

“Learning English in Guantánamo”

Maya Nath

Interpersonal communication is so fundamental to our everyday lives that we scarcely think of it. It was only after visiting Guantánamo Bay for the first time that I began to understand the horrors of miscommunication.

As a young, female, and American attorney, I arrived in Guantánamo full of uncertainty. When I met with my client, whom I’ll call “Samir,” I saw the notorious prison through the eyes of a twenty-four year old man who, despite prolonged imprisonment, has cultivated an optimistic outlook on life, a burgeoning faith, and an astonishing ability to put others’ well-being before his own.

Having worked on his case for months, I firmly believe that Samir should be freed from imprisonment at Guantánamo and released to his family, who mourn each day lost with him. However, even if our government had accurately characterized Samir as “the worst of the worst,” I would not believe that our government should indefinitely detain him, virtually incommunicado, bereft of hope of a fair hearing, much less of ever being released.

Unlike most Guantánamo prisoners, Samir enjoys the protection of the English language. Having used English as a shield against unwarranted abuse by establishing himself as an affable and peaceable individual, Samir acts as an informal advocate for his fellow prisoners. Although he is essentially powerless, Samir tries to use language to facilitate understanding between prisoners and captors in everyday situations. His attempts reveal one of the many problems plaguing Guantánamo—miscommunication.

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In our meeting, Samir painted a vivid picture of the treatment endured by some Guantánamo prisoners unfamiliar with the English language. Consider the experience of “Amar” who ripped his trousers to seek respite from the sweltering Guantánamo prison cells. Although Samir did not witness everything that happened to Amar, he was within hearing distance and generally can learn of incidents happening in the same prison area almost contemporaneously.

Since prisoners are forbidden from altering their uniforms, a guard came to Amar’s cell and ordered him to stand behind the black line painted on the floor so that he could pass him new trousers. Amar misunderstood the command and thought that the guard was asking him for his trouser size. An absurd exchange ensued; instead of standing behind the black line, Amar continued to repeat his pant size, “3XL? 3XL?” while gesturing to his trousers. The guard left the cell.

Samir, who knew the guard, told his neighboring prisoners to warn Amar that the guard would likely return with pepper spray but his fellow prisoners were afraid to become involved. The guard returned with pepper spray, as predicted, and apparently used it against Amar. Samir was told that after screaming in pain and coughing, Amar lay down, unconscious. Neighboring cellmates then heard the familiar footsteps of the Immediate Reaction Force (IRF) team. Clad in riot gear, IRF teams are used to subdue “noncompliant” prisoners at Guantánamo. Samir was told that despite Amar being in a prone position, the IRF team beat him. Samir then saw Amar being removed from the cell and taken to a different area of the prison.

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Samir learned that Amar was isolated for forty-eight hours. Every ten minutes, he was forced to acknowledge verbally a knock on his door. Failure to respond resulted in another visit from the IRF team. When Samir saw Amar being returned to his cell, Amar wore only shorts although he had worn pants when he was taken.

It thus appears that Amar was pepper sprayed and spent two days in isolation for misunderstanding a shouted command. However, language cannot provide the only explanation for this altercation. Behind this beating lies a system where I fear guards may have been trained to identify the prisoners as the “worst of the worst,” to essentialize them as Muslims or Arabs and to avoid seeing the common humanity that binds us all together.

After Samir related the story, we both lapsed into momentary silence. I reflected on the fact that prisoners in Guantánamo are denied access to most written materials. Although prison officials cite security concerns as their reason for denying such materials, I often wonder whether the real reason is to prevent the empowerment that comes from understanding a captor’s language? One habeas attorney had the temerity to submit Dr. Suess’ “ABCs” for his client, in the hopes that a children’s book might pass the scrutiny of the prison officials who must approve all non-legal materials given to prisoners. Dr. Suess failed the test, as have other written materials. The one book that the U.S. government has deemed appropriate is the Quran, written in Arabic.

It is curious that our government will only give the Quran to prisoners, many of whom had never read the Quran closely prior to their years of imprisonment. While the Quran has given mental solace to many in Guantánamo, Amar’s experience demonstrates the important role that the

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English language plays on a day-to-day basis in these men’s lives. Providing Arabic-language Qurans to prisoners cannot and should not obscure all the fundamental things denied them: an ability to understand their captors, knowledge of the evidence against them, unfettered access to counsel, a fair evidentiary hearing and on and on.

The Supreme Court ruling in *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld* in June surely marks an important step in a slow, arduous legal battle. However, since *Hamdan* most directly relates to Guantánamo prisoners with formal charges, hundreds of men like Samir and Amar remain imprisoned in Guantánamo, waiting to receive formal charges, an evidentiary hearing, and the hope of release. Until then, Samir and his fellow prisoners continue to wait in a place where not knowing English can lead to sleepless torture or worse.

In writing this, I wonder what effect these words can have for those men?