

August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018

American Psychological Association  
Attn: Board of Directors and Council of Representatives

Dear member of the Board of Directors and Council of Representatives:

As a member of the Muslim community, in North America and globally, as a psychologist, as a diversity and inclusion consultant, and as an advocate for human rights, I write this brief letter to note my significant concerns for the ruling APA is taking in allowing psychologists to return to the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp. Though I write these concerns as an individual, I want to be clear that I have been actively involved with APA because I believe in us as an institution and our ability as a profession to do right by humanity. It is our research, our experience in working with people (of all backgrounds), that I believe places our profession and our organization in a unique circumstance to be helpful to those in need. I entered the APA through a diversity leadership training initiative, have served as chair for the committee on international relations for psychology, and currently sit on the diversity and inclusion committee for division 13. I've also provided diversity training to APA governance on the issue of Islamophobia. I write this not as an outsider, but as an insider, hoping to help improve our organization for the better.

1. While I recognize there is the issue of returning psychologists to help the men held at the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp with their mental health, one must question if supporting an institution that is based on injustice, is helpful in the big picture. To be holding prisoners based on their ethnicity, their religion, in the context of a so called "war against terror" that inadvertently has targeted Muslims, Arabs, and anyone deemed to be related to them, all without evidence or transparency, in a location where US laws cannot be applied to uphold human rights, we as an organization should be advocating for the dismantling of the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp if we are truly aiming to help those held without trial. **There is no mental health without justice.**

2. If we truly feel allowing psychologists to return to the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp to assist with the mental health of the men held there is a worthwhile endeavor, then we should be mindful of our own professional research. Cultural congruence is critical to trust, to understanding cultural nuances, and the most effective for improving mental health. Psychologists who come from the same cultural, ethnic, language, and religious backgrounds as the detainees would prove to be far more helpful than sending those that do not come from this background. Thus far, this has not happened, and furthermore I believe you would be hard pressed to find a psychologist from ethnic, cultural, and religious background interested in attending the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp because the overwhelming majority see the entire institution and politics around it as unjust, and something that promotes Islamophobia and xenophobia.

3. If we ignore the above two points (and ignoring them speaks volumes to bias we may hold) and still insist on sending psychologists to "help" who are not culturally congruent to the detainees, then we risk sending individuals who won't be as culturally aware, individuals who don't have the lived experience of being the target of Islamophobia, and perhaps those who will

carry with them bias and misunderstanding that will only harm the detainees the aim to assist. **Intention alone is not sufficient to be helpful.** Research also notes that in typical clinical settings (not one based on wrongful imprisonment without evidence, that purportedly implement torture or questionable interrogation tactics at best) trust is a critical factor in the success of therapy between the client and a therapist, which is why cultural congruence is strongly recommended when available. One common misunderstanding that occurs is the perception that clients from a Muslim or Middle Eastern background don't open up to therapists of the opposite gender because of culture or religious views on a gender divide. On the contrary, this tends to be related to trust due to fear of being misjudged or misunderstood due to a lack of cultural congruency, or a proper reflection of understanding, or the therapist.

4. If we ignore the facts above, I am afraid we leave ourselves victim the blindness of our biases. Which unfortunately do not fit any model of cross cultural competence, almost all of which suggest a review of our own biases, before learning about the cultural beliefs of the other. Have we, in this review, sought the opinion of the Middle East and North African (MENA) group or other Muslim psychologists? If we have not, or if we've only sought the opinion of a minority of people from this cohort of colleagues, then we may risk coming across as knowing what is better for people whose experience we may know little about. And that, unfortunately and unintentionally, may come across as quite colonial in thinking and in process.

With all due humility, but with a sincerely concerned heart, I urge you to consider these points.



Rehman Abdulrehman, Ph.D., C. Psych.  
Clinical Psychologist & Clinic Director - Clinic Psychology Manitoba  
Consulting Psychologist – Lead With Diversity  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Clinical Health Psychology  
Max Rady College of Medicine  
Faculty of Health Sciences  
University of Manitoba