

UN report documents Israeli regime's abuse and torture of Palestinian children

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The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) published a report last week accusing Israel of committing abuses against Palestinian children, including torture, solitary confinement and threats of death and sexual assault in prisons.

The committee's 18 independent experts examined Israel's record of compliance with a 1990 treaty as part of its regular review of a pact signed by all nations except Somalia and the United States. They obtained their evidence, which relates to the 10-year period from 2002, from other UN rights bodies, military sources and Israeli and Palestinian rights groups, including the Israeli soldiers' group Breaking the Silence.

The Israeli authorities once again refused to cooperate with requests for information, with the UN committee noting Israel's "persistent refusal" to provide information on children in the Palestinian territories and occupied Syrian Golan Heights, captured in the 1967 war, since its last review in 2002, and Israel's failure to implement most of its recommendations from earlier investigations.

The last 10 years include the violent suppression of the second intifada that started in September 2000, the assault on the West Bank in 2002, and several military campaigns against Gaza, including in 2006, 2008-2009 and 2012.

The committee said soldiers arrested Palestinian youth regularly during night-time raids, tying the children's hands painfully and blindfolding them, and often transferring them to detention centres without informing their parents. Israeli soldiers testified to the often arbitrary nature of the arrests.

It also said that arrested Palestinian children were systematically subjected to physical and verbal abuse and threatened with death, physical violence and sexual assault against themselves or members of their family,

as well as having limited access to toilets, food and water.

The UN expressed its "deepest concern about the reported practice of torture and ill-treatment of Palestinian children arrested, prosecuted and detained by the military and the police."

The committee said, "These crimes are perpetrated from the time of arrest, during transfer and interrogation, to obtain a confession but also on an arbitrary basis as testified by several Israeli soldiers as well as during pre-trial detention." It added, "Palestinian children arrested by [Israeli] military and police are systematically subject to degrading treatment, and often to acts of torture, are interrogated in Hebrew, a language they do not understand, and sign confessions in Hebrew in order to be released."

The report made the point that "In no other country are children systematically tried by juvenile *military courts* that, by definition, fall short of providing the necessary guarantees to ensure respect for their rights. All children prosecuted for offences they allegedly committed should be treated in accordance with international juvenile justice standards, which provide them with special protection" [emphasis added].

It said that many were brought in leg chains and shackles before military courts, while youths were held in solitary confinement, sometimes for months.

The CRC report was particularly concerned about Israel's "failure to end these practices in spite of repeated concerns expressed by treaty bodies, special procedures mandate holders and United Nations agencies in this respect."

The report highlighted the large number of Palestinian children who have been held in Israeli jails—an estimated 7,000 aged from 12 to 17 years, but sometimes as young as 9, have been arrested,

interrogated and detained since 2002—an average of two per day. Most of them were detained after being accused of throwing stones at Israeli security forces and settlers, an offence that can carry a 20-year penalty.

To give this some perspective: with a Palestinian population of 3.5 million in the occupied territories, it means that 1 in 50 Palestinian families have had their youngsters imprisoned in the last 10 years. There can be few people on earth for whom child detention been such a central issue in their lives and the lives of their families.

This practice continues today. Citing evidence from UNICEF and the Israeli rights group B'tselem, it said that 236 children were in military detention centres, dozens of them aged between 12 and 15, as recently as last April.

The UN report was concerned about the “continuous use of Palestinian children as human shields and informants”, stating that 14 such cases had been reported between January 2010 and March 2013 alone. It said that Israeli soldiers had used Palestinian children to enter potentially dangerous buildings ahead of them and to stand in front of military vehicles to deter stone-throwing.

But, the CRC added, “Almost all those using children as human shields and informants have remained unpunished, and the soldiers convicted for having forced at gunpoint a nine-year-old child to search bags suspected of containing explosives only received a suspended sentence of three months and were demoted.”

The report added, “Hundreds of Palestinian children have been killed and thousands injured over the reporting period as a result of the state party [Israel] military operations, especially in Gaza where the state party proceeded to conduct air and naval strikes on densely populated areas with a significant presence of children, thus disregarding the principles of proportionality and distinction.”

It attributed the increasing levels of poverty and chronic malnutrition, and the acute water shortage faced by Palestinian children and their families, to the Israeli occupation and the measures taken by Israel to expand the settlements on Palestinian land, construct the Security Wall within the West Bank, and maintain the six-year-long blockade on Gaza.

This report, noting Israel’s failure to carry out its

recommendations from earlier investigations, is not unique.

Crucially, it follows similar investigations that have come out in the last year. The first was a report last summer by Breaking the Silence, which reported on Israeli soldiers’ abuses of Palestinian children. It found many instances of children getting beaten “to a pulp.” The second was a British report *Children in Military Custody*, which showed that Israel was torturing children by holding them “routinely and for substantial periods in solitary confinement,” while UNICEF reported on children in military detention last winter.

Benyamin Netanyahu’s right-wing government dismissed the report with contempt, saying it was no more than a “political bashing of Israel”, and implicitly acknowledging that the findings were not new. The Foreign Ministry said Israel had responded to a report by UNICEF in March on the ill-treatment of Palestinian children and said that this report “recycled old stuff.”

Such inhumane practices—and Israel’s response—are the necessary concomitant of its occupation and land grab, both of which are illegal under international law and are opposed by the Palestinians. Just one aspect of Israel’s oppression of the Palestinians, they make a mockery of Israel’s claim to be the “only democracy in the Middle East”.

The silence from the US and European as well as regional powers—including those who have long used the plight of the Palestinians to boost their own tattered credentials —and media outlets, apart from brief summaries of the report, has been deafening. This should come as no surprise. Israel is playing a crucial, if largely silent, role in the ongoing sectarian civil war being stoked up in Syria to unseat the regime of Bashir al-Assad in favour of a more pliant pro-Washington regime, and to isolate Iran.

They are not going to criticise Israel, when their own criminal wars in the past, those ongoing, and those planned, involve similar if not worse practices.



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