

# Physicians for Human Rights

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

<https://phr.org/our-work/resources/the-brutal-toll-of-psychologists-role-in-torture/>

## Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Donna McKay, MS on August 6, 2015

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Much of the attention on the scandal surrounding the [collusion between the American Psychological Association \(APA\) and the U.S. Department of Defense](#) and the CIA in support of torture has been focused on the consequences for the association and the field of psychology. While there is no question that the APA has much work to do to repair the damage to its integrity and to restore people's faith in the discipline of psychology, it is worth remembering that myriad individuals suffered directly as a result of this collusion. Over the last 13 years, [more than 750 detainees](#) have spent time in a rights-free zone that is the detention center at Guantanamo Bay.

Some detainees have spent more than 10 years in limbo, deprived of any meaningful contact with the outside world and any way to challenge their detention. The APA approved the participation of psychologists in the interrogation of this group of individuals, paving the way for health professionals to directly contribute to an illegal torture program.

International law defines torture as the intentional infliction of severe pain and suffering for specific purposes. The men detained in the far-flung locations of Bagram airbase in Afghanistan, Abu Ghraib in Iraq, and Guantanamo Bay in Cuba were at the receiving end of torture and ill-treatment, including indefinite detention, among other human rights violations.

Moreover, the men who have been released usually years after they had been cleared having survived the torture and ill-treatment suffered in detention, [face additional struggles](#) with the aftereffects of abuse as they try to rebuild their lives. Some mostly those who were released relatively quickly have succeeded, but for others the road to health and well-being is difficult, maybe even impossible.

We know from years of supporting victims of torture that it can be a long process. One element that helps with the healing and rebuilding is the acknowledgment that what they experienced was profound the attempt to destroy their personhood and strip them of any sense of control over their own lives.

Acknowledgment accompanied by justice and accountability helps restore that sense of control. But for national security detainees held by the U.S. government and its proxies, justice and accountability are being systematically denied as a matter of law.

For those still held in indefinite detention, the suffering continues. In fact, [52 prisoners have been cleared for release](#) from Guantanamo, but shamefully still languish at the center.

So when the APA meets for its annual meeting in Toronto this week, it must take stock of the pain and suffering it caused by contributing to the torture program. It must take stock of its complicity in a system of detention that is unlawful at its core, and must recognize the corruption that fueled an unconscionable dismantling of ethical standards aimed at ensuring that psychologists do no harm.

The APA's newly elected president must demonstrate strong leadership, acknowledging that the association can only move forward by coming to terms with not just the APA's policy decisions and the subsequent campaign to conceal those decisions, but also the very real harm these policy changes caused. It must also acknowledge the many psychologists who were persistent in their advocacy over the last decade calling for transparency, truth telling, and justice without which this report would not have come about.

U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein who has stood up to the CIA by demanding transparency [has stated](#), "This is a stark reminder that torture can corrode every institution it touches, including medical and psychological professions."

Leadership in Toronto may be the first step toward justice for the victims of U.S. counter-terrorism policies and practices.

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