

Milestones from the Struggle of the Palestinian Prisoners Movement

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with whatever weapons at hand



The following article, by liberated prisoner Ablam Tamimi (under constant threat from the United States) was published in Arabic on April 23, 2025 in Etar Online, examining the history and development of the Palestinian prisoners' movement over the decades. We are republishing it in English translation below in order to highlight the intellectual contributions and historical record of the Palestinian Prisoners' Movement, as documented by the prisoners themselves.

Ablam Tamimi is a Palestinian-Jordanian journalist and writer, originally from the village of Nabi Saleh in occupied Palestine and born in Zarqa, Jordan, in 1980. One of the first women to join the Izz el-Din al-Qassam Brigades, she escorted the martyr Izz el-Din al-Masri inside occupied al-Quds '48 to carry out a resistance operation at a Sbarro restaurant. She was arrested and sentenced to 16 life terms in occupation prisons, and was liberated in the Wafa' al-Abrar prisoner exchange achieved by the Palestinian Resistance in 2011. She was deported to Jordan; later, in 2017, the U.S. government announced that it was adding her to its most-wanted list and issued a \$5 million reward for her capture. The U.S. has repeatedly demanded she be extradited from Jordan, despite Jordanian courts' ruling that she must not be turned over.

Historical tracking: Milestones from the struggle of the Palestinian Prisoners' Movement

by Abalam Tamimi

Introduction

The Palestinian prisoners' movement is considered to be one of the most important elements of the Palestinian national struggle, as prisoners have, over the last decades, constituted an important dimension in the resistance against Israeli occupation. Israeli prisons have turned into arenas for struggle and confrontation that have led to the formation of a collective consciousness and a culture of resistance inside the prison cells, and have contributed to the elaboration of the concepts of freedom, resilience and national belonging. This article seeks to examine the historical development of the prisoners' movement since 1967, and analyze its political, organizational and militant role.

Historical Background

Zionist gangs have adopted the policy of summary execution after arrests and violent interrogations during the 40's. In 1949, five Israeli soldiers arrested a Palestinian girl in her twenties, they then murdered this girl after raping her and subjecting to her to a violent interrogation, and the soldiers have admitted during their trial that the murder and the rape came as a result of clear and explicit orders. [1] And between the years of 1948 and 1967, the Israeli occupation used many of the camps that they inherited from the British mandate, and in it they imprisoned tens of thousands of Palestinians, leading to the spreading of disease and epidemics due to the poor treatment and the overcrowding.[2]

Phases of the History of the Prisoners Movement: The First Phase: 1967-1970

Since the 1967 occupation of the West-Bank and the Gaza Strip, the Israeli occupation authorities started arresting thousands of Palestinians and Arabs after the launch of armed resistance inside and outside the country, which overshadowed the reality of the prisoners' movement. Researchers started documenting the history of the prisoners' movement since the year of the Naksa. In an exclusive interview conducted by the researcher during her preparation of her Master's thesis on March 15, 2019, with Mahmoud Bakr Hijazi, the first Palestinian prisoner to be liberated

after having been incarcerated in the isolation cells of al-Ramla prison[3], he talked to her about the detention conditions he was subjected to during his first incarceration. This incarceration lasted from January 17, 1965 to February 21, 1971, and during it, he was completely isolated from the outside world and put under constant surveillance by the jailer who was replaced once every 8 hours. He added: “After my arrest I was subjected to physical torture and mental pressures to push me to snitch on my colleagues, and I was also aching from the wound I sustained while clashing with the Israeli army. With the start of 1967, the number of imprisoned fedayeen increased. I was never allowed to live with them or to meet them, and I used to loudly call to them to raise their morale. I was under constant surveillance and I was not allowed to be in contact with anyone.”[4] The occupation sentenced Mahmoud Hijazi to death, making him the first Palestinian prisoner to be given the death penalty, after the execution of Ata al-Zeer, Mohammad Jamjoum and Fuad Hijazi in Akka prison in 1933, and Sheikh Farhan al Saadi [1937] and Youssef in 1939[5]. Hijazi’s death sentence was subsequently overturned in the appeal hearing and he was liberated on February 28, 1971.

The treatment of female prisoners at that time was not any better than that of the male prisoners. Liberated female prisoner Fatima Bernawi, who was arrested by the occupation forces in October 1967, says that the Prison Services forced female Palestinian prisoners to work in the laundry rooms and in agriculture in the fields of al-Ramla prison. They were put together with the penal female prisoners arrested for prostitution and drug-related charges. It was not easy for female prisoners to extract their rights during the 1960’s, which forced them to wage multiple hunger strike campaigns to gain some basic rights in detention.[6]

We can say that the first conditions of detention were harsh, that they constituted a form of slavery and a tool to practice violence and terror with the objective of cementing its monstrosity in the mind of the Palestinian, and of dissuading any militant action, paving the way for the elimination of the project of liberation struggle before it even started.[7] Liberated prisoner Aisha Odeh, who was arrested on March 1, 1969, documented her experience in prison in her book *Dream of Freedom*. She described the heinousness of the first conditions of interrogation, characterized by constant physical beating alongside spitting, insults, threats of sexual assault and the use of electro-shock, as well as hearing other prisoners being tortured in neighboring cells, and her seeing corpses dragged on the floor, as she herself was on the verge of dying.[8] She explained that the reason behind all this cruelty was the shock of the occupation at the qualitative and successful participation of women in the resistance efforts, confirming that the year 1969 had seen multiple successive militant operations led by women such as Aida Saad, Mariam al-Shakhshir, Lutfiya el-Hawari and Rasmea

Odeh, among others.

In this time period, the prisoners endured the effects of the harsh treatment by the Israeli Prison Service, and their systemic targeting through the policies of starvation and anonymization, in an attempt to erase the militant self and replace it with an exhausted, compliant and surrendered self. They were deprived of sufficient quantities of food that was prepared by the “criminal” prisoners in the worst ways possible, such as the “Goosefoot soup” which consisted of a few leaves of herbs inside a large quantity of water, alongside half of an old boiled egg that was served for breakfast[9]. As for the dress code, there was a single uniform for all inmates, and it was not allowed to bring in one’s own clothes. They also made sure to grant them the least amounts of rights stipulated by the 4th Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of the Prisoners of Wars, such as granting each prisoner two blankets and a thin leather mattress instead of a bed, and they were restricted in their sleep due to the number of times inspections were carried out on a daily basis, starting at 5:30 a.m., and during which the prisoner is forced to tidy his bed and prevented from going back to sleep. The prisoner is also forced to reply with “Yes Sir”. As for the yard time, it did not exceed 30 minutes or at best, an hour a day.

As for forced labor, it was, according to the writings of liberated prisoner William Nassar in his book *Taghribat Bani Fatah*, characterized by the following: [10]

- 1- Forced cleaning works; including the cleaning of the cells, the hallways and the jailers’ offices under the threat of punishment or solitary confinement.
- 2- Workshops; such as furniture maintenance workshops or the manufacture of tank nets used by the soldiers for the purposes of camouflage.
- 3- Hard labor in prison yards; such as shoveling dirt, moving rocks and tidying up the yards for free.
- 4- Mandatory Services; such as ironing the military uniforms of the jailers, offering them coffee, tea and food, or executing humiliating personal orders.

There was no presence of factionalism or organizational distinctions in this period because the prisoners considered themselves the upholders of a common revolution. Quietist and regionalistic policies sprang up with covert support from the Israeli Prison Service (IPS) in order to achieve their objective of getting the prisoners’ minds caught up with anything besides the homeland and its liberation.[11]

This phase, despite its harshness, constituted the main focal point of the upcoming rebellious undertakings and instances of disobedience in Israeli prisons, as well as the use of hunger strikes which we will be discussing later on.

The Second Phase: 1970-1973

After the increase in the incarceration rates in the ranks of the revolutionaries with organizational backgrounds, they refused the policy of forced labor imposed upon them. In retaliation, they were subjected to the penalty of solitary confinement, as well as the banning of family visits and constant beating. With the constitution of an organizational nucleus among the prisoners from Fatah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the rebellion against forced labor erupted and the number of those opposed to it increased, and hunger strikes were used as a tool to extract rights under detention.

It is during this phase that the prisoners launched their first hunger strike on February 18, 1969, in al-Ramla prison. The strike lasted for 11 days before it eventually failed because the prisoners were subjected to repression, isolation and sanctions.

[12] During this strike, the strike leaders, including Abdulhamid al-Qudsi, Kamel al-Nemri and William Nassar, among others, were placed in solitary confinement, and were subjected to violent beatings by the Ramla prison director until they were moved to Asqelan prison.[13] The Kfar Yona prison hunger strike was simultaneously launched and it lasted for 8 days, and ended up successfully achieving some of the demands such as the prisoners getting writing implements and stationery, and them not having to respond with “yes sir” anymore, something which was exclusive to Kfar Yona.[14]

Liberated prisoner Shawqi Shahrour says: “I was transferred, alongside the leaders of the strike, to Asqelan prison. It is a prison specially designed to break morale and humiliate the prisoner and discipline him. We were welcomed with a series of beatings that we called “al-tashrifah” (the bestowing of honors); we had to walk through a long hallway, with soldiers on both sides holding batons and electric wires. While naked, we were almost beaten to death under the pretext that we are criminals. I remember that my head was swollen and my body was bleeding. We were then sprayed with DDT and were locked up in rooms with twenty prisoners each, without getting treatment or sufficient quantities of food, as we continued getting beaten while inside the rooms depending on the mood of the jailer, whom we were only able to address by saying “yes sir.”[15]

The detention conditions in Asqelan prison were humiliating. Prisoners were forced

to launch a hunger strike on July 5, 1970, which lasted for around a week. Thanks to this hunger strike campaign, the prisoners were able to achieve some meagre demands such as the increase of the duration of yard time and allowing the inmates to receive clothes from their families and allowing them to have writing implements and stationery. Despite the extreme difficulties, the prisoners were able to limit the scope of the aggressions that were committed against them.[16]

The Third Phase: 1973 – 1980

This phase was characterized by the effort to consolidate the factional system inside prisons, and its imposition upon the jailers as an internal system of life, turning the prisoners' life from chaos into order. The prisoners also emphasized the necessity to extract the rights that were stipulated by international charters which pushed them to launch multiple hunger strikes during this phase, including:

- The strike in Asqelan prison which lasted from April 13, 1973 up until October 7, 1973.
- An open hunger strike that was launched from Asqelan prison on December 11, 1976, and spread to all other prisons. It lasted around 45 days, after they organized themselves so that each room had its own representatives who spoke at its behalf, and a general representative was elected in every prison to speak on behalf of the prisoners of all factions. Moreover, a list of demands was presented to the Asqelan prison service on top of which was the end of the policy of constant beating. Some of these demands were granted, such as the prisoners managing the library and the replacement of the prisoners' rotten mattresses with new ones, while the prison administration violated the other agreements which led the prisoners to launch another hunger strike on February 24, 1977, to demand the implementation of these promises, and this strike lasted 20 days. [17]

The Fourth Phase: 1980 – 1985

The IPS realized the impactful role played by the Palestinian organizations inside prisons, and it grew aware of the cultural level that the prisoners developed, as they used to hold cultural sessions and issue monthly magazines written on the back of food packages; these included the Thawra (Revolution) magazine and the Hurriyah (Freedom) journal which gave the prisoners the opportunity to write articles about various topics.[18] Therefore, the IPS decided to open Nafha prison in 1980. In it, the IPS incarcerated the leaders of the prisoners' movement in harsh conditions including bad food both in terms of quantity and quality. In addition, the highest possible number of prisoners were crammed up in rooms with no ventilation, writing

implements and stationery were confiscated and the prisoners were totally isolated from the outside world, leading them to coordinate with the prisoners of Asqalan and Bir al Saba' to wage a hunger strike campaign that started on July 14, 1980 and lasted for 33 days. [19]

Talking about his hunger strike, liberated prisoner Azmi Mansour says: "During this hunger strike, prisoners Rasim Halawa, Ali al Jaafari, Ishaq Maragha and Anis al Dawla were martyred; Ali was my friend and we were in the same room.[20] They killed him by force feeding him with a laryngeal tube and then claimed that he had committed suicide." [21] Then, the hunger strike spread into all prisons, and it ended up achieving all the prisoners' demands, especially that of getting beds and increasing the area of the rooms. This strike was also characterized by the popular and media solidarity movement that followed the martyrdom of the four prisoners.

In 1984, prisoners of the Juneid prison extracted a higher number of demands after waging a 13-day hunger strike that was met with widespread solidarity from the Palestinian population which made it successful. Subsequently, televisions, radios, earphones and cassette tapes were introduced into the prisons, as well as blankets and pajamas that were given by the families of the prisoners, which significantly impacted their general life, and provided them with a degree of stability that enabled them to prioritize their culture and advance their militancy.

The Fifth Phase: 1985 – 1993

After the al-Jalil operation which oversaw the liberation of over 1000 Palestinian prisoners among those sentenced to long sentences or to life in prison in 1985, the prisoners sought to reconstruct Palestinian organizations, especially after the emergence of Islamic organizations. Thus, the IPS decided to overturn the previous achievements of the prisoners and bring them back to square one, forcing them to launch a hunger strike on March 27, 1987 led by inmates from Juneid prison, which were then followed by those of the other prisons, ultimately lasting 20 days but did not achieve their demands.

Thousands were arrested in the early days of the first Intifada in December 1987, and the battle overshadowed the prisons which saw heavy repression and the overturn of previous achievements. This went on until 1992, after the prisoners had launched a hunger strike on June 23, 1991 that was met with failure, mainly because of the Gulf War and the instability of the general regional political situation.

The prisoners decided to launch a crucial hunger strike on September 25, 1992 which

included prisoners from all prisoners that had around 7000 participants in total. This strike saw a great deal of success and restored the balance of life in detention after the prisoners extracted a number of gains, including: The end of strip searches, the closure of the solitary confinement section of Ramla prison, the resumption of visits by family members and the extension of the duration of these visits, as well as allowing private visits, the extension of the list of purchases and introducing cooking tiles and equipment into the rooms [22], as well as allowing the pursuit of university education in the Open Hebrew University. [23]

The Sixth Phase: 1994 – 2000

The signing of the Oslo Accords and the creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA) impacted the situation of the prisoners in Israeli prisons. The prisoners were divided into sections: one that is comprised of those in support of the accords, thinking it will lead to their release, and another comprised of Marxists and Islamic thinkers who opposed the accords and did not believe that they were going to lead to the emptying of the prisons. [24]

This phase was characterized by the economic stability of the prisoners, in particular after the creation of the Palestinian Prisoners Club and, later on, the Ministry of Detainees and ex-Detainees Affairs. The prisoners gained rights as the general peaceful situation reflected on them. The regular visits of the lawyer of the Palestinian Prisoners Club and the Ministry of Detainees bridged the relationship with the PA which contributed to achieving some of the prisoners' demands, on top of which was the resumption of university education and the arrangement of the financial support of the prisoners and their families outside and inside the prisons according to a special salary scale, which provided the prisoners with relative stability. Despite this, the question that reoccurred in the minds of the prisoners revolved around the possibility of their release in the light of the Oslo Accords and the peaceful relationship between the PA and the Israelis, which led to a downfall in the internal organizational presence and a decrease in the levels of organizational culture and the general situation. [25]

Some prisoners were liberated after the Oslo accords, under “good will” initiatives, but these releases did not include many of the veteran prisoners or those with long sentences, leading to a decrease in the morale of the prisoners and their disillusionment in the PA leadership. Liberated prisoner Israr Sumrain says he was heavily disappointed after seeing prisoner Ahmad Abu al-Sukkar who was not liberated by the Oslo Accords, leading him to question: “If Abu al-Sukkar was not liberated, then when are we getting liberated?” This led the prisoners to wage a

political strike under the slogan of “The Oslo Accords did not liberate them: releasing the male and female prisoners without exception” on March 18, 1995, lasting 18 days. This strike had the aim of delivering a political message to the PA and the Palestinian people in the light of the current quiet state of affairs. [26]

This phase was characterized by political strikes, which delivered multiple messages to the Palestinian Authority. The 1995 strike was followed by another on February 5, 1998, which lasted just 10 days and was only waged by PLO prisoners without the participation of the prisoners from the Islamic movements. Then, yet another strike followed on May 1, 2000, lasting 30 days. This strike started after the opening of the Hadarim prison and the isolation of a number of prisoners and the attempt to replace the dividing net with glass during the family visits to the prisoners. This strike saw a wide-scale popular solidarity movement that led to the martyrdom of some Palestinians. These strikes spread further as prisoners in Asqelan, Nafha and Shatta joined in, increasing the number of prisoners on hunger strike to around 1500, ultimately leading to the granting of the majority of humanitarian demands, such as; removing the prisoners under solitary confinement from isolation, allowing university education and stopping the policy of naked searches. However, all of these achievements were later completely overturned after the eruption of the al-Aqsa Intifada in the year 2000. [27]

The Seventh Phase: 2000 – 2006

After the eruption of the al-Aqsa Intifada on September 28, 2000 and the arrest of large numbers of Palestinians, the IPS opened new prisons and prison sections and even reopened old prisons such as al Ramla, Kfar Yona, Hadarim, Gilboa and Ramon. Most of the achievements of the prisoners were overturned and a policy of daily searches of the prisoners’ rooms was enforced. The situation of female prisoners in Ramla prison worsened, leading them to wage a hunger strike for 8 days starting on June 26, 2001, followed by their participation in the general prison strike on August 15, 2004, which led to the achievement of some basic demands after 19 days on hunger strike.

The arrest of large numbers of Palestinians in the wake of this Intifada led to the deterioration of relations between them and older prisoners, as well as the presence of a gap in their communication and harmony. Liberated prisoner Fakhri al-Barghouti says: “It was a difficult phase, one in which the prisoners of the PA security services didn’t wish to take part in the general organization in prison. This period saw the prioritization of personal interests at the expense of the general interest, and it was said that it exhausted the older prisoners because of the age and intellectual and

organizational gap between them and the new prisoners.” [28]

The Eighth Phase: 2007 – 2019

Inter-Palestinian division overshadowed the prisoners movement. The prisoners’ lives in Israeli prisons was divided on the basis of the organization they belonged to, and now, every organization had its representatives and sections and private life, which weakened their position in the face of the IPS. The national ranks of the prisoners were divided, which led a number of prisoners from different Palestinian organizations to launch a conciliatory initiative on June 27, 2007, known as the National Reconciliation Document of the Prisoners. However, this initiative did not succeed in settling the internal disputes of the prisoners. And after the arrest of a large number of children after the 2015 al Quds Intifada, the IPS launched an offensive against the prisoners across all prisons, costing the prisoners a great effort to accommodate and support the new prisoners and safeguard their rights. This phase was characterized by the weakening of the internal unity of the prisoners, as well as weak strategic plans and general position. [29]

The year 2011 saw the release of more than 1000 Palestinian male and female prisoners on October 18, after the exchange agreement between the Israelis and Hamas. And after a few months, the Hamas and PFLP prisoners in solitary confinement led a hunger strike on April 17, 2012, with the goal of putting an end to their isolation and to rejoin other prisoners in the collective cells. This strike saw a state of organizational solidarity which, although it did not include all organizations, ultimately culminated in the success of the endeavor. Nevertheless, the exchange deal also led to a feeling of frustration felt by those who remained in prison for not being included among those released. Liberated prisoner Amjad Abu Latifa says: “After the deal and the implementation of the Shalit law, disciplinary measures were restored and most benefits were terminated, especially when it came to prisoners from the Gaza Strip, who were subjected to measures that were twice as harsh, and were completely deprived of family visits, and were isolated in their sections.” [30]

The effects of the intra-Palestinian division on the general state of the prisoners led the prisoners under administrative detention to decide to launch a hunger strike on April 24, 2014, demanding the abolition of administrative detention. This strike saw a wide solidarity movement, and lasted for 63 days, becoming the longest hunger strike led by prisoners under administrative detention in the history of the prisoners’ movement, and it was subsequently ended after a limit of just one year of administrative detention was set. [31]

This phase saw the emergence of individual hunger strikes, which some prisoners were led to undertake due to the division in the ranks of the national prisoners' movement. Some of these strikes lasted for hundreds of days and more. The year 2012 saw multiple individual hunger strikes such as that which was led by Khader Adnan throughout 66 days, the hunger strike led by Thaer Halahleh for 76 days, Hana Shalabi who went on hunger strike for 44 days, or Samer Issawi who exceeded all expectations by going on a hunger strike for 265 days, which is considered to be the longest individual hunger strike in the history of the prisoners' movement. [32]

The Ninth Phase: 2020 – the aftermath of Al Aqsa Flood War

The prisoners of this phase suffered from the coronavirus which spread among their ranks, as they lacked any sterilizers or antiseptics as well as precautionary measures. This led to the increase in the numbers of infected prisoners. This period also saw an attempt by six prisoners to escape from Gilboa prison on September 2021, and these prisoners are: Zakaria Zubeidi, Mahmoud al Ardah, Yacoub Qadri, Ayham Kamamji, Mohammad al Ardah and Munadil Nafa'at. This was followed by a series of heightened security measures after their recapture. This forced the prisoners to wage two hunger strikes in 2022 that culminated in the meeting of their demands after the prisoners threatened to dissolve their organizations and structures and enter a complete rebellion. [33]

In the wake of the Al Aqsa Flood War beginning on October 7, 2023, the number of prisoners increased and exceeded the 16,000 mark, while around 59 prisoners were martyred since the eruption of the flood. [34] The IPS used new and unprecedented torture methods against male and female prisoners, which included rape and sexual harassment, using dogs for intimidation purposes, overturning all the achievements of the prisoners' movement and bringing it back to square one. It also opened the Sde Teiman prison which it specifically designed to incarcerate prisoners from the Gaza Strip against whom it committed war crimes that violate international law and the Geneva conventions, and it did not reveal the names of the detainees to any legal entity. Lawyer Khaled Mahajneh transmitted the testimonies of multiple prisoners that were locked up in Sde Teiman, which included: The 24h chaining and blindfolding of the prisoner, not allowing prisoners to change their clothes, the spread of diseases and epidemics, skin diseases in particular such as scabies, subjecting the prisoners to maximum security and assaults by armed guards, not allowing the prisoners to communicate between each other or to practice their religion, only allowing them to shower once a week or even less, reducing the food quantity and the continuous and sudden beating of prisoners. [35] As for the other Israeli prisons, the IPS has isolated the veteran leaders of the prisoners' movement and brutally assaulted

them, and denied them treatment and medical operations, while also attempting to assassinate many of the prisoners and the leaders of the prisoners' movement, confiscating their belongings and dispersing them between the prisons. [36]

And despite the release of Palestinian prisoners in seven successive batches as a result of the first phase agreements of the al Aqsa Flood deal between Hamas and the Israelis, the arrests are still ongoing, and the conditions inside the prisons keep deteriorating day after day as the war rages on.

Conclusion...

The history of the Palestinian prisoners' movement boasts of a long record of sacrifices and developments, which reflects the resilience of the Palestinian people and its determination to achieve liberation, and which constitutes a focal point to understand the development of the Palestinian national struggle, as it reflects the scope of the transformation of the concept of resistance inside the prisons. And despite the attempts for repression and exclusion that were exercised by the jailer, the prisoners were able to cement their presence in the national collective conscience. And from here on, it is indispensable to study this movement in order to grasp one of the most important pillars of the modern Palestinian struggle, and to maintain the prisoners' cause as a priority on a Palestinian and on an international level.

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[17] Al-Azza, Muhannad, the date of the hunger strike in the prisons of the Israeli enemy, Al-Adab magazine.

[18] Id.

[19] Id.

[20] This tube that enters the prisoner's stomach through the nose, in a coercive way to force him to break the hunger strike, and pass through it a liquid substance for forced nutrition.

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A dull evening in a run-down village
Eyes half asleep
I recall thirty years
And five wars
I swear the future keeps
My ear of corn
And the singer croons
About a fire and some strangers
And the evening is just another evening
And the singer croons

And they asked him:
Why do you sing?

And he answered:
I sing because I sing

.....
And they searched his chest
But could only find his heart
And they searched his heart
But could only find his people
And they searched his voice
But could only find his grief
And they searched his grief
But could only find his prison
And they searched his prison
But could only see themselves in chains

