

# 'Israeli Commander Admits Abuse of Palestinian Children'

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(Source: Katya Adler- BBC News)

In an interview with the BBC's Middle East correspondent Katya Adler, Eran Efrat a former commander in the Israeli army who served in the occupied West Bank talks candidly about the blindfolding, handcuffing and routine beating of Palestinian children by Israeli soldiers. We're astonished at how low Israel continues to sink.

A former Israeli military commander has told the BBC that Palestinian youngsters are routinely ill-treated by Israeli soldiers while in custody, reports the BBC's Katya Adler from Jerusalem and the West Bank.

"You take the kid, you blindfold him, you handcuff him, he's really shaking... Sometimes you cuff his legs too. Sometimes it cuts off the circulation. "He doesn't understand a word of what's going on around him. He doesn't know what you're going to do with him. He just knows we are soldiers with guns. That we kill people. Maybe they think we're going to kill him.

"A lot of the time they're peeing their pants, just sit there peeing their pants, crying. But usually they're very quiet." Eran Efrati is a former commander in Israel's army. He served in the occupied West Bank.

In a discreet park in Jerusalem we meet to discuss allegations that soldiers like him often mistreat Palestinian minors, suspected of throwing stones.

Mr Efrati - who left the army five months ago - says the allegations are true:

"I never arrested anyone younger than nine or 10, but 14, 13, 11 for me, they're still kids. But they're arrested like adults. "Every soldier who was in the Occupied Territories can tell you the same story. The first months after I left the army I dreamed about kids all the time. Jewish kids. Arab kids. Screaming.

"Maybe [the kid is] blindfolded for him not to see the base and how we're working... But I believe maybe we put the blindfold because we don't want to see his eyes. You don't want him to look at us - you know, beg us to stop, or cry in front of us. It's a lot easier if we don't see his eyes.

"When the kid is sitting there in the base, I didn't do it, but nobody is thinking of him as a kid, you know - if there is someone blindfolded and handcuffed, he's probably done something really bad. It's OK to slap him, it's OK to spit on him, it's OK to kick him sometimes. It doesn't really matter." Young Palestinians are mostly arrested for throwing stones at Jewish settlers or Israeli soldiers.

This, they say, is their only means of venting their frustration at Israel's military occupation of their home, the West Bank. Every week in the West Bank village of Bilin, Palestinians organise a demonstration against Israel's West Bank barrier. Israel says it needs the barrier to stop attacks on its citizens. Palestinians call it a land grab. They say it makes their daily life even tougher. Israeli soldiers monitor the protest from the other side of the barrier.

## Night-time arrests

At a recent protest, I watched a gang of Palestinian boys darting amongst the olive trees, picking up stones and rocks to throw at the soldiers.

Some used sling-shots. Many had a scarf or shawl wrapped round their face to hide their identity. The soldiers responded with tear gas and sound grenades. Sometimes they have used rubber-coated bullets too. Often after an incident like this, Israeli soldiers raid a West Bank village. Usually in the middle of the night. The arrests can be brutal.

"Their faces were painted when they came for him. It was frightening. All those soldiers for one boy. They put iron weights on his back in the jeep and beat him all the way to jail. He couldn't get up for a week." Mohammad Ballasi's 15-year-old son, also called Mohammad, was arrested by Israeli soldiers for stone-throwing. We met him and his wife just outside an Israeli military base in the West Bank. Palestinian youngsters are tried in military tribunals. The tribunals regard minors as Palestinians aged 16 or under. In Israel's civil courts minors are young people under the age of 18.

The first time Mohammad's parents saw him since he was arrested two weeks before was at his trial. He pleaded guilty.

"When you're beaten like that, you would confess against your own mother," said Suad Ballasi, choking back tears. "He's a child. His friends are playing in the street and he is in handcuffs. I couldn't stop crying in court. My heart feels like it's going to explode."

The human rights organisation Defence for Children International (DCI) has written a report accusing Israel's military of what it describes as the systematic and institutionalised ill-treatment and torture of Palestinian children by the Israeli authorities.

Gerard Horton is an international lawyer for DCI. He said Mohammad's Ballasi's story is a familiar one.

"We see these stories again and again. Israel is a signatory to the UN convention against torture. It's also a signatory to the UN convention on the rights of the child - and under customary international law, it's not permissible to mistreat and torture, particularly children, who are obviously more vulnerable than adults."

He told me that Israel arrested 9,000 Palestinians last year. Seven hundred of those were children. Mr Horton says the military tribunals need to process cases quickly. DCI believes the system is designed so that it is in an adult or a child's interest to plead guilty. Gerard Horton says Palestinians tend to end up in jail longer if they try to fight their case.

Mohammad Khawaja had just turned 13 when he was arrested. "They dragged me from my home by the scruff of the neck. The more I cried the more they choked me," he said. "My mum was screaming. They pulled me along on my stomach. My knees were bleeding. They beat me with their guns and kicked me all the way to the jeep. "They cuffed my hands and legs, blind-folded me and left me there for 24 hours. I thought I was going to die. "Later interrogators wanted me to tell on other people. I wouldn't. They beat me with plastic chairs. They told me to sign a paper written in Hebrew. I don't read or speak it. Because I signed it they put me in jail."

Israel's military denies any suggestion that the abuse of young Palestinians is routine, but the army says it has to guard against Palestinian children involved in what it describes as "acts of terror".

## Nightmares

Lieutenant Colonel Avital Leibowitz is a spokeswoman for Israel's military: "Even though it's just a stone or just a Molotov cocktail, they're deadly weapons. Doesn't matter who did it - they're deadly weapons," she said. "Almost every other week we find a 14 or 15-year-old carrying an explosive belt or grenade on his body, in one of the crossings. "This is the situation we live in, and since we are defending ourselves and we want to punish those terrorists, we have no choice but to find them, to punish them - and hope that we won't return to this."

Mohammad Khawaja hasn't slept properly since the soldiers came. He says the nightmares will not go away.

Human rights groups are calling on the international community to investigate what they say are Israel's violations of children's rights.