

The Grim Conditions of Jordan's Immigration Detention Camps. Blatant Human Rights Violations

An Expat's Perspective

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The following elucidates the grim conditions of immigration detention camps and the defective process of deportation existing within Jordan, which innocent migrant workers have endured for so long, in silence. Organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Tamkeen, Global Detention Project, and more have persistently attempted to raise awareness on the preceding conundrum.

I strongly feel my personal experience may append some insight to their efforts. Recently, I and my wife (an Iraqi refugee), were unexpectedly arrested and quickly deported from Jordan -upon orders of the Jordanian Mukhabarat (intelligence)- for my passion in highlighting Syrian refugees' tribulations and for me reporting labor violations and corruption to the National Centre of Human Rights, Tamkeen, and the Anti-Corruption Commission of Jordan. My labor complaint was in regards to the International Independent School on Airport Road and Sands National Academy in Khelda , Jordan.

It has unfortunately become the norm in the Hashemite Kingdom for indigent migrant workers and others to be booted from Jordan, violating international laws, before their trials commence or labor grievances against employers investigated. This is what occurred to me and my wife. In other words, if employees protest loud enough or their complaint possesses substantial merit, they are discreetly punished via deportation, even though their employers' failure in abiding by Jordanian Labor Laws, resulted in immigration infractions which consequentially led to such deportation. It is hopeful this publication may provide a closer glance at the conditions of Jordan's detention camps and deportation process for expats, Human rights NGOs, and those affluent supporting the Hashemite Kingdom's persistent (media assuaged) violations of international human rights laws.

No Phone Call to Stay in Jordan

The mandatory one phone call - upon arrest- expected in most western nations to prisoners, is out the door in Jordan. While incarcerated within Jordan's deportation camps, no one - other than those with 'wasta' or money- could access the telephone to buzz a lawyer or embassy. I was denied by every single officer from Jabal Shemalia to Tababour to Claa Ali detention centers for an entire week. I was either given a flat emotionless 'no' or the tautology of 'later'. The latter reply, 'later,' of course never materialized within the Hashemite Kingdom's 'luxurious' detention camp. However, if deportees submitted to voluntary deportation-prior to seeing an immigration judge- previously forbidden telephone privileges shockingly appear.



The Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan

It is quite simple, yet a cruel process. If you possess no one on the outside to facilitate your departure from Jordan, you are inured in waiting for an immigration judge. You should be prepared to inform your loved ones that over-stay fees are demanded to be paid in addition to travel costs. Thus, if you are estranged from family (as some Muslim reverts) or an introvert, you'll be incarcerated for a long period of unknown Rip Van Winkle, amount of time.

Miserable conditions

The conditions at the detention camps are miserably unacceptable. The heatless rooms are dark. On two occasions, I saw cells with four lamps , but only one functioning. The bathroom is an 18th century replica, a hole in the ground with water well beside it. Ventilation is meager and even the whiff of someone's butt percussion is generously distributed to unsuspecting nostrils. People sleep on plastic mattresses with a thin sheet and rock hard pillows, surrounded by the unclear pitch of deep conversation by others clueless what will occur to them, and moldy decaying walls that stare emotionlessly at you. Although the Middle East is a male-dominated and gender repressive society, female facilities are chivalrously better. As my wife explained, the female prisoners have their own elevated bunk beds.

You are unlucky to be a tenant of the Amman Shemalia detention camp though. It is an 'equally generous' concrete sweet built for a capacity of twenty, but one may see fifty humans jammed inside like a rusty can of dead sardines. This crowdedness seems to proliferate animosity and verbal/physical confrontations between prisoner and prisoner and correctional officers (COs) and prisoners. Prisoners also are coerced to catch shut-eye without their mattresses, on top of each others' feet and chests, while regularly tip-toeing to the bathroom around others' vulnerable limbs who are helplessly laying on the cold concrete floor. Also medical assistance is non-existent. One obese detainee's pleas for medical help as he held his palm flat against his chest and collapsed to the floor, went completely ignored. Also, prayer in the Amman Shemalia camp must be performed directly in front of the bathroom, in which I witnessed some vainly protesting this occurrence. In addition, there are no washing laundry nor hygiene products nor access to a shower or a change of clothes. Bad breath, stinky underarms, lice, and cancerous-like sores distinguish seniority among the knowledgeable and experienced male prisoners. However, the female prisoners are allowed a shower daily and the ability to do their laundry and change clothing.

The glamorous victuals at the Jordanian detention facilities are distributed once in two days. It is comprised of watery soup, old vegetables, and tasteless rice which barely suffices what is necessary for human nutrient intake. However, the female prisoners are given a more varied amalgam of healthy vegetables, bread, rice, and meat for breakfast and dinner, twice a day. Male and female prisoners were administered just a bottle of 1/4 liter water. More bottles, better cuisine, and snacks are available to individuals who possess currency (prisoners maintain money on them while imprisoned). Unlike prison films, these detention camps luckily had no bugs in the chow. Thankfully, bugs have better slop outside the detention camps.

The Bad Correctional Officers

It is pertinent to not generalize because there is good and bad everywhere. And the Jordanian Cos and police are humans as well. Some are honest with you in regards to what occurs at the centers. Others attempt to connect you with the outside world by passing messages. A few even attempt to accommodate you if possible, when in urgent need. Another sneaks outside meals to certain prisoners. There were good Cos and police I met there which I respect tremendously now, and forever. However, there are ghastly ones as well.

While being transported between facilities, I surprisingly witnessed a childish armed officer playfully point his automatic double-handed firearm at one of the handcuffed detainees. I also witnessed two COs mercilessly take turns repetitively slapping a cornered handcuffed Turkish prisoner in the head and face, for the minor infraction of talking back. After this cruel beating, he was -while still handcuffed- thrown back into the holding tank for duration of time. An additional CO aggressively dragged a blond-haired outspoken Jordanian prisoner -who loudly bemoaned for coffee in the early morning- out of the inmates cell. The CO then violently shoved, repeatedly slapped, and like a pugilist, punched him with hooks and straights and uppercuts; while this helpless victim was handcuffed to a chair.

The CO ceased when breathless and exhausted. He then forcefully threw this prisoner out the door to other awaiting officers, who consequentially escorted the injured patient into solitary confinement. In a different incident, I witnessed one inmate remain in handcuffs for two entire days, sleeping in this manner, in consequence to his bold decision to go on hunger strike. I don't know what his ultimate outcome was because he was unexpectedly and discreetly transferred out. When speaking to other prisoners about the horrible occurrences I witnessed, many retorted with worse horror stories. Eg. One unnamed prisoner was beaten unconscious, handcuffed, and his lifeless body thrown into the bathroom according to witnesses. The sole abuse I suffered were racial slurs against Asians by a CO at Tababour facility and shouts of "Fuck America" by one police man at the Claa Ali center. The aforementioned cases of abuse, of arrogant fear as author Ghassan Kanafani would describe, mostly occurred at the Amman Shemalia detention center.

My wife also witnessed one female Jordanian prisoner severely beaten and stomped by three female guards, and an officer, for the unthinkable dereliction of asking the staff to light her cigarette. One female staff retorted to this prisoner's query by screaming, in which the prisoner calmly reminded the CO that she -as a human- has some right to dignity to shield her from unreasonable shouting. The pummeling then commenced. At the conclusion of this malaise, the female COs threatened to falsely accuse this inmate of insulting the King of Jordan, if she dared mention what occurred. That same victim a few hours later -while

laying bloody on the ground- suddenly began gasping for oxygen in wild convulsions in front of everyone, until unconsciousness silenced her.

Testimonies of Hope

The experience in Jordan's detention camps was utterly horrible. Yet the resilient in life discover some positive, under such tribulations. I recollect my Clemson University professor's advice , Professor Lance Howard, to unearth the tiny glimmer of light in any gloomy situation, and nurture it. And I did. I formulated lasting friendships with 'good' people who despite suffering pitiful treatment equivalent to that reserved for dangerous felons, were solely guilty of pursuing their dreams of a better life. Some like an engineer Mohammed Bayo, who like me and others, swallowed our self respect to survive. I witnessed Jordanian COs and police on occasions, coerce him to loudly sing and shout chants of praise to the King of Jordan and recite the Jordanian National Anthem, in order to win their approval and avoid a more difficult imprisonment. Conversely, such childish treatment wretchedly failed to coax us into loving the Hashemite government and the King of Jordan. On the contrary, it subconsciously, and perhaps by the purpose of God's will, permanently etched into our minds the recollection of this horrid Royal treatment and criminal violations of human rights laws with that of the Jordanian government, and the King of Jordan, all as the same.

I beheld these pioneers of human history, migrant workers, vehemently stripped of human dignity and some cruelly abused, denied natural rights accorded to the average human, and lingering in anguish without any glimmering contact to their own loved ones; while patiently awaiting an uncertain outcome in the squalid Jordanian detention camps. Their only crime, the many kind Syrians and Egyptians and Africans and Asians I met. They did not possess sufficient funds to pay for exorbitant immigration or labor fees. Or because they made a single small-minded immoral Jordanian citizen , enraged enough to barefacedly lie and fabricate a charge against them. Or these migrant workers were incarcerated and being deported as a result of punishment by an employer, for wrongly entrusting in a crooked Jordanian government and its superficial laws, when initially filing their own complaints against that employer first. One of the few occasions in the detention camps wherein a zephyr on the pinnacle of this mountain of tribulation cooled my nerves and comforted me, was when I came to the realization that my situation was not an anomaly.

I spoke with many migrant prisoners -who like me- filed official complaints against employers, but as with Arnold Abbot of Ft. Lauderdale Florida who was imprisoned for feeding the poor, suddenly found 'themselves' arrested for doing the right thing. My interviews and casual conversations with these victims for a week, abridged a closer revealing glimpse into this Jordanian injustice which synchronously augmented previous accusations by Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Tamkeen. I am a believer in both HRW and Tamkeen now!

The palpable testimonies from the casualties of King Abdullah II's obtuse immigration laws and detention camps touched my heart deeply in an indescribably sad manner. Some of these twice-victimized prisoners-forgotten and unloved,-were under the callous sponsorship of abusive employers who discreetly beat and pugnaciously locked them in tiny apartments, after illegally confiscating their passports. Silence was demanded by employers via threatening their employees with endless imprisonment. Others were capriciously sold off as property or sheep to a different employer without consent, separating dear friends and family. Others were reprimanded with imprisonment and deportation after complaining that

their salaries were unpaid for months and even years. Many were refused the very labor contracts assured to them by employers, which inevitably resulted in their imprisonment. One Egyptian was incarcerated because he equally traded insult with insult, against a single Jordanian antagonist. These were not criminals! They were the indigent all of the real prophets of old respected and defended. They were innocent victims crushed within a cold machinery of corruption in Jordan! They were innocuous victims without the heroes and heroines of today, to grant them real justice.

Jordan's Violations of International Human Rights Laws

King Abdullah's regime is not the worst amidst the Middle East. Yet Jordan's cajoling declaration as a staunch ally of Israel and the West doesn't efface the truth. The Hashemite Kingdom is committing human rights violations with impunity while waving the banner of the War of Terrorism as an excuse. Jordan, is not an ally of humanity in the world. As NGOs as Tamkeen pointed out, Jordan is violating international laws in consequence to deporting migrant workers under incredulous conditions of detention and disgusting treatment, despite pending trials and doing so on the flimsiest of evidence. Contrary to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the UN Convention Against Torture. Additionally, I witnessed approximately ten to twelve Syrian refugees in these camps awaiting deportation which is against recognized international laws opposed to refoulement. My Iraqi wife was one of the deported asylees. Those refugees informed me, as well as other inmates, the deportation of Syrian refugees was a normal monthly routine.

Conclusion

Although I was not allowed to call anyone outside of the detention facilities, Mohammed Bayo , by the grace of God, handed me a telephone in the back of a police transport van. And with the help of others blocking the view of the police, I made phone calls. Certain 'good' police worked with my wife to financially arrange my departure. Those were my heroes and heroines. I humbly thank all of them dearly. I also recollect seeing a mentally handicapped beggar in the detention camp. From my arrival to my departure from Jordan, within a period of 5 years, I occasionally saw this man with his hands out at the intersection of the University Street, at the corner of the University of Jordan's mosque and the street which led to the West Gate of the university. Till this day, I am proud that, unlike many Jordanians who attempted to convince me otherwise, I never refused handing him money, if I had it. I think reconnecting with him in jail was a sign from God. I would be released a week later.

It is pertinent to express my own opinion on King Abdullah II's detention facilities and immigration laws. I feel that the deportation of migrant workers in Jordan is a discriminatory instrument of unnecessary punishment in Jordan, nothing to do with justice. Employers liberally employ 'administrative detention' and deportation- once reserved for state security motivations- as an instrument of repugnant punishment in Jordan. It is not a policy of prudence for Jordan's future, but in contrast a tool to enforce the dominance of the repulsive racial and political hierarchy based upon the procreation of the progenitors of Jordan's posterity. Those with exceptional skills, unmatched abilities, and extensive education are unimportant to Jordan and thus the brain drain continues its cycle to the Jordanian peoples' own detrimental loss. The treatment and conditions of migrant workers in Jordan flirts closely - if not already there - with the demarcation line of slavery. It needs reform desperately and no one should hold the Jordan in any regard, other than outright condemnation and shame.

Notes:

1 Wasta is the word Jordanians use to describe a distinct form of unfair influence by an individual or group, which allows one or many to surpasses normal laws or rules. Examples are bribery, close relationships, tribal names, etc

2 Daily Mail "Drop that plate Right Now"

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2821129/90-year-old-man-arrested-feeding-homeless-Fort-Lauderdale-new-law-introduced-bans-people-sharing-food-public.html>

3 "Migrant Domestic Workers in Jordan" Huffington Post. Christoph Wilcke.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/10/12/migrant-domestic-workers-jordan>

4 Global Detention Project <http://www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/middle-east/jordan>

5 Human Rights Watch Jordan: Vulnerable Refugees Forcibly Returned to Syria

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/11/23/jordan-vulnerable-refugees-forcibly-returned-syria>

6 Mohammed Bayo <https://www.facebook.com/mohamed.mbayo?fref=ts>

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