

Guantanamo victims say Israel is using U.S.-style torture against Palestinians

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A Palestinian detainee shows injuries to his hands after being released by the Israeli army into Gaza on June 20, 2024. The man had been detained during an Israeli attack on the Gaza Strip. The Palestinians who were released east of the city in the central Gaza Strip were seen to be weakened and had scars on their bodies [Ashraf Amra/Anadolu via Getty Images]

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Ramallah, June 23 (RHC)-- When former Guantanamo detainee Asadullah Haroon looks at pictures of Palestinians being held in Israeli prisons, the memories of his own abuse and torture in United States detention center come flooding back.

“This is the worst form of oppression,” he says. “When you are labelled as a terrorist you cannot defend yourself in any way. Without a doubt, it’s the same process; they are torturing the people in the same way. I think the Americans have made this and the Israelis are implementing it.”

Haroon, who won his case against the U.S. government for illegal imprisonment in 2021, was held without charge in the notorious Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba for 16 years following his arrest in 2007. He has no doubt that Palestinians held in Israeli prisons now are enduring similar treatment to that he experienced.

“It’s like in the first days when I was arrested. I was beaten to an extent that I was standing; I couldn’t sit down or if I was sitting down and beaten up, I couldn’t get up. Same with insomnia and I was assaulted for several days. A lot of the prisoners were bitten by dogs. We were provided very little medical care.”

“Physical torture was really bad but the worst was mental torture in different forms. I believe there isn’t much of a difference in the torture of prisoners of Palestine, Guantanamo, Bagram and Abu Ghraib.”

Attacked by dogs and deprived of water

Some 54 Palestinians have been killed in Israeli jails since Israel launched its deadly war on Gaza in October last year, according to the Commission of Detainees and Ex-Detainees Affairs in Gaza.

The United Nations Human Rights Office in Palestine says it has been receiving multiple reports of mass detentions, abuse of prisoners and forced disappearances of Palestinians for months, while harrowing testimonies have been provided to aid agencies or posted to social media by Palestinians who have been released from detention.

In late April, the Israeli newspaper, Haaretz, published details of the abuse of Palestinian prisoners who had been jailed without trial. Its report included descriptions of regular beatings, prisoners being attacked by dogs, being forced to kiss the Israeli flag, being forced to curse the Prophet Muhammad, being deprived of water (including for a toilet in a cell shared by 10 inmates), the electricity being cut, insufficient food and being stripped naked.

One prisoner’s account reads: “A guard then started to stuff carrots into the anus of AH and other prisoners.”

Much of the abuse carried out in Israeli prisons has been filmed by the soldiers carrying it out. It has strong echoes of the treatment of Iraqi and Afghan prisoners in U.S. detention centers such as the notorious Abu Ghraib prison – where U.S. soldiers photographed themselves alongside prisoners in humiliating positions in 2003.

The Public Committee Against Torture in Israel (PCATI) and other human rights organisations have called on the United Nations special rapporteur on torture for urgent action to end “the systematic abuse, torture and ill-treatment of Palestinian prisoners and detainees in Israeli prisons and detention facilities.”

That submission by Adalah, HaMoked, Physicians for Human Rights Israel and PCATI describes a “brutal escalation”, characterised by what appears to be systemic violence, torture and ill-treatment against Palestinians in Israeli custody in seven different prisons and detention facilities since the start of the war

in October.

Lawyers and activists say the Israeli treatment of Palestinian prisoners bears all the hallmarks of “US-style” abuse and torture. “Unfortunately over the past 20 years, the U.S. has given the world a very bad example of how prisoners should be treated,” says human rights lawyer Clive Stafford Smith, who was one of the first lawyers to be granted access to detainees in Guantanamo Bay more than 20 years ago and has represented clients, including Haroon, who have eventually won their freedom from the prison.

“Whether it is ISIS (ISIL) copying the orange uniforms, or other countries, including Israel according to the UN, using abusive interrogation methods, all this can be traced back to the sordid example of Guantanamo Bay and the other secret U.S. prisons,” Stafford Smith says. “It is well past time that the U.S. admitted our dreadful mistakes, and insisted once more that both the U.S. and the rest of the world behave in a civilised manner.”

Held without charge

Of 9,500 political prisoners, more than 3,500 Palestinians are being held without charge in Israeli prisons. While thousands were already in prison before the war on Gaza began in October last year, many more have been arrested or rearrested since then.

Those detained without charge can be held indefinitely by the Israeli military for renewable periods, based on “secret evidence” that neither the detainees nor their lawyers are permitted to see. Activists and human rights lawyers consider these people to be hostages with no legal recourse.

Others who have experienced similar detentions, torture and abuse at the hands of US-led forces in Iraq and Afghanistan agree with them.

Moazzam Begg is a human rights advocate who was imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay for three years without charge. He also draws parallels with what Israelis call administrative detention under which Palestinians can be rounded up and denied legal rights.

“There’s an evident parallel between Gaza and Guantanamo and the war on terror,” Begg says. “What you see from the treatment, from the stripping naked of the prisoners to the mistreatment of them, to the abuse of the religious and racial attributes. There’s absolutely a parallel. It’s undeniable.”

Begg says what happened to him two decades ago, first in Afghanistan’s Bagram prison and then in Guantanamo, is still happening. “I’ve returned to Afghanistan several times. I’ve been back into the Bagram detention facility where I was stripped naked, where I was beaten. I was tied to other prisoners. I watched the abuse of other prisoners. I watched the murder of other prisoners by American soldiers.

“And those American soldiers went on to do what they did from here, almost as a textbook copy in Abu Ghraib [the notorious prison in Iraq where U.S. soldiers abused detainees in 2003 and 2004], what was done to us in Guantanamo. Again, the stripping, the cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.”

Rights groups are demanding an urgent international investigation to hold the perpetrators of torture and abuse of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons accountable. Human rights group Euro-Med Monitor, which has documented the testimonies of former Palestinian prisoners, said: “The information gathered leads to the conclusion that the Israeli army routinely and widely commits crimes of arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, willful killing, torture, inhumane treatment, sexual violence, and denial of a fair trial.

“Detainees were also denied access to food and medical care, including critical and life-saving care, were spat and urinated upon, and were subjected to other cruel and degrading acts and psychological abuse, including threats of rape and death, insults, and other forms of sexual violence.”

Despite such calls for justice from rights groups and lawyers, however, Begg says he is not optimistic that things will change in the near future. “There’s no hope. I don’t see any hope in relation to international law, in relation to the United Nations resolutions – multitudes of them have been violated.

“And the same with Israel committing genocide, ethnic cleansing, the targeting of children happening at a time when we claim that human rights laws and international law is across the board.”

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