

Wiretapping allegations cause new embarrassment to Abbas

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London

Allegations that Palestinian Authority officials, with the help of the US Central Intelligence Agency, eavesdropped on rivals and allies of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas led to high-profile figures suing the Palestinian government.

Former Palestinian intelligence chief Tawfiq Tirawi and bar association head Jawad Obeidat said they were seeking legal action against the Palestinian Authority (PA) after a 37-page anonymous document, reportedly leaked by a whistleblower, revealed they had been victims of a wiretapping operation said to have been set up in 2014.

PA officials dismissed the authenticity of the document, with one security spokesman branding it as “nonsense.”

Obeidat and Tirawi said they believed the document to be accurate. “I made these phone calls and this is evidence that the leaked report is true,” Obeidat told the Associated Press.

Tirawi told Ma’an news agency that the wiretapping was carried out illegally. He told al-Quds al-Arabi newspaper that, from 1994-2008 when he was head of Palestinian intelligence, wiretapping was only allowed after receiving permission from the public prosecutor.

Speaking to Sky News Arabia, he said he filed a lawsuit against the Palestinian telecom company Jawwal over its suspected collusion

with the security services in the alleged eavesdropping.

Adli Shaban Hasan Sadeq, former Palestinian ambassador to India, Algeria and Romania, said the wiretapping was meant to give Abbas an advantage over his political rivals and did not serve a security purpose.

The outrage over the wiretapping allegations could cast doubt on the sincerity of Abbas’s diplomatic push for statehood.

“They want to know if the respectable lawmaker Yahya Shamiya has travelled with his wife or on his own... if they pass on this information to the enemy (Israel), the enemy will rebuke them: ‘How petty and silly you are, that’s not what we want of you,’” wrote Sadeq in an opinion article on the Palestinian website Ahwal el-Belad.

“These people (alleged eavesdroppers) are despised by Palestinians and Israelis alike,” wrote Sadeq. “The vast majority of Palestinians who work in the public domain behave with the assumption that their conversations are being recorded.”

Palestinian officials sought to downplay the scale of such operations.

“Wiretapping operations are conducted but in very narrow contexts and targeting people suspected of security breaches or criminal offences,” a Palestinian security service official told Al-Monitor on con-

dition of anonymity.

Commentators said the legal case against the government was unlikely to make serious progress.

“The public prosecutor in the West Bank works under political directions, not legal ones,” Abdul Sattar Qassem, a Palestinian university professor who had been arrested on a number of charges, including insulting the president, told the website felesteen.ps.

Although the outcry may hit a legal dead end, the allegations are likely to cause political embarrassment for Abbas domestically. They would likely demonstrate that security coordination with the United States has continued despite disagreement between the Palestinian leader and Washington over the Trump administration’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital.

The purported leaker of the document, who remains anonymous, said they recently quit their job because they objected to the continued US-Palestinian sharing of intelligence.

Abbas is to address the UN Security Council on February 20. He is expected to criticise US President Donald Trump’s policy on Jerusalem and the stalled Middle East peace process in general.

The United States said it was withholding \$65 million of a planned \$125 million funding instalment for the UN agency tasked with helping Palestinian refugees. Abbas reiterated that the United States cannot impose a peace deal on the Palestinians. “This is our pen and we are the only ones to sign,” he said.

The Palestinian leader appears to be searching for alternatives to the



New concerns. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas at a meeting in the West Bank city of Ramallah, on February 3. (AFP)

United States in the peace process, looking for support from the United Nations, the European Union and Russia. He is to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin to discuss a possible new mediation mechanism to replace the Middle East Quartet.

Abbas is also scheduled to meet with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in an apparent bid to dissuade New Delhi, a traditional

ally of the Palestinians, from siding with Israel, following a recent visit by Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to India.

The outrage over the wiretapping allegations, especially as they are perceived to be conducted for domestic political purposes with the support of the United States, could cast doubt on the sincerity of Abbas’s diplomatic push for statehood.

Israeli military courts expose Palestinian minors to undue torment

Razan Shamallakh

London

Rights activists accused Israel of systematically prosecuting young Palestinians in military courts, exposing them to undue torment. The activists argue that the case of Palestinian teenager Ahd Tamimi is an example that drew media attention but the problem is widespread.

An Israeli military judge ruled that Tamimi, 17, from the West Bank village of Nabi Saleh, was to be held in custody during her trial despite calls from human rights groups for her release.

She was arrested during an overnight raid on her home after a video went viral showing her hitting two Israeli soldiers. Shortly before, Tamimi’s 15-year-old cousin Mohammed was shot in the face with a rubber bullet. Tamimi has been indicted on charges including assault, incitement and stone-throwing.

Her case received international media attention and even in Israel commentators have frequently discussed how her case should be handled. However, the discussions have rarely shed light on the number of Palestinian minors going through similar ordeals.

The Defence for Children International-Palestine (DCIP) said Israel prosecutes 500-700 children in military courts each year.

“Ill-treatment starts from the moment of arrest, as the overwhelming majority of Palestinian children arrested by Israeli forces in the West Bank have their hands tied and eyes blindfolded, while three out of four experience some form of physical violence during arrest or prior to or during interrogation,” DCIP said in a 2016 report.

“Many children are arrested in the middle of the night, and in many cases the children and their parents

are not informed of the reasons for arrest or the charges against them. There is no official notification process to inform parents where their child will be or has been taken by the Israeli military. Parents are not allowed to accompany their child,” DCIP representative Ruba Awadallah said.

DCIP figures indicate that of approximately 600 Palestinian children detained by Israeli forces and prosecuted in military courts from 2012-16, 72% experienced physical violence following arrest, usually being pushed, slapped, punched, kicked or struck with a soldier’s helmet or rifle. Once a child is in Israeli military custody, almost all of them – 95% – have their hands restrained with plastic cords and 85% of them are blindfolded.

Awadallah said nearly half of the children are forced to sit on the metal floor of military vehicles “where they are subjected to physical violence and verbal abuse.”

“One child said in sworn testimony that the Israeli soldiers played very loud music in Hebrew against

his ear during the transfer and he heard beeping sounds in his ears a few days after the incident,” Awadallah said.

In 2017,

DCIP documented 26 cases involving the solitary confinement of Palestinian children in the Israeli detention system.

Specifically, during the first 24-48 hours after arrest children are subjected to some form of physical violence and verbal abuse, humiliation, or intimidation, the DCIP report “No Way to Treat a Child” said.

It cited 15-year-old Tareq, from Al-Arroub refugee camp, who was accused of throwing stones by Israeli soldiers: “One of them started barking in my ears, while another shouted: ‘Are you a man? You’re not a man,’” the report quoted him saying.

Tareq was blindfolded and hand-

cuffed and forced to sit on the ground of an observation tower for 90 minutes. He said he was kicked and insulted. Tareq was transferred to Etzion interrogation and detention centre and denied the right to have a parent present or consult a lawyer. He was detained overnight and denied food and water when he requested it, the report said.

“Interrogation techniques in the Israeli military detention system are generally mentally and physically coercive, frequently incorporating a mix of intimidation, threats and physical violence with a clear purpose of obtaining a confession,” the report stated. Awadallah said that 62% of the cases of young Palestinians DCIP documented in 2017 suffered verbal abuse and intimidation.

Additionally, 66.4% of children were not properly informed of their rights, including the right to remain silent and to consult with an attorney prior to questioning. Children are usually ordered to sign a form printed in Arabic and Hebrew that states they have been informed of their rights. However, children have reported not properly understanding the form or not being allowed time to read the entire form. After they have signed the form, Israeli authorities have denied the children access to the rights described therein.

In 2017, DCIP documented 26 cases involving the solitary confinement of Palestinian children in the Israeli detention system. The average time spent in solitary confinement was 12 days. The use of isolation for Palestinian child detainees is usually for interrogation purposes to obtain a confession and/or gather intelligence on other individuals.

Many organisations have documented the numbers of Palestinian detainees throughout 2017. It was found that the Israeli occupation forces detained 6,742 Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

“We’ve seen a huge spike in arrests of children over the past



Undue torment. Israeli police arrest a young Palestinian during clashes in the West Bank city of Bethlehem, last April. (AP)

month. There have been 500 arrests since [US President Donald] Trump’s declaration on Jerusalem and the current figure of children in prison is 350,” said Dawoud Yusef, representative of Addameer, the Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association.

“In the extreme cases we’ve seen threats of sexual violence against family members,” he said.

The right to education is not granted to children detained by Israeli forces.

“For security prisoners there’s no duty to provide education within the prisons. We see the children who don’t come from good backgrounds really get thrown into the meat grinder when released from prison, it stunts and traumatises children,” Yusef said.

“Israeli authorities have restricted the types of formal classes available to just a couple of subjects, namely Arabic and math. All sciences are prohibited because of ‘security concerns.’ The quality of education offered is inadequate and does not prepare children to return to school after release. The education does not follow the Palestinian curriculum, therefore once they are released most have to repeat the academic year,” DCIP said.

Israel denies systematic mistreatment of Palestinian minors and says it does not condone any individual cases of wrongdoing. Israel has previously said that it does not often open an investigation into claims of abuse of minors based on statements from rights groups, insisting that a formal complaint must be filed to the relevant authorities.

Israeli officials have frequently dismissed similar reports on Palestinian minors as biased or untrue, accusing rights groups of seeking to generate negative publicity against Israel’s military and security forces.

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