preparedness for the onslaught of the coronavirus pandemic. It lamented that if only the world's richest democracy could have, instead of frittering away trillions of dollars on 'endless wars,' invested in the country's health infrastructure, the world would be in a better place today.

Washington had 'built an entire infrastructure to counter terrorism and criminalise Muslim communities', spending almost \$6.4 trillion on pointless wars that had killed half a million people since September 11 2011 (Hilal & Raja, 2020). Yet, which was the biggest threat—the elusive target of the so-called 'war on terror', or the pandemic, which killed more than 20,000 Americans and infected a further 500,000 (with numbers still



rising when this edition of *PJR* went to press)?

Two books published by two of the most challenging television networks—Doha-based Al Jazeera and Turkey's newly emerging TRT World News—pose some really timely and uncomfortable questions about this reality.

In *Prisoner 345: My 2330 Days in Guantánamo*, Sudanese journalist Sami Alhaj recounts his heart-rending, horrifying tale of seven years he spent at the hands of US military tormenters before eventually being released. He was innocent, of course.

His story isn't anywhere near as well-known as that of Australian Peter Greste, a fellow Al Jazeera journalist, detained by the Egyptian state for 13 months in the wake of the Arab Spring

before being freed (while two other colleagues remained in jail) and now UNESCO professor of journalism at the University of Queensland. But it is far more disturbing.

Alhaj had arrived in Pakistan just weeks after the Twin Towers attack on September 11 to report on the ‘war on terror’ in Afghanistan for the Qatari-based television news channel. He was detained ‘by mistake’ and ‘sold’ by Pakistani security authorities to the US military in the early stages of the notorious rendition programme.

Although Alhaj well knew in 2001 that journalism was already one of the most dangerous occupations in the world, he could never have imagined that he would spend more than six years incarcerated and tortured in three US prison camps, most of this time in the horrendous Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, before charges were dropped and he was released in 2007.

His employers, Al Jazeera—from the journalists, through to the director-general to the legal team – fought continuously to have him freed during all those years. They have described Alhaj in this publication as ‘a symbol of all that is wrong with America’s “war on terror” and the camp of horrors sent up to support it’.

Alhaj’s painful story, based on his recollections of those cruel years in Guantánamo after he returned to his media home in Doha, were published on the 22nd anniversary of the founding of Al Jazeera Media Network. It was described by the network’s chairman, Sheikh Hamad Bin Thamer Al Thani,

as ‘exemplary of the sacrifices’ made by Al Jazeera employees in the course of their professional mission of providing impartial reportage to the world.

Sami Alhaj was first flown to Bagram airbase in Afghanistan, and then to Kandahar, finally to Guantánamo in late June 2002. But the first prisoners transported to Cuba were flown there on 11 January 2002—‘was this a coincidence, or did [the Americans] choose the four-month anniversary of September 11 to transport those they thought [were] responsible for those attacks? (p. 55)’.

After he had been already imprisoned for at least 39 days with no idea what he was accused of, he finally had an interrogation that actually acknowledged he was a journalist. The interrogation went like this:

[One of the interrogators]: ‘We have a journalist with us here?’

‘What kind of journalism do you do?’

‘I work at Al Jazeera,’ I said, and he slapped me across my face. He insulted Al Jazeera and called it all sorts of indecent things. Then slapped me again.

‘Okay, so you’re fighting us,’ he said. ‘And you hate America and are fighting against it.’ He pushed me to the next person.

They stripped the entire group naked, cutting all our clothes with scissors, then asked us: ‘Do you have anything to complain about?’ (p. 46)

The interrogation was actually a ruse to later pressure, unsuccessfully, Alhaj to inform on fellow prisoners because ‘you’re a journalist and find out information’.

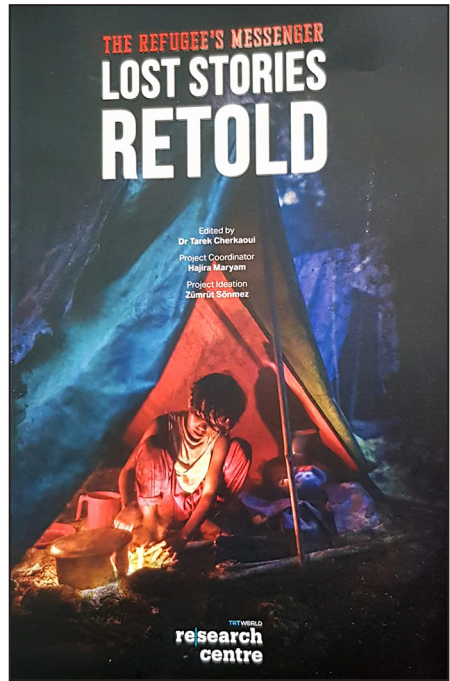
After DNA tests with blood, hair and saliva samples, eye scans and fingerprints, Alhaj and the group were taken to an aircraft to fly from Afghanistan to Cuba. They were trussed with short chains that forced down their heads, tight hand and leg restraints, black hoods over their heads, and gags.

They beat us all over, no matter how we moved, kicking and punching us until they had dragged us onto a bus waiting on the airfield tarmac. There were no seats on the bus, so they sat us down on the floor in rows ...

Guantánamo ... a place filled with injustice and hatred. It saw the crushing of every single principle and belief to which believers are called. An ugly face that sent humanity down a slippery path worse than life in the jungle, and worse than what history says about the Middle Ages. Guantánamo was the embodiment of the beating heart of force's dominion—a nightmare. (p. 59)

As Alhaj writes, the 'war on terror' has produced new forms of rights abuses, contrary to all international treaties and conventions: 'Torture, detention in secret facilities, handing over suspects to countries practising torture, and extending detention without trial. All based on mere suspicion.

The prisoners of the 'war on terror' were deprived of their right to litigation and the right to silence, to retain a lawyer or legal representation. One could never have imagined that it would be the United States (democratic protector and leader of the free



world) that would resort to [such authoritarian] practices, would run secret prisons, carry out cross-border prosecutions and kidnappings on the slightest suspicions, and use physical and mental torture as a matter of course. (p. 61)

Added to these violations were the summary executions without due process by US drone attack—with at least 8,845 killed under the Obama and Trump presidencies (Bureau of Investigative Journalism, n.d.)

THE OTHER timely book featured is this double review, *The Refugee's Messenger: Lost Stories Retold*, also a global television channel publication, is the work of 10 journalists who are contributors to TRT World News from different parts of the globe. Turkey is

home to the world's largest refugee population of 4 million—the Syrian war has contributed 3.7 million, almost a third of them in camps close to the border. It is unsurprising that TRT has produced this book.

The range of human rights storytelling represented in this collection owes its vision to the editor, Dr Tarek Cherkaoui, manager of the TRT World Research Centre, and incidentally a gifted doctoral graduate of Auckland University of Technology, who believed there was a need to produce a publication as an antidote to the so-called 'CNN effect' of the 1990s.

While that expression represented a widely held belief that news television in general, and CNN in particular, had a very influential role in shaping the US foreign policy agenda, Cherkaoui argues that such optimism was short-lived.

'A series of in-depth quantitative studies demonstrated that these humanitarian narratives were used for self-serving motives and that the US agenda was mostly interventionist and militaristic in nature,' he notes (p. 16).

Although TRT World (launched in 2015) was a late-comer to the ranks of global television broadcasters, Cherkaoui is already optimistic about its growing contribution to social justice: 'TRT World has positioned itself among the very few outlets that champion the causes of the South, avoiding not only some of the stereotypical political and cultural representations disseminated by corporate mainstream news media, but also by challenging them.'

This book demonstrates empathy with contemporary essays such as *The Rohingya Refugee Crisis: A Textbook case of Ethnic Cleansing*, *Women of War—Boko Haram Wives*, *The Objectification of Refugees: Why We Must Not Lose our Humanity in Search of a Headline* and *My Refugee My Teacher*.

Among the most poignant of the essays are the final two, *My Journey as a Journalist* by editor-at-large Ahmet Alioglu, who negotiates a chilling pathway through the brutality of Israel's repression against Palestinian Gaza to the defeat of Daesh, and *Mary Saliba*, who covered the Arab Spring and narrates a depressing cameo with an Australian connection in *The Syrian Brides of Lebanon's Bekaa Valley*.

The writers and other contributors reveal a resolute longing for an end to both the devastation and devastated lives.

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