



News Release
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Internment of Palestinian Civilians in Israeli Labor Camps, 1948-1955
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Washington, DC, October 1, 2014 – “**The internment of thousands of Palestinian civilians in Israeli-run prisoner of war camps is a relatively little known episode in the 1948 war.**” In the newest issue of the *Journal of Palestine Studies* 172, authors Salman Abu Sitta and Terry Rempel have compiled reports from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) along with firsthand accounts of internees in an unprecedented in-depth article on Israeli internment and labor camps from 1948-1955.

According to ICRC files, the wide-scale capture and internment of Palestinian civilians took place mainly after 15 May 1948 and largely coincided with Israel’s military campaigns. The number of **documented Palestinian civilian prisoners was estimated to be at around 5,000** according to Israeli records, consistently outnumbering Arab military prisoners by a large margin in all Israel’s official POW camps.

The article emphasizes the important work of the ICRC and the Red Cross delegates to protect the Palestinian civilian population by recording and condemning the **egregious violations of the existing laws of war** in the treatment of the internees. However thanks to the diplomatic cover of major Western powers, Israel was able to ignore with impunity the ICRC complaints.

In the article, Sitta and Rempel provide **firsthand testimonies from interviews they conducted with those who were interned in the camps**, including Marwan ‘Iqab al-Yahya. Yahya was then a fifteen-year-old boy, captured after the massacre of Tantura, a coastal village south of Haifa.

“There was screaming and running blood. They took us to Zichron Ya’aqov and we were led to a damp dark cellar... We were about three hundred. We stayed for three days without food and were then pack in waiting trucks. Again they knocked and beat all standing heads. There was so much splashed blood. Under guard we were driven to [the village of] Umm Khalid. There we were taken to a concentration camp with barbed wire and gates and put to forced labor.”

Palestinian internees constituted an **important supplement to the Jewish labor during the war** and were used to carry building materials, dig military trenches and fortifications and bury the dead among other forced labor tasks. There were also records of Palestinian internees being forced to give blood for Jews wounded in the fighting.

While five camps in the report are “recognized,” Sitta and Rempel also document “unrecognized” internment camps which were not officially recorded by the Israeli government. Prisoner

testimonies point to the existence of at least seventeen such sites where conditions were undoubtedly the worst. ICRC delegates documented the harsh conditions in “recognized” camps as well as the diversity of the civilian camp inmates, including this account by ICRC delegate Emile Moeri:

“It is painful to see these poor people, especially the 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. Little children (10-12 years) are equally found under these conditions.”

There were many accounts of random acts of violence on job sites and the shooting of prisoners. “Anyone who refused to work was shot,” according to Taqfiq Ghanim, a former internee interviewed for the article. He added that he was lucky he had been given a number inscribed on a steel band, which meant that it was not possible for a guard to shoot him “without anyone knowing.”

After the war, only a very small number of internees managed to remain inside the de facto borders of the State of Israel. In most cases, civilian internees, especially the unknown number held in the unofficial camps, were expelled across the armistice lines without food, supplies, or shelter.

Full text of the article is available upon request. Contact Paige Brownlow at 202-342-3990 ext. 13 or paigeb@palestine-studies.org to obtain a copy or to schedule an interview with the authors, Salman Abu Sitta and Terry Rempel.

About the Authors

Salman Abu Sitta, founder and president of the Palestine Land Society, is the author of numerous papers and books on Palestinian refugees and the Nakba, including *The Atlas of Palestine 1917-1966*.

Terry Rempel is an honorary university fellow at the University of Exeter and an independent researcher with a focus on Palestinian refugees and international refugee and human rights law.

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