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Life at Risk After Rapidly Declining Health and Suicidal Statements

The Center for Constitutional Rights is gravely concerned about the life and health of CCR client Sharqawi Al Hajj. Mr. Al Hajj, a 45 year-old citizen of Yemen who has been detained without charge for over 17 years, stated on a recent call with his attorney that he wanted to take his own life — a first in CCR's years-long representation of Mr. Al Hajj that attorneys are taking with the utmost seriousness. His suicidal statements follow a steady and observable deterioration of his physical and mental health that his legal team has been raising the alarm about for two years. They are monitoring his condition as best they can, and will provide any further information as soon as they are able.

In response to Mr. Al Hajj's statements and rapidly deteriorating condition, the Center for Constitutional Rights released the following statement:

When things are in a state of perpetual crisis, as they seem all around today, it is easy to lose sight of just how extreme a situation is, and grow numb to it. We have lost sight of just how extreme the situation in the Guantánamo prison is. We have grown numb to it.

The prisoners there have all been in some form of captivity for nearing two decades, since the start of a war in Afghanistan that was so long ago that it counts as history for people now in college. When they first arrived at Guantánamo, the prisoners were shoved off planes, picked

up by their necks, thrown in literal cages. Others landed later, after years in underground CIA sites where they were brutalized in the ways that have been documented in scores of reports and testimonials. On top of that treatment, most who remain have been held without charge and will remain in that limbo for as far as they can see. That quality of detention – indefiniteness – has its own cruel effects, physically and psychologically.

Over the years, it is the detainees themselves that have woken us up to the crisis – more than any amount of advocacy we have done on their behalf. In 2013, after years of stagnation under the Obama administration, it was a prison-wide hunger strike that put Guantánamo back on the public radar.

Today, it is again the men themselves who are waking us up, in the most tragic of ways. Our client Sharqawi Al Hajj, is a 45-year-old man from Yemen whose body is so depleted by everything – prior torture, chronic pain, repeat hunger strikes as the only autonomous form of protest he has had – that outside medical experts say he is at risk of total collapse. But while his body could give at any moment, he said in a recent phone call with us that he wanted to take his own life. It is the first time in all the years we have worked with him, over all the years he has struggled, and despite the depth of his Islamic faith, that he has spoken with seriousness and specificity about suicide.

Detainees have died or been near death in Guantánamo before. When they have, the government's response has been to clamp down with secrecy, or downplay the gravity of the health of detainees on the brink, or, in the case of apparent suicides, distort those desperate acts as a form of warfare.

Guantánamo was a system designed to break people down. It is working. Mr. Al Hajj's desperate state should wake us up once and for all to the reality that it is rotten to its core. Some would say, as members of Congress like Tom Cotton have, that detainees should be left to rot in Guantánamo. The rest of us need to ask what we are willing to accept.

Mr. Al Hajj has been imprisoned at Guantánamo without charge since 2004. Prior to his arrival there, he was [tortured](#) for two years in secret CIA detention. He has never received adequate mental health treatment for the effects of his torture. Additionally, Mr. Al Hajj has suffered for years from severe physical symptoms, including acute abdominal and urinary pain, extreme weakness and fatigue, and recurring jaundice, which are exacerbated by his repeated hunger strikes.

In 2017, Mr. Al Hajj fell unconscious after a hunger strike during which he stopped drinking water, and required emergency hospitalization. Lawyers submitted an [emergency motion](#) to a federal judge requesting an independent medical evaluation and the release of Mr. Al Hajj's medical records. Medical experts warned the court Mr. Al Hajj was in danger of "imminent irreparable harm" and "on the precipice of total body collapse." That motion has yet to be ruled on.

The Center for Constitutional Rights will appear before Judge Royce C. Lamberth at the United States District Court for the District of Columbia for a recently scheduled status conference in Mr. Al Hajj's habeas case on Friday, September 6, 2019. For more background, and critical ongoing updates, please visit and check frequently [Mr. Al Hajj's client profile](#), his [case page](#), a recent motion discussing his suicidal statements, and our pending 2017 [motion requesting an independent medical evaluation](#)