

UN says Israel has “de facto state policy” of organised torture

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The United Nations committee on torture has said that Israel has “a de facto state policy of organised and widespread torture” and ill-treatment that has gravely intensified since October 7, 2023.

It expressed “deep concern over allegations of repeated severe beatings, dog attacks, electrocution, waterboarding, use of prolonged stress positions [and] sexual violence,” as well as the impunity of Israeli security forces for war crimes.

The report, published Friday alongside reports on Albania, Argentina and Bahrain, was part of the committee’s regular monitoring of countries that have signed the UN convention against torture. It covered the last two years since the start of the Gaza genocide.

The UN’s committee of 10 independent experts expressed its concern about the disproportionate nature of Israel’s response to the October 7 attacks that have resulted in 70,000 deaths, the destruction of or damage to much of Gaza’s infrastructure and buildings and the displacement of 90 percent of the population.

It said Palestinian detainees were humiliated by “being made to act like animals or being urinated on”, were systematically denied medical care and subject to excessive use of restraints, “in some cases resulting in amputation”.

It noted that Israel lacked a distinct offence criminalizing torture and that its legislation exempts public officials from criminal culpability under the “necessity” defence when unlawful physical pressure is applied during interrogations.

It drew attention to the “high proportion of children who are currently detained without charge or on remand”, noting the age of criminal responsibility imposed by Israel is 12, and that children younger than 12 have also been detained. Children categorised as security prisoners “have severe restrictions on family contact, may be held in solitary confinement, and do not have access to education, in violation of international standards,” it states. The UN committee appealed to Israel to amend its legislation so that solitary confinement is not used against children.

The UN report adds to the mounting evidence produced by Israeli and Palestinian human rights and legal advocacy groups of the torture, abuse and neglect in Israel’s detention centres, operated by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) and the Israel Prison Service (IPS). Israel’s *Channel 14* aired a programme showing an Israeli prison officer describing the abuse, while testimony of the abuse and torture have been widely disseminated on social media, accompanied by the photos and videos shot by Israeli soldiers and former detainees.

Death Sentence for Palestinians in Custody: Report and Testimonies, published recently by the Physicians for Human Rights–Israel (PHRI), says that at least 98 Palestinians have died in Israeli detention centres since October 7, 2023, with evidence pointing in many cases to torture, starvation or medical neglect. Since hundreds of Palestinians detained in Gaza are missing, the real toll is likely to be substantially higher. Fewer than 30 prisoners died in Israeli custody in the 10 years before the war.

These large numbers, and the fact that they occurred across at least 12 detention centres, those of both the Israel Prison Service (IPS) and the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), indicate that they were not isolated incidents—or the result of a few “bad apples”—but flowed from a deliberate policy of killing Palestinians in custody.

The PHRI report tracked deaths from causes including physical violence, medical neglect, the lack of treatment for severe infections and malnutrition, using freedom of information requests, forensic reports and interviews with lawyers, activists, relatives and witnesses. It provides evidence of the severe abuse meted out by the Israeli security forces to Palestinian detainees.

The emaciated appearance of the 1,726 detainees who were recently released and returned to Gaza made plain the suffering they had endured. They described the shocking mistreatment they had received, including being deprived of food, water and sleep, denied medication and treatment, allowed access to the toilet just once a day, shackling in painful positions, suffocation, sexual assault, rape, beatings, abuse and torture that resulted in some cases in permanent injury and even blindness. Verbal, physical, and psychological torture and humiliation were routine.

The PHRI report provides chilling details of the physical abuse and medical neglect suffered by prisoners, including personal testimonies from prison staff who spoke of such severe shackling of prisoners, causing such severe wounds to their arms and legs that their limbs had to be amputated. Other cases point to a systematic pattern of severe violence, including head trauma, internal haemorrhages and broken ribs.

The UN committee found the death toll in Israeli custody to be “abnormally high and appears to have exclusively affected the Palestinian detainee population” and noted that “to date, no state officials have been held responsible or accountable for such deaths”.

It drew attention to Israel’s widespread use of the “Unlawful Combatants Law” to justify the prolonged detention without trial of thousands of Palestinian men, women and children. This law

allows Israel to imprison people indefinitely, without charge or trial, during wartime without recognising them as prisoners of war as mandated by the Geneva Conventions, if there are “reasonable grounds” to believe they participated in “hostile activities against the State of Israel”, or that they are a member of a group that has done so. Detainees can be denied access to a lawyer for up to 75 days, while the courts routinely extend their detention, based on “secret evidence”.

According to the Israeli human rights group HaMoked, the prison service is holding about 2,660 Gazans as “unlawful combatants”, the highest number since the start of the war, while legal rights groups believe hundreds more are being held in military detention centres before being transferred to IPS prisons. The law means that hundreds if not thousands of Palestinians have been forcibly disappeared and held without external oversight.

Yet data obtained in May from the IDF’s Military Intelligence Directorate showed that Israel had arrested only 1,450 Palestinians from the military wings of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) of the 47,653 Palestinians it considers to be Hamas or PIJ militants. This means that the overwhelming majority of the 10,000 or so Palestinians held in prisons and the thousands more held in military detention centres are civilians who are not members of either group. Human rights groups and Israeli soldiers have testified to an even smaller ratio of fighters to civilians among those detained in Gaza than the numbers leaked from IDF sources.

Michael Sfard, one of Israel’s leading human rights lawyers, explained that international law only permits the internment of civilians if they pose an imperative security threat, while at the same time guaranteeing basic rights, which Israel is violating.

He said, “The conditions of Gazans in detention in Israel absolutely, without doubt, do not meet what is stipulated in the Fourth Geneva Convention,” noting that violent abuse, food deprivation, and the denial of Red Cross visits and family communication is routine. He added that the legislation used to hold them is also itself “a flagrant violation of international law”.

These numbers flatly contradict the IPS’s claims, without citing any evidence, that almost all the “unlawful combatants” held in Israeli prisons are members of Hamas or PIJ, as well as those of Israel’s politicians, the IDF and media that routinely brand all Palestinian detainees from Gaza as “terrorists”. As Tal Steiner, director of the Public Committee Against Torture in Israel, said, the fact that most are not members of militant groups “undermines the entire justification for their detention”.

Israel is responsible for the deaths of dozens of Palestinian civilians in custody as a result of the atrocious conditions in its detention centres. The Palestinian Prisoners Club said that Palestinian prisoners are exposed to “slow death through systematic deterioration of inhumane living conditions, medical crimes, and torture” and pointed to the medical neglect of Palestinian prisoners.

This pattern of abuse is a deliberate strategy, designed to terrorise the Palestinians and demonstrate the futility of resistance. Itamar Ben Gvir, the far-right National Security Minister, declared that one of his top priorities was to “worsen conditions” for Palestinian prisoners, including by providing only “minimal” food,

“and to reduce their rights to the minimum required by law”.

In June 2024, Ronen Bar, who headed Israel’s domestic spy agency Shin Bet, warned Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of the overcrowding in the prisons that were holding 21,000 people—50 percent more than their maximum 14,500 capacity—with the treatment of prisoners “bordered on abuse,” exposing state employees to possible criminal proceedings abroad.

While the IDF claims that it investigates all allegations of abuse, its top lawyer has brought no prosecutions against soldiers for killing civilians. This is even after high-profile attacks that have prompted international outrage and were clearly in breach of international humanitarian law, including the killing of hundreds of medical and health care workers and 562 aid workers, not to mention tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians.

Only one Israeli soldier has been prosecuted and convicted, receiving a seven-month sentence for assaulting detainees from Gaza. Five other soldiers have been charged with aggravated abuse and causing serious bodily harm to a detainee at the Sde Teiman detention centre—downgraded from initial allegations of rape—after footage of soldiers raping a blindfolded Palestinian detainee and causing serious injuries was leaked to the Israeli media last year.

This is deliberate policy. Last month, there was uproar after Maj. Gen. Yifat Tomer-Yerushalmi, the IDF’s top lawyer, revealed that it was she who leaked the infamous video. She became the target of a right-wing campaign of vilification, arrest and possible prosecution that had already mobilised in defence of the IDF criminals.

That the Arab regimes along with the Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Fatah’s Central Committee have remained silent about Israel’s abuse and torture of prisoners testifies to their perfidy and collusion with Israel in suppressing the Palestinians.

The silence of world leaders and the corporate media about Israel’s abuse and torture of Palestinian prisoners is confirmation of their complicity in Israel’s genocidal assault on Gaza and its escalating attacks on the West Bank. Israel enjoys the support of all the imperialist powers that are now themselves slashing democratic rights and freedom of speech to suppress all opposition to their domestic and foreign policies. As far as they too are concerned international humanitarian law and the Geneva Convention drawn up in the aftermath of World War II are a dead letter.



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