



# Palestinian children should not be treated like threats



**Robby Berman**

This month, the Israeli military raided a Palestinian home in the West Bank village of Beit Ummar in the middle of the night. They pulled a 13-year-old boy out of his bed and took him. His single mother Fatma and her six children in the two-room apartment were terrorised. Fatma begged the soldiers to tell her why her son was being arrested and where they were taking him. They ignored her.

I have known Fatma for close to 20 years. Although she lives in the West Bank, Fatma would frequently walk through my affluent West Jerusalem neighbourhood trying to sell her colourful, home-made, embroidered purses to put food on the table for her children. On school holidays, Fatma had no choice but to bring her children with her. I frequently bought the children a Coke and a cupcake and paid them to sit with me in a coffee shop so I could practise my Arabic.

Muhammad, then about seven years old, taught me the Surah Al Fatiha, the opening chapter of the Quran. As our relationship developed over the years, Muhammad told me that he and his siblings have never seen the sea, so I got permission from Fatma to take them to the beach. I have been to their home in Beit Ummar and they to mine numerous times.

So when Fatma called me after the raid, crying that she didn't know where Muhammad was, I was also very concerned. I contacted a few lawyer friends who work with Palestinians, as well as the incredibly helpful and very important HaMoked, an Israeli-based human rights NGO that helps Palestinians. Within a few days, they found out the boy was being held in Ofer Prison, charged with throwing stones at Israeli soldiers.

Ofer is in the West Bank, and looms large for Israelis

who commute daily from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv as it abuts the motorway between them. It has a bad reputation, with reports of systematic humiliation and abuse of prisoners, beatings by guards and near-constant handcuffing. A delegation of British lawyers who visited the facilities said they saw iron shackles on Palestinian children being held there. Unexplained prisoner deaths at Ofer are not unheard of either.

Muhammad told his jailers in Ofer that he did not throw any stones. Before his official interrogation, he spoke on the phone with a lawyer, who gave him the same advice any defence attorney would: say nothing. But the boy says he was beaten by the guards right before the interrogation and was told if he does not confess, he will never see his mother again.

In Israel, this is not an idle threat. Israel possesses and uses a draconian legal tool called "administrative detention", which can keep a person in prison for years with no trial. Given the beating, the thought of never seeing his mother again, the yelling, the cursing and the prolonged interrogation, Muhammad decided to confess to whatever they accused him of, just to stop the interrogation.

His lawyer told me that while all interrogations carried out by Israeli forces are filmed, often the threats and beatings happen before the interrogation officially begins

or when the prisoner steps out to use the bathroom. This alleged modus operandi is why the Israeli military has an impressive 99 per cent conviction rate when arresting Palestinians. Needless to say, a 99 per cent conviction rate in a putatively fair court system doesn't sound fair at all.

Fatma needed 2,200 shekels (about \$650) to post bond for Muhammad. The young boy had already been in prison for five days with thousands of adult male prisoners. But Fatma is destitute (when I met her she owned neither a refrigerator nor an oven). I posted the story on my FB page and gracious people – including many Jewish Orthodox Zionists – donated \$750. If convicted, the money will be used to pay any fine and if not it will go as a charitable donation to Fatma.

Muhammad told me he did not throw stones at anyone. I believe him. But I am biased. I also know that 13-year-old boys sometimes do regrettable things and then lie about it – I know I did when I was his age. But whether he is guilty is not the question.



Not telling the mother why the boy was being taken and not having a parent or lawyer present at the interrogation indicate a system gone wrong

The question is the process of how a little Palestinian boy was arrested and how he was treated. How you arrest someone is just as important as why you are arresting someone.

Not telling the mother why the boy was being taken, where he was being taken to or who to call, and not allowing the boy to have a parent or lawyer present at the interrogation are all indicative of a system gone wrong. But what particularly bothered me was the timing of the arrest. Did the military have to raid the house at 2am, causing the other children in the bed to soil their clothing from fear?

Two years ago, I was beaten up at Damascus Gate in Jerusalem by a right-wing Jewish Israeli teenager because I asked him to stop screaming "death to the Arabs". My 17-year-old attacker, who was taller than me, punched me in the head and face, kicked me in the stomach and spat on me. The attack was caught on film and aired on the nightly news. When the police finally identified him as a resident of the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, did they raid his home in the middle of the night and arrest him? No. They sent him a letter politely asking him to come in for questioning.

Over the past few years, Israeli military violence and settler violence against Palestinians has peaked. And the identity of the guilty soldiers and settlers who have killed innocent Palestinians are often known, yet they are not held accountable.

For years, I told my Palestinian friends that violence is not the answer to stopping violence. I would always tell them that peaceful protests, writing articles, appealing to the international community and filming and documenting the military and settler violence will bring about change. Of course, I still believe in non-violence, but I am less convinced that anything they do can bring the change we need.



Israel's army frequently arrests Palestinian children Getty

# Digitalisation succeeds when it's designed for everyone, as UAE and Estonia show



**Liisa-Ly Pakosta**

Dubai's latest three-year budget that was announced last week, the largest in its history, is a clear message about the kind of future the emirate – and the country as a whole – intends to build. It places long-term investment behind public services, innovation and the digital infrastructure that supports daily life.

For Estonia, a country that chose to digitise early and completely, that message resonates. Our experience has shown that technology should make life easier and societies fairer. As innovation scales, the real measure of progress must look beyond the number of services online, and instead at how many people can access them with ease. The UAE's commitment to building an innovation-driven society, where digital systems create opportunity and improve daily life, reflects this, too.

Digitalisation succeeds when it is designed for everyone. Estonia began with a simple idea to make access universal. That meant building services that worked as well for a parent in a small town as for an entrepreneur in the capital. Libraries became digital gateways, and public services were built around inclusion, transparency and trust.

The UAE's *We the UAE 2031* national plan speaks of wellbeing, opportunity and global competitiveness, yet at its heart lies a human idea where a nation's success is measured by how well it serves its people. Digital progress is the tool that makes this possible.

This shared philosophy explains why co-operation between Estonia and the UAE is growing quickly. Our countries are now working together on AI governance, digital justice and secure data exchange – areas that rely on technology and institutional trust in equal measure. Artificial intelligence dominated conversations at this year's Gitex event, which was held last month in Dubai. The technology promises to redefine how economies operate and how governments and citizens interact. But every powerful tool demands responsibility. AI must be transparent, explainable and aligned with public values.

In Estonia, we call our next step the "AI Leap" – a national effort to make AI literacy part of everyday education and to build ethics and accountability into design. The UAE's own work to integrate AI into schools and public administration shows the same maturity of vision. Both nations recognise that innovation without understanding risks leaving people behind. Education

ensures that technology remains understood and purpose-driven.

Gitex is often described as a showcase of invention, but it is also a study in collaboration. Each breakthrough on display depends on shared data, interoperable systems and public-private partnerships that cross borders. This is where Estonia and the UAE find common ground.

For Estonia's entrepreneurs, the Gulf is one of the most dynamic markets in the world. For the UAE, Estonia's experience offers a living example of what trusted digital infrastructure can unlock. And its agile start-up ecosystem is supporting the Gulf's transformation ambitions.

Our trade continues to expand, and our dialogue now focuses on joint capacity building in cyber security, digital trade and green technology. Yet, this ambition is founded on not just trade, but a shared conviction that progress must be inclusive. The digital economy thrives when everyone can take part, regardless of age, income or



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background. When people trust the systems that connect them, they use them, and innovation follows.

The UAE's energy and Estonia's experience complement each other. One brings the ambition and scale to transform entire industries, the other brings the lessons learnt from years of digital experimentation. Together, they show that modernisation and human values work best side by side.

What is happening in the UAE today is a timely reminder that the future is shaped by long-term choices. It applies scale to an approach that is increasingly visible across the Emirates, where digital infrastructure, strong public services and inclusive growth are treated as strategic priorities rather than ambitions. When governments plan in this way, they create the conditions for innovation to take root.

The digital era will favour nations that design with everyone in mind. Estonia and the UAE are working to ensure that the benefits of progress are shared widely and confidently. The future will belong to countries that build systems their citizens trust and use, and make sure no one is left behind.

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