

Palestinian hunger strike ended after Egypt's intervention

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Palestinian prisoners have accepted a deal brokered by Egypt to end their hunger strike in protest against Israel's widespread use of detention without charge or trial and the inhuman conditions they face in jail.

Some 1,600 Palestinians, one third of the 4,635 in Israeli prisons, have been on hunger strike, including 218 children, 27 elected legislators from the Palestinian Council and 456 prisoners from Gaza who have not been allowed family visits since 2007. This is the latest of a series of hunger strikes which began last year, when 400 prisoners went on hunger strike to protest the refusal of the military authorities to allow them to study for a university degree.

Khader Adnan spent 66 days on hunger strike. He was arrested at the end of last year and allegedly beaten repeatedly in jail. He was only released after his lawyers brokered a deal whereby he would serve the remainder of his six-month detention order and either face a trial with substantive new evidence or be released. His release without a trial in April testified to the lack of any evidence against him.

The plight of Hana al-Shalabi from the West Bank is noteworthy. Shalabi spent weeks on hunger strike before being forcibly transferred to Gaza. She was one of the prisoners released, after two years of administrative detention orders, in exchange for Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit's release by Hamas last October. She was rearrested less than four months later.

Two prisoners have been on hunger strike since February, and are believed to be close to death. Most started on April 17. They were protesting against detention without charge or trial under military regulations originally established under British rule and never revoked, by which prisoners can be held on the basis of secret information that is not made known to the detainee or his lawyer. Subject to military courts

under Israel's occupation, detainees do not know when they will be set free as there is no limit on how long they can be incarcerated.

To cite just one example, Palestinian legislator Nayef Rajoub has spent a total of 10 years in Israeli jails on spurious charges such as "inflammatory speech" and "incitement" against Israel's military occupation. On May 7 he had his detention without charge extended for another six months for the fourth time by a military tribunal.

Administrative detention persists despite the existence of a military justice system in the occupied territories so all-embracing that it covers any connection with resistance to the occupation, including membership of a political faction. Even membership of the Palestinian Authority's ruling Fatah faction is still outlawed. According to the human rights group B'stelem, the military courts secure an unparalleled 99.7 percent conviction rate.

Israel has held some prisoners in solitary confinement—Mahmoud Issa has been in isolation for more than 10 years—and refused to allow their families or lawyers in Gaza to visit them. Since family visits from Gaza were terminated in 2006 after the capture of Gilad Shalit, some prisoners have not seen their families for seven years. Such visits were supposed to have restarted following the deal that secured Shalit's release in return for 1,000 Palestinians prisoners in Israeli jails last October.

Among the nearly five thousand Palestinians currently in Israeli jails are 320 being held without trial in "administrative detention". More than 750,000 Palestinians are believed to have been detained since Israel illegally occupied the West Bank, Gaza and the

Golan Heights, and annexed East Jerusalem in 1967. With a Palestinian population of 3.5 million in the occupied territories, this means that 25 percent of Palestinians and half of all Palestinian males have been imprisoned at some point in their lives. This alone makes a mockery of Israel's claim to be the "only democracy in the Middle East."

The plight of the hunger strikers, some of whom were near death, had attracted a growing protest movement in the West Bank to which Israeli troops responded with tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannon. It threatened an angry backlash in the West Bank and Gaza in the run up to Nakba day on May 15 that commemorates the expulsion and flight of the Palestinians from their homes in 1948 when the state of Israel was established.

In this explosive context the strike attracted a rare intervention by Middle East Quartet envoy, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. He warned that the death of any of the prisoners could have "serious implications for stability and security conditions on the ground". This was a reference to the serious condition of the two men who had been on hunger strike for a record 77 days.

Israel, under a deal brokered by Egypt's intelligence service, agreed to lift some of the restrictions on prisoners, claiming cynically that it was a "good will gesture" aimed at getting "peace talks" with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas back on the road.

The deal may bring some immediate relief to the prisoners, as Israel has agreed to "consider" ending solitary confinement and resuming family visits from both the West Bank and Gaza, and to "review" whether some of the 320 held in administrative detention should be released. But few of the Palestinians' demands have been met. Israel has refused to end detention without trial or to consider detainees as "prisoners of war" as their legal status under occupation warrants. It still insists that the prisoners are "terrorists" or "security prisoners", although most have never been involved in violence against Israel.

In return, the prisoners are to refrain from further hunger strikes and involvement in any anti-Israeli activities in prison, including recruiting activists to carry out militant attacks and abetting or aiding acts that could undermine Israel's security. Any breach of this agreement on the Palestinians' part, including a

resumption of the hunger strike, would absolve Israel from its commitments to ease their living conditions.

The deal has little substantive meaning. Furthermore, Israel's record for going back on any deal worked out with the Palestinians is notorious. It rearrested more than a dozen of the 1,000 prisoners released under the Shalit swap, holding them under administrative detention without charge, despite promising not to do so.

While in the past, Israel's Supreme Court has on occasion ruled in favour of the Palestinians, this is no longer the case. Just two weeks ago, the Supreme Court rejected an appeal against their imprisonment by Bilal Diab and Thaer Halahla, the two Palestinians who had been on hunger strike for more than two months. The prisoners were so weak that they appeared before the court in wheel chairs.

Egypt's military council, working closely with the Muslim Brotherhood, which became the leading party in Egypt's elections last year, has also brokered ceasefires between Israel and Hamas that controls Gaza, and the release of Shalit. Many of the prisoners on hunger strike are supporters of Hamas, a Brotherhood offshoot. The deal testifies to the crucial role that the junta and the Brothers continue to play in policing the resistance and suppressing the Palestinians on Israel's behalf.



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