

Mass protests demand release of Palestinian hunger striker

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Last weekend, hundreds of Israeli Palestinians, including several legislators, staged angry demonstrations demanding the release of Mohammad Allaan.

Allaan has been on hunger strike for 60 days, in protest of his detention without trial and is reportedly close to death.

Israeli authorities have declared their intention to force-feed Allaan, who was moved to a heavily guarded intensive care unit at Soroka Hospital in Beersheba. This would be the first instance of force-feeding since the controversial and illegal bill became law.

Doctors at Soroka hospital refused to force-feed Allaan, forcing the prison authorities to transfer him on Monday to Barzilai in Ashkelon where he was placed on a life-support system, with doctors there also refusing to force-feed him.

His resistance and the support he has won are a profound embarrassment for both the Israeli and the Palestinian authorities, who fear that his death could spark wide scale unrest in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, and a mass hunger strike in Israeli jails. Seven Palestinian prisoners have already begun hunger strikes over the last two weeks.

The Israeli prison authority responded by declaring a state of emergency throughout the penal system, closing all sections, imposing a curfew on all prisoners and a ban on prisoners holding collective prayer.

Police stopped four busloads of Palestinian protesters from approaching the hospital in the southern city of Ashkelon where Allaan is being treated. In an ensuing confrontation between the Palestinians and Israeli ultra-nationalists who chanted racist slogans and said that they hoped Allaan would die, police fired tear gas and pepper spray and arrested 13.

Another rally took place in Wadi Ara, in northern

Israel, where Palestinians carried the national flag and banners calling for the immediate release of 31-year-old Allaan and an end to his administrative detention. The Israeli authorities routinely invoke this procedure against the Palestinians they deem a threat to Israel's security as a means of enforcing indefinite detention without charging or even citing any evidence against them.

According to Addameer, a Palestinian NGO in Jerusalem that provides free legal aid to political prisoners, Israel is currently holding 5,686 Palestinian prisoners, of whom 426 are detained under administrative detention on the orders of the military courts, many for years on end. The Israeli rights group B'Tselem estimates that a further 1,000 Palestinians are being held for entering Israel "illegally."

Numerous legal and human rights organisations have described 2015 as the worst year for Palestinian prisoners in terms of their conditions.

Such detention orders are in defiance of the 1978 United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/33/24 that reaffirms the legitimacy of the struggle of all peoples for "liberation from colonial and foreign domination and foreign occupation by all available means, particularly armed struggle."

Detention orders are also a violation of Israeli law which upholds the right to be informed of the nature and cause of an accusation and a speedy and public trial by an impartial jury in the state where the alleged crime was committed.

The Palestinian Authority has done nothing to ensure Allaan's release other than issue a statement condemning the use of lengthy detentions—confirming yet again that it is nothing more than Israel's subcontractor in policing dissent.

Islamic Jihad, the militant group based in Gaza, in a

move designed to embarrass both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip, has promised a violent response in the event of Allaan's death.

Allaan, who is from the occupied West Bank, is accused by Israel of belonging to Islamic Jihad, which it deems a terrorist organisation. He was previously imprisoned by Israel in 2006, and was sentenced to three years in jail. He subsequently trained and practiced as a lawyer.

His lawyers have petitioned the Supreme Court for his immediate release on medical grounds in a hearing that has been postponed until today, after the southern district prisoner release commission rejected a similar petition over the weekend.

The Israeli authorities told the court it would free Allaan if he agreed to go into exile for four years. His lawyers rejected the state's proposal of a de facto expulsion order, saying that it "shows that his arrest was vindictive." Allaan rejected a similar offer at the start of his hunger strike.

There have been a number of hunger strikes by Palestinian prisoners in recent years, in protest against being held indefinitely without charge or trial.

A collective strike of nearly 2,000 prisoners in 2012, in support of Khader Adnan, attracted international attention. He was captured by Israel that year and placed under an administrative detention order, along with more than 55 prisoners, most of whom had been set free under the prisoner exchange for Gilad Shalit in 2011. This was his tenth administrative detention order without charges or trial, prompting him to go on hunger strike. A mass hunger strike followed.

Only when Adnan was on the point of death did the Israeli prison authorities free him and concede to some of the prisoners' demands. These included granting family visits for prisoners from Gaza, improving the living conditions of political detainees confined in Israeli jails and limiting the use of administrative detention.

Two years later, Adnan was arrested again and held under an administrative detention order. He was only released last June following a 56-day hunger strike.

Israel has responded to hunger strikes by passing a law last month permitting the force-feeding of prisoners if their life is in danger, in a move to deter other potential hunger strikers. Such a law is in breach of

Israel's Patient Rights Act.

The government has pointed to the fact that prisoners on hunger strike at the US' concentration camp at Guantánamo Bay have been force-fed, as proof of the measure's validity. Gilad Erdan, the Israeli interior minister who sponsored the bill, justified the measure in a truly absurd statement saying, "Hunger strikes of terrorists in prisons have become a means to threaten Israel."

On Tuesday, Erdan said freeing Allaan "would clearly result in a mass hunger strike by Palestinian prisoners and provide ammunition to terrorists."

International human rights and medical organisations, including Israel's Physicians for Human Rights and the World Medical Association (WMA), have criticised the law, with the WMA describing it as "violent, very painful and absolutely in opposition to the principle of individual autonomy."

The Physicians for Human Rights-Israel said, "Force-feeding violates medical ethics as it administers forceful treatment to a patient against his will, and is considered a form of torture."

The Israel Medical Association, the doctors' union, said the law was "equivalent to torture and every physician has the right to refuse to force-feed a hunger striker against his or her will." It has petitioned the Supreme Court, challenging the legality of force-feeding, which will be heard next month. The Al-Mizan human rights group has filed a similar petition.



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