

JEWISH VOICE FOR PEACE

PALESTINIAN HUNGER STRIKERS



Palestinian protesters rally in support of political prisoners outside Ramle prison in Israel, 3 May.
(Mahfouz Abu Turk / APA images)

JVP Fact Sheet: Hunger Strike by Palestinian Prisoners & Detainees

May 2012

Who are the hunger strikers?

An estimated 1,600 to 2,000 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons began a hunger strike on April 17, 2012. (1)

Several prisoners have been refusing food in nonviolent protest for far longer. Bilal Diab and Thae Halahleh started their hunger strike at the end of February. They are both now gravely ill, according to Physicians for Human Rights-Israel. (2) Both filed petitions protesting their ongoing detention. Both petitions were denied by the Israeli Supreme Court on May 7.

Hassan Safadi, Omar Abu Shalal, Mohammad Taj, Jaafar Azzedine, Mahmoud Sarsak have all been on hunger strike for one to two months as of May 8.

What are the hunger strikers protesting?

The prisoners and detainees in the Israeli prisons are holding two primary struggles by means of their open-ended hunger strike (3).

First, they are struggling against administrative detention. This is a struggle initiated about four months ago, originally by former administrative detainees Khader Adnan and then carried on by Hana Shalabi.

Second, they are struggling for humane imprisonment conditions that respect human rights. In recent years, detention conditions have become harsher for Palestinian prisoners, and collective punishment is inflicted on them as a matter of policy, in violation of their basic and legal rights enshrined in both Israeli and International Law, and in blatant disregard for international criticism. These conditions worsened even more when the Israeli government intentionally worsened prison conditions in order to pressure Palestinian leadership to release Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. These changes were not lifted after Shalit's release (4).

What is administrative detention?

Administrative detention is the system under which Israeli officials hold Palestinians without charge or trial indefinitely. Often, any evidence used to justify these detentions is kept secret from the detainee and his or her lawyer (5). Thus, Palestinians may be taken from their homes, taken to Israeli prisons, and kept indefinitely for years without being told why, without being shown the evidence (if any) that led officials to lock them up and without being given a chance to present their side.

The Hunger Strikers' Primary Demands

- Removal of Palestinian prisoners from solitary confinement, including prisoners who are members of the political leadership.
- Termination of the practice of imprisoning Palestinian prisoners in prisons inside Israel in violation of International Law.
- Renewal of family visits from Gaza, which Israel has been preventing completely for five years now; the renewal of family visits for several hundred Palestinian prisoners from the West Bank whose families are prevented by Israel from visiting, and the removal of obstacles impeding family visits in general.
- Provision of appropriate medical care.
- Termination of the policy of daily cell searches under application of physical force.
- Termination of the policy of strip-searching prisoners and visiting family members.
- Termination of the practice of shackling and handcuffing of prisoners during family or attorney visits and during medical treatment in hospitals.
- Fulfilling the prisoners' right to an education.
- Termination of the severe and disproportional policy of punishments, as expressed in physical confinement, monetary fines, prevention of family visits, denial of canteen rights, etc.
- Termination of the violation of the basic rights of the Palestinian detainees such as the right to meet an attorney in the course of an investigation, and the reduction of judicial oversight on the process of detention and investigation

According to the Israel Prison Service, 320 Palestinians are currently being held under this system. (6) Some detainees spend years in detention. Thaer Halahleh has been locked up for nearly two years.

This practice is illegal under international law. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Israel is a party, guarantees all persons a fair trial.

There are altogether over 4,000 Palestinians being held in Israeli prisons; most of the hunger strikers are therefore not under administrative detention, but are protesting those and other inhumane practices (7).

How are Palestinians treated in Israeli prisons?

Addameer, B'tselem, and others have documented widespread human rights abuses suffered by Palestinians in Israeli prisons, including physical abuse, sleep deprivation, prolonged and excessive use of physical restraints, painful stress positions, and threats of physical and sexual assaults against detainees and family members. (8) The excessive use of solitary confinement is also well documented (9). Prolonged solitary confinement is known to cause severe trauma, psychosis, and suicide (10).



Khader Adnan (center), who was on hunger strike for 66 days earlier this year, shows his support for the mass hunger strike at An-Najah National University, Nablus, 3 May (Ahmad Al-Bazz / ActiveStills)

What are the health risks of going without food?

Hunger strikers who refuse to eat any food rarely survive after two months. Both Bilal Diab and Thaer Halahleh are seriously ill as of May 8, 2012.

Hunger strikers face additional dangers from their jailers. Human rights groups report that hunger strikers are being denied contact with their families and attorneys and denied adequate medical care or medical monitoring for their conditions. (11)

What is being done to support the hunger strikers?

Several Palestinian organizations have taken the lead in supporting the hunger strikers and getting their message out. Addameer (<http://www.addameer.org/>) in Jerusalem and Samidoun (<http://samidoun.ca/>) in North America. Other groups have taken up the campaign. Amnesty International, Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, and Human Rights Watch have taken action: <http://www.amnestyusa.org/actioncenter/actions/uaa11912.pdf>. After pressure from a student sit-in in Ramallah, the UN issued a statement as well (12).

The hunger strike has spread throughout Palestinian society as another form of nonviolent protest against Israeli oppression (13). Every day, more prisoners and civilians are joining the strike, and solidarity demonstrations are sweeping the West Bank and Gaza.

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