

Israel responds to jail break with dragnet across the occupied West Bank and Israel

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Following an unprecedented dragnet operation across Israel and the occupied West Bank, the Israeli authorities captured four of the six Palestinians on the run after their audacious jail break on Monday from the maximum security jail in Gilboa, Israel.

Four of the prisoners were serving life sentences for their involvement in attacks on Israelis during the second Palestinian Intifada (2000-2005), while two had been held for years, awaiting trial. As Palestinians living on land captured by Israel during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, they had been held in Israel by the Zionist state's military regime that has for decades used collective punishment, house demolitions, expulsions, torture, forced confessions and systematic theft to strip the occupied population of almost all democratic rights and human dignity.

Their detention in an Israeli jail contravenes Article 76 of the Fourth Geneva Convention that outlaws the transfer of prisoners outside of the occupied territory. This is, however, a widespread Israeli practice that serves to prevent the prisoners' families in the West Bank and Gaza from visiting them. According to Addameer, the prisoners' rights group, Israel holds 4,750 Palestinians, including 42 females, 200 children and 550 administrative detainees, across dozens of prison facilities.

Many of these prisoners are awaiting trial, while others are in so-called administrative detention, whereby they are held without trial or even charges. Their conditions in captivity are nothing short of brutal, and they face the constant threat of beatings and torture. The Israeli authorities even deny them food, with the result that the Palestinian Authority (PA) pays their families to support them in jail.

Two were caught on Saturday in the Arab town of Umm al-Ghanam in Israel. One was Zakaria Zubeidi, 46, from the northern West Bank city of Jenin. Zubeidi joined and later emerged as a leader of the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, Fatah's armed faction, after Israel launched a horrific attack on the Jenin refugee camp in April 2002, killing hundreds of Palestinians and carrying out a mass demolition of homes, including Zubeidi's family home. The other was Mahmoud

al-Arida, a member of the Al-Quds Brigades, the military wing of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

A further two, Mahmoud Arda, 46, and Yacoub Qadri, 49, were arrested late on Friday night in Nazareth, a predominately Arab town in northern Israel. The remaining two, Ayham Kamamji, 35, and Munadel Infiat, 26, Muhammed Arda, 39 and Zakaria Zubeidi, 46, remain free.

While there were reports that local residents in Umm al-Ghanam and Nazareth had turned in the prisoners—claims denied within the two towns—sparking angry denunciations by Palestinians in the West Bank, others have suggested that such reports were part of a deliberate attempt by the Israeli authorities to drive a wedge between the Palestinians in Israel and the West Bank.

The men all hail from Jenin, where there is mass opposition to President Mahmoud Abbas's corrupt Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority for its role as Israel's subcontractor in its efforts to permanently subjugate them in their own land. In recent months, there have been gun fights between Israeli forces and the Palestinians in the Jenin area and the refugee camp, with the PA's own security units unwilling to enter the camp. Two weeks ago, Israeli security forces killed at least four Palestinian men with live fire when Israeli special forces raided the Jenin refugee camp to arrest a Palestinian man.

The prisoners' audacious escape from the high security jail prompted jubilation and hilarity among the Palestinians and throughout the Middle East while profoundly embarrassing Israel's military intelligence apparatus that described it as "a major security and intelligence failure." It is one of just a handful of such escapes that include the escape of three Palestinians from the Kfar Yona facility in 1995 and an escape via tunnels from the Shata prison in 2014.

The Palestinians had tunneled their way out of Gilboa by digging a hole with a spoon from their cell toilet floor to open underground passages built during the prison's construction, whose plans were apparently on the website of the architectural firm that had designed the prison. As the

underground passages were open and apparently not monitored, the prisoners were able to dispose of the building waste without detection. The hole beyond the prison's fence through which the prisoners escaped was situated directly below a watchtower whose guard was asleep.

The Israel Prison Service (IPS) immediately announced that it would relocate around 400 Islamic Jihad-affiliated inmates inside Gilboa, Megiddo, Rimon and Katziot prisons in Israel to other prisons to isolate them from each other, some of whom were later held in solitary confinement. Their use of special units and the military to transfer prisoners who refused to go voluntarily prompted days of tensions inside the jails. On Wednesday, after Palestinian prisoners in Katziot prison set fire to seven cells in protest against their transfer, the military moved in to reassert control, while the IPS banned all visits for Palestinian prisoners for the rest of this month and declared that no new visits could be booked.

As the news of the tensions within the prisons emerged, angry demonstrations broke out across the West Bank that were put down with brutal force. According to the Palestinian News Agency, Israeli forces fired stun grenades and tear gas at protesters, injuring nearly 100 Palestinians in the Nablus and Hebron governorates, while four were injured in clashes in East Jerusalem. On Friday, the Palestinians held a mass "Day of Rage" protest, called by Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated group that controls Gaza, in solidarity with the prisoners.

Israel deployed hundreds of troops to scour villages and the countryside for the escapees and arrested several of the prisoners' relatives, a form of collective punishment outlawed under international law. The military extended the closure of the occupied West Bank beyond the planned closure from last Monday to Wednesday during the Jewish New Year celebrations and set up hundreds of checkpoints to prevent the escaped prisoners from crossing into the West Bank and Gaza, amid calls for the security forces to catch and kill them as a deterrence to others.

The Palestinian Authority warned that Israel's "repressive" measures against the prisoners could ignite a new intifada. A PA official said, "Israel is playing with fire. The issue of the prisoners is extremely sensitive. The situation is very dangerous." He warned Israel that the West Bank "is on the verge of explosion" because of the anger over the measures taken against the security prisoners, while the PA Foreign Ministry said that Israel's latest measures "rise to the level of war crimes and crimes against humanity."

The PA is acutely aware of mounting public anger over its cooperation with Israeli security forces, its rampant corruption and nepotism, mismanagement of public monies and refusal to tolerate dissent, especially if it targets Fatah,

the ruling party that has enriched a handful of Palestinian families at the expense of the broad mass of the population.

Last week, the PA was forced to indict 14 members of the PA's security services on charges of beating to death Nizar Banat, an outspoken activist well known for his fierce criticism of the PA on social media, last June. His death at the hands of the Palestinian security forces turned into a rallying cry against Abbas and the PA. Banat's family, however, dismissed the indictments, saying that the 14 are merely "sacrificial lambs" and that the senior Palestinian officials that gave the instructions should also be charged.

Last month, Israel agreed to transfer \$155 million to the Palestinian Authority—monies it described as a loan—to keep the cash-strapped government afloat.

In Gaza, following threats by Islamic Jihad and Hamas to launch rockets into Israel if the six escapees or other prisoners were hurt, militants fired a rocket into Israel on Friday and again on Saturday, causing no damage after the prisoners were captured. Israel launched air strikes on the Palestinian enclave in response.

A Hamas spokesman said that Hamas will demand that the escaped prisoners be included in any future prisoner exchange deal negotiated with Israel, which is seeking the release of two Israeli civilians and the bodies of two Israeli soldiers held in Gaza. There is still no agreement with Israel over Gaza's reconstruction following Israel's 11-day assault last May, after the PA backtracked on transferring Qatari monies through its banks in the West Bank to Gaza, citing concerns that its banks would be exposed to lawsuits alleging support for terrorism, as Hamas is designated as a terrorist organization by Israel and other Western countries.



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