

# Physicians for Human Rights

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

<https://phr.org/news/american-psychological/>

## Public Facing Advocacy Writing

For Immediate Release

The American Psychological Association (APA) today voted to keep a ban on military psychologists at Guantanamo Bay prison, maintaining its firm ethical standards at detention sites that violate international law. Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) called the vote a resounding victory for human rights and has the following statement as a response, attributable to Sarah Dougherty, Senior Fellow, Anti-Torture Program:

PHR commends the American Psychological Association for defending human rights in the face of sustained pressure to weaken its ethics policies. Guantanamo remains a symbol of lawlessness, where detainees face indefinite detention without charge or trial. Many of these men were tortured by the U.S. government, with the systematic involvement of psychologists. The failed push to return military psychologists to Guantanamo is happening at a time when the U.S. president plans to expand the prison and regularly pledges to restore torture. The world is watching what the APA is doing. Maintaining high ethical standards and insisting on access to independent care are critical to upholding both the humane treatment of detainees and the ban on torture and ill-treatment at Guantanamo and elsewhere. It is extraordinarily troubling that the APA allowed a proposed reversal to reach a vote in the first place, and the human rights community will continue to hold the association to its commitments.

Current APA policy, upheld at the APAs annual meeting this week in San Francisco, prohibits psychologists from working at sites determined by relevant United Nations authorities to violate international law, such as Guantanamo Bay detention center, unless specific safeguards are in place. Namely, the psychologist must work directly for the detainee or for an independent third party working to protect human rights. The proposed reversal would have allowed psychologists under the command of the detaining authority to resume clinical roles with prisoners who have been victims of serious human rights abuses.

Physicians for Human Rights is one of several human rights organizations that publicly opposed the policy changes voted down today, including the [American Civil Liberties Union](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), [Amnesty International USA](#), [Human Rights First](#), [Center for Victims of Torture](#), [National Religious Campaign Against Torture](#), [Defending Rights and Dissent](#) and [North Carolina Stop Torture Now](#). In addition, Juan E. Mndez, former UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, [voiced opposition](#) to allowing military psychologists to return to the prison.

Indefinite detention and prolonged isolation violate the absolute ban on torture and ill-treatment under international law. In addition, UN experts and other independent observers have repeatedly raised serious concerns about detention conditions, the health status of detainees, inadequate medical and mental health care, secrecy surrounding accounts of torture, and serious problems with the medical system. As highlighted in PHRs [recent letter](#) to the APA, these concerns include the fact that clinicians are instructed to avoid documenting histories that include torture and ill-treatment and to avoid inquiring into the causes of post-traumatic stress disorder and other psychiatric illnesses linked to severe mental and physical harm.

A policy reversal would have been a shameful capitulation to the U.S. governments interests and a tacit admission that the worlds largest psychology association had weakened its position on torture and ill-treatment. With todays vote, the APA has upheld detainees right to independent and trauma-informed care, and has closed the door on future complicity in abuses by psychologists at Guantanamo, Dougherty said.

PHR has repeatedly called for the closure of Guantanamo, and for years advocated for the APA to strengthen its ethics policies to prevent a return to complicity in torture for psychologists at national security detention sites. Since 2005, PHR has documented the systematic use of psychological and physical torture of national security detainees by U.S. personnel in a series of [groundbreaking reports](#). PHR has also called for an end to the torture and ill-treatment of detainees by the United States, a federal investigation into the role of health professionals in the U.S. torture program, and full criminal and professional accountability for any health professionals complicit in detainee abuses.

*Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) is a New York-based advocacy organization that uses science and medicine to prevent mass atrocities and severe human rights violations. [Learn more here.](#)*

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