

UNESCO CHAIR ON HUMAN RIGHTS & DEMOCRACY AN-NAJAH NATIONAL UNIVERSITY RIGHT TO EDUCATION CAMPAIGN

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Blocked Roads: The Arrest of a 17-year-old University Student and the Story of Kafr Qaddum

At 2am on October 5, 2011, 10 Israeli soldiers surrounded the home of the Qedoumi family in the village of Kafr Qaddum and ordered them to exit the house and turn over their IDs. After inspecting the IDs, the soldiers placed Abbas Qedoumi, a 17-year-old medical student at An Najah National University under arrest. Although the soldiers offered no explanation for why he was being taken, his family could only assume it has to do with the weekly protests organized by the village since July of this year.

Abbas is a top student who has always dreamed of becoming a doctor. He was so committed to this future that, while preparing for the Palestinian high school exit exam—the Tawjihi—he attended German classes in Ramallah, in case he was unable to study medicine in Palestine, where there are only two medical schools and competition is fierce. Abbas' hard work paid off, and with a score of 97.5 on the Tawjihi he was accepted to the medical school at An Najah National University. His family was thrilled that Abbas, the oldest of six siblings would be able to stay at home while he studied.

Abbas started at An Najah this September as a first year student, and was busy preparing for the first series of exams last week when he was taken from his home in the middle of the night by Israeli soldiers. The soldiers surrounded the family home and banged on the door at 2:00 in the morning demanding that everyone come out of the house. They had already placed ladders against the house presumably to storm in if the family did not open the door. Abbas, along with his three brothers, two sisters and mother and father were ordered out of the house and made to turn over their ID cards. All of the family's ID cards were soon returned to them except for Abbas'. After a brief discussion amongst the soldiers, they proceeded to arrest Abbas. Abbas's father, shocked by the arrest, asked the soldiers why he was being detained. One soldier, who identified himself as "Captain Shakri" stated that they were taking Abbas for questioning and that he would be released if had done nothing wrong. Abbas was then taken away without further explanation.

During the military incursion into the village, four other residents were arrested from their homes, including another university student from Al Quds University and a recent graduate from the Engineering Department at An Najah. In an interview with Abbas' father, he described his disbelief that his studious son, who is unaffiliated with any political organizations, would be arrested. He explained, "While some people invest their lives in jobs or money, I have spent my life on my children—this is my investment. Even though we are Palestinians and live under occupation, we never thought [the arrest of one of our children] was possible."

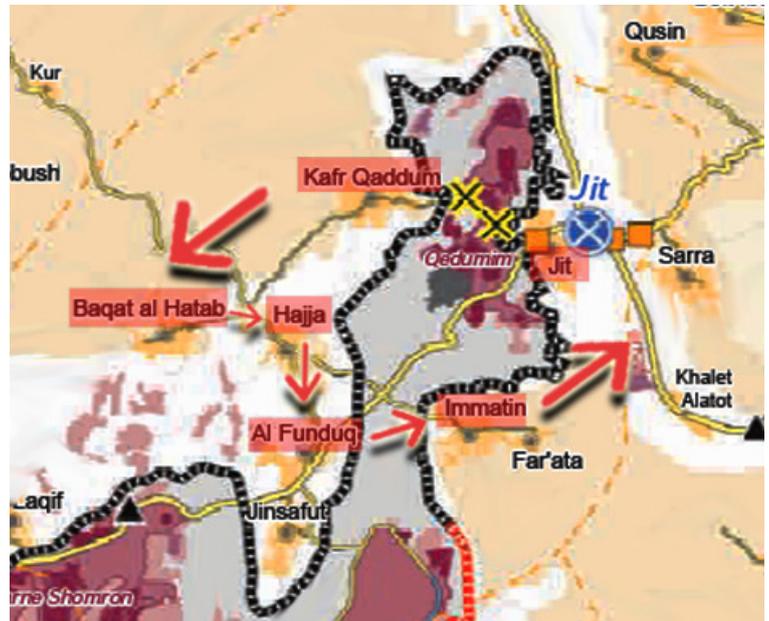
Although Israeli military law was changed just last month to raise the age of legal majority from 16 to 18 after 44 years of treating Palestinian children as adults, there are still serious concerns about how Palestinian children are treated in Israeli detention. Defence of Children International has highlighted that Palestinian children held in Israeli military detention continue to be interrogated without an attorney being present, are not informed of their right to remain silent, are often subjected to ill-treatment, and the majority are arrested from their homes in the middle of the night, causing extreme fear and anxiety. Despite the fact that Abbas is a legal minor, he was held in detention for seven days without being able to contact his parents, who did not even know where he was being held, or consult with an attorney. On Tuesday, October 11, Abbas was released after a military hearing in which Israeli prosecutors presented no charges against him.

Although it was a shock for Abbas' family to see their young son taken from them in the middle of the night, they suspected that this arrest was linked to the weekly demonstrations the village has been holding since July 2011 to protest the Israeli military closure of the principle road leading to the village.

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Kafr Qaddum, a village 6 miles east of Nablus with a population of approximately 3,200 people, has steadily been losing its land since the establishment of the nearby illegal Israeli settlement of Qedumin. Qedumin was established in 1975 and, according to the Israeli organization Peace Now, the population of the settlement grew from 810 in 1982 to 3,774 in 2009 and occupies approximately 520 acres of land, half of which is privately owned Palestinian land. As Qedumin continued to expand, in 2003 the Israeli army closed off the road that connects Kafr Qaddum to the main Nablus road so that Israeli settlers would not have to use the same road as their Palestinian neighbors. The road closure forces residents from Kafr Qaddum to travel an extra eight miles through neighboring Palestinian villages on agricultural roads instead of using the direct and paved road. The road closure poses a significant economic challenge to the village, especially for the many residents who commute daily to Nablus for work and school, and creates health risks, as the village does not have any medical facilities of its own and residents must travel to Nablus for both regular and urgent medical care.



Map showing the enforced detour residents from Kafr Qaddum must take after the road closure between the Kafr Qaddum and Jit.
Map: United Nations OCHA oPt, June 2010.

Despite Israeli justifications that the road has been closed for “security concerns”, locals explain how for 20 years both villagers and settlers used the same road without incident. The village filed a lawsuit in Israeli courts to reopen the road years ago but no action was taken. Recently, the village reinitiated the case and despite promises that they would have news from the Israeli authorities by the first of this month, there is still no word on whether the road will be opened. In the meantime, the village has organized demonstrations every Friday after the midday prayer in protest of the closure, which Abbas has attended alongside his father. Although there have been some incidents of stone-throwing towards the heavily armed Israeli soldiers who block their path, the soldiers without fail fire a barrage of tear gas canisters on the largely peaceful protest to the point that the village has had to set up a make-shift field hospital in the local mosque to treat the many cases of asphyxiation. Since July 3, the Israeli military has arrested ten residents from Kafr Qaddum, seven of whom remain jailed.

Importantly, the arrest of Abbas and the others last week comes during the annual olive harvest, a time when villages throughout Palestine see an increase in settler violence and Israeli military restrictions, as Palestinian residents attempt to access land often near or sometimes within Israeli settlements. During the harvest last year, Kafr Qaddum suffered a spate of settler attacks including uprooting of trees, arson, and the vandalization of several homes and the village cemetery with graffiti in Hebrew. Although the harvest this year has seen few problems with the nearby settlers, the army has sharply restricted the times when villagers can collect olives on their land, 58% of which is Area C—meaning that it is under complete Israeli authority. Just this week, the Israeli authorities informed the village council without further explanation that they were prohibited from harvesting for five days.

Although Abbas has been released and is now back at the university making up for the time he lost during exam period, his story is not uncommon in Palestine. Despite academic determination and peaceful struggle, young Palestinian men and women face a constantly uncertain future under Israeli occupation.