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[Ahed Tamimi, a sixteen-year-old Palestinian rights campaigner, appears at a military court which extended her detention, at the Ofer prison in the West Bank. Source: Medium.com@SIPTU]

A Mind Is a Terrible Thing to Imprison: Confining Palestinian Political Thought

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April 2, 2018

Considerable [public](#) and [media](#) attention has recently been paid to Israel's detention and prosecution of [Ahed Tamimi](#) – the teenager who was filmed slapping Israeli soldiers on her family's property shortly after a soldier [shot her cousin](#) in the head at close range. Once the video of the incident went viral, Tamimi was arrested, tried behind closed doors in an Israeli military court, and, eventually, [sentenced to eight months in prison](#).

Tamimi is among an estimated 800,000 non-citizen Palestinians that Israel has taken into custody since 1967. In fact, the entire non-citizen Palestinian population has been locked up in a colossal jail of sorts, or rather a disjointed network of jails. Israel has placed the Gaza Strip under closure, while enclosing the West Bank with a wall and splintering it into enclaves. Yet, not only have Palestinians been subjected to mass incarceration and the restriction of physical movement. As I show in two [recent articles](#) and a [book](#), Israel also seems resolute to curtail and confine their thought and communication.

Mental Incarceration in Prison

Many former Palestinian prisoners have spoken of Israeli prison as a site for raising their consciousness and acquiring valuable political knowledge. These prisons have been called “an academy of political activism,” “a university,” “a school,” and “a

lecture hall.” Such images refer, among other things, to the prisoners’ informal study groups and also, until recently, their enrollment in Israeli Open University courses, subject to the discretion of the Israeli prison authorities. These courses were hugely popular, with an average of around 250 Palestinian prisoners enrolled each year, mostly under the Palestinian Authority’s sponsorship.

Through these informal and academic studies, Palestinian prisoners engaged in critical thinking, particularly regarding places and times different from their own. Their self-organized study groups reportedly placed emphasis on examining parallels and differences between military and colonial regimes, as well as on studying the political experiences of liberation movements outside Israel/Palestine. Similarly, the most popular Open University course among Palestinian prisoners repeatedly encourages students to draw critical lessons from what it describes as the “colonial” past and present of countries such as the United States and Australia. One of the course books also uses the term “colonial” in reference to Israel’s treatment of Palestinians, perhaps insinuating parallels across time and place.

Without idealizing the emancipatory power of education, these studies represent, in a sense, what anthropologist Esmail Nashif once [described](#) as the “revolutionary pedagogy” of Palestinian prisoners: their use of “reading/writing [as a form of]...resistance...not just in and by itself but, more importantly, as part of the community-building process..., as a space between captives that transcended the space of the prisons.”

Israeli authorities have repeatedly warned of Palestinian prisoners fostering collective political awareness through these and other activities. In 2007, for instance, Israel’s prison authorities cautioned that Palestinian prisoners were trying to “turn prison into a place of training, instruction, [and] forming an ideology... In addition, the prisoners try to operate various committees for organizing [education and]...instructing prisoners.” A year later, a piece in the prison authorities’ journal described prison as the “Palestinian academy for national leadership” and as “a stage in [Palestinian prisoners]...national development, personally and collectively.” “[T]hese prisoners,” the piece continues, “have delved into Israeli issues, mainly by reading [and translating Israeli] books... They have had ideological debates on the ways and means of acquiring Palestinian political independence...[and] the future

character of the Palestinian state.” Noting specifically that “Open University studies were also made available in prison,” the piece adds that Palestinian prisoners “completed Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees within the prison walls, and a few successfully pursued doctoral studies... Not for nothing has prison been called ‘the national Palestinian academy’.”

Possibly due to these concerns, Israeli authorities have recently clamped down on Palestinian prisoners’ studies. The informal study groups were placed under heavy regulation: inmates in one cell were prohibited from attending study groups in other cells, and a provision that had allowed these prisoners to teach fellow inmates in their ward was revoked. As a result, these study groups have been on the wane. In 2011, the Israeli government also announced a prohibition on Palestinian prisoners’ enrollment in Open University courses—a decision later upheld by the Israeli courts. According to the Israeli government, the aim was to pressure the Palestinian Hamas into releasing Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit from captivity in Gaza. The truth, however, is that Palestinian prisoners had already been barred from taking courses before Shalit’s capture, and the ban remains in place despite his release, in 2011, in exchange for Palestinian prisoners.

Further curtailing avenues for Palestinian thought and communication, Israeli authorities have increasingly cut these prisoners off from outside information and contact that are available to Israeli prisoners: books, visits of parliament members, and (non-Israeli) media. Palestinian prisoners whom Israeli authorities deem especially troublesome, such as hunger strikers, are even more radically isolated from fellow inmates and the outside world. As a result, in 2017, more than one thousand Palestinian prisoners went on hunger strike and [demanded](#) (unsuccessfully), among other things, “re-allowing education through the Hebrew Open University,” the “introduction of books [and] newspapers,” and adding non-Israeli “satellite channels suitable for the needs of [Palestinian] prisoners.”

Restricting Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer in Prison

In the past, Israel held all Palestinian child prisoners, as well as detainees aged sixteen and over, with Palestinian adults. Inadvertently, this enabled Palestinian inmates to transfer what they regarded as valuable political knowledge from one

generation to another, including through their self-organized study activities. Time and again, the Israeli judiciary expressed concern over this intergenerational knowledge transfer. In 2003, for example, an Israeli military court cautioned against the exposure of a twelve-year-old Palestinian convict “to...[older] prisoners’ ideologies” and ordered his removal from those Palestinian “adults who wished to capture his soul.” The Israeli Supreme Court repeatedly voiced a similar concern in a series of judgments given between 2007 and 2014: “[N]obody wishes for minors (or others who are very young)...[convicted of] terrorist offenses to be upgraded in criminality, and [for] prison to become their university for terrorist science.”

Since the turn of the century, a series of legal changes have nearly eliminated joint adult-child incarceration. In 2009, Israel also established the world’s first and only so-called “military youth court,” though there has been no discernible change to either sentencing guidelines or the actual sentences imposed on Palestinian children. Unlike the denial of Palestinian prisoners’ access to education, information, and visits, the separation of adult and child inmates has largely escaped critical notice.

This separation, however, can be no less detrimental to these prisoners, in various ways. Among other things, the usual justification for separating children from adult criminals does not seem to apply to Palestinian political prisoners, who are neither criminals in the common sense of the word nor held with those who are classified as “criminal prisoners.” In fact, various sources suggest that prior to this separation, Palestinian adult inmates provided their juniors with crucial support—which is not provided by the Israeli authorities—in addition to representing their concerns to the prison management.

One child who had been detained with adults [told](#) Israeli NGO B’Tselem: “The [adult] detainees treated us [children] well...I felt comfortable... At first, I was afraid and cried sometimes, because my family was far away... The adult detainees took care of me.” Given that Palestinian children in Israeli custody are usually denied contact with their parents, the adult inmates might have been the closest substitute for parental care, as this child’s account indeed suggests. Moreover, separation from these adult inmates has left Palestinian children less protected against abuse and violence by the Israeli authorities, as well as by other children, whose violent disputes adult inmates used to peacefully mediate.

In a show of support for intergenerational contact, Palestinian prisoners recently secured the right to elect a few adults serving long sentences to oversee Palestinian child inmates during the day, while still being held separately at night. This has [reportedly](#) had both beneficial and harmful consequences for Palestinian children. On the one hand, these adults provide them with valuable assistance and support. On the other hand, reports suggest that Israeli authorities have attempted to trick child suspects into confessing by detaining them with adult Palestinian informants who pose as these elected supervisors. Israeli authorities, then, might be using the limited intergenerational interaction Palestinian inmates have secured from them against the children it was aimed to assist.

The Mental Prison Outside Prison

The restrictions on Palestinian prisoners' self-organized study groups; the ban on their enrollment in Open University studies; their limited access to books, media, and visits; and the increased separation of child and adult inmates—all of these, despite their differences, share a similar function. These restrictions operate, not necessarily successfully, to incarcerate the mind of those who are already physically imprisoned, to impede the movement and continuity of Palestinian thought across space and time.

This incarceration of the mind inside Israeli prisons shares parallels with the experiences of non-citizen Palestinians generally. Israel's heavy restriction of Palestinians' access to education is by no means limited to prison. Since 2000, Israel has barred Gazan students from studying in the West Bank. A relatively small number of students from Gaza are allowed to travel to academic institutions abroad through Jordan, but the timing of their exit permits usually has no correlation with the dates of the academic year. In 2016, the Israeli press also reported that the delivery of about 300,000 science and math textbooks from the West Bank to the Gaza Strip was being delayed in order for Israel to examine and approve them. While West Bank Palestinians are not currently subject to such practices, in the past, their university and school curriculum, textbooks, and extracurricular activities were all under close Israeli monitoring and censorship.

Education in Gaza suffered another blow during Israel's 2014 military offensive, as seven libraries were destroyed, including the destruction of 16,000 books at the Beit Hanoun and Shujayea Club libraries. Israeli authorities had also previously banned the entry into the Gaza Strip of certain Palestinian newspapers from the West Bank. When the ban was lifted in 2010, Hamas barred the entry of these newspapers due to their support of the rival Fatah movement. Electronic sources of information in Gaza—internet and cell phones—are badly affected by the ever-present electricity shortage. The electricity shortage is attributable, among other things, to severe restrictions on the entry of equipment and fuel, the difficulty of obtaining permits to use new technologies, and Israel's decades-long policy of economically [de-developing](#) Gaza.

Like incarceration in the physical sense, the incarceration of the mind inside Israeli prisons resonates with Israel's outside control mechanisms. In addition to rendering the Gaza Strip and West Bank prison-like in the physical sense, Israel has also, at different points in time and in specific but important ways, erected barriers to the movement of thought, information, and communication.