

Israeli Police State: Solidarity with Palestinians is a “Crime”, Over 4,500 Palestinian Political Prisoners

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On April 24, Frank Barat, a Palestine solidarity activist and co-coordinator of last year’s Russell Tribunal on Palestine, was stopped at Ben Gurion International Airport by the Shabak, Israel’s internal security service, and subjected to four hours of interrogation and nearly a full day’s detention before being deported back Belgium. His “crime”? To have visited Israel while a supporter of Palestinian rights. Here, he describes what took place.

“WRITE YOUR e-mail addresses, your mobile phone number, your house phone, the name of your father and the name of your grandfather on this piece of paper” were the first words the Israeli security officer told me when I sat in front of him in his office.

As anyone involved in solidarity work with the Palestinian people will tell you, landing at Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv, Israel, and having-to-face questioning by the authorities is never an exciting prospect. In the last couple of months, a few activists have been turned back. Due to my work with the Russell Tribunal on Palestine, I knew even before I arrived in front of the immigration desk that I was a likely target for hard questioning from the Shabak, Israel’s internal security service.

I was coming to Palestine to visit old friends and also to take part in a conference on political prisoners organized in Ramallah as part of my role as coordinator for the Russell Tribunal. Due to the fact that Israel controls all the West Bank borders of Palestine, one has to go through Israeli officials in order to reach the occupied Palestinian territories. (Now, only Gaza-via the Rafah border crossing with Egypt-is accessible without too much Israeli interference.)

So I wrote the requested details on the piece of paper in front of me—except that I put an alternative e-mail address, being fully aware that what the officer in front of me wanted was information about other people involved with solidarity work in Palestine and abroad. Mapping networks has in recent years been vigorously pursued by Israel.

The line of questioning, at first, stuck to my travel plans. Six days in Tel Aviv without a travel guide was too much to bear for the man. He then quickly moved to my personal details and asked me to log on to my e-mail account, which is apparently less illegal (in Israel anyway) than I thought (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

He started to get upset when my inbox opened and there was no message in it. He told me repeatedly, “I know you have another e-mail address. Give it to me.” “I only have this one,” was the answer I stuck with throughout the whole process. I was taken to various offices throughout the whole interrogation process and spoke to a few people, who asked, again

and again, the same questions.



Image: Israeli security forces inside Ben Gurion Airport

I HAD to wait for long periods between each interrogation. Palestine and political activity only were raised after about three hours of questioning. I was sort of relieved to hear the word because I knew deep down that the Shabak agent had known about my work on the Palestine issue from minute one. He even asked me at one point, "What will Google tell me if I search for your name?"

The goal, however, was somewhere else. The goal was to exhaust me into giving information about workmates, colleagues and various people I knew in Israel/Palestine. The exhaustion part worked. I was clearly on my knees at 4 a.m., having had no sleep for 24 hours and faced with several unfriendly people questioning me. But they never got what they really wanted—my e-mail account and its content. After four hours of questioning, the verdict came (there were five people in the room, including me, at this time): "You lied to me. So you won't get in. You will now be deported back. Your flight is in 23 hours."

Still, right after telling me this, the officer tried one more time, telling me that he was my friend, here to help me and that if I collaborated he might change his decision. I was at this point taken to a room where I was body searched thoroughly (by a young man with an apologetic look on his face), and where my carry-on bag (the only piece of luggage I brought) was fully checked, in and out, approximately three times, including passing through X-rays.

At roughly 4.30 a.m., I was put in a van, alone, and driven to my next destination: the deportation center. Why we stopped, for about 10 minutes, in between airplanes on the tarmac is a question that remains unanswered. He told me before he dropped me off that I would be deported in 23 hours. "You're lucky," said the man. "Some people have to wait for a week here."

The next 23 hours were the longest in my life. With no means to know what the time was, it took forever. My cellmate, a 21-year-old Ukrainian man who spoke no English at all and came to Israel in search of a better future, and I were allowed two 10-minute breaks outside, under surveillance of course, and managed to catch a glimpse of the palm trees and the sunshine that we were at this point longing for. We were then joined by two older Ukrainians as well as a Chinese man.

What I did not know at the time was that a friend in Israel, at 9 a.m. on Tuesday morning, had contacted the office of Israeli lawyer Gabi Lasky to ask her to try to get more

information regarding my whereabouts—did I enter? Was I being deported? Detained? They did not want to say anything. It took many hours for Gabi to get confirmation that I was in the detention center at the airport. Over the phone, Gabi later told me that the authorities are making life harder and harder for lawyers and that they are being more difficult every day.

I was put back on a plane, escorted by an immigration official, my bag full of security tags, paraded in front of the other passengers, at 1 a.m. the next day. The fact that the main air hostess was Arab and smiled at me when the immigration official handed her my passport felt, I have to say, very good at the time.

WHILE THIS was an extremely unpleasant experience, it is crucial to put things into a broader context. The pressure, fear and humiliation I often felt during this time—the scare tactics used by the Shabak (“Tell me the truth, or you’re going to jail right now”) and the short time spent in jail—are nothing compared to what the Palestinians are going through every day. Right now, more than 4,500 Palestinian political prisoners are rotting in Israeli jails. A few of them have started “hunger strikes” and are slowly dying, while the “international community” (understood as the Western states, the European Union and the United Nations) is doing nothing to come to their rescue.

It is crucial to keep highlighting this. The inconvenience felt by a privileged international citizen should not overshadow the reason at the core of his activism: To acknowledge the right of the Palestinian people to resist their far more powerful occupier and to do so until the systematic and institutionalized [apartheid system](#) put in place by Israel ends; to expose the active role played by third parties (states, institutions and corporations) in supporting Israel’s occupation; and to highlight Israel’s impunity regarding countless resolutions passed by the UN General Assembly and the UN Security Council that have been, so far, never followed by any concrete action.

It is our role as global actors involved in a global struggle for justice, freedom and dignity for all people, regardless of their ethnicity, political orientations, or countries of origin, to show solidarity with those people stripped of their rights. The breaking down of human civilization in sub-categories of human beings (privileges come depending on where you were born, while this act was simply an accident of nature), the slow crumbling of any “common decency,” solidarity and compassion showed by people towards others, can be reversed and is not ineluctable.

This can only happen if we all unite towards this goal.

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