

Guantánamo Diary

A book review by Rafael Mendez

Guantánamo Diary is often discussed as a document of the post-9/11 era, a testament about the horrendous and unjust detention and torture policy of the United States. A close read, however, brings an experience something far more intimate and destabilizing: the internal, psychological life of Mohamedou Ould Slahi as he endures 14 years of captivity without being charged with a crime. The book does not simply tell us what happened to him. It draws us into what it felt like to inhabit a world where certainty collapses, time disintegrates, and identity is relentlessly tested.

At the heart of Mohamedou's experience of torture is radical uncertainty. Arrested, transferred between countries, and eventually held at Guantánamo, he enters a legal and penal system that never articulates its case against him. Interrogations are constant, the accusations are fluid. The crime shifts constantly.

U.S. gov't accused Mohamedou Ould Slahi of being a significant al-Qaeda operative: they accused him of having sworn allegiance to al-Qaeda in the early 1990s. That he and later recruited members for the organization while living in Germany; that he facilitated travel to Afghanistan for people known as the "Hamburg cell," who committed the 9/11 attacks. They accused Mohamedou of playing a role in planning and supporting terrorist plots, including the September 11 attacks. Under coercive interrogation, he

signed confessions that he later said were false and extracted under torture.

Mohamedou recounts how he was subjected to a coordinated “special interrogation plan” that combined physical coercion with intense psychological pressure. He describes being held in prolonged isolation and solitary confinement, deprived of sleep through constant disruptions and repeated cell transfers, and exposed to extreme cold.

Mohamedou was forced into painful physical stress postures, beaten, and roughly handled by guards. He was subjected to sexual humiliation, including forced nudity. Interrogators told him they were going to hurt his family, especially his mother. They staged mock renditions in which he would be blindfolded, taken out on a boat, and led to believe he would be executed or sent to another country for torture. The cumulative weight of these tactics shattered him psychologically, driving him to offer false confessions in a desperate attempt to bring the abuse to an end.

Despite the seriousness of these allegations, Mohamedou was never formally charged or tried in a criminal court. After eight years in prison, in 2010, a U.S. federal judge ordered his release. The ruling stated that the government had not proven he was “part of” al-Qaeda. The U.S. government appealed the decision and kept him incarcerated for another six years, again without charging him with a crime. He was finally released in 2016 after 14 years of detention and torture. *Guantánamo Diary* is his story. It became an international bestseller, translated into

multiple languages. His story was also adapted into a movie now streaming on Netflix. The film pales in comparison to the book.

Mohamedou Ould Slahi describes how someone can survive and maintain one's dignity and humanity in the worst of conditions. He describes how he was pressured to confess not to a single act but to an expanding web of insinuations. The effect was disorienting. In ordinary life, even suffering has a structure. An illness has a diagnosis, a trial has charges, and a sentence has duration. Mohamedou's imprisonment lacked all three. He existed in a condition of accusation without resolution, detention without end.

This absence of structure intentionally produced a peculiar psychological atmosphere of torture. Ever-present fear. Ever-present confusion. A steady erosion of epistemic ground, where it was impossible to tell what was real. When interrogators present him with elaborate stories about his involvement in plots, he confronted not only their force but their insistence. As the false accusations were repeated and repeated, they began to exert a gravitational pull. His diary captures the vertigo of being told, repeatedly and with confidence, that his own memory was incomplete or false. In that space, the line between truth and survival became painfully thin.

Physical suffering compounds mental instability. Mohamedou describes prolonged isolation, extreme temperatures, sleep deprivation, stress positions, threats against his family, and sexual humiliation. These

techniques were not only aimed at extracting information; they were aimed at fragmenting his sense of self. Sleep deprivation is a powerful tool for creating disorientation. Without rest, thought frays. Emotions fluctuate unpredictably. The body becomes unreliable, and with it, the mind. Mohamedou describes what it felt like, not simply the pain but a slow blurring of internal boundaries.

One of the most remarkable elements of his memoir is Mohamedou's tone. He does not write as a man consumed by anger. He writes with reflection, irony, and at times a startling gentleness. He observed his captors, their accents, humor, and insecurities. Some are cruel; others display flashes of decency. He refused to flatten them into monsters, even when they participated in his suffering. In retrospect, this refusal wasn't naïveté. It was his form of resistance. By insisting on the complexity of those who guarded him, he preserved his own moral agency. Hatred would be understandable; instead, he cultivated a difficult form of empathy. Thus, he maintained his humanity.

Mohamedou threads humor through his narrative in unexpected ways. He jokes about cultural misunderstandings. About the absurd theatricality of certain interrogations, about the contradictions in the stories he was asked to confirm. His humor is subtle and often dark, yet it signals something profound: his sense of self had not been extinguished. Laughter became a quiet assertion of life's continuity, a reminder that even in his indefinite confinement, imagination persists.

Time in his diary feels viscous. Days do not accumulate toward a goal; they pool. Without a trial date or release timeline, his future became abstract. Hope would emerge only in fragile bursts, sparked by a guard's fleeting kindness, a promising legal development, or a rumor of transfer, only to vanish just as quickly. After eight years, when a federal judge eventually orders his release, the order is immediately appealed by the U.S. gov't. He remained in custody, indefinitely, at Guantanamo Bay. The judicial and penal system moves slowly and ambiguously. For Mohamedou, this meant hope was dangerous. To hope too strongly risked devastation. The emotional economy of indefinite detention required caution, even toward optimism.

In his diary, you feel how family memory became an anchor in this instability. Mohamedou repeatedly returns to thoughts of his mother, of Mauritania, where he grew up, and of ordinary domestic life. These recollections were both sentimental digressions and survival mechanisms. In a place designed to reduce him to a case number, his memory reasserts through his narratives a continuity of identity. He is not only a prisoner. He is a son, a brother, a citizen of Mauritania with a language. His recollections of sand, heat, conversation, and prayer restore texture to a life flattened by indefinite imprisonment.

Religion also played a stabilizing role for Mohamedou. Prayer gave him structure to time in the face of intentionally random, punitive, and arbitrary schedules. His faith offered a perspective for his suffering that is not

reducible to geopolitics. It provided an orientation. In moments of despair, Mohamedou would frame his endurance as a form of spiritual trial. This does not eliminate his pain; it situates it within a broader metaphysical spirituality.

The act of writing the diary itself is perhaps the most profound assertion of agency in the book. Composed in English, the language of his captors, the text carries a layered irony. Mohamedou uses the idiom of those who detain him to narrate his own version of events. The manuscript, later released with heavy redactions, visually bears the marks of censorship. Black bars interrupt sentences, leaving absences that echo the larger theme of erasure. Yet even in redacted form, the voice is unmistakable. The state attempts to control the narrative; the narrative persists.

What emerges from Mohamedou's memoir is not simply a chronicle of abuse but a meditation on the fragility of legal and moral frameworks under fear. Mohamedou inhabits a system that claims to defend justice while suspending its procedures. For him, this contradiction is not theoretical. It was a daily reality. He is told that he is dangerous; he is never formally charged. He is told that cooperation will bring relief; the terms of cooperation shift. The rule of law appears and disappears like the weather.

And yet, through years of confinement, he maintains a disciplined attentiveness to his own internal life. He tracks his emotions. He questions his reactions. He notes moments when despair threatens to overwhelm him and

moments when gratitude surprises him. This attentiveness becomes a form of quiet sovereignty. If he cannot control his circumstances, he can observe them. If he cannot shape policy, he can shape narrative.

To read *Guantánamo Diary* as an essay in feeling is to encounter claustrophobia mixed with resilience, humiliation intertwined with dignity, and uncertainty countered by narrative persistence. It is a glimpse at being suspended between accusation and silence, between hope and resignation. It is a glimpse of living in a room without windows and discovering, slowly, that language itself can become an opening.

Mohamedou's memoir conveys powerfully the experience of being rendered legally ambiguous yet stubbornly human. The institution attempts to categorize him as a threat; writing the diary restores him.