Israel a Step Closer to Guantanamo-style Force-feeding of Hunger-striking Prisoners

Israeli politicians have voted to continue work on a bill to allow hunger-striking Palestinian prisoners to be force-fed. Opponents argue it’s meant to silence convicts through torture similar to the force-feeding in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay.

The vote passed with a small majority Monday night at the Knesset plenum. The controversial bill, which could be soon fast-tracked into law, would allow prisons to seek official permission to force-feed a prisoner if a doctor advises there is a grave risk to the prisoner’s health.

The Israel Medical Association (IMA) has been strongly opposing the controversial bill, along with the American Medical Association, the British Medical Association, and the International Committee of the Red Cross, just to name a few.

“Force-feeding of hunger strikers is considered to be a form of torture,” the IMA says, stating that the World Medical Association’s (WMA) 1975 Tokyo Declaration prohibiting the participation of doctors in the practice of torture also prohibits doctors’ involvement in force-feeding.

“A doctor will not participate in force-feeding a hunger striker,” IMA says adding that a hunger striker is “entitled to request a second medical opinion and is entitled to request that the second doctor will be responsible for his continued treatment. In the case of an incarcerated hunger striker, the matter will be coordinated with the prison doctor.”

According to the IMA, the doctor should ascertain on a daily
basis how the hunger striker wishes to be treated in case he loses consciousness and is unable to make an informed decision. These findings must be recorded in the doctor’s medical records and kept confidential, the group states.

IMA head Leonid Edelman told the Washington Post that there have been over 1,000 Palestinian prisoners on hunger strikes in the past two years and that none died. “The point is they don’t want to die,” Edelman said.

The prisoners are protesting, not committing suicide,” he added.

“If the law passes, we’ll call on doctors to ignore it,” Edelman told Haaretz last month.

During the Israeli parliament session on Monday, MK (member of Knesset) Dov Henin has also called the bill “problematic, dangerous and unnecessary.”

“Israel has a law against force-feeding geese. We should understand that what cannot be done to geese cannot be done to people, either,” Jerusalem Post quoted Henin as saying.

Critics say the bill will only magnify Israel’s worsening image across the globe.

“I don’t understand what the use of this bill is, especially not at this time,” MK Karin Elharar said, according to the newspaper. “It will only lead to more harm to the State of Israel… We are at a time that Israel’s international image is not at its best, to put it delicately.”

MK Zuheir Bahloul has reportedly compared the force feeding to Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, which continues to be under fire by international community for its inhuman interrogation methods, force-feeding among them. According to lawyers, hunger-striking detainees being held by at the notorious prison facility have been painfully force-fed by authorities
as a method of punishment.

Although President Obama publicly pledged to shut down Guantanamo in 2009, as many as 122 prisoners remain at the prison, the majority of them without trial or charge.

MK Esawi Frej said the new bill will basically help silence prisoners through torture, wondering whether “anyone really think the Palestinians will stop their struggle because of force-feeding?” according to the Jerusalem Post.

One Israeli politician has meanwhile stated that Tel Aviv should learn from the Iron Lady, Margaret Thatcher, and allow hunger-striking prisoners to starve to death.

“We’re talking about a group of despicable murderers who are sitting in prisons with great conditions... These murderers should languish under harsh conditions,” MK Sharon Gal said, the Post reported.

Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan, an advocate of the legislation, told parliament that “security prisoners are interested in turning a hunger strike into a new type of suicide terrorist attack through which they will threaten the State of Israel. We will not allow anyone to threaten us and we will not allow prisoners to die in our prisons,” Erdan said last month, Haaretz reported.

Physicians for Human Rights have slammed the Israeli government for the proposed bill.

“Israel’s force-feeding bill contravenes established medical ethics, which unequivocally prohibit force-feeding as a form of inhuman and degrading treatment,” Sarah Dougherty, PHR’s senior anti-torture fellow, stated. “Medical professionals should never be used as instruments to inflict harmful and coercive measures on detainees and to violate their human rights. We join our colleagues around the world in urging the Israeli government to immediately reject this bill.
“Hunger-striking is often the only means detainees have available to protest unlawful detention and inhumane conditions. People have a right to make their own decisions about their health and to refuse unwanted treatment, and medical personnel must respect this fundamental principle,” she added.

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