

Israel steps up repression against its Arab citizens

Jordan Shilton
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Alongside its May 31 assault on a convoy bringing aid to Gaza, Israel has stepped up its repression of domestic political opponents.

In recent weeks, the security authorities have detained two prominent figures within the Israeli Arab community, accusing them of acting as spies for the Lebanese organisation, Hezbollah.

Ameer Makhoul, who heads an umbrella group of Arab human rights organisations in Israel and has backed an international campaign for boycott, sanctions and divestment against Israel, was detained on May 6 by Shin Bet, Israel's security forces. Two weeks earlier, on April 24, leading scientist Omar Said was taken into custody. Both were accused of having developed contacts with Hezbollah in order to pass secret information to them about political and military matters in Israel.

Having obtained a gagging order on the reporting of the arrests, the full details did not emerge until several days later. Makhoul was held for at least 12 days without any access to his lawyers and with no opportunity to appear in court. He was interrogated by the security forces, which subjected him to torture in order to extract a confession.

At the beginning of his trial last week, Makhoul's lawyers stated he had been deprived of sleep for 36 hours and had been tied to a small chair for several days without being allowed to move. Interrogators threatened Makhoul, stating that he would be "left disabled" after the ordeal. His family has claimed that he suffered a severe deterioration in his eyesight during his captivity, as well as sharp pains in his back.

The day before his trial began, Makhoul's family released a statement denouncing the methods of Shin Bet and calling for the security force to be prosecuted. The statement, signed by Makhoul's wife and brother, a former member of the Knesset (Israel's parliament), read, "We urge the international and local community to continue to pressure the Israeli government and the justice system and force it to open an independent investigation against the Shin Bet detectives, publish a detailed report about the investigation,

and prosecute those behind the systematic torture that he has suffered and have them punished."

The statement added, "Any indictment based on information collected by the Shin Bet using torture should be declared null and illegitimate."

It drew attention to the importance of the case for the wider population, noting that "defending Ameer's liberties as a prisoner is not a private matter, but is a general national and democratic affair."

Makhoul and Said have not been charged with public order offences or visiting neighbouring Arab states but with the much more serious charge of espionage, which carries a long sentence. Shin Bet alleges the pair made "contact with a foreign agent" and several meetings were held with this contact abroad in order to pass on sensitive information about Israeli military operations. Under the draconian emergency regulations being used in this case, the police need only the flimsiest circumstantial evidence to bring a prosecution and are allowed to keep their evidence secret.

Shin Bet has shown its willingness over recent years to flout legal procedure, having detained a number of prominent figures within the Arab community. In 2003 Sheikh Raed Salah, who leads the Popular Islamic Movement, was jailed for two years while he awaited trial on charges of supporting a terrorist group. The charge was eventually dropped without any evidence being produced, when Salah accepted a plea bargain in which he claimed to have committed only financial offences.

In 2007, Balad party leader Azmi Bishara was forced into exile after being accused of espionage while he was out of the country. Balad, an Arab political party, has come under particular scrutiny since Israel's month-long conflict with Hezbollah in 2006, with claims being made that the party was assisting the Lebanese movement. Said, the second man in the latest espionage charges, is a senior member of Balad.

Even Israel's military correspondents, who can generally be relied upon to back the security services, have not been able to accept the claim that Makhoul and Said are spies. Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff, defence correspondents for

Ha'aretz, pointed out that neither Israeli Arab citizen would have had access to secrets that would interest Hezbollah. Instead, they suggested that any contacts between Hezbollah and Hamas and Arab human rights activists in Israel should be seen as a threat because Arab leaders in Israel might offer assistance in “coordinating political positions” or initiate “protests and riots during sensitive periods.”

What this amounts to is the claim that any kind of political support given to Israel’s alleged enemies can be termed “spying”. Moreover, given the family and cultural links between the Arab population in Israel and neighbouring states it opens the way for the criminalisation of the whole Israeli Arab community.

This was the clear implication of a comment from a senior Shin Bet official to *Ha'aretz*, stating, “Part of the information that Makhoul transferred could be delivered by anyone with a pair of eyes and Google Earth [a computer programme that provides satellite photographs]. But Makhoul, as an Israeli Arab, has freedom of movement and access across Israel.”

Sections of the Israeli political establishment have been advocating stricter controls on the Arab population for some time. In 2007, Yuval Diskin, Shin Bet’s chief, introduced a new policy targeting the whole Arab community as a security risk. Since then repression has increased dramatically. More than 1,000 Arab youths in Israel were interrogated by the Shin Bet after the 2008-2009 assault on Gaza, and Arab Israeli leaders are under constant attack.

That is why Makhoul and Said have been targeted. During Operation Cast Lead at the beginning of 2009, when Israel killed more than 1,300 Palestinians over the course of several weeks of intense bombing of the Gaza Strip, Makhoul spoke out and led protests against this. He was told in January 2009 by a Shin Bet interrogator that he was “a rebel” who was supporting Israel’s enemies during a time of war, which could lead to him being sent to Gaza.

Mohammed Zeidan, head of the Human Rights Association in Nazareth, confirmed that Shin Bet had targeted Makhoul for some time and recent events had left him “afraid”. “The Shin Bet wanted to take him out of the game and they have succeeded. Ameer has been disappeared,” he stated.

A further warning of what is being prepared for opponents of the current regime came on the very day Makhoul’s trial commenced. Israel’s parliament introduced a bill to revoke the citizenship and permanent residency status of Israeli Arabs should they be deemed a security risk. There are 1.4 million Israeli Arabs, 20 percent of the population, including those living in East Jerusalem who have permanent residency rather than the citizenship status to which they are entitled.

The measure has been promoted by the right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu party, one of the coalition partners in the Likud-led coalition government. Avigdor Lieberman, Israel’s foreign secretary and the leader of Yisrael Beiteinu, has advocated the re-drawing of the border between Israel and the West Bank to include large Jewish settlement blocks and transfer northern Israel’s predominantly Arab town and villages to the West Bank. His party has also called for the exclusion from citizenship of Arab Israelis who refuse to sign an oath of loyalty to the state.

The bill’s provisions state that any Israeli Arab charged with “spying for a terrorist organisation” would have their citizenship revoked immediately. Given that Israel designates many of its political adversaries as “terrorists”, the scope of this law, in the event it passes its remaining three readings, would pave the way for Israel to revoke the citizenship or permanent residency of any Arabs within Israel that oppose its policies.

Increasingly, the Israeli political establishment views Israel’s Arab minority as a fifth column that poses a political threat to the survival of Israel as a Jewish state.

Yisrael Beiteinu has already called Hanin Zuabi, a Knesset member who was on the Mavi Marmara, the lead ship of the aid flotilla, a traitor and demanded that her citizenship be revoked. Eli Yishai, the interior minister, has petitioned Yehuda Weinstein, the attorney general, to help him revoke her citizenship in order to deter other Israeli Arabs from joining future aid convoys to Gaza.

This new legislation is being implemented at a time of growing tension in the region, with Israel engaging in provocative actions against the Palestinians in Gaza on a daily basis. On Monday, Israeli naval forces killed at least four divers from the Al Aqsa Brigade in Gaza’s coastal waters. It follows the murderous raid on the aid convoy bound for Gaza and the illegal interception of the Rachel Corrie, and bellicose threats against Hezbollah, Lebanon, Syria and Iran.

In this environment, Israel refuses to tolerate any political opposition to its policies. It is therefore preparing the means to enable it to outlaw any form of protest or dissention that emerges against its ever more aggressive policies in the region.



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