

Palestine & Abolition: Part 1

No New Washington Prisons

October 2023

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Content warning for discussion of police and military violence, torture, and murder of Palestinians, including of children, though not in graphic detail.

This month, it only took two weeks for Israel's ramp-up in genocidal violence towards Palestinian to lead to the doubling of the population of Palestinians incarcerated in Israeli prisons. Prior to October 7, 2023, there were approximately 5,200 Palestinians incarcerated by Israel; by October 21, that number had increased to over 10,000. Around 4,000 are Gazans who were working in Israel with temporary labor permits, and another 1,070 are Palestinians arrested in overnight army raids in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Imprisoned Palestinians are being treated worse than ever; Israeli forces and guards are assaulting them, starving them, preventing them from accessing healthcare, cutting off their water and electricity, and prohibiting them from any contact from their families. On October 18, the Knesset (Israeli parliament) even voted to allow prisons to reduce the minimum living space allotted to each detainee because of the drastic rise in new prisoners and to allow detainees to be imprisoned without a bed.

But this recent escalation in detention and increase in the dehumanization of Palestinians can only be understood in the context of the long history of oppression, torture, and murder of Palestinians by Israeli forces through criminalization. For a good background and summary, Rawan Masri and Fathi Nemer's piece "Imprisoning Palestine: Zionist Colonialism Through an Abolitionist Lens" for Scalawag Magazine is an illuminating analysis of how Israeli law, policing, and incarceration have worked together to advance Zionist colonization of Palestine and dispossess Palestinians of their land, their rights, and their humanity.

As a result of this history, the following dynamics and outcomes have long existed in Israeli policing and incarceration of Palestinians:

Prior to October 7, one in every five Palestinians had been arrested and charged under Israeli military occupation; that percentage is now even higher. For Palestinian men, that incarceration rate prior to October 7 was as high as 40%. Palestinians are systematically racially profiled by law enforcement in Israel, including by police, military, and Shin Bet (Israeli intelligence). The United Nations estimates that approximately one million Palestinians have been imprisoned since Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, including tens of thousands of children.

The Israeli criminal legal system is anti-Black as well, particularly towards Afro-Palestinians, who are tireless in their fight for Palestinian liberation. Even Black Jewish people are impacted by Israel's carceral anti-Blackness: 40% of minors in the Israeli correction system are Ethiopian Israelis, although Ethiopian Israelis make up less than 2% of population. But the racism is even clearer for the tiny community of 350-400 Afro-Palestinians, who live in a neighborhood in Jerusalem that is blockaded at both entrances by Israeli police, where they are highly surveilled and face constant police harassment. The majority of their community has been arrested at one point or another, and those who are incarcerated, including youth, are subject to constant rearrests for flimsy reasons. For example, Mohammed Firawi, an Afro-Palestinian youth who had been arrested when he was in twelfth grade because he was accused of throwing stones at Israeli police, was shuttled around nine Israeli prisons before being released five years later. However, he was rearrested two days after his homecoming because he "defied Israeli orders to refrain from celebrating [his release]."

Palestinians live under a different (and harsher) system of law than Israelis – an inequality so profoundly unjust that it didn't even exist in South Africa's apartheid system. In the occupied West Bank, Palestinians are tried under military law, when Israelis are tried under civilian law for the same crimes. Teenagers and adults alike are tried in military courts where simultaneous Arabic interpretation is not provided, so Palestinian defendants are only provided summaries at the end of proceedings that can leave out important details. Virtually all military cases in the West Bank end in convictions – 99.74%, to be exact.

The separate systems of law also mean that Palestinians can be held without trial or even being charged. “Administrative detention” allows the Israeli military to hold prisoners indefinitely on secret information and is applied almost exclusively to Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza. Prior to October 7, there were 1,264 administrative detainees out of the total 5,200 Palestinian people incarcerated in Israeli jails – almost 25%!

Palestinian children detained by the Israeli military are subject to physical and psychological torture. Since the Second Intifada (an uprising; intifada can be translated from Arabic as “shaking off”) in 2000, more than 12,000 Palestinian children have been detained by the Israeli military, and between 500 and 1000 children are held every year. A Save the Children report from July 2023 found that 86% of Palestinian children report being beaten in Israeli military detention, 42% are injured at the point of arrest, and 69% report being strip-searched. They are often interrogated without the presence of a parent or lawyer and potentially even in a language not understood to them. They are also charged according to their age at the time of sentencing instead of at the time of their alleged offense, allowing for higher charges simply because their trials take a long time. Sometimes their trials are delayed in order for them to age up into a higher sentencing category.

Palestinians are often murdered in prison by security forces, and the bodies of Palestinians who die in detention can be kept by Israeli forces for the remainder of their sentence. Since 1967, approximately 237 Palestinian detainees have reportedly been murdered with torture, medical negligence, or execution during arrest or an escape attempt. In late 2022 and early 2023, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories learned that Israeli authorities were holding 125 Palestinian bodies, including 13 bodies of Palestinians who had died in prison, “allegedly as they need to terminate the execution of the sentence”. The bodies of Palestinians are even lost or visibly damaged by Israeli authorities when they are returned to families.

Palestinian prisoners often face exile to Gaza even when they are released, regardless of where they were originally from. Former prisoners are often separated from their families, who may have difficulty entering Gaza, and who may also lose rights simply for being related to a former prisoner. For example, formerly incarcerated Palestinian Shuaib Abu Snina was exiled to Gaza and found that his wife and children in Jerusalem were raided and arrested by Israeli forces using him as a reason. Shuaib was forced to divorce his wife because his eldest son was told that Israeli forces “will not deal with your [family] as citizens with rights in Jerusalem unless your father divorces your mother”.

But even in captivity, Palestinians continue to resist and fight for their liberation. Incarcerated Palestinians engage in mass disobedience even when faced with beatings or solitary confinement from doing so. Since at least the 1960s, Palestinians have undergone mass and individual hunger strikes; on May 2, 2023, Khader Adnan, who was being held without trial in administrative detention, was martyred after 80 days of hunger strike. Incarcerated Palestinians also support each other and have earned concessions through their protests, such as increased visitations, better

conditions, access to books and political curriculum, and more – though many of these are clearly being violated by the current Israeli acceleration in imprisonment.

The US plays a key role in legitimizing, funding, and supporting Israel’s apartheid against Palestinians, including support for Israeli law enforcement and military. Social movements within the US must work to disrupt the US government’s genocidal practices, whether they are manifesting as anti-Black policing within US borders, or active military support for settler colonial governments like Israel abroad. We understand the fight for Indigenous sovereignty within the colonial borders of the US and the fight to free Palestine as parts of the same struggle. The US and Israeli governments certainly understand this point, which is why they share information and technologies between each other to repress movements in each country. Police, military, and intelligence agencies in the US and Israel conduct joint training programs in what is known as the “deadly exchange” to learn from each other in expanding surveillance, using racial profiling, intensifying use of force to suppress public protests, and more.

Similarly, we must understand the workings of the US police, prisons, and military as part of an integrated white supremacist totality, and not let the geographic distance between the people each of these institutions targets lead us to view them as separate. The Israeli and US governments will continue to criminalize resistance against them and survival within them, and then leverage that criminalization rhetorically to justify the generalization of racist repression. In response, we must continue to stand in solidarity with the targets of military and policing regimes in order to work toward the uncompromising end of these systems.

As Rawan Masri and Fathi Nemer conclude for Scalawag Magazine:

Today, more than ever, it remains crucial to center any discussion about Palestinian liberation through the lens of abolition and a complete rejection of carcerality. In this context, Incarceration is not only related to prisons and prisoners, but touches upon every aspect of our life. From the moment of birth, Palestinians must contend with being criminalized for existing. We are surveilled and censored, our oppression normalized, and our bodies corralled into various open-air and closed prisons.

Such tactics have always revealed more about the jailor than the prisoner, and the logics inherent to the carceral apparatus are shared between all oppressive forces. While the goal is to project strength and power, what it divulges instead is fear, insecurity, and self-doubt. Resorting to locking away the inconvenient reminders of a crooked system betrays its weakness, a society unable to function without constructed villains onto which the world’s ills can be pinned.

It is an attempt to cover the sun with a sieve.

ORGANIZATIONS TO FOLLOW AND SUPPORT:

- Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association
- Samidoun Palestinian Prisoner Solidarity Network
- Al-Haq: Defending Human Rights
- Adalah Justice Project

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