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HOW IMPRISONMENT SHAPES PALESTINIAN LIBERATION

APRIL 2025

EXPLAINER

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Imprisonment, and the system of violence and punishment which surround it, is a central tool of Israeli colonial rule to subjugate, discipline and wear down the Palestinian population. Systematic imprisonment has the effect not only of extracting a cost from Palestinians on an individual basis for any act of resistance, but of disrupting Palestinian political activity more broadly and breaking up families and communities, putting an immense strain on Palestinian society over time. Here are five key things you need to know:

01

Imprisonment is central to the Palestinian struggle

Imprisonment, and the system of violence and punishment which surround it, is a central tool of Israeli colonial rule to subjugate, discipline and wear down the Palestinian population.

02

Israel's carceral system is rooted in British colonial policies

Israel adopted British mandate-era emergency laws, including administrative detention and military tribunals, to justify indefinite imprisonment without trial. Several prisons built by the British are still in use today.

03

Palestinians are treated as a permanent insurgent threat

Israel systematically imprisons Palestinians, including children, as part of a broader policy of control. The Israeli state sees Palestinian resistance as an existential threat, using incarceration as a tool of subjugation.

04

Torture and abuse are widespread and well documented

Israeli authorities regularly subject Palestinian detainees to physical and psychological torture, including sleep deprivation, sexual violence, and extreme beatings. This has been officially sanctioned since 1987 and continues today.

05

Palestinian prisoners have a long history of struggle

For decades, Palestinian prisoners have protested against their conditions through hunger strikes, legal challenges, and other forms of collective action.

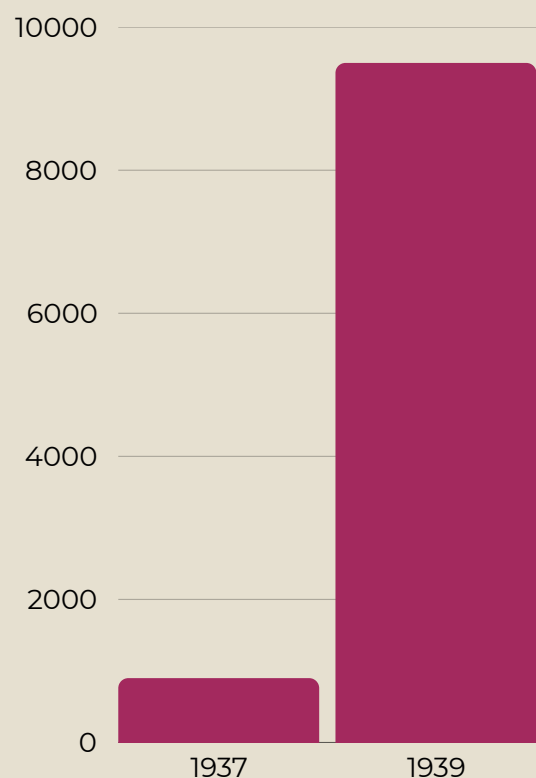
IMPRISONMENT AS A COLONIAL TOOL

Israel's carceral practices towards the Palestinian population are built on policies of imprisonment initially developed by the British authorities during the mandate era. During this period of colonial rule, lasting from 1920-1948, the British saw Palestinians effectively as an insurgent population to be policed and disciplined.

Using the typical colonial canard of "security" under military rule, the British developed "emergency regulations" to detain both peasants and urban workers in large numbers, arbitrarily, without trial, often in what resembled concentration camps, such as Sarafand al-'Amar, located in the coastal plain of historic Palestine. Significant sections of Palestine at that time effectively became huge prisons.

Imprisonment was particularly widespread and brutal with the onset of the 1936-39 Revolt, an uprising against both British colonial rule and Zionist settlement.

In May 1939, British Secretary of State for Colonies at that time, Malcolm MacDonald, confirmed to the British parliament that there were 13 prison camps in Palestine housing 4,816 people. At one point that same year, the number of detainees rose to over 9,000, ten times the figure of just two years previously. Overcrowding became so severe that some detainees had to be released in order to create more room for those newly-arrested.



Continuing the trajectory of increasingly ruthless and widespread imprisonment, the British went on to introduce the Defence (Emergency) Regulations of 1945, which decreed a huge expansion in repressive instruments, including the establishment of military tribunals to try civilians without granting the right of appeal, prohibiting the publication of books and newspapers, demolishing houses, detaining individuals administratively for an indefinite period, sealing off particular territories, and imposing curfews.

Crucially, after its establishment in 1948, Israel incorporated these regulations, as well as many other British mandate laws, into its state law.

They remain in force today, with amendments, and form an important part of the “legal system” of Israel’s colonial occupation in the West Bank.

This continuity in policy and practices, together with the fact that multiple prisons built during the mandate are in use by the Israeli state today, illustrates the degree to which contemporary Israeli colonial rule has been built on groundwork laid by British mandatory authorities. It also demonstrates a long colonial war against the Palestinian people, with imprisonment as a key instrument.

BRITISH MADATE ERA	ISRAEL TODAY
“Emergency” regulations used to suppress Palestinian resistance	Military orders continue to control Palestinian life
Mass arrests & indefinite detention without trial	Administrative detention (prisoners held without charge or trial)
Curfews & lockdowns imposed on entire cities	Frequent citywide closures & military raids in Palestinian areas
Censorship of press & political writings	Crackdowns on Palestinian media, book bans, and online censorship
British prison camps like Sarafand, Acre, and Nur Shams	Israeli prisons built during Mandate era still in use today (Megiddo, Ramleh, Al-Moscobiye).
Collective punishment, including home demolitions	Home demolitions still a common practice against Palestinian families

IMPRISONMENT FROM 1948

Upon its establishment, Israel's incorporation of the 1945 Defence Regulations was used to target Palestinians who remained within the borders of the newly-created state. Palestinians inside Israel were subject to military rule from 1948 to 1966, and the measures outlined in the mandate-era regulations were used against them, including arbitrary arrest without trial, and on an indefinite basis. Imprisonment was used freely for those committing "violations" such as breaking curfews, breaking movement restrictions, and engaging in political activity that was deemed a threat to the Israeli state. Some people were arrested on a monthly basis.

In 1967, when Israel's occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip began, following the June War, this same system, and the systematic use of imprisonment as an instrument of colonial subjugation, was extended to these territories and the Palestinians living there. More broadly, a military court system specifically for use in these newly-occupied territories was developed, and imprisonment became a key component of Israel's colonisation of the land.

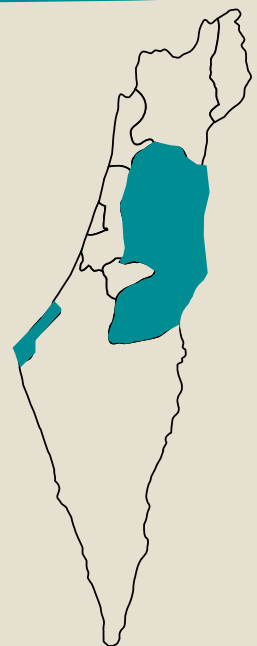
THE SCALE OF PALESTINIAN IMPRISONMENT

Since 1967:

- 1 million Palestinians arrested
- 20% of Palestinians in the West Bank & Gaza have been imprisoned (1 in 5 people)
- 40% of Palestinian men (2 in 5) have been detained
- Tens of thousands of children have been arrested

April 2025:

- 9,900 Palestinians are held in Israeli prisons
- 400 of them children
- 3,498 held without charge or trial



ADMINISTRATIVE DETENTION

Administrative detention is a significant instrument in Israel's broader policy of imprisonment of Palestinians. It is a procedure that allows the Israeli military to hold prisoners indefinitely on 'secret information' without charging them or allowing them to stand trial. 'Secret evidence' is used as the basis for administrative detention, justified by Israeli officials and military spokespeople "as necessary in light of the security situation in the occupied territories," where they claim "fighting crime and maintaining order are tantamount to counterinsurgency." In the vast majority of administrative detention cases, neither the detainee nor their lawyer are ever informed of the reasons for the detention or given access to this information.

As former UN Special Rapporteur for the situation of human rights in the Palestinian Territory occupied since 1967, Michael Lynk, has observed: "Administrative detention is an anathema in any democratic society that follows the rule of law [...]. It is a penal system that is ripe for abuse and maltreatment."

Israel has historically used administrative detention on a routine basis, claiming it has been under a continuous state of emergency since its inception in 1948. Israel has historically used administrative detention on a routine basis, claiming it has been under a continuous state

of emergency since its inception in 1948. This reflects the colonial relation between the Israeli state and the Palestinian people, the latter a subject population seen as a perpetual threat to the colonial order. The widespread use of detention, administrative or otherwise, as well as the normalisation of the broader use of captivity, are a means by which Israel can institutionalise control of the Palestinian population and contain it in a state of constant physical as well as psychological precariousness.

BREAKING DOWN ISRAEL'S ADMINISTRATIVE DETENTION PROCESS

Step 1: Arrest and Detention Order

Palestinians are arrested based on secret information. A military commander issues an administrative detention order without charging the individual.

Step 2: Court Hearing

A closed military court reviews the detention, where the detainee's lawyer and family are excluded. The detainee is not informed of the evidence against them.

Step 3: Detention

Detainees are held in various prisons without trial, with orders reviewed indefinitely in six month increments, prolonging detention without trial

MASS IMPRISONMENT

Israel's policy of mass imprisonment as a tactic of colonial warfare was all the more evident after 7 October 2023. By March 2024, BADIL Resource Centre reported that over 7,550 Palestinians had been arrested, including around 250 Palestinians with Israeli citizenship. This total number included hundreds of children and dozens of journalists. Crucially, it did not include those taken by the dozens from the Gaza Strip, many of whose whereabouts were totally unknown for months as they were held in secret Israeli detention centres.

During a four-day truce between Israel and Hamas in November 2023, 117 Palestinian children and 33 women prisoners were released as part of a prisoner exchange deal. Israel banned any celebrations of their release (including distributing candy) or any media coverage, and also threatened the newly-released detainees with reimprisonment if they conducted media interviews or participated in celebrations. Israeli forces went as far as shooting sound grenades and tear gas to disperse crowds of people waiting for their loved ones to finally be released. Moreover, during the timeframe of the prisoner exchange, Israel arrested an additional 133 Palestinians in the West Bank. Imprisonment, and its constant threat, is a vital component of Israel's containment of Palestinians, politically, psychologically and physically.

The ceasefire agreement signed by Hamas and Israel in January 2025, which included phased waves of prisoner releases, demonstrates the sheer number of Palestinians held in Israeli prisons, and the importance of decarceration for the Palestinian struggle. Israel also carried out mass arrests during the prisoner release process.

Key Moments in the Prisoner Release Process:

19 January 2025:

Nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners were released. Including: 21 children, 20 administrative detainees, 44 detainees awaiting trial, 3 female prisoners who were re-arrested after the November 2023 exchange deal.

30 January 2025:

110 Palestinian prisoners were released. Including 30 children.



TORTURE AND ILL-TREATMENT

Walid Daqqa, a Palestinian writer and member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), was long a symbol of the struggle of Palestinian prisoners and wrote about Israel's use of torture during his time in prison. In his study of Israel's psychological war on Palestinian prisoners, titled *Searing Consciousness (Or on Redefining Torture)*, Daqqa described in particular Israeli authorities' psychological torture of Palestinian prisoners as a microcosm of Israel's war against the Palestinian people as a whole.

There is a long and well-documented history of Israeli torture and ill-treatment of Palestinian prisoners. In 1977, the London Sunday Times published a detailed inquiry on Israel's use of torture. The inquiry reported that:

Torture of Arab prisoners is so widespread and systematic that it cannot be dismissed as 'rogue cops' exceeding orders. It appears to be sanctioned as deliberate policy. Some of the ill-treatment is merely primitive...But more refined techniques are also used...This sort of apparatus, allied to the degree of organisation evident in its application, removes Israel's practice from the lesser realms of brutality and places it firmly in the category of torture.

Significantly, in 1987, the Israeli government adopted the recommendations made by a preceding commission to authorise the use of "moderate physical pressure," making Israel the first state in the world to publicly and officially sanction interrogation techniques that constituted torture under international law. There is a long record of both use of torture by Israeli authorities against Palestinians, and documentation and reporting on it.

In May 2016, the UN Committee Against Torture published a report expressing concern over an increase and intensification of abusive practices carried out by Israel towards Palestinian detainees (and even non-detainees), including coerced confessions from children, force-feeding and even complicity of medical personnel in abusing prisoners.

Israel's ill-treatment and abuse of Palestinian detainees typically starts from the moment of arrest. The majority of detainees, including children, report being beaten, kicked, threatened, having their property illegally searched and confiscated and their family home destroyed. On occasion, relatives and neighbours of detainees report being used as human shields.

During interrogations, Palestinians are typically subjected to some form of physical or psychological inhuman or degrading treatment, ranging from sleep deprivation, excessive use of handcuffs, beatings and threats of sexual assault, to suffocation and sexual violence. A 2023 report by Save the Children found that Palestinian children also often endure abuse and violence while being detained: four out of five are beaten, over two-thirds are strip-searched, and nearly half are injured at the point of arrest, including gunshot wounds and broken bones. Sexual violence was also reported.

More recently, amidst Israel's genocidal assault on the Gaza Strip, there was renewed global attention on Israeli torture practices. In April 2024, it was reported that Palestinians being held at Israel's Sde Teiman military base were undergoing amputations due to the extreme use of handcuffs. Later, in June, reports then emerged from Sde Teiman regarding the use of extreme sexual violence against Palestinians. There were widespread reports that those Palestinians who were already being detained in Israeli prisons had been experiencing even harsher conditions than before, including severe beatings, death threats from heads of prisons, and escalating torture. In addition, multiple instances of Palestinians dying in custody and dying from torture emerged.

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"I SAW PEOPLE 70 YEARS OLD, VERY OLD. THERE WERE PEOPLE WITH ALZHEIMER'S, OLD PEOPLE WHO WERE BLIND, PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES WHO COULDN'T WALK, PEOPLE WHO HAD SHRAPNEL IN THEIR BACKS AND COULDN'T STAND UP, PEOPLE WITH EPILEPSY... AND TORTURE WAS FOR EVERYONE."

SDE TEIMAN SURVIVOR

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PRISONERS' RESISTANCE

While carceral practices have been central to the colonial subjugation of Palestinians, the resistance of Palestinian prisoners and the long-standing prisoners' movement have been formative to the Palestinian struggle.

Over the decades, Palestinian prisoners have fought against their conditions, as well as the practice of imprisonment by the Israeli state, by various means. In September 2021, six Palestinian prisoners escaped from Gilboa prison, one of Israel's most highly-secured prisons, by tunnelling their way out and crossing over into the West Bank. The news that they had managed to escape led to celebrations across Palestinian society, their ingenuity and persistence seen as a defeat of Israel's system of captivity. Palestinians pledged to protect them, and although they were later re-captured, their feat was a blow to Israel's image of invulnerability and it galvanised Palestinian morale.

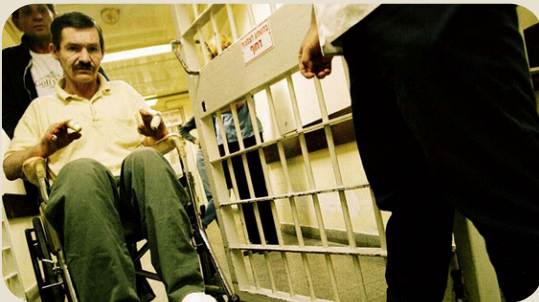
For decades, Palestinian prisoners have also regularly gone on hunger strikes, not just to protest their conditions inside prison but also to sustain their connections to Palestinian society and act as a focal point for Palestinian resistance. The largest strike in around 18 years was called for in March 2022, before being cancelled after Israeli authorities agreed to meet prisoners' demands

regarding healthcare and family visits. In April 2017, around 1,500 Palestinian prisoners began a hunger strike to demand improvements in conditions and an end to solitary confinement and heavy restrictions on family visits. After 40 days, with 834 prisoners still on strike and 18 hospitalised, the action was called off with the prisoners declaring victory. In 2014 another mass strike took place, perhaps the longest in Palestinian history, at over 60 days, with a focus on the issue of administrative detention. Almost 300 prisoners took part, with 70 hospitalised.

Palestinian scholar Lena Meari describes the history of Palestinian hunger strikes as "messy, nonlinear, and made up of various acts of singular and collective suffering, sacrifices, gains, and retreats." Hunger strikes carried out by Palestinian prisoners, whether individually or collectively, are a part of the history of Palestinian resistance to imprisonment, and reflect the way in which Palestinian prisoners understand their capacities and position within the Palestinian liberation struggle, not as subjugated captives, but as active participants. For this reason, the Palestinian struggle, in all the various forms it has taken, has always viewed the issue of prisoners as a driving force towards self-determination.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

To explore this topic further, we encourage you to check out our other resources.



Administrative Detention

Explore how this practice allows indefinite detention without charges or trial, based on secret evidence. Learn about its historical use, its application today, and its widespread impact on Palestinians.



Policing from the UK to Palestine

This virtual talk explores the origins and racialised nature of policing and prisons in the UK & Israel to understand the legacy of British colonial methods of policing and counter-insurgency.



Walid Daqqa

Walid was one of the most prominent Palestinian political prisoners. He spent 38 years in Israeli prison, making him one of the longest-serving Palestinian prisoners held by Israel.