

US frame-up of Aafia Siddiqui begins to unravel

Pakistani victim of rendition and torture

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Pakistani neuroscientist Aafia Siddiqui went on trial in a federal courtroom in New York City on January 19, charged with the attempted murder of US personnel in Afghanistan's Ghazni Province in 2008. The case against Dr. Siddiqui, 37, is rapidly unraveling due to lack of evidence and discordant testimony from witnesses.

It is becoming increasingly evident that the charges amount to a frame-up that has been staged to cover up the fact that Siddiqui, along with her eldest son, had been held without charges in the US military's notorious Bagram prison in Afghanistan between 2003 and 2008, where they were subjected to torture. Two of Dr. Siddiqui's younger children are still missing.

According to the account given by US authorities, Aafia Siddiqui was taken into custody by Afghan security services in July of 2008 after they alleged having found a list of US targets for terrorist attacks as well as bomb-making instructions and assorted chemicals.

Despite these claims, Siddiqui is not charged with any terror-related offenses. Instead, she is indicted for allegedly having seized an automatic weapon and fired on her Afghan and American captors when a group of FBI agents and US Army officers arrived to collect her. The most serious charge against her is using a firearm in committing a felony, the gun in question being a US soldier's rifle.

Siddiqui was shot twice in the stomach and barely survived after medics at Bagram air field had to make an incision from her breastbone to her bellybutton to remove the bullets. It was reported that part of her intestines had to be removed to save her life.

The accusations against Siddiqui strain credulity and have been fervently denied by her relatives, her defense attorneys, and human rights organizations, all of whom claim that she had been held in secret US detention facilities where she was physically and sexually abused ever since she disappeared off the streets of Karachi in the spring of 2003 with her three children, then seven, five, and six months old.

According to the German weekly *Der Spiegel*, just a few days before she disappeared Aafia Siddiqui had contacted her former professor, Robert Sekuler, at Brandeis University in search of a job, complaining that there weren't any job opportunities in Pakistan for a woman of her educational background.

Dr. Siddiqui is a Pakistani national who was educated at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Brandeis University. In July of 2001, she and her husband at the time were scrutinized by the FBI for their alleged association with Islamic charities. Following the events of September 11, 2001 the couple returned to Pakistan at a time when hundreds of Pakistanis and other Muslims were rounded up for questioning across the US. The family resided in Karachi where Aafia Siddiqui was employed at Aga Khan University.

According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Aafia Siddiqui

and her children were kidnapped by Pakistani intelligence agents on their way to the airport in Karachi. Their whereabouts remained unknown until Aafia Siddiqui and her eldest son, Ahmed, were reported detained in Afghanistan in July of 2008, several years after their disappearance. While the Pakistani Interior Ministry had initially confirmed that the abduction had taken place, it later claimed to have been mistaken and stated that Siddiqui was not in Pakistani custody. This about-face was an attempt to conceal the complicity of Pakistani intelligence services in the US government's rendition of Siddiqui to Afghanistan and her subsequent ordeal.

Aafia Siddiqui's sister, Dr. Fauzia Siddiqui, had informed the press that she and her mother had journeyed to the US in 2003 to meet with FBI officials, who had claimed that Aafia Siddiqui would soon be released. In Pakistan, Siddiqui's family was repeatedly harassed and received numerous death threats from sinister forces within the Pakistani ruling elite. The family was ordered not to make any public appeals in support of Aafia and her three children.

Between 2003 and 2008, when Siddiqui's whereabouts were still unknown, the US claimed she was working on behalf of Al Qaeda. In May of 2004, she was listed by US officials as one of the seven "most wanted" Al Qaeda fugitives. The US has also spuriously claimed that she is married to Ammar al-Baluchi, who is reported to be the nephew of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the so-called "mastermind" behind the 9/11 attacks. The claim that Siddiqui was married to al-Baluchi was based solely on coerced statements made by Mohammed, who has been repeatedly tortured.

The US military and the FBI have consistently denied that Siddiqui had been in US custody prior to her arrest in 2008. In reality, Aafia Siddiqui spent the years between 2003 and 2008 at the detention facility at Bagram air base, where many referred to her as the "Grey Lady of Bagram."

Around the same time as her staged arrest, the British journalist, Yvonne Ridley, had been bringing attention to an unknown female detainee in Bagram prison who was known as Prisoner No. 650. In his book *Enemy Combatant*, Moazzam Begg recalled hearing the woman's piercing screams as she was being tortured while he was imprisoned in the same facility. According to Ridley, in 2005 male prisoners at the facility were so disturbed by her screams and sobs that they staged a hunger strike that lasted for six days.

When she was arrested in 2008, her then-11 year-old son Ahmed, a US citizen, was by her side. The traumatized boy has since been repatriated to Pakistan, where he is now living with his aunt, Dr. Fawzia Siddiqui. According to his aunt, Pakistani authorities have forbidden Ahmed from speaking to the news media.

Siddiqui's appearance has changed markedly since 2002, according to her lawyers. She has suffered a broken nose, is deathly pale, and

extremely frail, weighing about 100 pounds. When she arrived in the US, she was suffering from acute trauma, according to her lawyers, who were outraged that she did not immediately receive urgently needed medical attention. Siddiqui had been suffering from agonizing pain from the wounds she had sustained in Afghanistan and was slumped over in her wheelchair when she arrived in court in August of 2008.

Her trial was delayed as her lawyers argued that she was mentally unfit to participate in her own defense. However, prosecutors eventually found mental health experts to allege that she was faking her condition to escape punishment. Judge Richard Berman ruled that she was mentally fit for trial.

The paucity of media attention given to the trial is noteworthy, particularly given that Siddiqui was listed as a top Al Qaeda suspect. The tabloid press in New York City, where the proceedings have received limited attention, has taken her guilt for granted, cynically dubbing her "Lady Al Qaeda." The trial is being closely watched in Pakistan, where Siddiqui's ordeal has outraged many and has sparked protests around the country.

From its beginning, the trial has been marked by irregularities, and the judge has gone out of his way to accommodate the prosecutors. Not a single Pakistani journalist was granted press credentials for the opening statements last Tuesday. Defense attorneys protested the robust security measures put in place during the trial, which obviously reinforces the notion that Siddiqui poses a security threat to the US.

In a clear violation of her rights, Judge Berman has repeatedly thrown Siddiqui out of the courtroom for what he called her "outbursts." The "outbursts" were Siddiqui's anguished claims of innocence and protests that she was tortured.

"Since I'll never get a chance to speak," she had told the court. "If you were in a secret prison, or your children were tortured... Give me a little credit, this is not a list of targets of New York. I was never planning to bomb it. You're lying."

The trial has also been marked by contradictory testimony from prosecution witnesses, which has undermined the case against Siddiqui.

On the third day of the trial, Assistant US Attorney Jenna Dabbs displayed several photographs of the room where the prosecution claims the shooting occurred. However, Carlo Rosatti, an FBI firearms expert who investigated the case, acknowledged last Friday that he had found "no shell casings, no bullets, no bullet fragments, no evidence the gun [the soldier's M-4 rifle] was fired." The only shell casing from the scene was from a 9-millimeter pistol with which Siddiqui was shot. On the fourth day of the trial, another FBI agent testified that the FBI never found Aafia Siddiqui's fingerprints on the M-4 rifle.

The warrant officer who shot Siddiqui also took the stand, recounting the version of events laid out by the prosecution. He claimed that on the day he and his colleagues went to collect Siddiqui, she suddenly got a hold of his rifle and aimed it at US personnel, at which point he opened fire with his 9-millimeter pistol.

When Siddiqui yelled out, "I never shot it," she was tossed out of the courtroom for the remainder of the day.

The unnamed warrant officer, who had hobbled to the stand using a cane, was also permitted to recount how he was wounded in a recent and totally unrelated roadside bombing in Afghanistan, shedding tears as he did so. While having absolutely no relevance to the trial, the soldier's wounds were invoked as part of a brazen attempt by prosecutors to sway the jury. Judge Berman's allowing the testimony demonstrates the rigged character of the trial.

Sensing that Siddiqui was indeed emotionally unstable, prosecutors moved to force her to testify in the hopes that she would incriminate herself. Defense attorneys argued that she wasn't mentally fit to take the stand. Once again, Judge Berman sided with the prosecution.

Berman warned Aafia Siddiqui that she is not permitted to speak about

events prior to her arrest in July of 2008. Nevertheless, on Thursday Siddiqui repeatedly told the jury that she was held in secret prisons by US authorities, according to the *Associated Press of Pakistan*. She told the jury how she was shot just after she peeked through a curtain in search of an escape route. She added that it would be ludicrous to believe that a soldier would leave his gun where an allegedly dangerous suspect could get a hold of it.

"It's too crazy," she said. "It's just ridiculous. I didn't do that."

When asked by a US attorney about the contents of her purse, which allegedly contained chemicals, bomb-making instructions and a list of US targets, Siddiqui said, "I can't testify to that, the bag was not mine, so I didn't necessarily go through everything." Siddiqui's lawyers have claimed the bag and its contents were planted evidence. Her attorney, Elaine Whitfield Sharp, said back in 2008 that Siddiqui had been carrying what amounted to "conveniently incriminating evidence."

"Of course they found all this stuff on her. It was planted on her. She is the ultimate victim of the American dark side," another one of her attorneys had told the *Associated Press* in 2008.

Siddiqui also told the jury that her children were constantly on her mind and that she was disoriented at the time of her arrest in 2008.

On Friday, the prosecution called Gary Woodworth of Braintree Rifle and Pistol Club in Massachusetts to testify. Woodworth claimed that Siddiqui had taken a 12-hour pistol course at some point in the early 1990s. *The Associated Press of Pakistan* reported that Woodworth was noticeably distressed when the defense team demanded to know how it was possible for him to recall a specific individual from two decades earlier, when he'd had hundreds of students. Woodworth admitted that he had no records or documentation to back up his assertions, insisting that he was good at remembering faces.

Also on Friday, FBI Special Agent Bruce Kamerman testified that Siddiqui grabbed the assault rifle in a fit of rage. However, he appeared to be flustered when one of Siddiqui's attorneys produced his hand-written notes in which there was no mention of her grabbing the gun.

In spite of the obviously fabricated character of the prosecution's case, there is no guarantee of an acquittal.

Even if she is found not guilty, the fate of Aafia's Siddiqui's other two children, Mariam and Suleman, remains unknown. Siddiqui recounts that, while she was held in solitary confinement for five years, she was endlessly forced to listen to recordings of her screaming, terrified children. Her baby, Suleman, she said, was taken away from her immediately, never to be seen again. She said her daughter Mariam was occasionally shown to her, but only as an obscure figure behind a sheet of opaque glass.

The horrifying case of Aafia Siddiqui and her three children is but one example of the criminal and inhuman practices of US imperialism and its ally, the Pakistani bourgeoisie. Hundreds if not thousands of Pakistanis have been kidnapped by Pakistani intelligence services and handed over to US personnel to be dispatched to Bagram, Guantanamo and other "black site" torture chambers around the globe. While the Pakistani government now claims to be doing everything in its power to bring Siddiqui back to Pakistan, its supposed efforts are little more than damage control.



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