

# **'It is a time of witch hunts in Israel': teacher held in solitary confinement for posting concern about Gaza deaths**

Monday 15 January 2024, by [GRAHAM-HARRISON Emma](#), [KIERSZENBAUM Quique](#) (Date first published: 13 January 2024).

**Meir Baruchin, who was fired and jailed for criticising the military, says that many who agree with him are afraid to go public**

An unlikely charge of intent to commit treason landed Meir Baruchin, a grey-haired, softly spoken history and civics teacher, in the solitary confinement wing of Jerusalem's notorious "Russian Compound" prison in early November.

The evidence compiled by police who handcuffed him, then drove to his apartment and ransacked it as he watched, was a series of Facebook posts he'd made, mourning the civilians killed in Gaza, criticising the Israeli military, and warning against wars of revenge.

"Horrific images are pouring in from Gaza. Entire families were wiped out. I don't usually upload pictures like this, but look what we do in revenge," said a message on 8 October, below a picture of the family of Abu Daqqa, killed in one of the first airstrikes on Gaza. "Anyone who thinks this is justified because of what happened yesterday, should unfriend themselves. I ask everyone else to do everything possible to stop this madness. Stop it now. Not later, Now!!!"

It was the day after Hamas's horrific attack on Israel, when the country was reeling from the slaughter of 1,200 people and the kidnapping of more than 240.

He knew his views about the Israeli military were controversial; similar criticism at a less volatile time had cost him a teaching post in the city of Rishon LeZion, near Tel Aviv, three years earlier. He also thought expressing them was vitally important as the country decided how to respond.

I became a ' Hamas supporter', because I expressed my opposition to targeting innocent civilians - *Meir Baruchin*

"Most Israelis don't know much about Palestinians. They think they are terrorists, all of them, or vague images with no names, no faces, no family, no homes, no hopes," Baruchin said. "What I am trying to do in my posts is present Palestinians as human beings."

Ten days after that Facebook message, he was fired from his teaching job in Petach Tikvah municipality. Less than a month later he was in a high-security jail, detained to give police more time to investigate critical views he had never tried to hide.

Inside Israel, veteran [journalists](#), [intellectuals](#) and rights activists say, there is little public space for dissent about the war in Gaza, even three months into an offensive that has killed 23,000

Palestinians and has no end in sight. "Make no mistake: [Baruchin](#) was used as a political tool to send a political message. The motive for his arrest was deterrence – silencing any criticism or any hint of protest against Israeli policy," the long-established *Haaretz* newspaper [said in an editorial](#).

He is not the only teacher to be targeted. Authorities also summoned Yael Ayalon, head of a Tel Aviv high school, after she shared a *Haaretz* article warning that Israeli media was hiding the suffering of Gaza's civilians. "Israeli citizens need to be aware of this reality," the piece said.

Her students rioted in the school after news of the post spread; she took her employers to a tribunal and was reinstated, but when she returned to school she was attacked again by students chanting "go home". She declined to speak to the *Observer*.

Baruchin also had a hearing at an educational tribunal case this month. Under Israeli employment law, municipal authorities have no right to fire a teacher whose performance has always been excellent, he says and free speech laws protected his right to post about the war.

But he is living on savings while he waits for the verdict and even if he wins the treason charges have not been dropped: he could live in their shadow for five years, the limit for the police to prosecute.

"This story is much bigger than my personal story, or Yael's personal story. It is a time of witch hunts in Israel, of political persecution," he said. "I became a ' Hamas supporter', because I expressed my opposition to targeting innocent civilians."

He said he'd received hundreds of private messages of support from fellow teachers and students who were too frightened to go public, and showed several to the *Observer*.

"The message is crystal clear: keep silent, watch out," he says, adding that they strengthened his own conviction about speaking out. "I thought to myself, when I retire, I might conclude this is the most significant lesson I ever gave in civics."

There were cold-water showers, a tiny piece of soap, two blankets stinking from cigarette smoke and a tiny towel - *Meir Baruchin*

Baruchin believes he is the only Jewish Israeli to have been detained for denouncing civilian deaths in Gaza, but this would not be unusual if he was a Palestinian citizen of Israel.

Hundreds have been [arrested](#) and jailed, or lost jobs or access to education [because of social media posts](#). The judge who put Baruchin in prison drew an explicit comparison. "Had an Arab resident made the post, the danger would have been clear. I do not believe that there is room for differentiating between an Arab post and a Jewish post."

The country's differing free-speech standards for Jewish and Palestinian citizens was [cited by a group of prominent Israelis](#) in a letter warning that incitement to genocide had been normalised in the country.

Baruchin was initially told to come to a police station for questioning over charges of sedition. When he pointed out to police that they needed a warrant from the attorney general to charge an Israeli citizen with that offence, treason charges were duly drawn up.

When he arrived at the police station, his arms and ankles were cuffed, and he was shown a warrant to search his home. Five detectives escorted him there, turned his apartment upside down and

eventually confiscated two laptops and six hard drives. The police then asked for more time to investigate, and a judge ordered that he be detained.

“I wasn’t allowed to take anything with me to the cell,” he says. “I walked in with my clothes on and stayed with the same clothes for four days. There were cold-water showers, a tiny piece of soap, two blankets stinking from cigarette smoke and a tiny towel.

“I was not allowed a book, TV or anything. The wardens were not allowed to talk to me and there were no windows, so I didn’t know daytime from night-time. My watch was taken away.

“In order not to go crazy I exercised every one and a half to two hours. Every time the warden came to check I asked what time it was, to calculate how much is left.”

He was interrogated again before a second judge ordered his release. Questioners told him his posts were like the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, among the most famously antisemitic documents in the world. “I’m a history teacher, so I asked, ‘Did you ever read them?’ They didn’t respond.”

When his name is clear, Baruchin plans to sue Israeli media who reported police charges without asking for his response or looking for evidence, and accused him of justifying and legitimising Hamas.

He says he has not been traumatised by the experience, as for him the fate of Palestinian civilians and Israeli hostages in Gaza is much more disturbing. He still follows what is happening there closely, and flicks on his phone through images of the recent dead, a journalist, a violinist, a baby.

His latest post before the *Observer* interview was an image of an improvised grave marker, that looks like part of a broken piece of furniture. “Unknown martyr, green jacket and trainers,” the inscription reads.

“The whole story in one picture,” he says. “The Israeli mainstream media don’t broadcast this picture. They don’t get this picture, and don’t want to get this picture.”

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