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**Submission by: Front Line Defenders – the International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders**

**Related to: Israel**

**UPR Session: 43rd Session of UPR Working Group**

**Submitted: 11th October 2022**

Front Line Defenders ([www.frontlinedefenders.org](http://www.frontlinedefenders.org)) is an international NGO based in Ireland with special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC). Founded in 2001, Front Line Defenders has particular expertise on the issue of security and protection of human rights defenders and works to promote the implementation of the UN Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders) adopted by General Assembly resolution 53/144 of 9 December 1998.

The following submission has been prepared by Front Line Defenders based on research carried out by this organisation and information received from independent human rights defenders in Israel and the OPT from June 2017 to October 2022.

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## **Introduction**

1. This submission draws attention to the mis-treatment and persecution of Palestinian human rights organisations and human rights defenders (HRDs). It shows that such practices are part of Israeli authorities efforts to stifle the peaceful human rights work of Palestinian HRDs.
2. Reprisals and campaigns against Palestinian HRDs and organisations have been carried out for years by Israeli authorities targeting those working to promote and protect human rights and documenting international law violations. These practices have intensified in recent years. Strategies used by Israeli authorities and government-operated non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) include delegitimising critical civil society through defamation campaigns, including labelling them as terrorists or anti-Semitic; pressuring and working with social media platforms and institutions to deny or limit space for their discourse and positions; cutting funding sources; hacking phones and conducting surveillance, arbitrary arrests and travel bans.

### **Reprisals, Smear and Delegitimization campaigns**

3. In the past few years, HRDs and organizations advocating for Palestinian rights have found themselves increasingly under attack from Israeli authorities, GONGOs, non-state actors who spread disinformation and smear their reputations.
4. These above mentioned campaigns are focused on intimidating, harassing, delegitimizing, -funding and ultimately silencing or shutting down HRDS and organizations. In particular, Israeli authorities have repeatedly attempted to smear Palestinian HRDs, activists and organizations with allegations of “terrorism.”
5. One example of such a delegitimizing smear campaign is the designation by Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz on 19 October 2021, of 6 leading Palestinian civil society organisations in the OPT as “terrorist organisations” under Israel’s Anti-Terrorism Law (2016), and as “unlawful associations” under military law, which is applicable in the occupied West Bank. The six organisations “the six” are [Al-Haq](#), [Addameer Prisoners Support and Human Rights Association](#) (Addameer), [Bisan Center for Research and Development](#) (Bisan center), [Defense for Children International- Palestine](#) (DCI), [the Union of Agricultural Work Committees](#) (UAWC) and [the Union of Palestinian Women’s Committees](#) (UPWC).
6. Similarly, [the Health Work Committee](#) (HWC), a Palestinian organisation working on women’s and children’s health was declared an “unlawful organisation” on 22 January 2020 and staff members were arrested. Their release was conditional on them stopping their human rights work (Para.22,23).
7. The phones of several staff members of the above mentioned organisations were targeted with the Pegasus spyware (Para.31,32) Pegasus is sold by the NSO Group exclusively to national governments; evidence strongly suggests that the spyware was placed on the phones as part of the delegitimization campaign. Israel has also been accused of using the Internet and online trolls to conduct its smear campaigns.
8. Israeli authorities are increasingly targeting individual HRDs and journalists, both in Israel and in the OPT, and has subjected them to restrictions on freedom of movement, stigmatisation, intimidation, administrative or judicial harassment and long periods of arbitrary detention usually under administrative detention orders, illegal searches of their homes and offices, surveillance and killings. The case of HRD [Salah Hammouri](#) is a n illustration of the above (Para.18,19).

9. This systematic repression by Israel authorities also applies to the daily life of HRDs in Hebron. Issa Amro, Imad and Fayza Abu Shamsiyya, Nasser Nawaj'ah and Badee Dweik are some of the better-known names.
10. As a consequence of their campaigning and organising peaceful demonstrations against the threat of forced eviction of their communities, HRDs from the neighbourhoods of Masafer Yatta in Hebron and [Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan](#) in Jerusalem are often subjected to physical abuse and arbitrary detention.
11. HRDs Mona and Muhammed Al-Kurd have been constantly targeted for organising peaceful demonstrations to protest against the imminent threat of the forcible transfer of 120 Palestinians families from their neighborhoods in Sheikh Jarrah.
12. HRDs [Sami](#) and [Hafez Huraini](#) in Masafer Yatta have also been subjected to physical abuse and arbitrary detention. Sami Huraini has an open case since January 2021 and is accused of “insulting a public police border”, “disturbing the public order”, and “entering a closed military area”. Hafez Huraini was detained on September 12 after settlers broke his arm and falsely accused of attempted murder, harming the security of the area and severe assault. The settlers were never arrested.
13. [As part of its assault on Gaza in May 2021](#), Israeli forces demolished the [Al-Jalaa](#) building which houses international and local media offices including Al-Jazeera and the Associated Press. Al-Jazeera considered the attack as ‘a clear act to stop journalists from conducting their sacred duty to inform the world and report events on the ground’. The offices held archives of material from previous years, including previous Israeli incursions into Gaza, and as such would have potentially been evidence in the ICC investigations into war crimes. HRDs in Gaza found their social media accounts suspended or had postings blocked when trying to share videos of the bombardment.
14. Indigenous Bedouin HRDs such as [Aziz](#), [Saleem](#) and [Sheikh Sayah](#) Abu Madhi'm continue to be harassed. They are among the few who remained in Al-Aragib, a village that is not recognised by the Israeli authorities despite its establishment preceding that of the State of Israel. The authorities, which consider it to be built on state land, demolished the village for the first time in 2010. Protests are often violently dispersed by the police and house arrests and detention are common to silent dissent. FLD is aware of a number of other cases relating to the indigenous Bedouin communities, but will not share the specifics to protect their security.

### **Threats, Closure of Offices, Arrests, Administrative Detention and Judicial Harassment**

15. On 18 August 2022, Israeli security forces raided and sealed the doorways into the offices of the 7 Palestinian human rights organizations mentioned above (see Para 5 and 6). The security forces also confiscated documents and equipment and destroyed items in the offices. On the doors of the organizations, military orders were left behind ordering the closure of the offices under Article 319 of the Emergency Regulations of 1945.
16. On 21 August 2022, at least 4 general directors of the 7 Palestinian human rights organisations received calls and threats (see Para 5 and 6). Shawan Jabarin and Khaled Quzmar, HRDs and directors of Al-Haq and DCI were among them. The two directors were summoned for

questioning and threatened with arrest and imprisonment if the human rights work of their organisations continued.

17. A number of staff members from these organizations were arrested after the designations: Juana Sanchez and Shatha Odeh (HWC); Khitam Saafin (UPWC) and Salah Hammouri (Addameer).
18. [Salah Hammouri](#), a Palestinian-French human rights lawyer and field researcher for Addameer has been in and out of Israeli jails since 2005, including a year under “administrative detention,” without being charged and based on undisclosed, secret evidence. In early March 2022, Salah Hammouri was placed under administrative detention once again. On September 4, the day before his scheduled release from a second three-months round of detention, the Israeli military extended it a third time. On 25 September 2022, he joined a collective open hunger strike initiated by 30 Palestinian detainees to protest against their administrative detention in Israeli prisons. His life is in real danger.
19. Although Salah Hammouri was born in Jerusalem, on 18 October 2021, the Israeli Minister of Interior informed Salah Hammouri of the decision to revoke his permanent residency in Jerusalem and deport him to France, on the basis of his alleged “breach of allegiance to the State of Israel” based on a “secret file.” The HRD remains at risk of forcible deportation from Jerusalem upon his release.
20. On 7 July 2021, [Shatha Odeh](#), WHRD and HWC director was forcibly and arbitrarily removed from her house in Ramallah. On 26 July 2021, during her third hearing, the military prosecution presented five charges against her including “holding a position in an unlawful association”, and fraudulently using documents and receiving support and funds. The charges were based on secret evidence preventing her to fully exercise her right to fair trial and defence. Shatha Odeh was released from prison on 3 June 2022 on the condition that she would stop working on health issues with the HWC for the coming 5 years.
21. On 9 June 2021, Israeli security forces closed down the office of the HWC in Ramallah for 6 months. Previously, on 13 April 2021, WHRD [Juana Ruiz Sanchez](#), a Spanish national married to a Palestinian and project coordinator at the HWC was arrested under the charges of "participating in the activities of an illegal organisation", "being part of the board of directors of an illegal organisation", "receiving and introducing money into the Palestinian territories" and "receiving money for a false purpose", for her human rights and medical rights work for the HWC. The charges were again based on secret evidence preventing her to fully exercise her right to fair trial and defence. She was released from prison on parole on 8 February 2022, under the condition that she would stop any human rights work in Palestine for the coming 5 years.
22. On 2 November 2020, [Khitam Saafin](#), president of the Union of Palestinian Women’s Committees (UPWC) was arrested and held in administrative detention without charges until 8 June 2021, when the initial indictment was filed. The detention was based on secret evidence, that has never been disclosed to her or her lawyer- preventing her to fully exercise her right to fair trial and defence. The indictment cancelled the administrative detention order and placed Khitam Saafin in pretrial incarceration on unsubstantiated charges, including “membership in a terrorist organisation”. On 6 May 2022, Khitam Saafin was released from prison after spending 18 months between administrative detention and imprisonment on condition that she should stop here human rights work in Palestine.
23. As the example of the HWC shows, it is not only organisations that document human rights violations that are targeted. Also those providing health services or defending the cultural

rights of Palestinians are harassed and burdened administratively with the aim of stopping them from doing their work.

24. On 22 July 2020, Israeli Police raided the home of HRDs Rania Elias and Suhail Khoury in Jerusalem. Rania Elias is the Director of the [Yabous Cultural Centre](#), a non-profit cultural centre in Jerusalem. The main objective of the Centre is to maintain and defend the cultural rights of Palestinians in Jerusalem, through organizing different cultural and artistic events and activities. Rania Elias was later released on bail but faced charges of “money laundering”, “tax evasion” and “supporting terrorist activities”. Judicial harassment of the centre is still ongoing.

### **Travel bans**

25. In April 2022, [Sahar Francis](#), WHRD and Director of Addameer, and [Ubai Aboudi](#), HRD and Director of Bisan Center were reportedly banned from travelling to Mexico City through the United States (US) to participate in the World Social Forum. Ubai Aboudi is a US citizen and Sahar Francis had a valid visa to enter the US. Both had travelled to the US without any difficulty in the past.
26. In June 2022, four Special Rapporteurs addressed a letter to the US government in which they expressed their concerns that “the U.S. Government may have acted upon the Israeli Government’s designation of these organizations restricting their members’ rights to freedom of expression and movement, and to engage in human rights work as HRDs individually and in association with others”.
27. Palestinian HRD [Laith Abu Zeyad](#) has been subjected to a travel ban since 26 October 2019 because of his human right work. Laith Abu Zeyad is a campaigner with Amnesty International focused on travel companies operating in the illegal settlements in the West Bank, whilst also documenting the discrimination and human rights violations committed by the Israeli authorities against Palestinians. On 6 April 2021, the Jerusalem District Court upheld the travel ban against HRD Laith Abu Zeyad for the second time.

### **Surveillance**

28. Surveillance technologies are often used by authorities to target HRDs in a bid to dissuade them from continuing their human rights work.
29. A digital forensic investigation<sup>1</sup> carried out by Front Line Defenders uncovered the presence of Pegasus spyware on the phones belonging to 6 Palestinian HRDs. Three of the affected HRDs consented to be identified and three wished to remain anonymous.
30. The three HRDs that consented to be identified work for “the Six”. [Ghassan Halaika](#) is a HRD and a field researcher working for [Al-Haq](#). [Ubai Al-Aboudi](#) is a HRD and the executive director at [Bisan Center](#). Ubai Al-Aboudi holds US citizenship. [Salah Hammouri](#) is a HRD and field researcher at [Addameer](#). Salah Hammouri is a citizen of France.
31. The prevalence of the misuse of surveillance technology contributes to a chilling effect in which HRDs are aware they may be targeted through these technologies if they continue

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/statement-report/statement-targeti...> Front Line Defenders investigated 75 iPhones and found that 6 devices were hacked with NSO Group’s Pegasus spyware. Citizen Lab and Amnesty International’s Security Lab each confirmed FLD’s analysis.

their work. In the aftermath of the Pegasus scandal, several HRDs have reported to Front Line Defenders that they are purposefully reducing their public facing human rights work.

### **Publication of Defamatory Content, and Censorship**

32. In May 2021 censorship of social media platforms was imposed over content related to the human rights violations committed in OPT/Israel. [Bloggers and HRDs](#) such as Mohammed Al-Kurd in Jerusalem and Omar Ghraieb in Gaza reported to Front Line Defenders that social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have taken steps to silence them, by blocking their accounts or their content regarding ongoing incidents.
33. In August 2022, the double standard of social media companies was again [denounced](#) when HRDs and human rights organisations accounts mentioning human rights abuses in Gaza were censored. Such policies contribute to the silencing of HRDs and deny them their right to freedom of expression. [According to WHRD Mona Shtaya](#), advocacy advisor at 7amleh: "This has been happening for years now, and it's contributing to silencing our voice and restricting us from documenting human rights violations and war crimes."
34. As highlighted in a paper prepared by 7amleh, the Arab Center for the advancement of Social Media, dedicated to Online Smear Campaigns<sup>2</sup>, the Israeli system also works to delegitimize human rights organizations and their staff by publishing defamatory content and launching de-funding and de-platforming campaigns whose sole purpose it is to silence those advocating for Palestinian Rights.
35. This includes the publication of defamatory reports and campaigns published by the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs (MSA) such as [the #TerroristsInSuits campaign](#), premised on racist caricatures, attempting to depict Palestinian civil society organizations as suspicious and terrorists, in order to discredit and defund them. Among the HRDs targeted were Salah Hamouri and Shawan Jabarin, mentioned above.

### **Recommendations**

Front Line Defenders calls upon the member states of the UN Human Rights Council to urge the Israeli authorities to prioritize the protection of HRDs and in doing so to:

- Immediately refrain from stigmatizing human rights work, notably by designating human rights organizations and defenders as “terrorists”, and conducting smear and defamation campaigns against them; to immediately rescind the “terrorist” designation of human rights organizations, notably: the Health Work Committee, Al-Haq, Addameer Prisoners Support and Human Rights Association, Bisan Center for Research and Development , Defense for Children International- Palestine, the Union of Agricultural Work Committees and the Union of Palestinian Women’s Committees;
- Immediately cease systematic and ongoing policies and practices aimed at intimidating and silencing Palestinian civil society and HRDs, including through arbitrary arrests and deten-

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<sup>2</sup>7amleh - Online Smear Campaigns and Deplatforming: The Silencing and Delegitimization of Palestinian Human Rights Defenders, Activists and Organisations

tion, intimidation, institutionalized hate speech and incitement, residency revocation, deportations, surveillance, arbitrary arrests, travel bans. and other forms of coercive or punitive measures;

- Repeal the Anti-Terror Law, 2016 effectively used to institutionalize the persecution of HRDs;
- Halt the use of administrative detention against HRDs and ensure that detained HRDs are immediately and unconditionally released and in the meantime given full and prompt access to their families and lawyers and allowed to receive all necessary medical care in compliance with UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners;
- Ensure that all HRDs in Israel and OPT are free to carry out their peaceful human rights work.
- Conduct an independent, impartial and thorough inquiry into the source of threats, ill-treatment and all forms of intimidation and harassment by Israeli forces and settlers as well as unfair trial and initial arbitrary detention directed towards all HRDs.