**Jewish Leaders Denounce Palestinian Authority’s ‘Fort of Torture’**

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With $221 million in US aid to the Palestinian Authority (PA) hanging in the balance, American Jewish leaders and organizations across the political spectrum are denouncing the PA’s reported use of torture against prisoners.

Israeli Arab journalist Khalid Abu Toameh charged last week that the PA’s Jericho Central Prison has become a “fort of torture.” Writing for the Gatestone Institute, a New York-based foreign policy think tank, Toameh cited a new report by the Arab Organization for Human Rights, which claimed that the PA’s security forces committed more than 3,000 human rights violations in 2016.

That finding dovetails with Amnesty International’s most recent report on human rights in PA-controlled territory, which found that torture is “common” in PA prisons.

John Calvin, who was raised in the PA-run city of Nablus, described in an interview with *JNS.org* this week how he was arrested by the PA in 2010 for converting from Islam to Christianity. In the Nablus Central Prison, PA policemen repeatedly struck him, and initially confined him to a dark cell that he recalled “was so small, I couldn’t stand up straight.”

Calvin, who now lives in the US, claimed that political opponents of the PA regime are often tortured in prison. He said that seven of his family members, who have been detained by the PA because of their association with the Muslim Brotherhood or Hamas, were subjected to torments such as being forced to hold their bound hands in the air for up to two days at a time.

“My uncle returned from his interrogation permanently blinded, and one my brothers suffered severe back injuries,” Calvin said.

Betty Ehrenberg, executive director of the World Jewish Congress for North America, said, “It is outrageous that American tax dollars intended to help build peace with the Palestinians by supporting basic services such as education and health care, are instead used to enable the abusers of human rights.” Ehrenberg told *JNS.org* that it is “only right that Congress stop the transfer of [the $221 million in] additional funding that was granted at the very end of the last administration.”

Ehrenburg also expressed concern that if a Palestinian state is established, its leaders might continue engaging in human rights violations. “What kind of state can be created by such a society and how can anyone expect Israel to make peace with it?” she asked.

Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, told *JNS.org* that Palestinian Arab leaders with whom he has met said that grassroots Palestinian support for the PA is extremely low because of corruption and human rights abuses by PA leaders. “One important clan leader in the Hebron area estimated the PA’s public approval rating at 2 percent,” Cooper said. “PA officials want a state, but they don’t want to bother with the hard work of building the democratic institutions needed to actually run a state — and why should they, if the foreign aid checks keep rolling in, no matter what?”

“The only way to reform the PA’s behavior is if there is a price tag,” Cooper added. “Governments and NGOs that have been giving money to build the Palestinians’ judicial and penal system need to ensure that there is accountability, transparency and strict oversight. Otherwise, you can assume that if there is a Palestinian state, there will be corruption and torture and nothing will change. In the end, it all comes back to the checkbook.”

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) is likewise troubled by the latest evidence of the PA’s use of torture. “We are concerned about the reports of human rights violations by Hamas and the PA,” AIPAC spokesman Marshall Wittman told *JNS.org*. “Current law provides the administration with a mechanism to investigate and respond to such violations.”

Disapproval of the PA’s actions is also being expressed by liberal American Jewish groups. Ori Nir, spokesman for Americans for Peace Now, said, “We are aware of reports of torture and abuse of detainees by security services of the Palestinian Authority.” Nir added, “We are definitely concerned by such practices, and believe that they should stop, even if they are done in the course of the PA’s close security cooperation with Israel to fight terrorism.”

Rabbi Michael Lerner, the veteran progressive activist and editor of *Tikkun* magazine, told *JNS.org*, “I oppose any use of violence or torture, no matter how much the user is an oppressed group or feels that it has a justification at that moment to use these for self-preservation.”