https://farid.ps/articles/israel_nakba_forced_labor/en.html

The Forgotten Chapter: Palestinian Detention and Forced Labor in Israeli Camps During the 1948 War

The 1948 Arab-Israeli War, known to Palestinians as the Nakba or “catastrophe,” marked a pivotal moment in Middle Eastern history, resulting in the displacement of over 700,000 Palestinians and the establishment of the State of Israel. Amid the chaos of village expulsions and military operations, a lesser-known aspect emerges: the internment of thousands of Palestinian civilians in Israeli-run detention camps. Drawing from declassified International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reports and historical analyses, this essay explores who was detained, the harsh conditions they endured, the nature of the forced labor imposed upon them, and how these practices violated established international humanitarian law. While Israeli narratives often frame these camps as necessary wartime measures for holding potential combatants, Palestinian accounts highlight systemic abuses and exploitation, underscoring the human cost of the conflict.

Who Was Interned: Civilians Caught in the Crossfire

The detainees in these camps were predominantly Palestinian civilians, not combatants, captured during Israel’s military campaigns to secure territory and create a Jewish demographic majority. Estimates suggest between 5,000 and 9,000 individuals were held across at least 22 sites—five official POW/labor camps and up to 17 unofficial ones—from 1948 to as late as 1955. Official camps, such as Atlit near Haifa, Ijlil northeast of Jaffa, Sarafand near the depopulated village of Sarafand al-Amar, Tel Litwinsky near Tel Aviv, and Umm Khalid near Netanya, housed the majority, with capacities ranging from hundreds to nearly 3,000. Unofficial camps were improvised in police stations, schools, or village houses, often in areas assigned to the Arab state under the UN partition plan.

Demographically, the internees were mostly able-bodied men aged 15 to 55, labeled as “fighting age” and treated as potential threats despite their civilian status. However, records reveal a broader net: elderly men over 55 (at least 90 documented), boys as young as 10 to 12 (77 under 15), the sick (including those with tuberculosis), and occasionally women and children. In official camps, 82-85% were Palestinian civilians, far outnumbering regular Arab soldiers or bona fide POWs. Captures often occurred during mass expulsions, such as Operation Dani in July 1948, where 60,000-70,000 Palestinians were driven from Lydda (Lod) and Ramle, with up to a quarter of adult males interned. Similar sweeps targeted Galilee villages like al-Bi’na, Deir al-Asad, and Tantura during Operation Hiram in October 1948.

Methods of abduction were systematic and brutal: men were separated from families using pre-prepared suspect lists, forced into marches under extreme heat without water, or transported by truck under heavy guard. Many were accused of being “saboteurs” without evidence or trial, reflecting a policy of arbitrary detention for security, demographic control, and labor needs. Survivor accounts, such as those from Moussa in Galilee, describe being marched at gunpoint, with young men shot during captures. Educated or politically active individuals, like those from the 1936-39 Arab Revolt, faced heightened scrutiny, though some ideological affiliations (e.g., Communists) occasionally led to better treatment via external advocacy.

Harsh Realities: Conditions in the Camps

Life in these camps was marked by deprivation and abuse, falling far short of humanitarian standards. Housing consisted of repurposed British Mandate facilities, tents surrounded by barbed wire and watchtowers, or half-demolished Palestinian village structures. Overcrowding was rampant, with 20-30 men per damp, leaking tent or room, leading to winter hardships where water seeped under makeshift bedding of leaves, cartons, or wood scraps. Sanitation was abysmal: uncovered latrines, inadequate washing facilities, and poor hygiene contributed to diseases like tuberculosis. Food rations were minimal—400-700 grams of bread daily for workers, supplemented by defective fruits, poor-quality meat, and scarce vegetables—resulting in malnutrition. Water was severely restricted, exacerbating suffering during forced marches and daily routines.

Medical care was woefully insufficient; the sick languished without treatment, and vulnerable groups like the elderly and children suffered most, with some deaths from exposure or untreated injuries. Abuses were systemic: beatings, arbitrary shootings framed as “escape attempts,” and humiliations such as forced naked strip-searches watched by kibbutz residents. ICRC delegate Emile Moeri, in a January 1949 report, described the plight: “It is painful to see these poor people, especially old, who were snatched from their villages and put without reason in a camp, obliged to pass the winter under wet tents, away from their families; those who could not survive these conditions died.” Guards, including former British officers and ex-Irgun members, enforced a regime of fear, with daily routines involving inspections, labor, and threats.

The ICRC played a crucial role, visiting camps and documenting violations, but its influence was limited to “moral persuasion,” as Israel often ignored demands for releases or improvements. Reports noted mixed evaluations—early criticisms of food and coercion gave way to slight improvements in hygiene by late 1948—but the overall confusion between civilian and POW statuses persisted.

Exploitation Through Labor: The Backbone of Wartime Needs

Forced labor was central to the camps’ purpose, exploiting detainees to bolster Israel’s emerging infrastructure amid labor shortages from Jewish mobilization. Tasks were grueling and dangerous, performed daily under armed supervision: clearing battlefields of bodies, debris, and unexploded ordnance; digging trenches and fortifying positions; building roads (e.g., to Eilat in the Negev); quarrying stones; farming vegetables; cleaning soldiers’ quarters and toilets; and transporting looted property from demolished Palestinian homes. Refusal invited beatings or executions, as recounted by survivor Tewfic Ahmed Jum’a Ghanim: “Anyone who refused to work was shot. They said [the person] tried to escape.”

Working conditions amplified the camps' hardships: all-day labor in extreme weather, with minimal rations as "incentive." ICRC delegate Jacques de Reynier labeled it "slavery" in July 1948, noting civilians aged 16-55 were locked up for military-related work, violating prohibitions on such coercion. Testimonies, like Marwan Iqab al-Yehiya's from Umm Khalid, describe cutting stones in quarries with meager food—one potato in the morning and half-dried fish at night—interspersed with humiliations. Labor extended beyond camps to sites like Mitzpe Ramon, directly aiding the war effort and state-building.

Israeli historian Benny Morris, in *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*, touches on these detentions briefly, noting Palestinians from areas like Lydda and Ramle were held for screening and used for agricultural, domestic, and military support until release or expulsion. However, he frames them as ad hoc security measures amid chaos, downplaying systematic exploitation compared to pro-Palestinian sources.

Violations of International Law: A Clear Breach

These practices contravened emerging and customary international humanitarian law, particularly the 1929 Geneva Convention on POWs and the 1907 Hague Regulations, which influenced 1948 standards. Arbitrary abductions and indefinite detention without charges violated protections against forcible transfers (later codified in Geneva Convention IV, Article 49) and required humane treatment without discrimination. Forced labor, especially military-related tasks like trench-digging or UXO clearance, breached Article 31 of the 1929 Convention, prohibiting work aiding the enemy's operations or endangering lives.

Camp conditions—substandard food, hygiene, and medical care—flouted requirements for adequate rations to maintain health (1929 Convention, Article 11) and monthly medical inspections (Article 15). The ICRC repeatedly protested these as violations, but Israel's noncompliance, backed by Western powers, rendered interventions ineffective. Such acts, including using civilians for dangerous work, would today constitute war crimes under the Rome Statute, highlighting the conflict's enduring legal shadows.

Legacy and Reflections

The internment of Palestinian civilians in 1948-1955 remains an understudied facet of the Nakba, overshadowed by mass displacements. Of the detainees, 78% (around 6,700) were expelled as "hostages" in armistice negotiations, barred from return, while others were released piecemeal. This episode not only inflicted immediate suffering but also contributed to intergenerational trauma and the refugee crisis. Today, as debates over historical accountability persist, acknowledging these camps through declassified archives fosters a fuller understanding of the conflict's origins. By confronting these violations, societies can strive toward reconciliation grounded in justice and international norms.

References

1. Abu Sitta, Salman, and Terry Rempel. "The ICRC and the Detention of Palestinian Civilians in Israel's 1948 POW/Labor Camps." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 43, no. 4 (2014): 11-38. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279227552_The_ICRC_and_the_Detention_of_Palestinian_Civilians_in_Israel%27s_1948_PC
2. Morris, Benny. *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Available at: https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/birth-of-the-palestinian-refugee-problem-revisited/8AE72A6813CEA7DDDE8F9386313F0D97.
3. International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Declassified Archives on 1948 Conflicts, including reports on Palestinian detentions. Referenced in: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jps.2014.43.4.11 (via Abu Sitta's analysis).
4. Zochrot. "Remembering the Prisoners of War Camps." Booklet, 2024. Available at: https://www.zochrot.org/publication_articles/view/56542/en?_Remembering_the_Prisoners_of_War_Camps.
5. Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (1929). Full text available at: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gc-pow-1929.
6. Geneva Convention (III) Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (1949). Full text available at: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciii-1949.
7. Additional historical context on ICRC's role in 1948: "From our archives: protecting prisoners and detainees." Available at: https://www.icrc.org/en/document/150-years-humanitarian-action-protecting-prisoners-and-detainees.
8. Al-Awda. "On Israel's little-known concentration and labor camps in 1948-1955." October 19, 2014. Available at: https://al-awdapalestine.org/2014/10/on-israels-little-known-concentration-and-labor-camps-in-1948-1955/.