

It has been removed from maps and airbrushed from aerial photographs. But Facility 1391 certainly exists - you just have to ask the Palestinians and Lebanese who have been imprisoned and tortured there.

Facility 1391 has been airbrushed from Israeli aerial photographs and purged from modern maps. Where once a police station was marked there is now a blank space. Sometimes even the road leading to it has been erased. But Israel's secret prison, inside an army intelligence base close to the main road between Hadera and Afula in northern Israel, is real enough. For 20 years or more it has been housed in a large, imposing, single-storey building designed by a British engineer, Sir Charles Taggart, during the 1930s as one of a series of garrison forts designed to contain growing unrest in Palestine. Today, the thick concrete walls and iron gates are themselves protected by a double fence overseen by watchtowers and patrolled by attack dogs.

The prison has held Lebanese abducted by the Israeli army as hostages, Iraqi defectors and a Syrian intelligence officer who tried to defect but was accused of spying and chose to remain in another prison rather than return home and face a firing squad. More recently, scores of Palestinians were incarcerated in 1391 for interrogation, which finally led to the almost accidental disclosure of a prison the state decreed did not exist.

Those who have been through its gates know it is no illusion. One former inmate has filed a lawsuit alleging that he was raped twice - once by a man and once with a stick - during questioning. But most of those who emerge say the real torture is the psychological impact of solitary confinement in filthy, blackened cells so poorly lit that inmates can barely see their own hands, and with no idea where they are or, in many cases, why they are there.

"Our main conclusion is that it exists to make torture possible - a particular kind of torture that creates progressive states of dread, dependency, debility," says Manal Hazzan, a human rights lawyer who helped expose the prison's existence. "The law gives the army enough authority already to hide prisoners, so why do they need a secret facility?"

Unlike any other Israeli prison, the International Red Cross, lawyers and members of the Israeli parliament have been refused access. One leftwing MP, Zahava Gal-On, describes Facility 1391 as "one of the signs of totalitarian regimes and of the third world". The Israeli government declines to discuss the secret prison other than to issue a standard response: "Facility 1391 is situated on a secret military base. The base is used by the security services for various classified activities and thus its location is kept confidential."

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