

Australian documentary reveals Israeli torture of Palestinian youth

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13 February 2014

A documentary broadcast on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Four Corners" television program on Monday night provided a devastating portrait of the Israeli government's systematic policy of threats, arbitrary arrest and torture of Palestinian youth and children.

These measures are aimed at holding the Palestinian population, particularly the youth, in a permanent state of terror and suppressing any opposition to the Israeli occupation. An entire generation of youth is being traumatised as the Israeli security forces sow a climate of fear, as well as suspicion and division, through the forced recruitment of young informers.

The well-researched exposé—which also involved the *Australian* newspaper—was based on interviews with Palestinian youth themselves, as well as an Israeli lawyer, a former Israeli soldier and an Australian lawyer who has spent six years in the country.

Qusai Zamara, one of the boys interviewed, was 14 years old when he was abducted from his bed during a late-night military raid on his family home in the West Bank. He was taken to an interrogation facility and tortured into confessing to throwing stones at Israeli citizens and security forces. This accusation is commonly used by the Israeli military to justify the repression, arbitrary arrests and killings meted out against the Palestinian people.

"There was a big machine with electrical wires on it connected to the electricity," Zamara said. "He would throw me on the ground and hit me... He also had a whip with a hose, which he hit me with... He said, 'Either confess or we'll beat you up and bring your parents, beat them up and break their bones'." After signing a confession written in Hebrew, which he did not understand, Zamara later found out that many additional crimes had been added.

Fifteen-year-old Fahti Mahfouz explained what happened when he refused to confess. He was kept in prison for 82 days and tortured. Mahfouz said that the lead interrogator "sent me to a room that had a cross in it and hung me on it. I was standing on the tips of my toes and all my weight was on the handcuffs and my toes ... and he kept hitting me." When he was taken down five hours later, "white foam started coming out of my mouth. Two men came and took me to first aid. Then my chest was cramped. I couldn't breathe. He took me in and asked me, 'Where's the pain?' Then he'd press on it and hit it."

Children are also detained. Wadi'a Mawadeh was just five years old when six soldiers arrested him after an Israeli man accused him of throwing a stone. He was held for two hours before being released.

Among the brutal acts committed in interrogation, Australian lawyer Gerard Horton reported the case of a large dog feeding on food placed on a child's bare body. Another interrogator "specialised" in making detailed threats of rape against children. Horton, from the organisation Military Court Watch, interviewed hundreds of Palestinian youth about their experiences.

The interviews make clear that the abuse is not the callous actions of a few rogue soldiers, but a strategy organised by the Israeli government and security forces. It is part of the decades-long suppression of the Palestinian population that has included targeted assassinations of political opponents and illegal and disproportionate wars of aggression, most recently the 2008–2009 slaughter in Gaza.

A UNICEF report from March 2013 estimated that for each year over the past decade, approximately 700 youth aged 12–17 have been arrested, interrogated and detained—an average of two per day. After being forced into confessions, they are hauled before military courts,

and sentenced in “hearings” as short as 60 seconds. “Four Corners” revealed that the courts have a conviction rate of 99.74 percent—that is, they simply rubberstamp the charges.

Last June, a UN report documented the use of torture, solitary confinement and death threats in Israeli prisons. It was also revealed late last year that the Israeli government kept children overnight in outdoor cages during snowstorms, a practise that the government claims to have since stopped.

One Palestinian man interviewed on the documentary pointed to another purpose of the government program: to expel sections of the population from the occupied territories captured by Israel in the 1967 war. The man was told by an Israeli soldier that in “five years ... you’ll be out of the houses. Your houses have been sold. You have no houses.”

The documentary revealed a practice known as “mapping,” in which young people are woken from their beds at night during heavily-armed military raids, photographed, checked for ID, and forced to detail where they sleep. During interrogations, they are coerced into becoming regular informants for the Israeli state about family members, friends and neighbours.

Islam Darayyoub was 14 when he and his brothers were awoken at 2 a.m. and “mapped.” Several days later, security forces arrested Islam and demanded that he inform on his uncle, Bassem Tamimi, reportedly the leader of a local protest movement.

The broadcast pointed to significant opposition among Israelis to the government’s program. It included footage of Guy Pavia, an Israeli civilian who carries a video camera to escort school children walking past Israeli settlements in the hope of preventing attacks from Israeli thugs. The program revealed that Israeli soldiers are ordered to not intervene if such attacks take place.

Pavia stated: “I can’t describe this in words because I feel myself as a holocaust survivor. My grandfather was a holocaust survivor... All his family died in the Holocaust. And I don’t get it. How one who is suffering from all that stuff, we became people who made other people suffer. It breaks me.”

The program also interviewed Gaby Lasky, an Israeli lawyer who has defended Palestinians in court and opposed the two-tier justice system between Israeli citizens and Palestinians, and Yehuda Shaul, the

founder of Breaking the Silence. This is an organisation of 950 current and former Israeli soldiers who have written testimonies exposing their previous human rights abuses. Shaul recounted: “I have never broken into houses in the middle of the night here in Jerusalem and torn apart apartments. But in Hebron where I served for 14 months 24-7, that’s what we’ve done, in order to make our presence felt.”

The Israeli government simply rejected the revelations and blamed the Palestinian people themselves. Interviewed in the documentary, foreign ministry spokesman Yigal Palmor declared: “A policy to create fear? There is no such thing. The only policy is to maintain law and order, that’s all.”

The Australian government responded by stressing its full support for the Israeli regime. Foreign Minister Julie Bishop claimed to be “deeply concerned by allegations of the mistreatment of Palestinian children,” but in the same breath said the “Australian government welcomes Israel’s ongoing efforts to address these issues.” Both the ruling Liberal-National Coalition and opposition Labor Party in Australia have long been apologists for the Israeli state and all its crimes.



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