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Middle East

'Since 1967, 35% to 37% of Palestinian society has spent time in Israeli prisons'.

- IV Online magazine - 2025 - IVP602 - March 2025 -

Publication date: Sunday 9 March 2025

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At a public meeting held in Bourges, France, on 4 February, Salah Hamouri described the situation of Palestinian prisoners.

Before 7 October 2023, there were around 5,000 Palestinian political prisoners from Gaza, the West Bank and the whole of Palestine, who had spent 10, 20, 30 and 40 years in prison, men and women some of whom had died. The issue of freeing these prisoners was one of the triggers for 7 October 2023. Everyone agreed that enough was enough. We've had enough of women and men spending so many years in prison without anyone talking about it. After 7 October, there were between 14,000 and 16,000 prisoners.

Intolerable treatment

Just 48 hours after 7 October, Palestinians were subjected to inhuman conditions, daily physical and psychological torture. Conditions that I, in ten years in prison, have never experienced. For those in Gaza, there was the notorious Sde-Teiman detention centre. According to the figure given by the newspaper *Haaretz*, which is not yet definitive, between 45 and 55 Palestinians were killed under physical torture. Tortures that no human being can imagine. There's one, published in a newspaper, that has always stuck with me. They buried the men in the desert sand up to their heads for days. They let the dogs loose on these people so that they shit on them and piss on them for weeks and weeks. They barely feed them. There are reports of sexual violence and rape against men and women. We saw a video of the special forces raping a prisoner. Prisoners in the West Bank were also tortured: 19 of them were killed in Israeli prisons as a result of torture or medical negligence. Today, prisoners are held in armed bases, detention centres and prisons. There are between 27 and 30 places of detention. Prisoners are not allowed visits from the Red Cross or their relatives. They have no contact with the outside world. I saw images of prisoners released last week asking whether their parents and children were still alive. There really is genocide inside the prisons too.

After the exchanges of 6 February, 12 women and 30 children had not yet been released but will be released in the next waves. There are children aged 12, 13, 14 and up to 18 because, for the Israelis, a Palestinian child can be tried and go to prison from the age of 12. The youngest, released last week, was 13, arrested at the age of 12. Children have also been released with broken backs and feet. The released prisoners take Red Cross buses straight to hospitals. The last prison to release prisoners from the West Bank is a prison near Ramallah called Ofer.

For each prisoner, there are 4 or 5 guards who say: welcome to the 'goodbye' party. The 'goodbye' party consists of tying their hands and feet, putting them on the floor, stepping on them, pissing on them and beating them. I've seen prisoners evacuated from the Red Cross, from buses in hospital, with broken ribs in the last hour before they were released.

It's Gaza that's in the media today, which is understandable, but there really are crimes against humanity in the interrogations that take place in the prisons on a daily basis.

Prisoners in administrative detention

Administrative detention is a law that was passed by the British before the occupation in 1948, and the Israelis apply

it to Palestinians. A military order allows the Israeli army to arrest any Palestinian for between one and six months. This period is renewable. You can receive orders for six months, plus six months plus six months... Up to two, three, four years of detention based on a secret security file between the military prosecutor and the military judge.

There are no charges, no trial. The prisoner and his lawyer do not know why he is in prison. In this case, there are currently 3,000 women, children and men detained in this totally illegal framework. They can spend years, like friends of mine who spent 15 and 16 years in administrative detention. They spend three years, four years, they are released, one month, two months, and then another three, four years of detention and it goes on... From the 2000s until today, the Israeli prison system has nothing to do with the alleged problem of 'Israeli security'. It's about trying to break the will, the psychology of the prisoners. Since 1967 - there was no exact count before then - 900,000 Palestinians have passed through Israeli prisons, i.e. 35% to 37% of Palestinian society. There isn't a house in two where you don't have a prisoner who has spent months or years there. The Israeli prison system is part of the means of destroying Palestinian society and controlling the lives of Palestinians.

Resistance

Despite the difficulties experienced in prison, over the years Palestinians have been able to develop a system of resistance and win rights before 7 October, because afterwards it was impossible. A resistance made up of hunger strikes, including the two I took part in in 2011 and 2022. These hunger strikes were our last means of resistance to win rights, things that might seem very normal. For example, getting a mattress 2 cm bigger than the one we had, negotiating a hot plate, an extra hour or two in the yard instead of being locked up 20 hours a day. Visiting rights for people from Gaza (banned under the 'Schalit law') between 2006 and 2008. These may seem like simple needs, but to achieve them we went on hunger strike several times and some of our comrades were martyred in these hunger strikes. We were able to develop a system of resistance without hiding. For us, resistance inside the prison is a right. The Israelis want to break our psychology, our mentality and make us a burden on our families and on our societies. We did the opposite in prison so that we could resist collectively and set up this system of solidarity. We were able to build a life of solidarity and community.

This is what enabled us to develop our culture, to develop our political level, our ideological level, our commitment to our homeland and to the values of humanity, the freedom of our people and the freedom of human beings in general. All the figures who are appearing today in all the Palestinian political parties, from all the Palestinian regions, are people who have been in Israeli prisons, who have been trained there, people who have suffered the worst there. Today 1,967 prisoners were released. The last wave will be on Saturday 15 February, when a total of 22 or 23 hostages will be released. There will still be 58 hostages in Gaza and 14,000 Palestinian hostages in Israeli prisons. It is unacceptable for people to spend their lives in prison. It is unacceptable for a Palestinian to spend 10, 15, 20 and even 30 or 40 years in prison. The oldest Palestinian to be released, Nael Barghouti, has spent 45 years in prison, while Ibrahim Abu Moh is spending his 43rd year in prison. Negotiations are going to be tough over the coming weeks. But there is a will to free these men, women and children from the hell of Israeli prisons.

[L'Anticapitaliste](#) 22 February 2025

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