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Last week, Mansoor Adayfi, Moazzam Begg, Lakhdar Boumediane, Sami Al-Hajj, Ahmed Errachidi, Mohammed Ould Slahi, and Moussa Zemmouri published an [open letter](#) in the *New York Review of Books*

. Noting that many Guantánamo detainees had been abducted from their homes, sold to the United States for bounties, and subjected to physical and psychological torture, these seven former prisoners—all held without charge or trial before their eventual release—called upon President Biden to close the detention facility. Their letter, which merits reading in its entirety, includes this plea:

Considering the violence that has happened at Guantánamo, we are sure that after more than nineteen years, you agree that imprisoning people indefinitely without trial while subjecting them to torture, cruelty, and degrading treatment, with no meaningful access to families or proper legal systems, is the height of injustice. That is why imprisonment at Guantánamo must end.

These accusations are neither isolated nor unsubstantiated. Indeed, the week before Biden's inauguration, a group of United Nations experts—including Nils Melzer, the Special Rapporteur on torture—[described](#) Guantánamo as a “disgrace” and as “a place of arbitrariness and abuse, a site where torture and ill-treatment was rampant and remains institutionalised, where the rule of law is effectively suspended, and where justice is denied.” They too called for its closure and reaffirmed, “The prolonged and indefinite detention of individuals, who have not been convicted of any [crime](#) by a competent and independent judicial authority operating under due process of law, is arbitrary and constitutes a form of cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment, or even torture.”

As an American psychologist, I recognize that my profession should be among the most vocal in supporting this humanitarian call. There are three compelling reasons why. First, the ugly, unwelcome truth is that psychologists, and other healthcare professionals, were key participants in designing and implementing the brutal “war on terror” detention and

interrogation operations that have caused so much grievous harm. According to a Senate [report](#), for example, a military psychologist and psychiatrist stationed at Guantánamo during its first year of operation recommended that “all aspects of [the environment](#) should enhance capture shock, dislocate expectations, foster dependence, and support exploitation to the fullest extent possible.”

Likewise, according to a [memo](#) from the Department of Justice, “close observation” by psychologists and physicians was required whenever waterboarding and other torturous “enhanced interrogation techniques” were employed at the CIA’s infamous black sites. In short, Guantánamo is a potent symbol of a shameful catalog of abuses and torture from which psychologists cannot hide, one that includes sleep deprivation, extended isolation, [stress](#) positions, sensory bombardment, forced nudity, freezing temperatures, sexual and cultural [humiliation](#), and confinement in coffin-like boxes.

Second, the [American Psychological Association](#) (APA), the world’s largest organization of psychologists, failed to adequately resist these unfolding horrors or defend the profession’s fundamental do-no-harm principles. In the days immediately after the 9/11 attacks, Vice President Dick Cheney [told](#) a national television audience that those deemed to be our enemies would face the “full wrath” of the United States and that our operatives would “spend time in the shadows” working “the dark side” and using “any means at our disposal.”

Early reports from Guantánamo also raised concerns about psychologists’ involvement in detainee mistreatment. The International Committee of the Red Cross even [characterized](#) the regime there as “tantamount to torture.” Yet for years the APA’s stance was to deny any wrongdoing by psychologists, instead insisting that their participation helped to keep these operations “[safe, legal, ethical, and effective](#).” Eventually, an [independent review](#) documented that key APA leaders had engaged in years-long covert [collaboration](#) with Department of Defense psychologists to ensure that the APA’s [ethics](#) policies would not constrain the continuing participation of psychologists in Guantánamo’s detention and interrogation activities.

Third, given our training, psychologists understand better than most how profoundly devastating [trauma](#) can be. Those who work with survivors of abuse and torture have witnessed the ongoing anguish that results from deep [psychic wounds](#) and from the feelings of [helplessness](#) that persist long after being subjected to intentional pain and humiliation at the hands of another human being. For many victims, [nightmares](#) and flashbacks are recurrent experiences, making any lasting sense of safety seemingly unimaginable. Despite examples of remarkable [resilience](#), many who were once imprisoned at Guantánamo will undoubtedly carry [psychological scars](#) for the rest of their lives. The familial and [transgenerational effects](#) of trauma are significant as well.

As for those who are still detained indefinitely, they are understandably very distrustful of U.S. military healthcare personnel. Experts from the [Center for Victims of Torture](#) and [Physicians for Human Rights](#) also [warn](#) that they suffer from deprivation and despair, along with the adverse consequences of inaccurate and misleading health records, the subordination of their medical needs to security functions, and outright neglect.

Over the past several years, the APA has made headway in acknowledging its past failures and in resetting its [moral compass](#). Of particular note, in 2015 the association's [leadership](#) overwhelmingly approved a policy that now prohibits military psychologists from involvement with detainees at Guantánamo or other sites that United Nations authorities have determined to be in violation of international human rights law. But for the APA, its members, and the profession at large, these and related steps face ongoing resistance from influential actors with ties to the military-[intelligence](#) establishment and defense contractors.

It would therefore represent an important milestone on this fraught journey forward for the APA to now call for the permanent closure of Guantánamo and the just resolution of the legal cases of the 40 prisoners who are still there. Other organizations committed to human rights—[ACLU](#)

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[Amnesty International](#)

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[Center for Constitutional Rights](#)

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[Human Rights First](#)

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[Human Rights Watch](#)

,
[National Religious Campaign Against Torture](#)

,
[Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition](#)

, and

[Witness Against Torture](#)

, among others—have already done so. Joining these groups would signal loudly that respect for human dignity and professional ethics had successfully overcome considerations of political and economic expediency at the APA.

In his book *Life Lines*, the late minister and theologian Forrest Church wrote, “When cast into the depths, to survive we must first let go of things that will not save us. Then we must reach out for things that can.” That insight applies here: The United States should let go of Guantánamo, and the APA should help Americans understand why.