

EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT: PALESTINIAN CHILDREN LIVING UNDER OCCUPATION

by Michaela Czerkies

“Welcome to Hebron,” a young boy named Ahmed said to me and shook my hand. He showed me beautiful ceramic bowls, tiles and dishware in his family’s shop, where members of our delegation were browsing before embarking on a guided tour of the city. Ahmed and several other young children joined us along the way. Walking through Hebron we saw cages, nets and sheet metal above us, put there by Palestinian residents, covering the streets as protection from the garbage, excrement and even acid that settlers throw down at Palestinians below. There were Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers with bulletproof vests and assault rifles on almost every street corner, ready to protect the notoriously violent Israeli settlers of Hebron and enforce the military occupation of Palestine.

Walking past countless Israeli soldiers and military installations with the children, I was brought back to a few days earlier, when our group visited the former al-Fara’a prison in the West Bank. The prison had been used by the Israeli military to detain, intimidate and torture Palestinian political prisoners, many of them arrested for participating in demonstrations or throwing stones during the early 1980s. As representatives from Defense for Children International-Palestine (DCI-P, <https://nwtac.dci-palestine.org>) showed us around the complex and its cells, they told us that many of the prisoners had been children and detailed the cruel methods of physical and psychological torture used.

Although this particular prison is no longer in use, Israeli soldiers’ night raids and detention, imprisonment and abuse of Palestinian children does remain a widespread and systematic problem today. The story of Ahed Tamimi made international headlines last year: the 17-year-old Palestinian girl who was arrested for slapping and kicking an Israeli

soldier at the door of her family’s home shortly after another soldier had shot her cousin in the face with a rubber-coated bullet. She was interrogated without a lawyer, family member, or female officer present, and her interrogators threatened to detain her entire family if she did not confess to assault. Her trial in the Israeli military court system resulted in convictions of assault, incitement and obstructing Israeli soldiers. She served eight months in an Israeli military prison.



A Palestinian girl walking with us through Hebron, near a former Palestinian market street now closed off with gates and barbed wire, filled with trash. Photo: Naylee Farjad

Ahed’s treatment is not unique. According to DCI-P, Israel is the only country in the world that automatically prosecutes children in military courts. The Israeli military arrests and prosecutes between 500–700 Palestinian children each year. The most common reason for the initial arrest is stone-throwing. Upon arrest, three out of four Palestinian children are subjected to physical abuse by Israeli soldiers, usually being slapped, punched, kicked or struck with a soldier’s helmet or rifle. They are not properly informed of their rights, and 88% of them are arrested without either them or their

parents being informed of the reason. They are then bound, blindfolded and forced into a military vehicle without being told where they are being taken. Once they arrive at a police station or interrogation center, they are subject to mentally and physically coercive interrogation techniques, including intimidation and violent threats to themselves, family members and friends. In a few cases, children who maintain their innocence are subjected to solitary confinement or stress positions. Most children are denied access to legal counsel or a parent during interrogation.

After our walk through al-Fara’a prison, our group met with members of the Tamimi family in the village of Nabi Saleh. Bassem Tamimi, Ahed’s father, told us about the raids regularly conducted in the village by IDF soldiers and the necessity of resistance. Sitting with a group of delegates from the US—organizers, educators, artists, students—he told us that the most important thing we could do was to appeal to our representatives, the people with the power to shift US policy toward supporting Palestinian human rights.

In April 2019, Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN-04) introduced HR 2407, the Promoting Human Rights for Palestinian Children Living Under Israeli Occupation Act. The bill would prohibit any US military aid from being used to support the military detention and ill-treatment of children by any country, including Israel. SPC’s Justice for Palestine committee is actively campaigning for representatives to co-sponsor this legislation, especially in NY districts 22 and 24. We call on supporters of human rights to take action, and get involved in the campaign! Call your representative, help gather petition signatures, join us at Town Halls, write a Letter to the Editor. We are especially looking for community organizations and faith groups to sign on to our resolution of support for the bill. If you are part of a group that may be interested, please get in touch! Contact michaela@peacecouncil.net or call (315)472-5478. ☎

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