

Health conditions of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails

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FACT SHEET

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Introduction

- Since the beginning of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967 the number of Palestinians detained is in excess of 700,000 men, women and children, representing 20% of the Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories.
- The current number of prisoners and detainees is estimated at between 8,000 – 10,000 spread around 30 prisons and detention centres. This includes prisons in the desert, where prisoners are held in tents in the searing heat of the summer and bitter cold of winter.
- Around 400 women have been jailed since the first Intifada started in 1987; a few dozen are still held in detention, some having given birth in prison and since separated from their children. The Israeli Prison authorities do not allow children to stay with their mothers past the age of two.
- The number of children imprisoned stands at around 4,000 and about 300 are still in detention. Most have been subjected to torture and ill-treatment, including head covering, beating and being suspended by their arms and legs.
- Since 1967, a total of 197 Palestinian prisoners have died in Israeli prisons. It is believed that some were killed deliberately while others died due to medical negligence.
- Israeli prison policies have changed noticeably since the capture by Hamas of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. Many prisoners have been denied family visits and collective punishments have been imposed along with the imposition of fines and strip searches. Moreover, many inmates are denied access to the prison canteens where they can normally watch TV. In addition, rations of water and bread have been reduced.
- Human rights organisations have blamed Israel for the recent death of a prisoner who died after his release and have called for urgent health checks for sick Palestinians in Israeli jails, especially patients with chronic ailments. The concern has arisen following the death of Mohamed Abdel Alafu Aumla, 26, from the village of Beit Ula, south of Hebron, who died on 3 February as a direct result, the organisations claim, of being denied essential treatment while in Ramla prison hospital.



Health status of prisoners in 2009

- The year 2009 witnessed a marked increase in violations against Palestinian prisoners; notably the prison authorities' procrastination over the provision of treatment to many sick prisoners, especially those suffering from chronic ailments. It is now generally accepted that nobody who spends time in any Israeli prison expects to be released in good health.
- The number of prisoners with chronic conditions is estimated to be in the hundreds, including 40 cases in prison hospitals under very difficult circumstances. Many are paralysed and rely entirely on wheelchairs for mobility; others suffer from kidney failure and terminal illnesses.
- Sixteen prisoners are suffering from cancer; most recently, Ahmed al-Najjar, who is suffering from throat cancer, lost the ability to speak.
- There are a number of prisoners with special needs, including artificial limbs which are not available. In addition, there is an acute shortage of respirators and inhalers for asthma and other chronic respiratory tract ailments.
- Because of the severe torture to which most prisoners are subjected during investigation, many now suffer from asthma, high blood pressure and diabetes.



Diabetic prisoners

- The number of Palestinian prisoners diagnosed with diabetes in Israeli prisons has increased to 88, up 10% from the previous year. They experience seizures and comas due to low blood sugar. Fellow inmates are often ignorant of their colleagues' condition and how to deal with the situation.
- Poor psychological as well as physical conditions in Israeli jails have provided fertile breeding ground for diabetes, with ample evidence that many of the patients succumbed to the disorder while in detention.
- Some prisoners suffer from what is described as "emotional diabetes" as a result of the deterioration in their psychological state due to the difficult circumstances or torture and brutality inflicted on them by Israeli intelligence agents during interrogation. It is also caused by an inadequate diet; inmates are systematically deprived of certain types of food, particularly vegetables and fruits, as well as regular exercise, while in prison.



- Records show that diabetics are given inappropriate medication. This occurred, for example, in the case of Walid Akl from Gaza who was prescribed drugs for diabetes which were actually meant to be taken by those suffering with heart disease, almost leading to his death.
- Prison authorities have been forced to address urgently diabetes cases through the provision of pills, insulin injections and regular check-ups. However, the problem has not been solved completely. In some cases, the authorities refrained from running tests on a regular basis, and patients have complained about delays and irregularity in the provision of the necessary medication.
- Among the prisoners with diabetes are Palestinian ministers and senior officials. It is believed that the condition was the direct cause of the death of some prisoners. Gomaa Ismail Musa (65 years), from Jerusalem, had long suffered from diabetes and died as a result of medical negligence.
- In many cases, diabetic inmates have learnt to control the condition by avoiding anxiety, reciting the Qur'an and using herbal remedies.

Ailments kill prisoners

- There are about 1,000 Palestinian prisoners who suffer from chronic ailments, such as cancer, kidney failure, heart disease and diabetes, hypertension, anaemia, acute inflammation in the back and lungs, and joint and skin problems.
- The number of affected inmates continues to rise as a result of medical negligence. Palestinian human rights reports have repeatedly accused the Israeli authorities of adopting a policy of deliberate neglect, leaving prisoners to face a slow death.
- Apart from the 16 prisoners suffering from terminal cancer and 17 who are wheelchair bound, there are two inmates are totally blind, with dozens more in danger of losing their sight. Forty-seven prisoners suffered gunshot and shrapnel wounds during their arrest. Three prisoners suffer from excruciating migraine.



Doctors' complicity in the suffering of prisoners

Several human rights organizations have accused Israeli doctors working in prisons of passing medical reports to security agencies, thus exposing prisoners' weaknesses so they can be exploited during interrogations. Some reports even suggest that doctors have been involved in concealing signs of torture prior to prisoners going to court or before visits by human rights organizations and the Red Cross.

Cases of medical neglect in Israeli prisons

- Nakab prison authority refused to make a CT scan for Akram Abdel-Aziz Mansour, who was sentenced to life imprisonment, to determine the causes of the health problems from which he was suffering. His condition has now deteriorated due to the lack of treatment. Palestinian campaigners say that Mansour might be suffering from a malignant tumour, as he has developed epilepsy and heart disease.
- Another prisoner, Tarek Ghanem Zidane, is suffering from gallstones which lead to high blood pressure and a rapid heart-beat accompanied by severe headache at the back of his head. He has developed acute diarrhoea and requires a cholecystectomy. After taking initial tests in Ramla hospital, the authorities now refuse him any follow-up treatment.
- Suleiman Asad Hatem suffers from severe toothache and rapid tooth decay because he hasn't received any proper treatment. His face is swollen and he has developed acute inflammation of the gums, with severe and persistent pain.
- Abdullah Mahmoud al-Faqih's health has deteriorated, after he suffered from a slipped vertebrae, swelling and the so-called "hair bag" in his back. No sample was taken from him until three years after this occurrence. He has not received any treatment.
- The only medication given to Prisoner Rashid from Tulkarem, who is suffering from several problems including an acute ulcer, was analgesics. There was no improvement in his condition and he was informed that he does not need any more painkillers.
- Yusuf Salah al-Din Abu Said of Balata refugee camp, sentenced to 21 years in prison, has been suffering for years from heart spasms resulting in neurological problems, including pain in the head and loss of balance. The authorities have failed to provide him with the necessary treatment.
- Naqab prison authority has barred materials, medicines and pesticides, particularly for eliminating insects, rats and snakes that infest many sections of their prisons and which have led to dozens of prisoners developing skin ailments.
- Prisoners in the Jalama prison went on hunger strike protesting over their inhuman conditions. There were ill-treated, prevented from bathing and denied healthy food.





Lack of equipment and drugs, and dependence on painkillers

- Ramla prison hospital, one of the 28 Israeli prisons located in the Ramla district, is very poorly equipped.
- There are about 30 prisoners in Ramla prison hospital. They are in a very poor condition and many survive on medical intervention; others are incapable of moving. Some of the patients are taking more than 12 types of medication and need to be examined daily.
- The prison hospital administration prescribes large quantities of painkillers to the level that their effectiveness has been diminished. To tackle this problem, the authority resorted to more analgesics prescriptions which have affected the prisoners badly.
- There are among the prisoners in Ramla prison hospital 3 from the Gaza Strip who have not been able to see their families for more than two years due to the blockade imposed on the territory.

The health condition of female prisoners

- Female ex-prisoners have confirmed that the Israeli prison authorities deprived prisoners of access to specialist doctors, and that they suffer from medical negligence.
- It has been learnt that medical services for female Palestinians in detention centres are poor. Ex-prisoners have told human rights organisations that the “Alokamul” (painkiller) tablet is the only medication provided.

Conclusion

It is irrelevant whether Israeli prison authorities deliberately practice medical negligence as a means to retaliate against Palestinian prisoners or eliminate them, or it is just a result of prison bureaucracy unable to cope with large number of prisoners. The reason hardly matters because the result is the same, the alarming deterioration of detainees’ health. When the number of chronically ill prisoners has reached around 1600, the international community has to intervene and press the Israeli government to improve prison conditions in compliance with international laws regarding how prisoners should be treated.

