

Palestinian employee of German development agency abused in Israeli jail

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Baraa Odeh, 34, is an employee of the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), and was detained by Israeli border guards on March 5 [Courtesy of Odeh's family]

Berlin, May 3 (RHC)-- A Palestinian employee of Germany's state-funded development agency has been imprisoned in Israel for more than a month, where she has been beaten and subject to abusive and humiliating treatment, her family members and lawyer say.

Baraa Odeh, 34, works for the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), and was detained by Israeli border guards on March 5 while returning to her home in Ramallah from a work trip to Germany.

She has since been sentenced to three months of administrative detention without charge.

Neither her husband, who is a German national, nor her family have had direct contact with Odeh since her arrest. "Our life is upside down," her sister Shireen Odeh told Al Jazeera, adding that her family is extremely concerned for her wellbeing. "The only thing we do is think about her. We haven't had a normal life since they arrested her."

Mahmoud Hassan, a lawyer for Odeh who has spoken to her in prison, said she has been physically assaulted and subject to inhumane conditions. "When she arrived [at Hasharon] prison, she was strip-searched while the policewoman was shouting at her. She was kept in a cell and later, a policeman that also shouted at her beat her on her leg," said Hassan, who works with Addameer Prisoner Support, an NGO that supports Palestinian prisoners.

"The policeman pushed her to the corner and the keys he had injured her hand. He kicked her. She said she had marks on her chest. He was threatening to keep her in this cell overnight.

"After a couple of hours, he took her to another room that was not clean and was very cold."

The second room had security cameras. The toilet was so dirty that Odeh refused to use it. She was then transferred to the overcrowded Damon prison and strip-searched again.

According to reports, detainees at the site have said it is difficult to access medical care or clean clothes. Guards have allegedly blindfolded and handcuffed prisoners when they are moved, and prevented them from sleeping.

Israel has regularly detained and imprisoned workers for Palestinian aid organisations, and sometimes UNRWA, but it is unusual for the Israeli army to hold an employee of a Western organisation such as the GIZ under administrative detention.

Since October 7, when the Israel-Palestine conflict escalated, Israel has sharply increased the arrest of Palestinians in the West Bank. Most have been held under administrative detention, without being charged or given due process. Administrative detention orders are often extended, sometimes for years.

Prisoner rights groups and released detainees have raised the alarm on Israel's systematic use of torture in its prisons, especially in recent months.

Israel has arrested 8,425 Palestinians, including about 280 women and 540 children, in the West Bank and East Jerusalem between October 7 and April 22, according to Addameer. Some 5,210 administrative detention orders have been issued during the same period, while 16 prisoners have died in Israeli prisons.

Meanwhile, Israel has prevented the Red Cross from making humanitarian visits to prison detainees since October 7th.

GIZ, one of the world's largest international development agencies, has operated in the occupied Palestinian territories since the 1980s. It works on issues such as economic development, governance and peace-building. It is funded by the German government, one of Israel's closest allies, and is overseen by its Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

“Israeli security forces have taken a national employee of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH into custody after a private trip. After a subsequent hearing, security forces ordered three months of administrative detention, to our knowledge unrelated to her professional employment,” said a spokesperson for GIZ.

“GIZ is working with all the means at its disposal to clarify the background. We are also in close contact with the family.”

Hassan told Al Jazeera she has been visited by a German consular official in prison. The German Federal Foreign Office did not comment on this visit when asked by Al Jazeera. Odeh is a technical adviser for GIZ, where she has been employed for 10 years. She has recently worked on projects focused on youth empowerment and psychosocial support for children, mainly in the West Bank.

She is also a graduate student at Birzeit University, where she is active in a student representative body.

After she was stopped at the King Hussein (Allenby) Bridge crossing, which separates Jordan from the West Bank, Odeh was first taken to Ofer detention centre and then to Hasharon prison, where she was allegedly beaten. A few days later she was transferred to Damon prison, where dozens of female detainees have been held.

On March 11, an Israeli judge ordered Odeh to administrative detention until June 4 on the grounds that she is a security threat.

During a hearing on March 19th, she was accused of working with a banned political group, based on confidential military information. Her lawyer said she denies this accusation, and that Israel has not offered any evidence against her.

The BMZ told Al Jazeera that it does not comment on individual cases. “The protection of human life and human dignity should be the top priority in every situation – including in the context of armed conflict and in detention facilities,” a spokesperson said. “The Federal Government is critical of the practice of administrative detention – ie, the possibility of detaining people over a longer period of time based on suspicion and without trial. International humanitarian law sets strict limits on this practice.”

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