

# Torture as a tool of domination: The logic behind the use of torture against Palestinians. A human rights approach

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## Abstract

This article explores the psychopolitical logic of torture within the Palestinian context, focusing on its role as a tool of domination and resistance. Torture in Palestine is not merely an instrument for inflicting individual suffering but is a strategic mechanism employed by the Israeli state to dismantle collective identity, suppress resistance, and erode the dignity of the Palestinian people. Since the onset of the Gaza war on October 7, 2023, the scale and brutality of torture tactics, including physical abuse, psychological manipulation, and sexual violence, have intensified, highlighting the urgent need for documentation and accountability. This article examines recurring patterns in testimonies of Palestinian detainees, focusing on the psychological and symbolic dimensions of state violence. These practices reflect a broader political and ethical crisis, requiring the involvement of mental health professionals in documenting the psychological consequences of torture. Traditional psychiatric frameworks are insufficient in addressing the realities of state-sanctioned violence; thus, a critical human rights-based approach is advocated. This approach emphasises the need for a decolonial, justice-oriented mental health praxis that supports collective resilience and political agency. By documenting torture (i.e. applying the Istanbul Protocol or by other means), this article argues, healthcare professionals can empower survivors to reclaim agency over their narratives and contribute to the pursuit of justice and redress. The article concludes by calling for global solidarity, not only through adherence to international humanitarian law but through active political action to hold perpetrators accountable and protect the human rights of Palestinians.

**Keywords:** Palestine, torture, mental health, human rights, solidarity

## Introduction

The torture and ill-treatment of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli custody have long been a pervasive component of Israel's system of colonial domination. However, since October 7, 2023, the scope and brutality of these practices have escalated to unprecedented levels. (Anadolu Ajansı, 2025). Despite Israel's obligations under international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL)—including Article 56 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which mandates the occupying power to ensure access to health care for protected persons, including detainees—these obligations have been systematically violated. As Sahar Francis (2017) of the

Palestinian Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association, Addameer, notes,

“Political prisoners’ rights, issues, and struggles [...] must be understood in the context of Israel’s ongoing refusal to abide by or respect IHL or IHRL. Israeli violations of such international norms have been systematic and widespread, and have included torture, extrajudicial killings, and arbitrary detention, to name just a few” (p. 47).

An estimated 750,000 Palestinians have been detained since Israel began its occupation of East Jerusalem, the West

\* The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Journal, the Publisher or the Editors

Bank, and the Gaza Strip in June 1967 (Negotiations Affairs Department, 2025). This figure includes approximately 23,000 women and 25,000 children (Haaretz, 2014; UN, 2019). Since the onset of Israel's latest war on Gaza, these numbers have surged dramatically, as mass arrests have intensified. According to data from the Israeli human organisation B'Tselem, as of late December 2024, the Israel Prison Service (IPS) was detaining 9,619 Palestinians on charges it classified as related to "security," a figure that includes 2,216 individuals from the Gaza Strip (B'Tselem, 2025). Central to the illegality of these detentions is Israel's military court system, which facilitates indefinite incarceration under the guise of "security," often withholding charges or evidence from detainees and their legal counsel.

Prisoner support organisations define Palestinian political prisoners as those detained in connection with the occupation, rather than for common crimes (Francis in Human Rights Council, 2009; Addameer, 2016a). Amnesty International adopts a broader definition, encompassing prisoners whose cases involve a political dimension, whether in terms of motivation, nature of the acts, or the authorities' response (Amnesty International, 2002). By contrast, Israel's Unlawful Combatants Law (No. 5762-2002) allows for the indefinite detention of individuals accused of participating—directly or indirectly—in "hostile activity," all without trial or due process. These detainees are tried in military courts but are not granted the status of prisoners of war. Instead, they are classified as "security prisoners" (EU Policy Department, 2013), a designation that permits the circumvention of fundamental protections under international humanitarian law (IHL). Human rights organisations, including the Israeli group B'Tselem, have long criticised this broad and ambiguous interpretation of "security":

"Security is interpreted in an extremely broad manner such that non-violent speech and political activity are considered dangerous. [...] Such usage is a blatant contradiction of the right to freedom of speech and freedom of opinion guaranteed under international law" (B'Tselem, 1997, para. 5).

The imprisonment of political activists for acts of expression violates international standards protecting freedom of speech (MIFTAH, 2018), while their criminalization serves to dehumanize and delegitimize their political claims: "Criminalizing political detainees [...] intends the transformation of these people into the other, inferior and less worthy of due process and legal procedures" (Abdo, 2014).

Israel, as a State party to the Fourth Geneva Convention (1949), the International Covenant on Civil and Political

Rights (1966), and the Convention Against Torture (1984), is obligated to uphold the rights enshrined in these treaties. Yet, Palestinian detainees are routinely subjected to torture, prolonged solitary confinement—sometimes for up to ten years—brutal interrogations, administrative detention without charge, denial of medical care, and coerced confessions (EU Policy Department, 2013).

Palestinian prisoners have long used hunger strikes to protest Israel's harsh and unlawful detention regime.<sup>1</sup> The case of Khader Adnan, who died in May 2023 following an 87-day hunger strike, illustrates the symbolic and political significance of this form of resistance. Adnan had previously staged multiple hunger strikes in response to his repeated detention without charge based on secret evidence (Amnesty International, 2023b; Physicians for Human Rights Israel [PHRI], 2023). His protests triggered widespread solidarity actions, both among fellow detainees and across Palestinian society, reframing prisoners like him as political activists resisting a carceral system designed to erase their identity and suppress dissent (Jabr, 2024c). In response, Israeli authorities subjected him to punitive and negligent treatment, including shackling him to his hospital bed, denying access to private physicians, and ultimately withholding adequate medical care (PHRI, 2023; Amnesty International, 2023b; United Nations, 2023, para.38). Such treatment also violates the World Medical Association's Malta Declaration, which prohibits force-feeding and mandates the ethical treatment of hunger strikers in accordance with their autonomy and dignity (World Medical Association, 2006). Adnan's death was widely condemned by human rights organisations as a case of medical neglect amounting to unlawful killing (Al-Haq, 2023): "When his life was at risk, Israeli authorities refused Khader Adnan access to the specialised care he needed in a civilian hospital and instead left him to die alone in his cell." (Amnesty International, 2023b) His case reveals how administrative detention, political dehumanisation, and medical coercion intersect within a broader system of structural violence—and how, in the face of such repression, hunger strikes remain one of the few available forms of resistance for Palestinian detainees.

Since October 7, 2023, the situation has sharply deteriorated. At least 59 Palestinian detainees (60 according to B'Tselem, 2025) have died in Israeli custody since the start of the Gaza war in October 2023 (Anadolu Ajansı, 2025), amid rising reports of inhumane treatment and collective punishment—an absolute prohibition under customary international law

<sup>1</sup> See Norman (2020) for a more in-depth analysis on the historical use of hunger strikes by Palestinian prisoners.

and explicitly banned by Article 33(1) of the Fourth Geneva Convention (PHROC, 2023)<sup>2</sup>. Human rights organisations warn that extended emergency measures have led to systematic abuse, torture, and the failure to investigate detainee deaths (Amnesty International, 2023a; OHCHR, 2023).

These practices are not new, but their visibility and brazenness have reached new heights. B'Tselem (2024) has described Israel's prison system as a "network of torture camps", underscoring the scale of violations since October 7. Videos of soldiers humiliating Palestinian prisoners have circulated widely on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, demonstrating a disturbing level of impunity and a chilling disregard for international legal norms, as well as evidence of genocidal intent (see, for example: Thomas & Brown, 2024; Forey, 2024; Gutman et al., 2024; Kershner & Bergman, 2024; Hawari, 2024).

Even prior to this escalation, mechanisms for accountability were virtually non-existent. Since 2001, over 1,400 complaints of torture have been submitted to Israeli authorities, yet only two criminal investigations were opened (Public Committee Against Torture in Israel, 2022). The approval by the Israeli Attorney General of coercive interrogation techniques used by the Israel Security Agency raises serious concerns regarding Israel's breach of the absolute, non-derogable prohibition on torture under international law (UN Human Rights Council, 2022, para. 30).

Based on testimonies, this article explores how the intensified use of torture against Palestinians since October 7, 2023, represents both a continuation and an alarming escalation of Israel's long-standing carceral and settler-colonial practices. We approach this analysis from a psychopolitical perspective. Psychopolitics has different meanings, but here we use it to refer to the study of how power works on—and through—the psyche (emotions, desires, beliefs) to shape political behaviour and social order. In this sense, it is linked to processes of mind manipulation and the molding of subjectivity. Torture is examined not only as a means of inflicting individual pain but as a deliberate political instrument deployed to dismantle collective identity, suppress resistance, and erode the social and symbolic fabric of Palestinian life. Drawing on testimonies from Palestinian detainees, the article identifies recurring patterns of abuse—emphasising the psychological and symbolic dimensions of state violence, including acts of humiliation, sexual violence, and dehumanisation. It also critically investigates the role of mental health professionals and human rights workers in

contexts where torture is systematic and politically sanctioned, asking what it means to bear witness in spaces where the state is both perpetrator and judge. Beyond clinical frameworks that tend to individualise trauma and depoliticise suffering, the article argues for a decolonial and justice-oriented mental health praxis—one that recognises the political nature of suffering and supports collective resilience, memory, and resistance. In doing so, it advocates for a critical human rights approach that foregrounds accountability, solidarity, and the political agency of the oppressed.

### **Torture as a political instrument**

Based on testimonies from 55 formerly incarcerated Palestinians since October 7—most of whom were never formally charged—the Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem documents a systematic and institutionalised regime of abuse. Detainees, including individuals from Gaza, the West Bank, and inside Israel, describe consistent patterns of physical violence, sexual assault, humiliation, deprivation, and denial of medical care. The testimonies reveal the conversion of multiple military and civilian prison facilities into *de facto* torture camps, where the infliction of suffering appears to be intentional and widespread (B'Tselem, 2024).

Historically, the Israeli prison system has functioned as a mechanism of control over the Palestinian population. Since the onset of the 2023 war, the number of Palestinians in detention has nearly doubled, with a sharp rise in administrative detentions—individuals held without charge, trial, or access to legal defence. Those imprisoned range from children and students to professionals and community leaders, many detained solely for political expression or due to broad categorisations such as being of "fighting age" (B'Tselem, 2024), aiming to suppress any forms of Palestinian resistance.

The institutionalisation of torture in Israel can be traced back to the Landau Commission Report (1987), which controversially authorised the use of a "moderate measure of physical pressure" during interrogations by the Israel Security Agency (ISA). This language provided legal cover for physical and psychological abuse, including sleep deprivation, stress positions, and beatings, and was widely condemned by international human rights bodies. Although the Israeli High Court of Justice formally outlawed this policy in 1999 (HCJ 5100/94), human rights organisations have consistently documented the continued use of similar techniques, particularly against Palestinian detainees (Public Committee Against Torture in Israel, 2007; UN CAT, 2009).

The systemic abuse described in recent accounts is situated within a broader socio-political context of entrenched dehu-

2 In comparison, 9 detainees had died in Guantanamo Bay, synonymous for unlawful detention, torture and widespread human rights abuses, since its first prisoners arrived in 2002 (Reprieve US, 2002, online)

manisation. The B'Tselem report argues that public discourse in Israel has increasingly normalised calls for extreme violence and collective punishment, with the suffering of Palestinians largely marginalised or ignored in mainstream narratives. Within this climate, the mistreatment of Palestinian prisoners has not only become routine but, in some circles, overtly endorsed (B'Tselem, 2024).

These testimonies must be regarded as evidence of a deliberate and coordinated policy rather than isolated incidents. This becomes especially viable given its rooting in the ideological agenda of Israel's National Security Minister, Itamar Ben Gvir, who has used his authority over the Israel Prison Service (IPS) to implement measures specifically targeting and degrading Palestinian prisoners. These actions have received full backing from the Israeli government and Prime Minister Netanyahu (B'Tselem, 2024).

Even before the October 2023 escalation, Ben Gvir had introduced several punitive policies—such as reducing family visits, cancelling early release options, limiting shower time, and eliminating basic privileges like food preparation and canteen access—designed explicitly to increase suffering (B'Tselem, 2024).

This policy of mass incarceration, systemic abuse, and inhuman treatment represents a profound violation of Israeli and international legal standards, including those related to torture and the treatment of prisoners. However, Israel's legal institutions, including the judiciary and the State Attorney's Office, have failed to intervene, effectively enabling the normalisation of torture and the erosion of human rights within the prison system (B'Tselem, 2024).

Through systemic abuse, Israel seeks to erode Palestinian collective identity, fracture social bonds, suppress political agency, and instil fear as a form of population control. The infliction of torture, particularly since October 7, 2023, represents both a continuation and escalation of longstanding strategies aimed at dismantling Palestinian resistance and undermining collective dignity.

### **Administrative detention as a form of psychological torture**

The practice of imprisonment without a charge or conviction and prolonging incarceration indefinitely after serving a sentence is known as administrative detention. It does not allow detainees to defend themselves, as evidence is classified as secret and not even shared with lawyers (Amnesty International, 2012; Addameer, 2016a).

According to Israel's Order Regarding Administrative Detention No. 159121, detainees may be kept in administrative

detention for a maximum of six months. The assumption that a suspect poses a security threat is the basis for administrative detention orders, which are granted by Israel's Ministry of Defence and carried out by Israel's executive branch. Orders can be renewed if there are "reasonable security grounds." Israel often extends these detention warrants without restriction, allowing it to detain Palestinians without charge or trial for an unlimited period of time. Additionally, the military judges who hear cases involving administrative detention base their judgments on secret information that is not disclosed to the accused and their lawyers. Many Palestinians have spent up to six years in detention without being charged or facing a trial, including minors (Al Haq, 2011; MIFTAH, 2012; EU Policy Department, 2013; B'Tselem, 2021; Addameer, 2022).

Figures published by the Israel Prison Service show that Israel uses the practice of administrative detention excessively to punish Palestinians. As of March 2025, the number of Palestinians held in administrative detention by Israeli authorities—meaning detention without formal charge or trial—has risen to 3,405 individuals. This figure includes over 350 children and at least 21 women. These numbers reflect a significant increase from the 1,310 administrative detainees reported in September 2023. Additionally, 1,555 Palestinians from Gaza are being held under Israel's "unlawful combatants" law, which similarly permits indefinite detention without trial (Commission of Detainees' Affairs, 2025).

Israeli authorities' practice of administrative detention remains of grave concern to the international community. According to the Committee against Torture, administrative detention for excessive periods may constitute a form of ill-treatment (UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 2009, para. 17, and UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 2016, paras. 22–23). The Committee urges Israel to "urgently take the measures necessary to end the practice of administrative detention and ensure that all persons who are currently held in administrative detention are afforded all basic legal safeguards" (UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 2016, para. 23a).

Israel's disproportionate and prolonged use of administrative detention, along with its inhumane treatment of Palestinians, is against international law and has been criticised as a form of collective punishment (UN News, 2025). The right to a fair trial and humane treatment constitutes an essential right for all human beings according to Article 10 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, both of which



Israel signed in 1966 and ratified in 1991 (EU Policy Department, 2013).

In addition to administrative detention constituting a form of ill-treatment, it takes a huge psychological toll on detainees. It is perceived as one of the most extreme forms of psychological trauma since detainees remain in a constant state of uncertainty regarding their charges and their release (Addameer, 2016b; Francis, 2017).

### **Testimonies and patterns of abuse**

As mentioned previously, the amount of evidence of Israeli soldiers performing human rights violations and acts of torture is unprecedented. In addition, there are plenty of articles and reports depicting the brutal treatment of Palestinian prisoners and recounting shocking incidents of rape, torture, sexual abuse, medical neglect and death (see, for example: Baroud, 2019; Amnesty International, 2023a; OHCHR, 2024; BBC News, 2025; Independent, 2025; Euro-Med Monitor, 2025). The articles describe systemic torture inflicted on Palestinians detained by Israel, especially since October 7. Detainees report brutal practices, including electric shocks, chemical burns, physical assaults, and sexual abuse. Testimonies further describe extreme mistreatment of detainees, including confinement in small, cage-like spaces, being tied to beds while blindfolded and dressed only in diapers. Prisoners report being stripped, denied basic necessities like food, water, healthcare, and sleep, and subjected to electric shocks, including to their genitals. Additional forms of abuse include blackmail, cigarette burns, excessive noise, attacks by dogs, waterboarding, suspension from ceilings, and severe sexual and gender-based violence (OHCHR, 2024). There are harrowing accounts of detainees being urinated on, being burned alive, being handcuffed for two months or blindfolded for extended periods of time (Middle East Eye, 2025a). Videos have emerged showing blindfolded Palestinian detainees subjected to cruel treatment by Israeli forces, including being forced to listen to a children's song for hours. Blindfolding, a common tactic during detention, exacerbates psychological trauma by inducing sensory deprivation. This method causes disorientation, anxiety, and long-term mental health issues. It isolates victims, making them more vulnerable to manipulation and dehumanisation. Blindfolding also serves to shield interrogators from emotional contact with detainees, fostering detachment and desensitisation. The practice, coupled with torture, is a violation of human rights and intensifies the psychological harm inflicted on prisoners (Jabr, 2024a).

Recent reports from multiple advocacy groups, including the Palestinian Prisoners Society (PPS) and Physicians for Human Rights, highlight the growing health crisis in Israeli prisons, particularly the widespread scabies epidemic. The

disease, which is highly contagious and caused by mites that burrow under the skin, has been rapidly spreading, particularly in overcrowded detention facilities like Megiddo Prison in Israel. The prison's harsh conditions, including inadequate food, clothing, and hygiene supplies, have exacerbated the situation, with many detainees suffering from scabies and other untreated health issues. The Israel Prison Service has been accused of neglect, as prisoners report a lack of medical care and resources that could prevent the spread of the disease. Overcrowding and the failure to separate infected detainees have further fuelled the spread of diseases like scabies, putting both adults and children at risk. The PPS and other human rights organisations have condemned these practices, describing them as deliberate and systematic violations of international law. With scabies and other diseases spreading unchecked, the groups warn that the situation could worsen, leading to even more deaths among detainees if immediate action is not taken. (Association for Civil Rights in Israel, 2024; Middle East Eye, 2025b).

Children alike are being subjected to torture and ill-treatment, enduring severe physical and psychological abuse in Israeli prisons. 17-year-old Hasan described, for instance, being brutally beaten by Israeli soldiers, who struck him with rifle butts and kicked him during his arrest in the Jenin refugee camp. Despite informing his captors of his cancer, Hasan continued to be mistreated and was denied medical care. Palestinian children, like Hasan, are often arrested in the middle of the night, subjected to torture, and deprived of basic necessities. They are frequently blindfolded, handcuffed, and interrogated without legal counsel or family presence. These children often face physical mistreatment, such as beatings and harsh conditions, including overcrowded cells and inadequate food (Defense for Children International – Palestine, 2024). There was international outrage over the death of 17-year-old Palestinian Walid Ahmad, who likely died from starvation in an Israeli prison, according to a medical report by an Israeli doctor who observed the autopsy. Ahmad, held for six months without charge, showed signs of extreme malnutrition, colitis, and scabies (Tondo & Associated Press; Mednick, 2025).

Children as young as 12 are frequently arrested, often for minor offences like stone-throwing, and are subjected to long periods of solitary confinement, forced confessions, and inhumane treatment. Such practices, including the widespread use of torture, violate international law and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which prohibits torture and cruel treatment of children. These systematic abuses against Palestinian child detainees are a stark reflection of Israel's disregard for international human rights standards and

the rights of children under occupation (Defense for Children International – Palestine, 2024).

Tactics are also used to break the will and resistance of Palestinian prisoners. One of the authors had heard accounts of detainees being forced to listen to Israeli national music without end or to dance to the Israeli national anthem. Others have told of being forced to kiss the Israeli flag, a brazenly symbolic act. Acts of dehumanisation and humiliation do not only occur in prison settings, but also on the streets, highlighting the impunity with which both settlers in the West Bank and soldiers in Gaza act.

Across detainee testimonies, what emerges is not only a catalogue of abuse, but a patterned and symbolic regime of violence that targets the body, mind, and identity of Palestinians in detention. Physical abuse—including beatings, burns, suspension, and sexual violence—is interwoven with psychological techniques designed to degrade, disorient, and control. Solitary confinement, sensory deprivation, and forced nudity are recurring tactics that serve not merely to extract information or punish, but to dismantle the detainee's sense of self and belonging. These acts, while physically harmful, function symbolically as instruments of power, establishing the carceral space as a site of domination and erasure.

Further, the symbolic nature of humiliation—such as being forced to kiss the Israeli flag or undress in front of soldiers—illustrates how violence is not only disciplinary but performative. It communicates the hierarchy between occupier and occupied, human and subhuman. Such testimonies reaffirm that Israeli carceral violence is not incidental, but a structural part of a wider project of control, deterrence, and political domination. They reveal a system in which the prison operates as both a material and symbolic weapon, designed to weaken the resistance of Palestinians.

### **The role of witnessing beyond a clinical framework**

This section examines the responsibilities and complexities of psychological witnessing and documentation in contexts where torture is systematic and politically sanctioned. In cases involving torture and grave human rights violations, mental health professionals are required to integrate clinical expertise with ethical and political engagement. While torture has severe psychological consequences, focusing solely on individual clinical symptoms without engaging in witnessing or advocacy may amount to a profound ethical failure (Herman, 1992; Agger & Jensen, 1996; Martín-Baró, 1994; Summerfield, 1999; Silove, 1999; Silove, 2013; Farmer, 2003; Kleinman, 1997).

In human rights practice, witnessing is both a method of evidentiary documentation and a political act aimed at raising

awareness and fostering change. It involves the collection of evidence—through interviews, documentation, and observation—and its presentation via legal testimony, public reporting, or media engagement (UN, 2022). As a discursive and performative act, witnessing goes beyond the transmission of facts; it appeals to shared moral and political values and calls for a praxis of global responsibility (Perkins, 2009). Witnessing, therefore, is neither neutral nor passive. It is embedded in a relational dynamic between the testifier and the listener, requiring the witness to be an ethically attuned and responsive listener. This dialogic relationship reveals a core tension: the ontological fragility of witnessing. Testimony can collapse into spectacle if this dialogic exchange fails or becomes instrumentalised, undermining the potential for solidarity or structural change (Perkins, 2009).

We argue that mental health practice similarly cannot remain neutral. Demands for justice and social repair are fundamental to recovery from psychological and political trauma. In colonial contexts such as Palestine, individual psychotherapy alone cannot address the collective wounds inflicted by ongoing human rights violations. Despite the persistent neutrality of many humanitarian responses, research underscores that recovery is intimately tied to justice, dignity, and political accountability (Marshall & Sousa, 2017). As such, the strengthening of political advocacy and collective resilience must be a core component of mental health interventions.

Mental health professionals play a critical role in witnessing gross human rights abuses. Barriers to testimony are considerable: survivors may downplay their experiences in comparison to others', or avoid narration altogether due to the retraumatizing effects of recall. Often, the most painful details—those associated with shame, humiliation, or perceived betrayal—remain unspoken. Here, the presence of a trained mental health professional becomes essential. Clinicians possess the tools to create safe environments where such narratives can be ethically and effectively treated and documented.

Assuming this role, however, demands moral courage—especially in political climates marked by censorship and repression. Since October 7, 2023, there has been an unprecedented escalation in the targeting of health professionals in the occupied Palestinian territories. The World Health Organization has documented over 1,000 attacks on healthcare personnel and infrastructure, constituting one of the most violent assaults on health systems in modern conflict history (PHR, 2024). In Gaza alone, these attacks have resulted in at least 747 deaths, 969 injuries, and the destruction or damage of 110 medical facilities. Israeli forces have conducted airstrikes on hospitals, obstructed humanitarian access, and detained medical staff—

actions that violate international humanitarian law (UN Human Rights Council, 2024). Internationally, fears of stigmatisation, professional repercussions, or accusations of antisemitism further discourage open critique, contributing to widespread self-censorship. Mental health professionals may retreat behind claims of neutrality, while the emotional toll of witnessing torture—including burnout and vicarious trauma—further contributes to silencing.

Thus, the practice of witnessing requires supportive professional and institutional networks. In light of the alarming rise in torture and other gross human rights violations, mental health professionals must expand their capacity to document psychological harm. This is not only an ethical obligation but also reinforces their credibility as expert witnesses—often exceeding that of journalists or lay observers. The Istanbul Protocol (UN, 2022) provides a vital framework for the forensic documentation of torture and its psychological effects and should be widely adopted in clinical settings.

Ultimately, the task of the mental health professional is dual: to alleviate suffering and to help translate that suffering to the world in ways that prompt action. By translating pain into testimony and testimony into political engagement—through advocacy, redress, and accountability—clinicians contribute to a broader praxis of global solidarity. The responsibility to bear witness includes a commitment to end impunity and ensure that perpetrators are held accountable. When perpetrators are made aware that they are being watched—and that their actions may have consequences—witnessing becomes a powerful tool of resistance and justice.

### **Toward a critical human rights approach**

A decolonial, justice-oriented mental health praxis—one that supports collective resilience and political agency—is essential when working with survivors of torture and ill-treatment. We concur with Patel (2011, 2019, 2020) that mental health must transition toward a critical human rights approach in order to do justice to survivors of human rights abuses and critically engage with issues of power.

A Critical Human Rights-Based Approach (CHRBA) “to applied psychology goes beyond the mere incorporation of human rights language into healthcare and mental health practice. It positions human rights as a foundational framework for all areas of psychology—research, policy, service delivery, and evaluation—while emphasizing that health is not simply a need but a fundamental right, inextricably linked to justice, equity, and non-discrimination” (Patel, 2020).

CHRBA necessitates critical reflection on how power dynamics shape psychological theory, practice, and even the

human rights framework itself. Both psychology and human rights are socially constructed and historically embedded in dominant Western paradigms, which often perpetuate systems of oppression (Patel, 2020). This reflection should question which rights are prioritised, who benefits from them, and how power dynamics influence their interpretation and enforcement. For instance, dominant conceptions of health and dignity often marginalise certain populations—such as people with disabilities, older adults, and racialised communities—by privileging professional perspectives over those of the individuals receiving care.

Historically, psychology has failed to interrogate power adequately. The discipline has often overlooked the influence of colonial histories, slavery, structural racism, and patriarchy in shaping mental health theory and practice. Mainstream psychological models frequently pathologise individuals while disregarding the socio-political and economic conditions that contribute to their suffering (Patel, 2020). This has led to what Mills (2007 in Patel 2020) terms epistemologies of ignorance, where psychological distress is decontextualised, erasing the impact of systemic issues such as racism, poverty, and inequality. As highlighted in our own work concerning Palestine (see, for example, Helbich & Jabr 2021; Helbich & Jabr, 2022), this individualisation of collective suffering obscures the structural causes of colonial oppression and perpetuates the illusion of the neutrality of mental health professionals. In order to address the mental health needs of Palestinians, it is crucial to connect their social suffering with the violent and oppressive context surrounding them, and to frame trauma within the broader context of human rights violations. Trauma, in this regard, is not merely an individual psychological issue but a direct consequence of systematic human rights violations. The traditional trauma framework, while helpful in documenting suffering, often fails to address the root causes of that suffering—namely, the systemic violence and human rights abuses inflicted by powerful political entities (Helbich & Jabr, 2021).

Focusing solely on trauma without acknowledging the socio-political context risks depoliticising the suffering of Palestinians, reducing it to individual pathologies rather than recognising it as a direct result of political violence. Such an approach undermines the structural dimensions of human rights abuses, treating them as isolated incidents rather than as part of an ongoing process of colonial oppression. In order to effectively alleviate the trauma experienced by Palestinians, there is a need for a political resolution to the root causes of violence, such as occupation, dispossession, and the denial of self-determination. Mental health interventions must therefore incorporate a critical human rights approach that not

only addresses individual suffering but also challenges the political and systemic structures that perpetuate this suffering (Helbich & Jabr, 2021).

A critical human rights-based approach (Patel, 2019, 2020) entails actively examining the social, political, and economic contexts that influence both psychology and human rights. It calls on educators, students, and practitioners to critically discuss how their own identities and privileges—such as whiteness, patriarchy, and economic status—inform their practice. CHRBA necessitates dual awareness: an awareness of the power structures embedded within knowledge systems, and an awareness of one's own positionality (Patel, 2020).

Ultimately, CHRBA in applied psychology is about transformation—dismantling oppressive structures, altering institutions, and challenging dominant narratives:

As a stance against oppression and oppressive practices, structural inequalities and human rights abuses, a CHRBA invites critical reflection of ourselves, our roles as psychologists and the ways in which we may reinforce inequalities and human rights abuses, and, importantly, the ways in which we may challenge and help transform policies and practices which harm people. (Patel, 2020)

Patel challenges us to consider how, as health professionals, we can prevent and respond to the suffering caused by inequality and rights violations. How can we reframe our tools—our theories, methods, and practices—so that they do not replicate harm, but instead contribute to justice and collective well-being?

In confronting widespread and systematic human rights violations, the Istanbul Protocol provides a standardised and internationally recognised framework for the ethical documentation of torture, grounded in principles of compassion, dignity, and justice. By equipping healthcare professionals with the necessary tools and knowledge, the ethical documentation of survivors' experiences can be ensured, empowering them to reclaim agency over their narratives and to pursue accountability and redress (Jabr, 2024b).

However, and more importantly, in our efforts to end torture and uphold the rights of its victims, it is imperative that we stand in solidarity with survivors—bearing witness to their suffering, supporting their healing, and advocating persistently for a world free from impunity and oppression. The public and often celebratory display of human rights abuses on social media by Israeli soldiers underscores the deep entrenchment of this culture of impunity. As Hawari (2024) observes:

The reality is that over the last seven and a half decades, there has been complete impunity for brutalising and slaughtering Palestinians. The ongoing genocide in Gaza and the way in which it is being so brazenly shared on social media by the perpetrators is a manifestation of that impunity. The only way to make sure that it stops and never happens again is to hold not only those who have taken part in the genocide accountable but also those who are complicit. (Hawari, 2024)

It has become evident that relying solely on the frameworks of human rights and international humanitarian law fails to deliver justice to Palestinians. As Richard Falk, former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories, asserts, Palestinian resistance must be supported by a global solidarity movement. He emphasises, “This movement of people in support of the Palestinian national struggle is strengthened by documenting Israeli violations of prisoner rights, under the auspices of the UN Human Rights Council and widely trusted NGOs” (Falk, 2019).

Ultimately, gross human rights violations can only be confronted through moral courage, principled resistance, and an unwavering commitment to speaking out and bearing witness.

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