

## Sitting ducks

If there's one thing the Israelis are good at it's waging war on women and children, writes **Stuart Littlewood\*** <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2009/971/re6.htm>

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They killed 952 Palestinian children in their homeland between 2000 and the start of the Gaza blitzkrieg in December 2008 (according to B'Tselem statistics). They murdered at least 350 more during their Cast Lead onslaught and have kept Gaza under daily attack ever since. So the brave Israelis must have eliminated nearly 1,400 youngsters by now. Would anyone care to guess how many they left bleeding, maimed and crippled?

The "most moral army in the world" also loves waging war against Palestinian university students. Not long ago I wrote about Merna, an honours student in her final year majoring in English. Israeli soldiers frequently rampaged through her Bethlehem refugee camp in the middle of the night, ransacking homes and arbitrarily arresting residents. They took away her family one by one. First her 14-year-old cousin and best friend was shot dead by an Israeli sniper while she sat outside her family home during a curfew.

Next the Israelis arrested her eldest brother, a 22 year-old artist, and imprisoned him for four years. Then they came back for Merna's 18-year-old brother. Not content with that the military came again, this time to take her youngest brother -- the "baby" of the family -- just 16. These were the circumstances under which Merna had to study.

Israeli military law treats Palestinians as adults as soon as they reach 16, a flagrant violation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Israeli youngsters, of course, are regarded as children until 18. Palestinians are dealt with by Israeli military courts, even when it's a civil matter. These courts ignore international laws and conventions, so there's no legal protection for individuals under Israeli military occupation.

As detention is based on secret information, which neither the detainee nor his lawyer is allowed to see, it is impossible to mount a proper defence. Besides, the Security Service always finds a bogus excuse to keep detainees locked up "in the greater interest of the security of Israel". Although detainees have the right to review and appeal, they are unable to challenge the evidence and check facts as all information presented to the court is classified. So much for Israeli justice.

Faced with this mounting mental stress Merna, far from giving up, determined to carry on with her studies. The most moral army in the world may have robbed her brothers of an education, but she would still fight for hers.

To get to Bethlehem University, or any other, many students have to run the gauntlet of Israeli checkpoints. "Sometimes they take our ID cards and they spend ages writing down all the details, just to make us late," said one. Students are often made to remove shoes, belt and bags. "It's like an airport. Many times we are kept waiting outside for up to an hour, rain or shine, they don't care." The soldiers attempt to forcibly remove students' clothes and they swear and shout sexual slurs at female students.

Some tell how they are sexually harassed on their way to university and spend the rest of the day worrying what the Israelis will do to them on their way home. The constant humiliation undermines student motivation and concentration.

Five years ago the Israelis forcibly removed four Birzeit University students from their studies in the West Bank and illegally sent them back to the Gaza Strip. All four were due to graduate by the end of that academic year. There was an outcry from around the world and the Israeli Army Legal Advisor was bombarded with faxes and letters demanding that the students be allowed to return to their studies.

The world's most moral army agreed that the students might be allowed to return to Birzeit if they signed a guarantee to permanently return to the Gaza Strip after completing their studies. This effectively exposed Israel's policy to impose a final separation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, even though the two are

internationally recognised as one integral territory. Under international law everyone has the right to freely choose their place of residence within a single territory, but since when did Israel give a damn about international law? The racist regime makes it virtually impossible for Gaza students to reach the eight Palestinian universities in the West Bank. In 1999 some 350 Gaza students were studying at Birzeit. Today there are almost none.

It was no great surprise, then, to hear from Bethlehem University a few days ago that Berlanty Azzam, a fourth year Business Administration student, was being held in detention by the Israeli military authorities with the intention of deporting her to Gaza "for trying to complete her studies at Bethlehem University".

Berlanty, a Christian girl, is originally from Gaza but has lived in the West Bank since 2005 after receiving a travel permit from the military to cross from Gaza to the West Bank. She too is being robbed of her degree at the last minute. She was detained at the Container checkpoint between Bethlehem and Ramallah after attending a job interview in Ramallah.

The 21-year-old was due to graduate before Christmas. On Wednesday night she was blindfolded and handcuffed, loaded into a military jeep and driven from Bethlehem to Gaza, despite assurances by the Israeli Military Legal Advisor's office that she would not be deported before an attorney from Gisha (an Israeli NGO working to protect Palestinians' freedom of movement) had the opportunity to petition the Israeli court for her return to classes in Bethlehem.

When they'd crossed the border the world's most moral army dumped Berlanty in the dark and told her, "You are in Gaza."

"Since 2005, I refrained from visiting my family in Gaza for fear that I would not be permitted to return to my studies in the West Bank," Berlanty told Gisha on her mobile phone before the soldiers confiscated it. "Now, just two months before graduation, I was arrested and taken to Gaza in the middle of the night, with no way to finish my degree."

Bethlehem University wants to mobilise people from around the world to protest. Who better to contact, I thought, than the Palestinian ambassador in London, Professor Manuel Hassassian, who happens to be a former vice-president of that excellent seat of learning? "Have you contacted the Israeli ambassador for an explanation to this outrage?" I e-mailed him.

Next day, having heard nothing, I e-mailed again: "Update... She has been removed to Gaza blindfolded and handcuffed! What is the embassy doing about this please?" Another 24 hours have gone by and the silence is deafening. Still, it's not unusual for the Palestinian embassy to be fast asleep, out to lunch or off on holiday and no one covering ongoing crises.

I simultaneously e-mailed Israeli Ambassador Ron Prosor, asking him, please, to make enquiries. "On the face of it," I wrote him, "this seems a senseless outrage. The student concerned has, I believe, just started her final year. I wonder what you or Prime Minister Netanyahu would say if the education of your sons and daughters or grandchildren was disrupted in this manner?" And next day, having heard nothing, I sent the same update about Berlanty being blindfolded and handcuffed. Another 24 hours have passed... silence here too. Not even the courtesy of an acknowledgement from Israel's press office, which usually responds like lightning to anything with news value.

If this had been a Jewish girl deprived of her university degree and life chances, Israeli embassies around the world would be instantly on the warpath hurling accusations of religious hatred and anti-semitism. But it's the Jewish state screwing up the young life of a Christian, so that's alright.

\* The writer is author of Radio Free Palestine , which tells the plight of the Palestinians under occupation. © Copyright Al-Ahram Weekly. All rights reserved