

## Justice for Aafia US Tour Diary: Day 6 - Milwaukee

Contributed by Yvonne Ridley  
Thursday, 22 October 2009

I arrived in America's Mid West after a flight from Atlanta in the Deep South to be greeted by cold drizzle and grey skies but the weather failed to put a dampener on what turned out to be an excellent meeting at the Islamic Society's community masjid in Milwaukee.

Milwaukee is the largest city in the State of Wisconsin and the 23rd largest in America, and just a few miles away from the masjid is a smaller city called Franklin named in honour of one of the Founding Fathers, Benjamin Franklin - more of him later.

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Hundreds of locals turned out to hear my story at the hands of the Taliban and as I told the tale of how I moved from being a Captive after 9/11 to a Convert in 2003 they appeared to hang on to every word.

They held their breath at times as I described my ordeal at the hands of the Taliban described by Bush and Blair as "the most evil, brutal regime in the world."

They roared with laughter as I revealed how I fell off a donkey and went on to become the prisoner from hell in Jalalabad. And they looked on in disbelief as I described how the Taliban reacted to my bad behaviour with almost suffocating kindness.

It was an entertaining evening which may seem slightly at odds with my mission which was to talk about the plight of Dr Aafia Siddiqui, but it served to highlight the tale of two women prisoners and the difference in treatment.

And it also raised the question of which society was more civilised and which was beyond primitive in its treatment of women prisoners.

Aafia was also held in Afghanistan, but while my captors did their best to treat me as "their guest" during my brief period in prison the same can not be said about the five grim years Aafia was held at the behest of US intelligence, much of it in Bagram.

I was treated with courtesy and respect but Aafia, according to various eye witness accounts, was brutalised as Bagram's Grey Lady and Prisoner 650.

In 2005 the hundreds of men being held by the US in Bagram were so disgusted at the brutal treatment meted out to the tiny, frail mother-of-three that they went on hunger strike until she was moved out of the men's prison.

Until then she kept them awake every night with her haunting sobs and piercing screams - in truth some of the men are still kept awake at night haunted by what they saw and heard of Aafia in Bagram.

No one knows for sure why she was kidnapped in March 2003 because the charges she faces today do not reflect anything from her past. Many of us believe Aafia to be wholly innocent of any crime.

I, on the other hand, was guilty of breaking the law by entering Afghanistan without a passport and visa. Despite my crime I was released on humanitarian grounds by the Taliban's spiritual leader Mullah Omar.

If there is any justice in this world then President Obama will do the same for Aafia. The US can gain nothing from her continued detention, but this one, single act of humanity will at least remind us of the days when America represented liberty and freedom for all.

Which brings me back to Benjamin Franklin, a man of peace, politics and amazing vision. Obama would do well to heed these particular words of wisdom from Franklin: "Those who would sacrifice freedom for security deserve neither."

\* Yvonne Ridley heads for Texas tomorrow

