Center for Constitutional Rights

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

https://ccrjustice.org/home/blog/2017/01/12/obama-s-guant-namo-essay-excerpt-ccrs-aliya-hussain

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The CCR blog

As President Obamas terms in office come to an end, eight years after he entered office he has yet to deliver on one of his most prominent campaign promises: to close the prison at Guantnamo Bay. He is now poised to leave it to the next administration. Though the prison was opened under President George W. Bush, Guantnamo has in many ways become Obamas prison, the title of a recent book of essays edited by Jonathan Hafetz*, to which CCRs Guantnamo lawyers contributed. Over the remaining weeks of Obamas presidency, we will be posting excerpts from their contributions. Below is our fourth installment, an excerpt from CCR Advocacy Program Manager* Aliya Hussain*, Storytelling #Guantnamo.*

For my so-called millennial generation, Barack Obama symbolized everything we wanted in an America we hoped was possible. On the bulletin board above my office computer, theres an image of himthe ad, torn out of the *New York Times*, was placed by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) the week after he won the election in 2008. In it, the ACLU urged the new president to fulfill his campaign promises and restore Americas moral leadership in the world by closing Guantnamo on his first day of office. I worked at the ACLU when the ad came out and it is a bit of swag, a piece of history, that traveled the 40 block or so uptown with me to my current job at the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR). Quoting the audacious candidate, it reads: As President, I will close Guantnamo, reject the Military Commissions Act and adhere to the Geneva Conventions. It is now creased, and the crisp black and white has fadeda striking reminder of the many years that have passed since these promises were made. I truly believed his presidency had the power to change the world for the better. Didnt we all?

Next to this piece of iconography is a photograph of me demonstrating outside of the White House for the first time with my CCR colleagues and hundreds of other activists to demand the closure of Guantnamo. It was the tenth anniversary of the prisons openinga rainy and cold January 11, but I stood there defiantly, a budding activist, as much for myself as for the man whose face adorned the sign I carried. In January 2015, Guantnamo turned 13.

Also scattered across my board are photographs of some of the men that CCR represents. Though he was only 15 or 16 years old, Fahd Ghazy already looked like a young man in his portrait, which was taken before he was captured, over a decade ago. It is only a paper copy, but the blue in his scarf, echoed in the blue background, is nevertheless piercing. It stands in stark contrast to the white shirt he now wears and the sterile cell in which we meet in Guantnamos Camp Echo. Another picture, this one of Tariq Ba Odah, is a worn copy of an image taken by the Red Cross in the prison. His hair is long, parted in the middle, with curls cascading down each side of his neck. Tariqs smile, which lights up the room, is surely meant for his family in Saudi Arabia, where the original photo traveled thousands of miles to reach them. He looks so handsome. When I see his face, I forget momentarily the physical toll that more than eight years of hunger striking has taken on his body.

The faces of these men are jarring against the backdrop of my freedom, commemorated by letter-pressed birthday cards, photographs from family celebrations, and souvenirs that I have collected during my travel over the years. Our clients' storiesand how they have become part of my own storyreinforce the need to make connections between experiences, people, and places that most would deem different worlds.

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I was 26 years old when I started working at CCR. I joined the Guantnamo Global Justice Initiative as a legal worker in October 2010, shortly after a steady stream of transfers of clients who were either repatriate or resettled in third countries in Europe. In my job interview, there was talk of how the prisons closure was imminent and how, after years of leading the fight against unjust detentions at Guantnamo, CCR would soon be redirecting its focus on other human rights and national security issues. Guantnamo would finally be closed.

So close, yet so far.

Just over a year later, with my newly minted security clearance, I made my first trip to Cuba in 2012. I had no idea what to expect. Sure, I knew about the prison. The liberal, social justice narratives were deeply ingrained in my mind: a legal black hole where torture and other heinous crimes took place; an internment camp where Muslim men from dozens of countries all over the world were broughtmost without rhyme or reasonbecause of a landscape of fear, hate and war; a place shrouded in layers of secrecy and propaganda that prevented the public from knowing exactly what happened in the island prison and who the men detained there really were. I was familiar with our clients cases too: where they were from, their ages, why the government alleged they should be there at all, and also what kind of books they liked to read and what food they requested. But still, I didnt really *know* what it would be like once I got there or how to prepare myself for feelings I couldnt predict.

Like most of my peers, to me, a trip to the Caribbean meant spring break, margaritas, and days on the beach. I had never visited a prison before, and my first trip would be to the controversial offshore military detention facility coined the gulag of our times by Amnesty International. I had trouble reconciling my life as a twentysomething Brooklynite with the fact that I possessed a high level national security clearance and was about to set foot somewhere most people in the world would never be permitted to go. In a sea of mostly corporate pro bono habeas attorneys, I was an exceptiona young Pakistani American Muslim woman with a pierced nose and left-leaning politics. Not only was I *not* a lawyer, I was the same age or younger than the men with whom I would be meeting. I could barely string together a full sentence in Urdu or Arabic, even though I looked like I should be able to. What would it feel like to be in a situation where my words could only be understood once they were morphed into something entirely foreign to my own earsmaybe shortened, maybe polishedby the translator sitting next to use? Our clients and I shared Islam as a faith, but there was no way of predicting what that would mean in practical terms. Having straddled two cultures my entire life, figuring out the appropriate way of presenting myself was often a struggle. Should I cover my head, make eye contact? Could I shake their hand or would it be better to wait to see whether they gestured first as I did with some family members? Would our similar roots and the color of our skin make it easier or harder for us to relate to one another.

What I discovered during my first visit would forever change me: the men I met were more like me than different. Over the years I have made nearly ten trips to the prison to meet with clients. I have spent hours sitting across the table from young men who have been detained without charge for over 13 years. In fact, many of them were cleared for release by the U.S. government long ago. Theres no doubt in my mind that if the public could sit across from Fahd, Tariq, Ghaleb, and Mohammed as I have, and hear the compassion in their voices, learn about their families, and see how they struggle every day to prevent the prison from claiming them, others would be closer to understanding the human cost of Guantnamo as acutely as my colleagues and I do.

But thats the thingthe government doesnt want anyone to see our clients humanity.

On January 11, 2017, Aliya joined hundreds of other activists at a demonstration *in Washington, DC to mark Guantnamo's 15th anniversary. Public reporting indicates that dozens of prisoners will remain imprisoned at Guantnamo after President Obama leaves office later this month.*

Get the book and read the entire chapter, *Obamas Guantnamo: Stories from an Enduring Prison.*

View the discussion thread.

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