

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article8673>



Israel/Palestine

# Inside the Hell of Israeli Prisons

- IV Online magazine - 2024 - IV596-September 2024 -

Publication date: Sunday 15 September 2024

---

**Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved**

---

**The Israeli NGO Physicians for Human Rights-Israel (PHRI) was founded during the first Intifada by a group of Palestinian and Jewish doctors. The PHRI Prisoners and Detainees Department deals with all prisoners who are under the control of different Israeli forces. In this interview, Oneg Ben Dror recounts his observations in this hell.**

### **What was the situation of Palestinian prisoners before October 7?**

Before October 7, Palestinians suffered from violations of their rights in prison and in the criminal justice system. All of these systems are hostile to Palestinians because they are part of the occupying forces. In prison, Palestinians are not allowed to establish contact with their family members, so no phone calls for example. In addition, most of the prisons where Palestinians are held are in the south, around Mitzpe Ramon and Beersheba, which complicates medical care, as it is far from the centre of the country. There are specialist doctors who visit the prison, but in these places there are fewer of them. Many incarcerated people suffer from medical neglect, and the use of solitary confinement is increasingly common, both for “security” prisoners and “criminal” prisoners. Before the war, there were approximately 15,000 people in prison in total, both Palestinians classified as “security” prisoners and as “criminal” prisoners.

The situation had already deteriorated under the present government, since Itamar Ben Gvir is responsible for prisons as Minister of National Security. Even before the war, he set himself the goal of making life miserable for Palestinians in prison. For example, he decided that they were not allowed to bake their own bread. He also tried to pass a law that provided for the death penalty for Palestinians, officially for “terrorists,” and opposed prisoners receiving any treatment that improves their quality of life. But from a medical point of view, there is no such definition: any treatment improves the quality of life!

### **What changed after the war began?**

The prison administration decreed a policy of confinement for all Palestinians in prison, which meant prolonged confinement in cells, no going out into the yard, confiscation of all private property. People were left with only the clothes they had on their backs, some of them spent the winter in a T-shirt. The prison administration provided very poor quality food, in very small quantities, and people lost up to 15 or 25 kg in a few months. Then there were water and electricity cuts. In each prison, there is an infirmary for basic treatment, but Palestinian prisoners were not allowed to go there. Family visits were banned, lawyers' visits are very limited, the International Committee of the Red Cross is still denied access to the prisons. All this was justified by the state of emergency, without further explanation.

Then the prisons began to get overcrowded. People are sleeping on the floor. The number of Palestinians imprisoned before the war was about 6,000 classified as “security” prisoners. In the summer of 2023, the number of Palestinians in administrative detention was 1,300, the highest since 2016. Today, nearly 10,000 Palestinians are classified as “security” prisoners and about 3,500 are in administrative detention.

There is a new category that was previously used for Lebanese detainees, namely “illegal combatants.” There are now reportedly about 1,200 “illegal combatants.” This category is used for detainees from Gaza, although there are also Gazans who are in administrative detention and others who are held as “regular” prisoners. We believe that this category serves as administrative detention for people suspected of criminal acts but for whom there is not enough evidence to incriminate them. In “normal” administrative detention, detainees must see a judge within 96 hours, while in this category there are people who have not seen anyone for six or seven months. At the beginning, it is 45 days

without a lawyer, but that can be extended indefinitely. This allows for a long disconnection from the outside world. The policy of confinement is a policy of revenge.

### **What do we know about violence and rights violations in prison?**

There has been systemic violence, although it was never declared as such, obviously supported by Ben Gvir and the head of the prison administration. There were raids on the cells. People told us: "They come twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and they beat us." In some prisons, for example in Megiddo in the north, there was a reception cell where they put all the new prisoners, Israeli songs were played and they forced them to dance. People said that if they stopped dancing, they would be beaten. If they fell, they would be beaten. If they refused to kiss the Israeli flag, they would be beaten. There were some who left that room with broken bones. They were also stripped naked and the prison guards would put them in the toilets all together, forcing them to touch each other. They would insert sticks and objects into their anuses. Sexual violence against men is widespread and very spontaneous in prison. We have received terrifying testimonies. For the first time, we have heard of Palestinians who have attempted suicide, which is very rare among political prisoners.

It is important to say that time is taking its toll. Today, we know that some of the systemic violence has stopped. People no longer tell us that their cells are raided twice a week. There is more spontaneous violence, mainly when prisoners are transferred to court or to places in prison where there are no cameras.

### **What is the level of access to healthcare for Palestinian prisoners?**

As I said, there are infirmaries run by the prison administration. Previously, specialist doctors came for consultations, but this has not been the case since the beginning of the war. Chronic patients who need to go to hospital for treatment have no longer been allowed to do so. This changed in February, but it is still unclear to what extent: there are still hundreds of people who need medical care and treatment in hospital and who are not receiving it.

And then we started hearing about cases of death in prison, which is very, very rare. Before the war, there were one or two a year. There was medical neglect, but not to this extent. There was the case of Mohammed Al-Zabbar, a 21-year-old Palestinian prisoner who was held in Ofer (the only Israeli prison in the West Bank). He was arrested a few months before October 7. He had a stomach disease and needed one very simple thing: a special diet. The prison administration knew this but denied it to him, and he suffered for weeks. When he was transferred to the hospital, it was too late and he died. Most of the recent deaths are of people with chronic illnesses. Maybe medical neglect can be managed for a while, but not for eight months.

Our doctors participated in some autopsies, but others were carried out without the family being informed, so we were unable to send anyone. It is important to note that even though autopsies are carried out, there is never a final report for the cases of death, and there are cases that date back to October. When our doctors participated in the autopsies, they spoke of clear signs of violence, such as internal bleeding and fractures, as well as clear signs of medical neglect. The confirmed number of deaths in prison is fifteen people since October 2023, but we know of others. This is the situation in the prisons, and I am still not talking about the detainees in Gaza.

### **So what about the Gazan detainees?**

In the early days of the war and especially after the ground invasion, Israel arrested thousands of Gazans, including in protected places: shelters, hospitals, schools. We know of the case of a six-year-old child who was arrested. And that of an 82-year-old woman, Fahamia Khaldli, who has Alzheimer's disease. Other prisoners told us she was being held in Damun prison in the north, where they keep Palestinian women who are classified as "security"

prisoners. We asked to visit her in prison and were told, "No, she is an illegal combatant ." We appealed: she is 82 and has Alzheimer's! A few days after our appeal, she was released at the border.

Most of the Gaza prisoners were held in Sde Teiman , in the south. The military base already existed, it is a huge base. Since the ground invasion, it has become a very central place where they say they are doing the first selection and classification process. There were between 800 and 1,000 detainees. It is also important to mention that some people are detained in the Gaza Strip and we do not know anything about them. We do not know if there are more of them than here. In Sde Teiman , the prisoners were held in an open-air cage, handcuffed at all times, with their eyes covered. At night, dogs were sent to attack them and walk all over them. They had to sit down and were not allowed to talk to each other or they would suffer violent punishment. There were cases of broken bones and dozens of deaths. People had amputations because of the handcuffs. Honestly, I have read what they did at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib in Iraq and this is no different.

We first heard about Sde Teiman through the field hospital, which was established there around November because civilian hospitals in Israel were refusing to admit patients from Gaza. The hospitals did not want to attract the attention of the fascists, because there were people who were going to the hospitals to look for Gazan detainees, but also because doctors refused to treat Gazan patients, saying they would not treat terrorists.

Since the field hospital is located just metres away from the military base, it is likely that the doctors could hear the screams coming from the pens, and doctors are not allowed to be present where torture is being carried out. They also received patients with fractures and internal bleeding and had to perform limb amputations, meaning they were aware of what was happening there. A doctor at the field hospital said that interns considered that it was paradise for them: they could gain a lot of experience because they were performing medical procedures without qualifications. Doctors performed complicated procedures without obtaining the patients' consent because there was no translation. The Ministry of Health issued guidelines stating that doctors operating in Sde Teiman are not allowed to give their names. This may be to protect them from the Israeli public, which could accuse them of treating Gazan detainees, but also to protect them from future prosecution.

### **What was PHRI's role in the Sde Teiman affair?**

The first thing we did was to gather together what we knew and write a report about it. We were the first to talk about Sde Teiman and we were in contact with many media outlets. Then we appealed to the Supreme Court to ask for the closure of Sde Teiman. The court decided that the state had to find a solution and so they started transferring the detainees. They built a new place near the Ofer military base , run by the Israeli army, where there are cells, so the Palestinians are not in an open-air prison and do not have their eyes covered, but they are still handcuffed all the time, even in the cells. We know that dozens of minors from Gaza are in Ktziyot prison in the south.

So there were 140 people left in Sde Teiman at the end of June, and they were supposed to reduce that number to 45, but then they arrested more people in Gaza and took them there. The last update we got from the state was on July 8, and it says there are 166 detainees.

### **What are the living conditions of Gaza detainees after their transfer to prison?**

After having been interrogated, some were released, but most were transferred to prison, mainly to Ktziyot . The detainees fear being beaten if they receive a visit from their lawyer. Very few lawyers started visiting them in February, now there are more. This is really the most delicate situation. The prison administration released a video of how the Gaza detainees are guarded: they have lights on them 24 hours a day and the Israeli anthem is played in their cells 24 hours a day.

To this day, we receive many phone calls from families in Gaza, who have only one question: is their loved one alive? We cannot answer this question because we have no information. We do not even know the exact number of people arrested in Gaza. They say: "We arrested about 4,000 people and we released about 1,500 ." But there is no official and precise information, neither about the conditions of detention, nor about the possibility of locating many of them - this is called enforced disappearance. The same goes for cases of death. In December, we sent a formal request to the army asking how many people had died in the custody of the Israeli army. We sent it in December and we only got an answer now, in July, after appealing to the court: they said it was 44 people. We believe there are more .

### **What about women?**

When the truce agreement was reached in November, most of the women were released. Previously, about forty women were being held, but now they have arrested many more. They are being held in Damun prison, near Haifa, but also in Anatot, near Jerusalem. There are about 80 women in Damun right now. We thought they were not keeping women in Sde Teiman , but a 56-year-old woman from Gaza described being held there. The guards are both women and men, and we have received accounts of sexual abuse .

### **How was the demonstration in front of Sde Teiman on April 20th?**

We brought many media outlets: CNN, Channel 4 , *Le Monde* ... There was a big discussion among the activists about whether we should demonstrate there, because we were afraid that they would attack the prisoners. But the prisoners say that the hardest thing is to know that they are alone. So if we had sung, they would have known that we were there, in solidarity with them, but they would have been beaten for that. It is a real problem: what is the point of going to demonstrate if they do not hear us? It is a very difficult work of solidarity. We used to demonstrate in front of Ofer prison , but it is not the same in Sde Teiman .

At least the demonstration helped to shine a spotlight on this torture camp and raise awareness, and in that sense it worked very well. Even if the people inside don't know it happened, their families do and they told us it warmed their hearts.

July 2, 2024

PS:

*If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint.* Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.