

Unveiling Shadows: Guantánamo Prisoners and the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances

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This August 30, the United States should reflect on its own violence, so there can finally be some semblance of accountability—including acknowledging wrongdoing, repairing the harm to the victims, and putting mechanisms in place that prevent this violence from recurring.

Despite the fact that the United States has routinely and openly violated the human rights of its own citizens as well as communities across the globe, the government rarely has any qualms about condemning the violations of other countries. These condemnations, almost always hypocritical, however, often do more to shine light on its own abuses and the lack of accountability.

Like clockwork each year, the United States issues statements commemorating various human rights days highlighting particular abuses. Last year, for example, Secretary of State Antony Blinken [released a statement](#) through the State Department on the occasion of the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances. The statement reads in part that "the United States renews its commitment to addressing enforced disappearance and calls on governments around the world to put an end to this practice, hold those responsible to account, reveal the whereabouts or fate of loved ones who have been disappeared, and respect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all persons."

This year, the U.S. government will almost certainly release yet another statement to commemorate the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances on August 30, once again erasing its own crimes. Although disappearances have less typically been associated with the United States, the U.S. has long deployed this abuse in the War on Terror—often disguising the practice through euphemisms and denials. After two decades plus of the War on Terror, however, it is imperative to shed light on the unresolved issue of

Guantánamo prisoners' disappearances and the CIA's disturbing rendition, detention, and interrogation program that operated in the earlier days of the war.

Obscured Realities: Rendition and Disappearances

In the early days of the War on Terror, the CIA was given the licence to render and detain people in countries across the globe who were willing to host black sites. The program operated from 2002-2009, with at least 119 individuals enduring the violence of the CIA. Some never returned home; others were sent to Guantánamo Bay. Although the U.S. government has continued to use the term "render" as in render to justice, in practice, many of those subjected to this violence have effectively disappeared—leaving their families in an abyss of uncertainty, all while the U.S. government refuses to reckon with this legacy.

On the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, the United States should reflect on its own violence, so there can finally be some semblance of accountability—including acknowledging wrongdoing, repairing the harm to the victims, and putting mechanisms in place that prevent this violence from recurring.



Activists holding signs with the names of 35 men still imprisoned at the U.S. military prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, protest outside the White House in Washington, D.C. on January 11, 2023, the 21st anniversary of the notorious facility. (Photo: Alex Wong/Getty Images)

Enforced disappearances are a particularly brutal form of state violence. Not only do the victims fear never being found, the families of the victims live in perpetual uncertainty with constant denials of information from the government about their loved ones' fates. The pain of not knowing whether a family member is alive or deceased, free or imprisoned, makes closure impossible.

Disappearing War on Terror Prisoners

The post-9/11 and the War on Terror waged by the United States transformed many parts of the world into war zones, cemeteries, and prisons. Lives were forever lost or shrouded in obscurity, while entire families were erased. [Gul Rahman](#), an Afghan citizen, is just one name among the countless individuals whose fate became tragically entwined with the secret operations of the Central Intelligence Agency, vanishing into CIA black sites, never to emerge alive. Among the torture Rahman endured was being handcuffed to the ground, put in a diaper, and placed in a cell with freezing temperatures—which led to his untimely death by hypothermia. Rahman's family was never formally informed of his death, and,

despite their fighting to have his body returned for a proper burial, the United States has denied their request.

Detention by the CIA was not the only way War on Terror prisoners have been effectively disappeared. When the first Muslim men were taken to Guantánamo in January 2002, only the nationalities of prisoners were disclosed. Not only because the U.S. didn't actually know the identities of many of the men, but because they were so dehumanized, that the U.S. government didn't prioritize sharing the names with the International Committee of the Red Cross or any other agency or institution—especially any that would hold them accountable. It wasn't until 2004 that the names of the men detained were finally revealed—although many with incomplete names documented, leaving their families in prolonged darkness about their whereabouts. Names were only disclosed by monitoring websites like Alasra and the Britain-based CagePrisoners.

Guantánamo became synonymous with secrecy, human rights abuses, and the plight of countless detainees. Many were held there for years, unaccounted for, like ghosts in the system. Families were left in a perpetual state of uncertainty, not knowing whether their loved ones were dead or alive. In addition, nine prisoners died while at Guantánamo—a harrowing and violent conclusion to their detention—especially since the deaths occurred years after many of the men last saw their families.

As a Guantánamo survivor myself, I spent around six agonizing years at Guantánamo before my family knew anything about my whereabouts. Another family came to know about their son in 2016; a lawyer contacted the family and let them know.

Continuing Injustice: Recent Cases

The injustices extended beyond the walls of Guantánamo. In many cases, after being transferred, detainees vanished for months, disappearing into solitary confinement in their home countries in Saudi Arabia or in third-party nations like the United Arab Emirates. Constituting a violent ebb and flow of being lost and found, War on Terror prisoners have been forced to endure the possibility of being disappeared again and again.

[Ghassan al-Sharbi's](#) case represents a more recent chapter in this ongoing tragedy. Forcibly repatriated to Saudi Arabia, he vanished into obscurity. Despite attempts to locate him, his whereabouts remain unknown. The lack of response from both the Saudi government and the State Department exemplifies the prevailing indifference to the plight of former detainees.

Another former prisoner, [Asim al-khalaqi](#), was released to Kazakhstan in 2015, but died tragically four months later due to mistreatment and medical negligence. The Kazakh government failed to inform Asim's family of his death, denying them the chance to retrieve his body or hold a proper burial—thus constituting a symbolic disappearance. He was buried in an unknown cemetery and an unknown grave.

In solidarity with victims and their families, we must reaffirm our collective determination to create a world where no one vanishes, justice prevails, and human dignity is inviolable.

The stories of Gul Rahman, Asim al-khalaqi, Ghassan al-Sharbi, and countless others stand as painful reminders of the enduring impact of CIA rendition, Guantánamo Bay, and the "War on Terror." While the black sites and detention camps have garnered international

criticism, their legacy continues to cast a long shadow over the lives of those affected. Families have been denied closure, and the cycle of suffering perpetuates even after release. The world must remember these names, demand accountability, and work toward a future where such gross violations of human rights are truly left in the past. Until then, the War on Terror will endure as a haunting testament to the cost of sacrificing justice for security.

On this international day, let us demand an end to enforced disappearances and the practices that perpetuate them. Let us hold nations accountable for their actions and demand transparency. In solidarity with victims and their families, we must reaffirm our collective determination to create a world where no one vanishes, justice prevails, and human dignity is inviolable. By doing so, we honor the disappeared, restore justice, and ensure that no one is condemned to obscurity or denied their humanity.

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