

# Israel's very own Guantanamo

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The "death ride" -- welcome to 21st century torture, says **Khaled Amayreh** in occupied East Jerusalem

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Israeli maltreatment of Palestinian captives and political prisoners has reached unprecedented levels of brutality, according to lawyers, human rights groups and newly-released prisoners.

There are currently as many as 12,000 Palestinian detainees languishing in Israeli detention camps, many of them without charge or trial. They include hundreds of university professors, engineers, school teachers as well as religious and civic leaders, students, resistance fighters and women activists.

Two years ago, the Israeli occupation authorities abducted hundreds of democratically- elected officials, including mayors, members of local city councils, law-makers, and cabinet ministers, many associate with Hamas's political wing.

Israel employs a set of draconian laws, some dating back to the British mandate era, to torment Palestinian prisoners. The same laws are also used to lend a façade of legality to other harsh treatment of Palestinians, such as house demolitions, land confiscation and deportation.

Normally, the harsh treatment meted out to Palestinian detainees starts in earnest with crack Israeli soldiers raiding a given Palestinian home in the quiet hours before dawn. There, the undisciplined soldiers normally ransack the house, vandalise property and furniture, smash house appliances and terrorise the entire family, before blindfolding and handcuffing their victim and dragging him away to a military truck that takes him to one of the dozens of interrogation centres all over Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories.

Upon arrival at the interrogation centre, the detainee is instantly subjected to an array of harsh treatment techniques designed to shock him and destroy his psychological immunity. These include sleep deprivation and solitary confinement as well as sporadic beating.

Then the victim is made to go through the routine technique called *shabh* whereby he is forced to sit on a 25cm high stool, with his hands tied to his back. He can be kept in this extremely uncomfortable position for weeks or even months except for short periods to go to the toilet and eat.

The main purpose behind the harsh treatment is ostensibly to extract confessions from the victim. On many occasions, the victims confess to having committed fictitious violations only to escape the harsh and intolerable torture. Eventually, however, if no confessions are extracted, the detainee is sentenced to administrative detention, or open-ended captivity without being charged or tried.

Torture, which the Israeli judicial authorities euphemistically refer to as "moderate physical and psychological pressure", is officially sanctioned by Israel's law. Indeed, several Palestinian detainees have recently died in Israeli jails either due to torture or medical negligence. According to the Palestinian Prisoner Club, which monitors Israeli treatment of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, 167 Palestinians have died in Israeli custody since 1967.

However, while torture was normally performed on detainees mainly in order to extract confessions, the Israeli prison authorities have been using torture for the purpose of simply tormenting and humiliating Palestinian detainees.

"Their goal is to make us suffer, to torment us, to humiliate us. They want to punish us further for our survival, for refusing to die and disappear as a people, for refusing to collapse. Perhaps they think that

by tormenting us, they get the feeling that they are avenging the holocaust, at least vicariously," said Mohamed Abu Zneid, from Dura, who was released recently from an Israeli detention camp near the Egyptian borders. "But I can say that such behaviour can only come from a sick people, a sadistic people. Otherwise, why would normal people behave this way?"

"Administrative detention" which is a mere euphemism for prolonged and mostly unlawful captivity as punishment for one's political thoughts and attitudes has become of late the *modus operandi* of Israeli treatment of Palestinian prisoners. Today, Israel is detaining hundreds of mostly innocent Palestinians in detention camps all over Israel, such as the notorious Kitziot concentration camp in the Negev desert.

A few years ago, Mustafa Shawar, a detainee at Kitziot, informed this writer that on several occasions he had appealed to the Jewish military "judge" at the Treblinka-like facility to tell him why he was being incarcerated so that he wouldn't commit the same violation again once he was released. Shawar, a senior lecturer at the University of Hebron, said the judge paid no attention to his just request. "He told me that he wouldn't grant me the privilege of knowing why I was in jail because, as he said, the Jews are the masters and non-Jews are the slaves and the chosen people are under no moral or legal obligation to explain to the inferiors why they are being mistreated."

Today, Shawar is still languishing at Kitziot for the fourth successive year, not knowing why he is being tormented by a state that claims to be a "light unto nations" and the "only democracy in the Middle East".

Shawar is not an exceptional case. He epitomises the fate of thousands of Palestinian detainees and hostages languishing in Israeli detention camps, mostly for harbouring ideas and thoughts that the Ashkenazi establishment deems too dangerous.

Similarly, Azzam Salhab, professor of comparative religion at Hebron University, has been languishing in the same desert concentration camp for eight years on vague charges such as "constituting a danger to the safety and security of Israel and the Jewish people."

According to the Nafha Society, a human rights group defending Palestinian prisoners' rights, the Israeli occupation authorities issue dozens of administrative detention orders per month.

Earlier, this week, the Israeli army renewed the "administrative detention" for Radi Sami Al-Asi for additional six months. Al-Asi, a journalist from the northern West Bank town of Nablus, was arrested on unspecified charges. However, when it became clear that there was no evidence indicting him, the Israeli military judge decided to sentence him to six months in jail, renewable for as long as the occupation authorities deem fit. So far, Al-Asi has spent more than 38 months in administrative detention without knowing why.

Farhat Asad, a 40-year-old father of three children from Ramallah, was sentenced to a sixth term of administrative detention on 16 June. All in all, Asad has spent more than 100 months in administrative detention.

According to Tawhid Shaaban, a prominent lawyer from East Jerusalem, some detainees have spent nine years in Israeli captivity without charge or trial. "Yes, this happens in a state that claims to be the only democracy in the Middle East."

The so-called "death ride" is one of the most agonising and nightmarish experiences a detainee undergoes. It starts with a sudden raid of a given ward by the notorious Nahshon squad, which is specialised in repressing Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. Then a prisoner or several prisoners are ordered to board an extremely filthy, hot and nearly hermetically sealed white vehicle, allegedly in order to appear before a judge several hundred kilometres away. The hateful vehicle would move very slowly from one prison to the other to carry additional prisoners, including dangerous Jewish criminals. The car would stop every hour for refreshment, while the inmates are sweating in the back chamber.

The nightmarish journey, which could last for 24 hours, is first and foremost meant to make the prisoners suffer as much as possible in the oven-like metal chamber where there is very little oxygen.

The prisoners are barred from using toilets for close to 16 hours, and some are forced to urinate and defecate inside the lock-up car.

Saed Yassin, a human rights activist describes the "death ride" as "an intolerable and unbearable form of torture. They don't treat you as a human being but as cattle or a piece of luggage. People are left to rot and suffer in these oven- like chambers for up to 24 hours without food, without water, and with very little oxygen. And if they want to torment a given person, he is forced to undergo this nightmare every few days."

In addition to the death ride, the Israeli Prison Authority has been introducing additional forms of punishments, aimed at breaking the prisoner's will. These include barring family visits for an extended period of times for the slightest and pettiest violation of outstanding instructions.

Moreover, the Israeli occupation authorities have been barring family visits for more than 900 Gazan prisoners in Israeli jails under the pretext of the 18-month harsh blockade which Israel has been imposing in Gaza. The Red Cross asked Israel on several occasions to allow Gazans to visit their beloved ones, but to no avail.

Israel recently resorted to "unorthodox tactics" to harass Palestinian prisoners, including raiding and vandalising their homes and mistreating their wives and children, imposing hefty financial fines on them, and carrying out surprise searches usually after midnight.

Last week, lawyers and newly-released prisoners reported that the Israeli Prison Authorities have naked Jewish women, probably prostitutes, harass prisoners, especially religious inmates, through sexually suggestive behaviour. A spokesman for the prison authorities refused to confirm or deny the revelation.

C a p t i o n : Palestinians inspect the wreckage of a car hit by an Israeli air strike on Gaza, virtually the largest open air prison in the world

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