

“The Forever Prisoner”: Abu Zubaydah’s testimony from Guantánamo Bay

The Atrium Gallery, London School of Economics until June 5, 2026

Paul Mitchell
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The exhibition at the London School of Economics of the drawings of Abu Zubaydah, still imprisoned after 24 years in Camp Delta detention camp in Guantánamo Bay, is not an artistic event. It is an indictment—of the United States, Britain and the other imperialist powers, their global War on Terror, and every institution that enabled, sanitised, or normalised the torture and indefinite detention that stand among the gravest crimes of the twenty-first century. It is the voice of a man they have worked systematically to erase.

Opening on 12 May but lasting for barely a month, the first ever exhibition of Zubaydah’s work was introduced by his international lawyer, Helen Duffy. She explained how Zubaydah has been held in arbitrary detention for 24 years without charge, trial, or judicial review. He was brutally tortured—waterboarded 83 times in a single month, as confirmed in 2021 Supreme Court proceeding—from the moment of his capture in Pakistan in 2002, and has remained in a legal black hole ever since. His case, Duffy noted, “epitomises the brutality, arbitrariness, and dehumanisation” that defined the War on Terror.

The drawings are testimony wrested from a brutal and vindictive censorship regime. Every word Zubaydah writes is presumptively classified; his letters, reflections, even his memories must be cleared and stamped “Approved to Release” by the same government that tortured him. As Duffy explained, she was not even allowed to relay a message from him to the audience.

The only reason these drawings exist publicly is because they were declassified, line by line and image by image, after years of legal struggle—a process first brought to wider attention when a 2019 Seton Hall Law School report published Zubaydah’s forensic reconstructions of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) “enhanced

interrogation techniques.”

The drawings are precise, diagrammatic. They depict waterboarding, stress positions, coffin-sized boxes, forced nudity, threats of rape, prolonged beatings and sleep deprivation—the full repertoire of a CIA torture programme designed and authorised at the highest levels of the American state. They are forensic reconstructions: a visual archive assembled because the state destroyed or classified the original evidence. They expose torture not as the aberrant conduct of rogue operatives but as a bureaucratic system ratified across successive administrations by presidents, vice presidents, attorneys general, and intelligence directors.

Barack Obama’s presidency did not close Guantánamo—it stabilised it. His 2008 promise to shut the prison served as political cover, allowing the Democrats to posture as humane while leaving the repressive apparatus intact.

In office, Obama signed orders that blocked detainee transfers, maintained the military commissions, and replaced Bush-era arbitrariness with Periodic Review Boards—a mechanism that entrenched indefinite detention rather than challenged it. Guantánamo was transformed into a permanent, legally codified institution, now inherited by Donald Trump and part of the apparatus aiding his drive to dictatorship.

The exhibition traces Zubaydah’s passage through the CIA’s network of black sites—Pakistan, Thailand, Poland, Afghanistan, Lithuania, Guantánamo—which map a global criminal enterprise involving intelligence agencies, governments, and military apparatuses across four continents.

It details how, through the dogged efforts of Duffy and similarly committed lawyers and activists, the European

Court of Human Rights ruled against Poland and Lithuania for hosting CIA torture facilities, and the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention condemned every state implicated in the programme. In 2018, the UK parliament was forced to publish a report confirming that British intelligence supplied questions to be put to Zubaydah while fully aware he was being tortured—consistent with the broader pattern of UK complicity in rendition and abuse documented for decades.

The British government recently made a damages payment to Zubaydah, following earlier out-of-court settlements with other victims of UK-facilitated rendition and torture. Each settlement is accompanied by confidentiality clauses, suppressed evidence, and the tacit assurance that no official will face prosecution.

Duffy emphasised the indispensable role of investigative journalists in exposing the CIA programme. But the exhibition being staged at the LSE serves to emphasise broader culpability.

The institution occupies a key place within the ideological architecture of the political order that launched and sustained the War on Terror. It was here that former LSE director Anthony Giddens—Tony Blair’s intellectual mentor—developed the “Third Way,” the doctrine through which New Labour severed its remaining connection to the working class and reconstituted itself as an open instrument of capital.

The “Third Way” was ideological preparation for a government that, within two years of taking office, was supplying questions to CIA interrogators while permitting British airspace, intelligence services, and diplomatic cover to facilitate a global torture programme.

The LSE incubated many of the staff directly responsible—its governing structures saturated with former intelligence officials, Blair advisers, and Foreign Office figures. Giddens met Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in Tripoli in 2006 and 2007 on visits vetted by Libyan intelligence. Sir Mark Allen, the MI6 official involved in rendering Libyan dissidents into Gaddafi’s torture apparatus, moved within the same institutional network. Sir David Manning—Britain’s ambassador to Washington when Bush informed Blair of the plan to invade Iraq—sat on the board of LSE Ideas.

That the LSE now hosts the drawings of a man tortured within a system it helped make intellectually respectable is an exercise in institutional containment: the management of historical guilt in a form that indicts no one by name.

The exhibition’s final section shows Zubaydah in Guantánamo looking outward. He responds to the police murder of George Floyd. He expresses solidarity with the Palestinian people. These works show a man who, despite everything, insists upon his own humanity—and extends it to others.

Zubaydah depicts what he calls “the terrorism in the War on Terror”—a phrase capturing the brutalising and punitive character of a quarter-century of imperialist war. He describes how “The long daily torture period did not end until I was swamped with blood, vomit, and urine. So I started to create, fabricate, and invent terrorist operations for them from my imagination just to get rid of, and take a break from, their torture and terror.”

“When I got out of the black sites and moved to Guantánamo, I started to meet with attorneys, and knew the world news, which I had not been in contact with entirely for four and a half years in custody. Then, I knew what they had done—killing, destruction, and torture, even against civilians, in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries. I realized that they used terrorism in their war on terrorism. So, the result is nothing but more and greater terrorism, from both sides.”

One of the exhibition’s most striking curatorial choices is the placement of sand within the display cases. Zubaydah is imprisoned on a Caribbean island surrounded by beaches he will never touch. He can hear the sea. He cannot reach it.

Duffy addressed the discomfort involved in viewing images of torture. But these images of suffering are also acts of resistance, memorialisation, and historical record. The exhibition ends with a board asking: “What Now?” Duffy urged visitors to consider it. The essential demand is clear: Abu Zubaydah must be released.

But 24 years of detention without charge, trial, or judicial review is a warning—of what capitalist states, armed with the language of emergency and stripped of democratic restraint, are capable of doing, and will do again and again, unless the working class is politically mobilised to stop them.



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