

Analysis | Nameless, Shackled: Israeli Ethics Committee Examined Medical Treatment of Detainees From Gaza

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Physicians for Human Rights called the conditions at the military medical compound in Israel - where patients are kept shackled and blindfolded the entire time - 'torture'

The entrance to the Sde Teiman military base in the Negev in Israel's south. Both the medical staff at the detention center and those hospitalized there remain nameless. Credit: Eliyahu HersHKovitz

At the end of February, an ad hoc Israeli medical ethics committee visited the medical compound set up in Israel for detainees from Gaza, at the request of the compound's staff itself. The committee consists of representatives of the Health Ministry, the ethics committee of the Israel Medical Association and directors of the country's hospitals.

"There was a request from the medical staff for ethical observation because very complicated and difficult questions are arising," a source who asked not to be named told Haaretz. This first visit was postponed several times, and took place about four months after the field hospital, as it is deemed, was established at the Sde Teiman military base in the Negev in Israel's south. There was no official announcement about the visit and, as far as Haaretz is aware, the committee has not yet issued conclusions or recommendations.

'Every limb that they have is shackled,' one of the visitors reported.

Both the medical staff at the detention center and those hospitalized there remain nameless. None of them have been identified by name and no names of patients or medical personnel appear in documents. The patients are given a five-digit military identification number, and during most of the day and night their arms and legs are shackled to their beds - sometimes for 24 hours at a time.

The facility is designed to be able to enable staff to do surgery that doesn't involve penetrating major organs. The doctors specialize in internal medicine, one doctor familiar with the situation told Haaretz, meaning that there are no emergency physicians or surgeons. Sometimes, as a result, doctors are summoned from outside the compound as consultants or to provide treatment.

There is no nursing staff. The patients drink liquid formula through a straw.

When it's necessary to conduct examinations using equipment not available at the site, or to perform more complicated surgery, or as a result of a deterioration of a patient's condition (due to the spread of infection, for example) – the patients are taken to civilian hospitals in Israel, where they are also shackled, blindfolded and identified by an ID number and deemed “anonymous.” There are soldiers accompanying them at all times.

They are released from the hospital and sent back to Sde Teiman prematurely and not in keeping with the rules or medical needs for recovery, according to a source who saw this firsthand on several occasions. He said it was his impression that the haste was also related to a desire to transfer the detainees for interrogation. In early January, Health Ministry director general Moshe Bar Siman Tov told the Ynet news site that “Israel has a military and intelligence interest in having these people remain alive and treating them results in the saving of the lives of civilians and soldiers.”

The ad hoc ethics committee was aware of the total anonymity of the patients and staff and that the prisoners are blindfolded and shackled the entire time since these things were detailed in a briefing that the Health Ministry gave in December. “In accordance with directives from the security officials responsible for the detainees at the detention facility, the detainees are shackled the entire time and blindfolded while being given medical treatment as well,” according to the ministry briefing.

[Although the Israeli army and the Shin Bet security agency](#) dictate the conditions under which the detainees are hospitalized, a security source told Haaretz that the Health Ministry is responsible for the medical facility. In February, Physicians for Human Rights – Israel issued a report on the situation of Palestinians detained by Israel since the outbreak of the war on October 7 in which it stated that the field hospital was jointly run by the army and the Health Ministry.

As was reported in the media in October, the medical facility for detainees from Gaza was established after several Israeli hospitals as well as medical personnel openly refused to treat them, but also because right-wingers had burst into [the Sheba Medical Center at Tel Hashomer](#) when they heard that a Gazan detainee was being treated there – and they threatened to do so again.

Two reasons have been given for the anonymity accorded to the doctors and nurses at the facility, who were called up to do emergency military reserve duty and are subject to the authority of the Israel Defense Forces. One was concern that the wounded Palestinians would later identify those who treated them and file complaints against them in international forums for collaborating with the commission of war crimes. The other is concern that extreme right-wing activists in Israel would attack the medical staff.

Haaretz was told that the doctors are keeping their army jobs a secret from their medical colleagues and apparently also from their families. The blindfolding of the patients is also designed to protect the doctors (and soldiers) from being identified. But there are doctors who have noted that the absence of eye contact with a patient helps them relate to the task at hand in a more functional

manner. Sources told Haaretz that their impression was that the medical staff at Sde Teiman was trying to provide the best possible care under conditions that were far from good.

Having the patients bound around the clock is designed to protect medical staff from possible attack by their severely wounded patients. The Health Ministry instructions regarding the facility state that patients are “unlawful combatants” (a status that permits Israel to hold them in conditions that are harsher than those of other Palestinians and to further limit their minimal rights, including meeting with a lawyer or disclosure of where they are being held).

Immediately after Hamas’ October 7 attack on Israeli communities near the Gaza border, it was clear that the Gazans being detained were involved in the attack, but once Israel began its ground invasion of the Strip at the end of October, hundreds of civilians were also arrested from inside Gaza. Some of them were brought to the Sde Teiman field hospital because they were wounded by weapon fire or were suffering from chronic illness that worsened in detention or because they hadn’t been getting medications. Since the patients were anonymous, it’s not clear the extent to which the medical staff was made aware of this.

The Physicians for Human Rights – Israel report states that “referencing their legal status in a document regulating the provision of medical care is perplexing, given that ethical guidelines and local and international law require that health-preserving care be provided to every person regardless of their legal circumstances.”

In its report, Physicians for Human Rights – Israel analyzed the Health Ministry directives and stated that they were supposedly designed to regulate the medical care given to detainees at Sde Teiman, but “in reality [they] lower the professional and ethical standards of medical care and the physician-patient relationship.”

The report also called the constant shackling and blindfolding of patients “conditions that constitute torture.”

When Haaretz asked the Health Ministry and the Israel Medical Association if such conditions permitted proper medical care, the ministry stated the following: “Medical treatment provided at Sde Teiman meets the rules and international conventions to which Israel is committed. The ministry is assisted by legal advice to every extent to which it is needed, with the accompaniment of an ethics team. Senior ministry officials visit the facility from time to time.”

The Israel Medical Association replied that the association and its ethics board “have an unequivocal and clear policy of providing medical treatment to anyone requiring it, without discrimination whatsoever. The Health Ministry established the medical facility at Sde Teiman to address medical [needs] at the site when there is no need for more complicated treatment. The Israel Medical Association and Israeli doctors are subject to the rules of ethics and international conventions.”

Dr. Yossef Walfisch, the chairperson of the ethics board of the Israel Medical Association, added that he “joined the Health Ministry ethics committee in order to provide advice to the doctors of the compound on whatever ethical issues arise. The state of Israel has a tradition of providing medical care to anyone needing it be they from our own forces or our enemy.”

The IDF Spokesman’s office said: “The military detention facilities were designed for initial interrogation and screening of detainees until they are transferred to the Israel Prison Service or until their release back to the Gaza Strip whenever it is found that they are not involved in terrorist activity. The manner in which they are shackled and secured is set in accordance with the level of danger of the detainee to protect the safety of our forces, including medical personnel at the facility.

The detainees at the facility are not prevented from showering and going to the restroom.”

The IDF spokesman did not reply to the question as to how many detainees have been hospitalized at the facility since the beginning of the war and Haaretz did not receive a response as to whether the 27 Gaza detainees who have died in IDF custody were transferred at any stage to the field hospital or whether they died because they had not been transferred there.

The Shin Bet did not respond to Haaretz’s questions.

Amira Hass

P.S.

- Haaretz. Mar 12, 2024:
<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-03-12/ty-article/.premium/nameless-shackled-blindfolded-medical-treatment-of-detainees-from-gaza-examined/0000018e-327a-d5ad-addf-7e7bca660000>