

'Welcome to hell'

# Israeli prison system as network of torture camps

## INVESTIGATION

Warning: This article contains details that some readers may find upsetting

This report concerns the treatment of Palestinian prisoners and the inhuman conditions they have been subjected to in Israeli prisons since October 7. B'Tselem collected testimonies from 55 Palestinians incarcerated in Israeli prisons and detention facilities during this time. Thirty of the witnesses are residents of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem; 21 are residents of the Gaza Strip; and four are Israeli citizens. They spoke with B'Tselem after they were released from detention, the overwhelming majority of them without being tried.

Their testimonies uncover a systemic, institutional policy focused on the continual abuse and torture of all Palestinian prisoners. This includes frequent acts of severe, arbitrary violence; sexual assault; humiliation and degradation; deliberate starvation; forced unhygienic conditions; sleep deprivation; prohibition on, and punitive measures for, religious worship; confiscation of all communal and personal belongings; and denial of adequate medical treatment. These descriptions appear time and again in the testimonies, in horrifying detail and with chilling similarities.

Over the years, Israel has incarcerated hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in prisons, which have always served, above all, as a tool for oppressing and dominating the Palestinian population. The stories presented in this report are the story of thousands of Palestinians, residents of the Occupied Territories and citizens of Israel, who have been arrested since the beginning of the war, as well as Palestinians already in prison on October 7, who experienced the massive increase in hostility from prison authorities since that day. The prisoners' testimonies lay bare the outcomes of a rushed process in which more than a dozen Israeli prison facilities, both military and civilian, were converted into a network of camps dedicated to the abuse of inmates. Such spaces, in which every inmate is intentionally condemned to severe, relentless pain and suffering, operate in fact as torture camps.

The abuse consistently described in the testimonies of dozens of people held in different detention facilities is so systemic, that there is no room to doubt an organized, declared policy of the Israeli prison authorities. This policy is implemented under the direction of Minister of National Security Itamar Ben Gvir, whose office oversees the Israel Prison Service (IPS), with the full support of the Israeli government and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

### Violent roll calls, increased frequency

According to the testimonies, roll calls and/or cell searches occur three to five times a day. In most cases, inmates were forced to crowd together, facing the wall, with their heads bowed down to the floor and their hands interlocked on the back of their necks, in some cases kneeling in prostration as during prayer. These practices no longer serve their original purpose and have become an opportunity for prison guards to unleash severe violence and another tool for humiliating and degrading prisoners.

"We were counted three times a day. It was done in a humiliating way, with

the guards shouting. The unit would come in heavily armed with gas and batons. [...] There was also a policy of collective punishment and random searches of the cells about once a week. They would force us to undress and then search us, take us out of the cells into the corridor, and do a thorough search of the room. It could take an hour or even several hours, and included shouting, assaults, and beatings with batons."

From the testimony of Muhammad Srur, 34, a father of two and resident of Ni'lin in Ramallah District, who was held in the Etzion detention facility and in the Ofer and Nafha prisons.



Palestinian detainees released by Israeli occupation forces through the Karam Abu Salem crossing wait to receive treatment after they were subjected to torture by Israelis, in Rafah, the Gaza Strip, on December 23, 2023.

AP



The photo shows the following tortured Palestinian detainees interviewed by the Al-Quds-based non-profit organization B'Tselem: Nabilah Miqdad (upper left), Abd al-Qader Tafesh (upper right), Sufian Abu Saleh (lower left), and 18-year old Muhammad Nazzal (lower right).

B'Tselem

The testimonies given to B'Tselem reveal the following prevalent, consistent, and widespread conditions.

### Overpopulation, crowding in cells

The testimonies indicate that cell occupancy more than doubled. Cells intended for six prisoners held 12 to 14 prisoners at a time,

with "excess" inmates forced to sleep on the floor, sometimes with no mattress or blanket.

"After October 7, 2023, [...] the prison administration collectively punished us on a regular basis. The first thing was increasing the number of prisoners in each cell from six to 14. This

meant reduced privacy and a much longer wait to use the toilet in the cell. In addition, the new detainees who came to the cell had to sleep on the floor because there were only three bunk beds."

From the testimony of S.B., a resident of East Jerusalem.

### No sunlight, no air to breathe

Some prisoners found themselves locked in their cells throughout the entire day; others were allowed out for

an hour once every few days in order to shower. Some never saw daylight during their time in prison.

"We were also forbidden to

go outside to the yard, unlike before. For 191 days, I didn't see the sun."

From the testimony of Thaer

Halahleh, 45, a father of four and resident of Kharas in Hebron District, who was held in the Ofer and Nafha prisons.

### Withholding access to courts, aid agencies, and legal counsel

As the Emergency Regulations permit, the vast majority of the witnesses went days, weeks, and in some cases, months before being brought before a judge for the first time, and even then, the hearings took place remotely via Zoom. The menacing presence of the prison guards inhibited prisoners from complaining to the judges or reporting the torture they underwent.

"They took us one by one to a room where we attended our hearings via Zoom. On the way there, IRF members punched me very hard in the chest. An Arabic-speaking guard was in the room, and he listened to the entire conversation between me, the judge, and the lawyer. He threatened that if I complained to the judge, I would pay. The lawyer told me before the hearing that the judges already knew about everything that was going on in the prison, so there was no point talking about it. Still, in the hearing, he asked me, "Have you been exposed to violence in prison?" I didn't dare answer because I was afraid the guards would retaliate and beat me even more brutally. [...] Every time they took me to the room where we attended our court hearings on Zoom, I endured the same path of torture, beating, and humiliation. All the in-



Firas Hassan, Palestinian resident of Hindaza in Bethlehem District, says "life totally changed" for him as a prisoner in an Israeli jail after the October 7 attacks.

BBC

mates in the prison went through that."

From the testimony of Firas Hassan, 50, a father of four and resident of Hindaza in Bethlehem District, who was held in the Negev Prison (Ketzio).

Meetings with legal counsel were denied for increasingly long durations, reaching as much as 180 days, on the pretext

of "dynamic needs on the ground". Most of the witnesses interviewed for this report did not see their lawyers once during their entire incarceration. They were also prevented from meeting with representatives of the ICRC, aid and human rights organizations, the Public Defender's Office, or other official oversight bodies.