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Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories 2020

Israel continued to impose institutionalized discrimination against Palestinians living under its rule in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). It displaced hundreds of Palestinians in Israel and the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, as a result of home demolitions and imposition of other coercive measures. Israeli forces continued to use excessive force during law enforcement activities in Israel and the OPT. Israeli forces killed 31 Palestinians, including nine children, in the OPT; many were unlawfully killed while posing no imminent threat to life. Israel maintained its illegal blockade on the Gaza Strip, subjecting its residents to collective punishment and deepening the humanitarian crisis there. It also continued to restrict freedom of movement of Palestinians in the OPT through checkpoints and roadblocks. The Israeli authorities arbitrarily detained in Israel thousands of Palestinians from the OPT, holding hundreds in administrative detention without charge or trial. Torture and other ill-treatment of detainees, including children, were committed with impunity. The authorities used a range of measures to target human rights defenders, journalists and others who criticized Israel's continuing occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Syrian Golan Heights. Violence against women persisted, especially against Palestinian citizens of Israel. The authorities denied asylum-seekers access to a fair or prompt refugee status determination process. Conscientious objectors to military service were imprisoned.

Background

Israel held parliamentary elections in March, the third in just over a year. In May, the two largest parties in the Knesset, Likud and the Blue and White alliance, reached a power-sharing agreement that included an announcement that Israel would further annex territories in the occupied West Bank starting in July 2020. This followed US President Donald Trump's announcement of his “deal of the century”, which included a formal extension of Israel's sovereignty over the Jordan Valley and the vast majority of the illegal settlements in the rest of the occupied West Bank in exchange for land currently inside Israel. Israel postponed the annexation plans following diplomatic deals with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in September. The parliament was again dissolved in December, triggering another round of elections in three months' time.

Israel imposed lockdown measures in March and in September to contain the spread of COVID-19, triggering waves of protests calling on the Prime Minister to step down. The measures allowed the Israel Security Agency (ISA) to use surveillance capabilities usually reserved for Palestinians to trace COVID-19 infections. The Prime Minister's trial on corruption charges began in May.

In February, the Palestinian armed group Islamic Jihad fired around 80 rockets and mortar shells from the Gaza Strip towards Israel, causing minor injuries to over 20 people, after Israeli forces killed an Islamic Jihad operative. The Israeli army carried out multiple airstrikes in Gaza, injuring 12 Palestinians, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health in Gaza.

In August and September, Israel launched artillery and airstrikes against Gaza in retaliation for incendiary balloons and kites launched from Gaza into Israel. Palestinian armed groups launched indiscriminate rockets into Israel in response.

In August, Israel launched airstrikes against Hizbullah targets in Lebanon after it said that shots were fired from Lebanon into Israel. Israel also launched airstrikes against Iranian and Hizbullah targets in Syria.

In July, a district court rejected a case to force the Ministry of Defense to revoke the export licence of spyware company NSO Group, dealing a blow to victims of unlawful and targeted international surveillance.

Forcible transfers, forced evictions and demolitions

Israel demolished 848 Palestinian residential and livelihood structures in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, displacing 996 people, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Israeli authorities said many of the demolished buildings lacked Israeli-issued permits, which are virtually impossible for Palestinians to obtain, or were in closed military zones. The law of occupation prohibits such destruction unless necessary for military operations.

In other cases, Israel confiscated residential and livelihood structures, including some that were donated for humanitarian purposes. Israeli forces also punitively demolished at least six Palestinian homes, leaving 22 people, including seven children, homeless, according to B'Tselem. Punitive demolitions constitute collective punishment and are prohibited under international law.

On 5 March, Israeli forces demolished the homes of Walid Hanatsheh, in Ramallah, and Yazan Mughamis, in Birzeit, displacing six Palestinians, after an Israeli court rejected a petition by the families against the punitive demolition. On 11 March, Israeli forces punitively demolished the home of Qassam Barghouti in Kobar village near Ramallah. The three men are in prison in Israel for alleged involvement in an attack in August 2019 that killed an Israeli civilian and injured two others outside Ramallah city in the occupied West Bank.

Israeli settler organizations initiated, with the support of the Israeli authorities, forcible evictions of Palestinians from their homes in East Jerusalem.

OCHA estimated in December that around 200 Palestinian households in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, had eviction cases pending against them, placing 800 adults and children at risk of displacement.

Israeli authorities demolished at least 29 residential and livelihood structures that belonged to Bedouin citizens living in “unrecognized” villages in the Negev/Naqab, according to the Negev Coexistence Forum, an Israeli NGO.

Discrimination

Israel continued to discriminate against Palestinian citizens of Israel in areas of planning, budget allocation, policing and political participation. According to the Adalah-The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, Israel maintains over 65 laws that discriminate against Palestinians.

Local Palestinian councils in Israel went on strike to protest against discrimination in the distribution of the state budget for local councils. The vast majority of Palestinians in Israel, comprising over 20% of the total population, live in around 139 towns and villages. They received only 1.7% of the state budget for local councils.

In August, Adalah and the Arab Center for Alternative Planning filed a petition to the Israeli Supreme Court on behalf of 10 local Palestinian councils and dozens of Palestinian citizens of Israel against government policy discriminating against these communities in the distribution of housing, construction and land development benefits compared to neighbouring Jewish communities that enjoy higher socio-economic status and have access to such benefits.

Israel continued to deny Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza married to Palestinian citizens of Israel the right to nationality by enforcing the discriminatory Entry to Israel Law.

In December, the magistrate court in Krayot, near Haifa, rejected a petition for access to education by Palestinian citizens of Israel living in Karmiel, citing the discriminatory Nation State Law. The decision said that establishing an Arabic school in the town or funding transport for its Palestinian residents to study in Arabic schools in nearby communities would undermine the town’s “Jewish character”.

In December, the Israeli Health Ministry began the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines that excluded the nearly 5 million Palestinians who live under Israeli military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Unlawful killings and excessive use of force

Israeli military and police used unnecessary and excessive force during law enforcement activities, including search and arrest operations, and when policing demonstrations.

Military and security forces killed at least 31 Palestinians, including nine children, in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, according to OCHA. Many were unlawfully killed by live ammunition or other excessive force when posing no imminent threat to life. Some of the unlawful killings appeared to be wilful, which would constitute war crimes.

Israeli forces frequently used excessive force against protesters in Kufr Qadum who continued weekly protests against settlements and settlement expansion. According to OCHA, 214 protesters and bystanders were injured during the year.

On 15 February, Israeli forces shot and injured in the eye nine-year-old Malek Issa while he was returning home from school in the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Issawiya. No clashes were recorded at the time, according to OCHA. Israeli forces were maintaining a violent and intense police operation in Issawiya as a form of collective punishment.

Israeli forces frequently opened fire on fishermen and farmers in Gaza. According to Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, 12 fishermen and five farmers were injured.

Freedom of movement

For the 13th consecutive year, Israel continued its illegal air, land and sea blockade of the Gaza Strip, restricting the movement of people and goods in and out of the area, which continued to have a devastating impact on the human rights of Gaza's 2 million inhabitants. Israel stopped the entry of construction materials and fuel into Gaza repeatedly. This shut down the only power plant in Gaza, leading to a further reduction in the supply of electricity, which had already been available for only about four hours a day. Israel also imposed a full maritime closure and repeatedly limited entry of goods to food and medicine only. The measures amounted to collective punishment at a time of increasing COVID-19 infections in Gaza.

On 2 February, following an exchange of attacks between Israeli forces and Palestinian armed groups, Israel cancelled the permits of 500 traders from Gaza that enable their holders to travel to Israel and the West Bank for business. The permits were reactivated on 18 February.

On 18 June, Omar Yaghi, a baby with a cardiac condition, died in Gaza after Israel denied the family a permit to enter Israel for a scheduled operation on 24 May at the Sheba Medical Center in Ramat Gan city.

In the West Bank, at least 593 Israeli checkpoints and roadblocks continued to heavily restrict the movement of Palestinians and access to rights, including health, education and work. Holders of Palestinian identification cards faced an ongoing bar on using roads built for Israeli settlers.

Israeli restrictions on freedom of movement continued to impede Palestinians' access to health care, posing further threats to vulnerable populations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lack of access to hospitals and specialized clinics during the pandemic particularly affected Palestinian residents of the East Jerusalem neighbourhoods of Kufr Aqab and Shu'fat Refugee Camp, which are segregated from the rest of the city by military structures, including checkpoints, and the fence/wall.

Arbitrary detention

Israeli authorities conducted hundreds of raids throughout the West Bank to arrest Palestinians, usually at their homes at night. Those arrested were detained in prisons in Israel, along with thousands of other Palestinians from the OPT arrested in previous years. This violated international humanitarian law, which prohibits the transfer of detainees into the territory of the occupying power.

Israeli authorities used renewable administrative detention orders to hold Palestinians without charge or trial. Some 4,300 Palestinians from the OPT, including 397 administrative detainees, were held in Israeli prisons as of December, according to the Israel Prison Service. Many families of Palestinian detainees in Israel, particularly those living in Gaza, were not permitted entry to Israel to visit their relatives.

On 16 July, Israeli forces arrested Iyad Barghouti, an astrophysicist and professor at Jerusalem's Al-Quds University, at a checkpoint near Jerusalem and placed him in administrative detention. He had previously been administratively detained in 2014 and 2016.

Israel held 157 Palestinian children in prison, including two in administrative detention, as of October. Defense for Children International Palestine said that children were interrogated without their parents present and placed with adults in prison. Under international law, detention of children should be a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate time.

Unfair trials

Palestinian civilians, including children, from the OPT were prosecuted in military courts that did not meet international fair trial standards.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Israeli soldiers, police and ISA officers continued to torture and otherwise ill-treat Palestinian detainees, including children, with impunity. Reported methods included beating, slapping, painful shackling, sleep deprivation, use of stress positions and threats of violence against family members. Prolonged solitary confinement, sometimes lasting months, was commonly used as a punishment.

Israeli forces occasionally denied medical help for Palestinians injured during law enforcement activities.

Freedoms of expression and association

The authorities used a range of measures, including raids, incitement campaigns, movement restrictions and judicial harassment, to target human rights defenders who criticized Israel's continuing military occupation of Palestinian and Syrian territories.

Israel continued to deny human rights bodies entry to the OPT, including the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the OPT.

On 30 July, Israeli forces arrested Mahmoud Nawajaa, a human rights defender and co-ordinator of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement in the occupied West Bank, from his home in Ramallah. A prisoner of conscience, he was released without charge on 17 August.

On 13 November, the Jerusalem District Court rejected a petition by Amnesty International against the arbitrary and punitive travel ban imposed on its employee, human rights defender Laith Abu Zeyad. For undisclosed reasons, Israeli security forces continued to bar him from entering occupied East Jerusalem and from travelling abroad through Jordan.

Rights of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants

Israel continued to deny asylum-seekers access to a fair and prompt refugee status determination process, leaving many without access to basic services. About 31,000 asylum-seekers were living in Israel.

Gender-based violence

Violence against women persisted in Israel, especially against Palestinian citizens.

At least 21 women were killed as a result of gender-based violence.

Conscientious objectors

At least four Israeli conscientious objectors to military service were imprisoned. Hillel Rabin spent 56 days in military prison for refusing to serve in the Israeli army citing oppressive policies against Palestinians.

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