Babar Ahmad presses the tip of his forefinger into the middle of his forehead. “Can you see that mark?” he asks. “That’s where the shrapnel struck my skull. It’s still embedded just below that red mark - a small ball-bearing from a hand grenade, buried in the middle of my cranium.”

Ahmad, a public schoolboy who grew up in Tooting, south London, where he served in the RAF cadets, suffered the wound while attacking Bosnian Serb positions at the height of the war in Bosnia when he was aged 21.

Ahmad's body is riddled with similar markings - a physical testament to the dangers of fighting a jihad in a foreign land long before jihad became synonymous with terrorism.

Then he opens his hands and proffers his wrists. “Can you see those marks too? That was when I was tortured by British police - when they pulled the handcuffs up my arm so tight that I...
screamed. And then they punched me all over my face before holding my neck so hard that I could no longer breathe. I really thought I was going to die.”

It was one of the most disturbing cases of police brutality in recent years – the Metropolitan police admitted liability and paid Ahmad £60,000 damages in 2009.

Ahmad unashamedly bears these physical scars from waging jihad in Bosnia and being arrested by counterterrorism police in London. But the scars left by his psychological struggles with the judicial systems of the US and Britain are more serious – and raise troubling questions for both countries.

Ahmad’s ordeal began in 2003, when his house was raided by the Met’s elite counter-terrorism squad. He was then extradited to the US, where he was convicted of providing material support to the Taliban. Last year he was finally released from prison to an emotional reunion with his family and thousands of supporters in south London.

The story of Babar Ahmad is the story of the west’s war on terror, a war that has been waged against those who bore arms in the name of Islam. It’s also the story of America’s desire for revenge in the wake of 9/11. And a story of how Britain blindly conspired with its ally to send Ahmad to the United States, despite knowing that there was no evidence to try him for the same crimes in the UK.

Even the London mayor, Boris Johnson, and his would-be successor, Tory MP Zac Goldsmith, said Ahmad should have been tried in the UK. Goldsmith’s rival in the capital’s mayoral race, Labour’s Sadiq Khan, went to visit Ahmad in prison to try to help.

After nearly 12 years’ imprisonment, torture and inhumane privations, Ahmad is unbroken, without bitterness and determined that his story will not be forgotten or dismissed as just the bleatings of another victim of the war on terror.

Ahmad came from humble beginnings. His father emigrated from Pakistan in 1963, finding work as a clerk in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London. His mother was a local teacher. The family, including Ahmad’s brother and two sisters, lived in a two-bedroom council flat in Balham, close to St George’s hospital.
“We weren’t very well off, but my parents told us that, if we wanted to get on, then we would have to work hard. For them, education was everything, and so when I finished primary school I had passed scholarship exams to four top public schools in the area – including Emanuel school and King’s College, Wimbledon.”

He chose Emanuel, provoking a phonecall from the headmaster of King’s, demanding to know why the family had snubbed his school.

It was at Emanuel that Babar joined the RAF cadets – which he says instilled in him an interest in military discipline as well as a basic understanding of how weapons work and how to fire them. Ahmad excelled in the classroom, the highest-ranked pupil in six out of his eight subjects, and he picked up a hatful of prizes on speech day.

“I was a shy and timid boy at primary school, but mixing with all these sons of army officers meant I became confident and pushed myself.”

Armed with a clutch of good A-levels and harbouring dreams of being a pilot, Ahmad went on to win a place at Imperial College to study engineering.

It was the same year, 1992, in which conflict in Bosnia blew up. Bosnian Serb forces had tried to annex Bosnian territory, ruthlessly imposing a policy of ethnic cleansing on the Muslim populations. Like many young Muslims, Ahmad was angered and outraged by the atrocities. He was moved by a news report on the Serbian-run Omarska concentration camp.

He says the pictures reminded him of scenes from the Holocaust from the World at War television series.

“I didn’t know these were pictures of Muslims; there was nothing to say they were Muslims. But when I later found out that they were being exterminated because they were Muslims, I felt that I had to do something.”

So when Imperial broke up for the winter holidays, Ahmad headed out to Bosnia with an aid convoy.

He ended up in Zagreb, Croatia, working with a non-Islamic charity looking after 2,000 refugees.

“All the refugees were white, they had blond hair and blue eyes, and none of the women was wearing a hijab – but they were all Muslim.” For several weeks he helped out wherever he could - handing out rice and flour to the refugees. But the more he mixed with the Bosnian Muslims, the more he discovered the true horrors of the Serbian genocide.

As he ventured across the border into Bosnia, he saw that reports of the war on Muslims were not exaggerated. White crosses were painted on mosque walls and all the minarets had been destroyed by Serbian artillery.
“Almost as soon as I arrived at a camp in Travnik, I started hearing stories of women being raped by the Serbs because they were Muslims. But one sickening story in particular made me think hard about what I was doing there,” he recalls.

“I was told of how a group of Bosnian Serbs had raped a three-year-old girl in front of her mother, then slit the child’s throat before feeding her body into a meat grinder. Not satisfied with this, they then cooked the meat and made the mother eat her own child.

“I thought to myself: ‘What good is handing out rice and flour when such horrible things were taking place a few miles away from where I was staying?’

“I couldn’t sleep all night. The next morning I walked to a Bosnian military post and said: ‘I would like to help you.’ I bigged myself up and said I knew the basics of handling a weapon [from my time in the RAF cadets at Emanuel school].”

Ahmad was sent to a small base for international fighters, where he was one of only seven Britons among mostly Arab volunteers who had fought in Afghanistan. He was given an AK47 and told to fire three bullets at a target – one standing, one sitting and one lying down.

Having passed that test, he was dispatched to the frontline in the mountains overlooking the Serbian positions, where he had his first firefight. He recalls the chaos when his unit was ordered to attack an enemy position.

“We could see the lights on in the [enemy] house and so we crept as close as we dared before firing our rifles and RPGs. They returned fire, but I didn’t see any of their fighters. That was what it was like – you didn’t see the enemy, just the sound of their guns.

The next morning I walked into a Bosnian military post and said: I would like to help you Babar Ahmad

“Still I felt I had achieved something and that night I remember returning to camp having silenced my inner turmoil, knowing that I had done something practical to bring an end to the atrocities.”

A few weeks later Ahmad returned to London to resume his studies. But he had now found a cause that had taken over his life. He spent his spare time in the UK organising aid convoys and campaigning on behalf of the Bosnian Muslims. But it wasn’t enough.

“I felt guilty – that here I was, safe in London after abandoning my fellow fighters.”

In the summer of 1995 the world’s media reported the massacre of 8,000 Muslim men and boys at Srebrenica. It marked a turning point in the war, galvanising the west into decisive action to halt the advancing Bosnian Serb forces. Within days of the massacre reports, Ahmad returned to Bosnia, where he was again involved in heavy fighting.

“These were much bigger battles, with thousands of fighters on both sides. The fighting was at much closer quarters and I saw many dead bodies.”

In one encounter with an enemy unit he was injured in a hand-grenade attack. “I remember someone shouting something in Serb, then there was a blast and I lost consciousness. When I came round, my face was covered in blood. I was in terrible pain. A Bosnian medic got me off the frontline and I was flown by helicopter to a hospital in Zenica.”

The x-ray showed that he was riddled with shrapnel. To this day it sets off security alarms. “One
piece hit my notebook, which I kept in my top pocket. The doctors said that otherwise it would have gone right through my heart.”

Once recovered from his injuries, Ahmad booked a flight back to Britain. In London, doctors found he also had a fractured skull. They decided it was too dangerous to remove the shrapnel.

“I lost a lot of friends in the fighting – some of them from Britain – and no one knew the sacrifice they had made to help the Bosnian people. One of them, whose body I helped identify, was a British university graduate.”

It was in Bosnia that he first met Shaker Aamer, the British detainee released from Guantánamo last year. “Shaker spoke good English [he originally came from Saudi Arabia] and we became good friends.

“When the war ended, I wanted the world to know about my friends who had been killed in Bosnia. So I decided to record an audio cassette narrating their stories for them. I sold them in the street, at the university or at Islamic conferences.”

In 1996 Ahmad graduated from Imperial with a degree in engineering. That same year he answered the call of jihad once again – this time to help the Muslims in Chechnya, who were at war with Russia. There he met the formidable and by now famous Saudi jihad commander called Khattab. But by the time Ahmad arrived, the two sides had agreed a truce and he put down his gun to help in Chechen orphanages.

To honour the memories of the many fighters who had died in Bosnia and Chechnya, Ahmad decided to set up a website to publish stories about the two conflicts. The website, Azzam.com, had a readership of hundreds of thousands of Muslims and non-Muslims.

“We were not involved in supporting the fighting from Britain – just providing media coverage. If anyone sent us money to send on to Chechnya, we sent it back to them. This was not what we were about.”

But as the website began covering other conflicts involving Muslim countries, Ahmad allowed two articles to be published on the site, which offered support to the then Taliban government in Afghanistan. This would prove to be his undoing.

Before Osama bin Laden’s attacks on America in 2001, a British-based website with an interest in foreign conflicts was of no more than curious interest to the US security services. But after 9/11 it was considered a dangerous threat to democracy.

One US agent made it his mission to close the site and bring down Babar Ahmad. It would take eight years before Ahmad would discover the identity of his nemesis.

In December 2003, 18 months after his websites were shut down, Ahmad was arrested by the Met’s counterterrorism unit working with the Americans who accused him of being a terrorist linked to al-Qaeda. Officers broke down Ahmad’s front door and charged into his bedroom, where he was sleeping with his wife.

Ahmad was subjected to a 40-minute ordeal of physical, sexual, religious and verbal abuse.
“They twisted the handcuffs until I cried out in pain. Two of the officers punched me repeatedly on the head, face, ears and back. On two occasions the officers sexually abused me by tugging at and fondling my genitals. And then the officers stamped on my bare feet with their boots.”

The officers mocked Ahmad’s religious beliefs. After placing him in the Muslim prayer position, one officer sarcastically asked: “Where is your God now?”

He was bundled into a police van, where he faced further abuse during his journey to Charing Cross police station. “An officer, whom I later found out was PC Mark Jones, punched me repeatedly, and another, PC Jon Donohue, twisted the cuffs until I screamed out in pain. Jones then applied two choke holds. During the second choke hold I thought I was going to die. To this day I still recall Jones saying: ‘You will remember this day for the rest of your life. Do you understand me, you fucking bastard?’”

CCTV shows Babar Ahmad in a collapsed state as he was pulled out of the van and taken to the custody suite at Charing Cross police station.

In the court case that Ahmad brought against the Met in 2009, the custody sergeant, Thomas Martin, described Ahmad’s handcuff injuries as the worst he had ever seen in 30 years as a police officer.

Doctors who examined Ahmad over the next seven days found that he had at least 73 injuries, including bleeding in his ears and urine. The injuries were recorded graphically by a Met photographer. US prosecutors tampered with one of these photographs to remove any sign of injury when they brought their case against Ahmad in a court in Connecticut.

After the seven days of questioning, Ahmad was released without charge when the Crown Prosecution Service advised that there was insufficient evidence to charge him with any criminal offence. He tried to put the incident behind him and went back to working as an IT assistant at Imperial. But in August the following year he was arrested again – this time on an extradition warrant requested by the Americans.

The warrant alleged that he was a terrorist who had used the Azzam websites to support fighters in Bosnia and Chechnya during the 1990s, defined by US prosecutors as material support for terrorism.

The Americans had combed through hundreds of documents, which they used to bolster their accusations. These included the presence of an unread and unopened document at Ahmad’s parents’ house, which detailed the movements of a US navy battlegroup and a 1970s tourist leaflet featuring the Empire State Building.

US officials argued that a DVD found at his parents’ home of a documentary describing the heroic efforts made by the New York firefighters after 9/11 was a “pro-9/11 DVD”.

America was able to claim jurisdiction in his case because it was alleged that one of the computer servers hosting one of the websites was in Connecticut.

For the next eight years, Ahmad fought against extradition in the UK and European courts. During this time he was imprisoned without charge in some of Britain’s top security prisons, including four years at Long Lartin’s infamous detainee segregation unit in Worcestershire, where he was held with other terror suspects who could not be charged.
If I went to trial and lost, I faced the rest of my life in prison – I couldn’t have signed the papers quickly enough
Babar Ahmad

Ahmad still holds the record as the longest-serving British prisoner to be detained without trial in the UK. The injustice of his case became the focus of a number of high-profile campaigns supported by lawyers, politicians and celebrities. An online petition calling for him to be tried in the UK, not the US, attracted 150,000 signatures and triggered two debates in the Houses of Parliament. While in prison he met many high-profile terror suspects including Abu Qatada and Abu Hamza, as well as leading figures in Britain’s crime world, including some of the infamous Adams family, whose criminal syndicate plagued London in the 1990s. But Ahmad used his incarceration to become a mediator helping to resolve disputes between crime gangs, Muslim terrorism detainees and the prison authorities. In one court case he even acted as a witness for a prison guard who had been accused of racially abusing a Muslim prisoner.

But in 2012 Ahmad lost his extradition battle and was sent to America to face trial.

When he left Long Lartin, some of the officers were in tears.

As he walked out of the unit, he remembers: “I saw the look on one of the female officers’ face. I said, ‘Goodbye, miss, and thank you’. She knew me very well and she was in tears. Many of these officers had lived with us for many years and we all knew each other’s lives.’

But in a final cruel torture the prison authorities refused a last visit from his family.

“I don’t know who ordered it but I was just informed that someone from London had told them to cancel the visit. It was a terrible blow, as I had seen my family every week while in prison and now I wasn’t sure I would ever see them again.”

Along with four others, he was driven to the US air force base at RAF Mildenhall in Suffolk. Before handing Ahmad over to the Americans, the accompanying Met officers left him in the police van and approached the US military office where the American extradition team was waiting. They came back to the van holding blacked-out goggles and ear muffs. One of the police officers apologised to Ahmad and said: “I’m sorry, but this is how the Americans want it.”

“I told him that, under UK law, it was illegal to hood prisoners in this way. But he just said: ‘They want us to put these on you before they take custody of you.’”

Ahmad says he realised then, if he needed any reminder, that “this was how the special relationship worked ... those Metropolitan police officers looked really worried and scared, but they refused to disobey the Americans. They were out of their depth.”

As Ahmad was led into the US building, the Americans told the Met officers to remove the mask and muffs. A senior member of the US escort team shouted at him: “You are now in the custody of the US government and you will be treated with respect unless you give us cause not to. Do you have any questions?”

Ahmad asked: “How long is the flight?”

“That question is irrelevant,” replied the soldier.
Ahmad was strip-searched, then told to put on a green and yellow jumpsuit. All the time he was being videoed. Before getting on the plane he was shackled and handcuffed – a chain was fitted around his waist and tightly attached through the handcuffs so that he was forced to walk hunched over. Finally the goggles and ear mask were refitted.

Ahmad remembers: “The only image going through my mind was: ‘This is Guantánamo’ – and I’m sure the Met officers were thinking the same thing and that’s why they looked so worried.”

An hour into the flight the goggles and muffs were removed. Sitting in front of Ahmad was a casually dressed American with a goatee beard, wearing a baseball hat. “You’re late. I’ve been waiting for five days and now I shall miss the latest episode of Homeland.”

“You recognise me?” he asked Ahmad.

“You’re the American who came to all my court hearings, aren’t you?”

The American told Ahmad he had made it his special mission to bring the Briton to America to face justice.

“He looked me in the eye and said he had lost 14 colleagues in the 9/11 attacks. As if to say that is why I was here now ... It was clear he was looking for some kind of closure or revenge.”

Ahmad then spent two years at Connecticut’s Supermax prison, locked in his cell for 23 to 24 hours a day.

But before his transfer to the Supermax, he was again strip-searched in front of six officers, shackled and taken to a holding cell with walls covered in faeces and where the temperature was kept at -14C. Ahmad was given a thin blanket, too small to cover his body.

“I spent the next three days curled up like a foetus on a concrete bed, gratefully eating what little food they gave me with my bare hands [Ahmad lost three stone while in prison]. And all the time prison officers were shouting: ‘He tried to blow us all up and he tried to kill Americans’.”

After his transfer to the Supermax conditions only slightly improved. “For two years I didn’t see the sun and whenever I left my cell I was strip-searched and then placed in shackles and handcuffs.”

Although the prisoners were not allowed to talk to each other, they invented ingenious ways of communicating, including speaking through vents and using the prison drainage system by speaking into the washbasin plug holes. The other prisoners were all serving life sentences or very long sentences for multiple murders and violent sex attacks. Ahmad had still not been convicted of any crime.

“I learned how to survive by always being true to my word. As soon as the other prisoners don’t trust your word, you become a prison rat. In prison I would talk to everyone apart from the paedophiles. In American prisons no one talks to child abuse offenders – you soon learn that.”

During the hours of solitary confinement, Ahmad busied himself researching his case.

In 2013 he made a significant breakthrough. Among the legal papers he found a Metropolitan police document showing that the server for the Azzam website was not located in Connecticut, as alleged by the prosecution: a police IT analyst discovered that the server was in fact located in
Chicago. Not realising the significance of this error the officer decided to correct the mistake. But it was an error that went to the very heart of the prosecution. The US counter-terrorism officer whom Ahmad had met on the plane and who had been leading the investigation had testified to the grand jury that the reason the case was being tried in Connecticut was because the Azzam server was located there. It was the only piece of evidence that gave the Connecticut prosecutor the right to ask for Ahmad to be prosecuted in that state.

Ahmad told his lawyer, Kelly Barrett, what he had discovered. Barrett was a former corporate lawyer who had given up a top job with a New York law firm to work in the Federal Defender’s Office. She had committed the last two years of her professional and sometimes personal life to representing Ahmad – after his release she flew to the UK to see him reunited with the his family. She knew immediately how important this breakthrough could be.

“Kelly told the prosecution that she intended informing the judge how the grand jury had been misled and would call for the case to be dropped, as there was no legal right to try it in Connecticut.”

The prosecutors immediately offered Ahmad a deal – plead guilty to the charge of using the website to support the Taliban and he would be back in Britain within months.

“I didn’t need to think twice about that kind of offer … I had been separated from my family for nine years and if I fought the case the prosecution was asking for life.

“At that point I had been held without trial for more than nine years, including the last year in solitary. If I went to trial and lost, I faced the rest of my life in prison – I couldn’t have signed the papers quick enough.”

Last year Ahmad was finally released from prison after being sentenced to 12-and-a-half years for providing material support [the two online articles] to the Taliban government at a time when they were harbouring bin Laden.

The US government had asked for twice this sentence, but the judge handed down an unexpectedly lenient sentence which meant, because of time already served, Ahmad was freed within months.

In a judgment that strikes at the very heart of the tenets that define the war on terror, the judge described Ahmad as a “good person” who had been a model prisoner and who had never been interested in terrorism. Crucially Judge Janet Hall, the chief federal district judge of Connecticut, said that supporting groups engaged in defensive jihad on a battlefield did not make someone a terrorist. She ruled that, although the two articles supporting the Taliban constituted a serious criminal offence under US law, none of his articles on the Azzam websites supporting the war efforts in Bosnia and Chechnya during the 1990s constituted a criminal or terrorist offence.

Ahmad admits today that he was “wrong and naive to support the Taliban” because he didn’t really understand the complex nature of the situation in Afghanistan.

Hall said Ahmad’s advocacy of the Taliban was very serious, stating: “You can’t walk away from the fact that what you were doing was enabling bin Laden to be protected in Afghanistan.” However, Hall also made it clear that Ahmad had never supported al-Qaida or bin Laden. She also accepted that Ahmad regretted his support of the Taliban, and had been naive when he chose to
The judge was particularly impressed with Ahmad’s community work in south London and recounted how in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks he had helped a family whose daughter had been killed in the attack on New York.

On 13 July last year, Ahmad was flown home on a commercial passenger jet. US immigration officers decided not to use handcuffs. Waiting for him at Heathrow were two Metropolitan police officers. One of the officers, without any sense of irony, greeted Ahmad with the words: “Welcome home, Mr Ahmad.”

It was 11pm and the officers offered to drive him back to his south London home, 12 years after the same police force had dragged him from his bedroom and handed him over to American soldiers for trial in America.

At home, he says, “my whole family was waiting for me. The house had been decked out in ‘welcome home’ banners. I walked into the room and I hugged my mother and then I hugged my father and then I fell to the floor in prostration and whispered glory be to God three times. It was the 27th night of Ramadan, and after missing 23 eids I was at last able to celebrate one with my family.”

Ahmad says he found it difficult to adjust to his newfound freedom, but has spent the past few months appreciating the simpler elements of life. “I think the first time the true significance of my freedom dawned on me was when I was at my parents’ house playing with my little nephews and they started blowing raspberries on my belly.”

The past 12 years have taken a huge toll on Ahmad. The time in prison has cost him his marriage and he has been deprived of his career at Imperial. He is being treated for post-traumatic stress disorder. His wrists, feet and sinuses still cause him pain from when British police officers tortured him. And, like his friend Shaker Aamer, the years of sleeping on a hard bed without a pillow have left his neck in permanent pain.

Yet despite all this he bears no grudges. “I would like the Metropolitan police commissioner to apologise for what they did to me - that’s all.”

He says of the current terror threat facing the world: “If terror is being brought to people under the banner of jihad, then that’s oppression. No regime can survive without the support of the people. Jihad is a noble act to defend and protect innocent people; it is not about killing innocent people.

“People need to get round the table and talk to those they don’t agree with, because ultimately it is up to us to choose the future we want our children to grow up in.

“I don’t want my last 12 years to have been in vain; I want something positive to come from it. Never lose hope, because one day the sun will shine again – as it did with me.”

On his release, Ahmad was approached by the CIA to work for them; when he was flown back to the UK the British security services made him a similar offer. He has declined both offers. But MI5 and the Met’s counter-terrorism unit have continued to contact him.

“I was first approached by the British officers who met me at Heathrow airport, who asked if I
wanted to work for the police. I said no. Given all that I had been through, I thought it was a rather odd request.

“A few weeks later officers came to my parents’ house looking for me. When I phoned them they repeated the request and suggested I would be paid for information. Again I politely refused.

“I thought this was an end of it, but then I got another call, this time from MI5. They said they wanted to learn from my experience. I told them quite firmly that I was not a rat and this was not the sort of thing I would do. I didn’t rat on anyone in prison and I had no intention of ratting on people now. I haven’t been contacted since December.”

Ahmad still believes in the ideal of jihad – the right to defend Muslims against attack – but he says that he has never supported any act of terrorism.

He says that, although he has been badly treated by both Britain and the US, his experiences have not radicalised him. He does not harbour any grudges against his tormentors and instead hopes that his story will help forge better relations between the government and Muslim communities.

Babar Ahmad was neither paid nor sought payment for this article.

AHMAD’S STORY

May 1974 Born in London, Ahmad grows up in Tooting.

December 1992 At the age of 18, Ahmad travels to Bosnia as an aid worker, but then takes up arms to defend Bosnian Muslims after hearing about the atrocities inflicted on them.

1992-95 Ahmad makes several more trips to Bosnia to deliver aid and to fight. Ahmad is in Bosnia days after the Srebrenica massacre in July 1995. During heavy fighting that follows, he is injured by shrapnel and returns to the UK.

July 1996 Ahmad graduates from Imperial College, then travels to Chechnya to fight the Russians. He meets Saudi jihad commander Ibn al-Khattab, works in an orphanage, then returns to the UK.

December 1996 Ahmad helps to set up the Azzam website to tell the world the biographies of his friends killed in the Bosnian war.

October 1999 Second Russian military operation in Chechnya. Azzam begins to provide daily news from the Chechen resistance in 20 languages.

2 December 2003 Ahmad arrested and abused by anti-terrorist police at his home in south London, receiving 73 injuries. He was released without charge after seven days.
5 August 2004 Ahmad rearrested on US extradition warrant and detained in prison.

18 March 2009 At the High Court in London, Metropolitan police admits liability for the 2003 assault on Ahmad and pays him £60,000 damages.

5 October 2012 Ahmad extradited to US by private jet from RAF Mildenhall in Suffolk. Spends the next two years in solitary confinement alongside death row inmates at a Supermax prison in Connecticut.


16 July 2014 Judge Janet Hall gives Ahmad an unexpectedly lenient sentence of 12-and-a-half years and says that he was a “good person” who was “never interested in terrorism”. With credit for time served, it means he only has to spend another 12 months in prison.

13 July 2015 Ahmad is released from custody in the US and returns to his family in London.