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Political Prisoners' Rights Activist Visits Twin Cities from Palestine

By *katrina plotz*

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This week nearly 70 people packed into a classroom at the University of MN to hear a presentation from Ala Jaradat, the program manager for Addameer, a Palestinian prisoner support and human rights organization in the occupied West Bank city of Ramallah. Jaradat was in the Twin Cities for 2 days as part of a national speaking tour to raise awareness about the plight of political prisoners in Palestine, and the specific practice of administrative detention where Palestinian detainees can be held indefinitely without charge or trial.

Over 750,000 Palestinians have been arrested by the Israeli government since 1967. Of the 3.8 million Palestinians currently living in the occupied territories, nearly 35% of them have been arrested by Israeli officials at least once. Since the majority of those arrested are males, it's estimated that 70% of Palestinian men have been held prisoner by Israeli security forces at some point in their lives.

"You can hardly find a family that hasn't experienced it or been affected by it," said Jaradat. Today, 7,400 Palestinians are being held in Israeli jails. 355 of them are being held in administrative detention. Some of these administrative detainees have been held for over 5 years without any charges being brought against them. They are primarily what Jaradat referred to as "civil society activists – people who are working to build the fabric of society. It's obvious," said Jaradat, "that Israel's intention is to destroy Palestinian society."

History of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

To understand this phenomenon, it's helpful to know some background about the history and current situation in Palestine. The roots of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict go back to the manner in which the state of Israel was founded. In 1917, the British government, which controlled Palestine after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, signed the Balfour Declaration which promised that a Jewish state would someday be established there. This declaration, made by a European power about a non-European territory, showed no regard for the indigenous Arab population who lived in Palestine at the time.

Over the years, Jewish settlers known as Zionists moved to Palestine in increasing numbers. Zionist militias began attacking Palestinian villages and driving families from their homes in hopes of controlling all of Palestine. They continued this campaign of violent dispossession, killing many Palestinians and forcing 750,000 to become refugees.

This so-called Israeli "War for Independence" – referred to by Palestinians as al-Nakba, or "the catastrophe" – was actually a systematic attempt to drive Palestinians from their homeland. Many left with the keys to their homes in hand, assuming they would be allowed to return in days or weeks. According to UN Resolution 194, Palestinian refugees have the right to

return home. Israel's admission to the UN was conditioned on acceptance of this resolution. Israel agreed but has never complied. By the end of 1948, Israeli soldiers had pushed Palestinians primarily into East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza. Now known as the Palestinian Territories, these lands are separate from each other and make up just 22% of historic Palestine.

In 1967, Israel attacked Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon. They also invaded the Palestinian Territories and have been occupying them ever since. Descendants of refugees from al-Nakba and the 1967 war number over 5 million, and make up the largest refugee population in the world.

Life Under Occupation Today

Today, nearly every aspect of Palestinian life is controlled by the Israeli military. Palestinians sometimes wait for hours at checkpoints while Israelis move freely and quickly on settler-only "bypass roads." Palestinians struggle to obtain permits to travel, to work, and even to build on their own land. Hundreds of Palestinian homes have been demolished because the proper building permits were supposedly lacking. The Israeli government also uses home demolitions as collective punishment for the families of people who resist the occupation. Additionally, a 20-foot tall "security fence," known to Palestinians as the Apartheid Wall, separates the West Bank from Israel. The wall curves significantly eastward from the actual border between the two territories in order to confiscate farmland and water resources from the Palestinian side. And Israeli settlers continue their aggressive push into Palestinian neighborhoods. In the first week of August, 50 Palestinian families were illegally evicted from their homes in East Jerusalem so that Israelis with no legal claim to the homes could move in. On September 8, Israel announced plans to build 455 more housing units in the West Bank.

The arbitrary detention and imprisonment of Palestinians is another tool of Israeli repression and was the focus of Jaradat's presentation. The West Bank and Gaza are each governed by a military commander who has the power to issue executive orders that become law. Political activity is tightly restricted in the occupied territories. It's officially illegal to display a Palestinian flag and according to Jaradat, "even drawing the shape of the flag without the colors is against the law. The image of Israel as a liberal democracy does not hold up under the most basic scrutiny," he said.

Once arrested, a Palestinian can be detained for up to 8 days without any legal proceedings. A detainee can then be held for interrogation, which can last up to 180 days. Specific charges are still not required during this period of interrogation, and access to lawyers is denied for the first 90 days. During this time, physical and psychological torture is often used to coerce defendants into making a confession. Information gathered under coercive interrogation techniques is often the only evidence presented against detainees at trial.

Indefinite Detention...Psychological Torture

But the most troubling kind of imprisonment, according to Jaradat, is administrative detention because no formal charges are *ever* needed and it can go on indefinitely. Any person can be arrested and placed under administrative detention for being a "security threat." A file that contains the supposed reason for the detention is kept secret from both the detainee and his or her lawyer. An Israeli judge with sole access to the file has the power to release the person after a period of one to six months, or to extend their detention. Some administrative detainees have had their detentions extended as many as 8 times.

"The families of administrative detainees suffer tremendously when their loved ones are imprisoned," said Jaradat. "A woman who has seen her son's detention extended several times

said even a long sentence would be easier, because then she would know the date of her son's release and she could look forward to seeing him again." Israeli security officials seem to use administrative detention and the threat of it as a form of psychological warfare. Jaradat told the story of one man who was finally released after sitting in administrative detention for over 2 years. He was followed on the way to his home village and was arrested again when he was less than 20 meters from his house. An Israeli soldier reportedly said to him, "You didn't think you were really going home, did you?" before returning him to administrative detention. He was not allowed to even briefly reunite with his family.

Case Studies

Jaradat said Israel uses administrative detention to deter Palestinians from organizing for justice and even from participating in the political process. Majeda Fidda, an elected member of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) for the city of Nablus in the West Bank was arrested on August 6, 2008. She was elected under the "Change and Reform Bloc" which has been labeled a terrorist organization by Israel. When a military court could find no evidence of terrorism against her, she was placed in administrative detention where she has been ever since.

Khaled Tafish, another PLC member of the Change and Reform Bloc was arrested for the third time on March 19, 2009 as part of a raid where 9 political leaders, including 3 PLC members were arrested. "This was immediately after the collapse of prisoner exchange talks between Israel and Hamas, said Jaradat. "Israel wants to secure the release of captured soldier Gilad Shalit and they think offering to release some of these administrative detainees will help their cause. But these people never should have been arrested in the first place."

Addameer

Jaradat, who himself experienced administrative detention for 4 months, works to support Palestinian political prisoners through Addameer, a group whose name means "conscience" in Arabic. Founded in 1992 by lawyers and former prisoners, the group provides free legal representation for detainees, monitors prison conditions, conducts legal research, and trains Palestinian lawyers in the use of international law. In March, they launched a global "Stop Administrative Detention Campaign." They have sent speakers to Europe and the U.S. to raise awareness and to call on world leaders to pressure Israel to immediately end arbitrary and indefinite detentions.

When asked if he fears retaliation when he returns to Palestine, Jaradat said, "I know it's a possibility. I may be arrested when I go back, but really I don't care. If I am detained, other people will continue this important work."

What Can Be Done

He urged those in the audience to participate in boycott, divestment, and sanction campaigns against Israel, and to pressure elected officials to end U.S. military aid to Israel. The Israeli occupation of Palestine is fueled by 3 billion in U.S. taxpayer dollars every year.

"Now is the time to get their attention," said Jaradat. "Obama and Hillary Clinton care more about their image and how they're perceived than the previous administration. But they won't enact change on their own. We must force them to change through political pressure."

Jaradat also encouraged listeners to visit the Addameer website http://www.addameer.org/index_eng.html [1] to find information about how to support current detainees, as well as contact information for Israeli officials who could be lobbied for their release.

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[1] http://www.addameer.org/index_eng.html