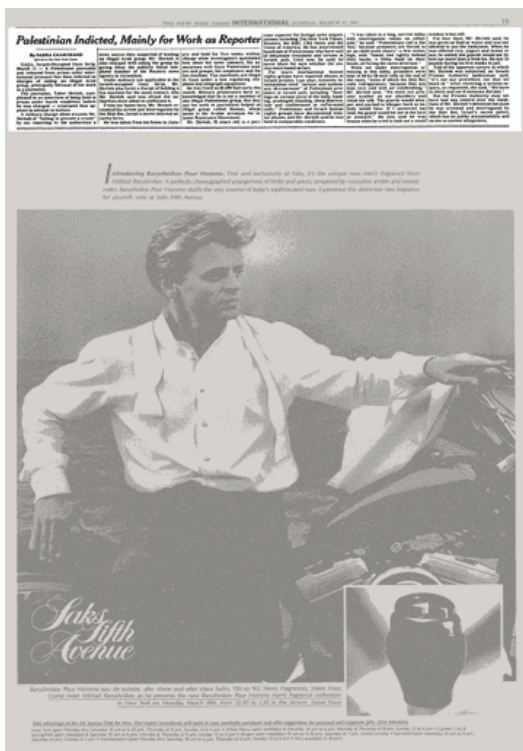


Palestinian Indicted, Mainly for Work as Reporter

By Sabra Chartrand, Special To the New York Times

March 17, 1991



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A Palestinian journalist just released from prison under international pressure has been indicted on charges of aiding an illegal Arab group, principally because of his work as a journalist.

The journalist, **Taher Shriteh**, complained in an interview of being held in prison under harsh conditions before he was charged -- treatment that appears to amount to torture.

A military charge sheet accuses Mr. Shriteh of "failing to prevent a crime" by not reporting to the authorities a news source they suspected of leading an illegal Arab group. Mr. Shriteh is also charged with aiding the group by giving them the publicly listed telephone number of the Reuters news agency in Jerusalem.

Under military law applicable in the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip, Mr. Shriteh also faces a charge of holding a fax machine for the same contact, who Mr. Shriteh said was afraid the authorities were about to confiscate it.

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From his home here, Mr. Shriteh recounted his arrest and interrogation by the Shin Bet, Israel's secret internal security force.

He was taken from his home in January and held for five weeks without charge while investigators questioned him about his news contacts, his associations with Gaza Palestinian leaders and groups, his employers and the fax machine. Fax machines are illegal in Gaza under a law regulating telephone and telegraph equipment.

He was freed on \$5,000 bail early this month. Military prosecutors have acknowledged that he is not a member of any illegal Palestinian group. But they say his work in journalism helped an illegal group called Hamas, whose name is the Arabic acronym for Islamic Resistance Movement.

Mr. Shriteh, 30 years old, is a parttime reporter for foreign news organizations including The New York Times, Reuters, the BBC, CBS News and the Voice of America. He has interviewed hundreds of Palestinians who have told of inhumane treatment and torture in Israeli jails. Until now, he said, he never knew for sure whether the stories were based on fact.

For years international human rights groups have reported abuses in Israeli prisons. Last year, Amnesty International cited "torture and systematic ill-treatment" of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, including "beatings on various parts of the body, hooding, prolonged standing, sleep deprivation and confinement in coffin-sized cells." Palestinian and Israeli human rights groups have documented similar abuses, and Mr. Shriteh said he was held in comparable conditions. "I was taken to a long, narrow lobby with interrogation rooms on either side," he said. "Palestinians call it the 'bus,' because prisoners are forced to sit on child-sized chairs" a few inches high, with "hands tied tightly behind their backs, a filthy hood on their heads, all facing the same direction."

When not under interrogation or waiting in this lobby, prisoners were kept in 60-by-30-inch cells at the end of the room, "some of which the Shin Bet calls 'refrigerators,' because they are kept very cold with air conditioning," Mr. Shriteh said. "We wore our prisoner number on our shoulders and could not talk. The guards would whisper, and you had to whisper back so nobody would hear. If I answered too loud, the guard would hit me in the face or stomach." He also said he was beaten when he tried to look out a small window in his cell.

For four days, Mr. Shriteh said, he was given no food or water and was not allowed to use the bathroom. When he was offered rice, yogurt and bread at last, he added, the guards would not let him eat more than a little bit. He lost 33 pounds during his five weeks in jail.

Told of the apparent torture to which Mr. Shriteh was subjected, an Israeli Prisons Authority spokesman said, "It's not our procedure, not that we know of." After receiving a written inquiry, as requested, she said, "We have to check and see if someone did this."

But the Prisons Authority may not have had any control over the conditions of Mr. Shriteh's detention because he was arrested and interrogated by the Shin Bet, Israel's secret police, which has no public accountability and no one to answer allegations.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section 1, Page 19 of the National edition with the headline: Palestinian Indicted, Mainly for Work as Reporter