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Minors in Jeopardy

Earlier this week I was invited to attend a press conference in Jerusalem organised by B'TSELEM, one of The Church of Scotland's partners out here in The Holy Land. B'TSELEM is an Israeli Human Rights organisation, who were launching a far-reaching report entitled 'Minors in Jeopardy: Violation of the Rights of Palestinian Minors by Israel's Military Courts'.¹



B'TSELEM means 'in the image of God', which underlies their vision and all they do in this conflicted land. They refuse to see the Palestinians as the enemy, but work tirelessly for a better future where Palestinians are able to live in freedom and dignity alongside their Jewish brothers and sisters; freed from the yoke of living under military occupation.



The treatment of minors in custody is of course an issue which every church should take seriously, not just here in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, but across the world. The way in which we treat our minors, is a barometer of the kind of society we live in.

It was Indira Gandhi who said:

We must protect children, who have inalienable rights and should be loved, should be taken care of physically and mentally, and should not be born into the world only to suffer.

¹ I would encourage you to read the report and the Executive summary, which can be found at: https://www.btselem.org/sites/default/files/publications_201803_minors_in_jeopardy_summary_eng.pdf

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B'TSELEM's report makes for harrowing reading. Israeli security forces can arrest and detain a child as young as 12. In most democratic and civilised countries, a child cannot be interrogated without his or her parents/ guardians being present. But not so in Israel, where children are denied this basic human right. That this should happen in Israel, which is frequently described as 'the only democracy in the Middle East', makes it all the more shocking. The opening paragraph of the Executive Summary of the report sets the scene:

Every year, hundreds of Palestinian minors undergo the same scenario. Israeli security forces pick them up on the street or at home in the middle of the night, then handcuff and blindfold them and transport them to interrogation, often subjecting them to violence en route. Exhausted and scared --some of them having spent a long time in transit, some having been roused from sleep, some having had nothing to eat or drink for hours-- the minors are then interrogated. They are completely alone in there, cut off from the world, without any adult they know and trust by their side, and without having been given a chance to consult with a lawyer before interrogation.²



Israel is not the only country that treats minors this way, lamentably there are countless other examples across the world. But unlike many other countries, Israel does claim to be a democracy.

Treating children this way will do nothing to safeguard Israeli security, let alone its standing and reputation amongst the international community.

I left the press conference and walked out into the warmth of the spring sunshine, reflecting on all that I had heard that morning. As I walked through Jerusalem and saw the blossom on the trees, I was reminded of the fragile beauty of our world.

²https://www.btsalem.org/sites/default/files/publications/201803_minors_in_jeopardy_summary_eng.pdf

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Under the shade of the blossom trees I gave thanks for the work of B'TSELEM, for their witness for truth, and their unrelenting efforts to expose injustice and demand dignity and justice for the Palestinians.

As I crossed the check point into the West Bank later that evening, and saw children playing in the shadow of the wall, I lamented the injustice of the military occupation, where children are all too often the victims of a conflict they were born into, and did nothing to create.



(JM 22.3.2018)

What You can do:

- Visit the B'TSLEM website (<https://www.btselem.org>) and read their reports.
- Disseminate their work widely among your contacts.
- Contact your MP urging them to raise the issue of child detention in Parliament.
- If you are part of a church, draw attention to the work of B'TSELEM in your Guild meetings or other events.
- Pray for all Children in detention.
- Pray for all those like B'TSELEM, who are working to bring an end to injustice in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.