Six Palestinians escape from high-security prison in Israel

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Police stand guard at the high-security Gilboa prison in northern Israel [Jalaa Marey/AFP]

Tel Aviv, September 6 (RHC)-- Israeli forces have been searching for six Palestinian prisoners who managed to escape from a high-security facility in northern Israel early on Monday. The prisoners

escaped from the Gilboa prison, which is supposed to be one of Israel's most secured facilities. Such breakouts are extremely rare.

"Overnight, we received a number of reports about suspicious figures in agricultural fields and from the prison service, which discovered very quickly that prisoners were missing from their cells and that six escaped," police spokesman Eli Levy told Israeli Kan Radio.

Police, soldiers, and agents from Israel's powerful internal security agency Shin Bet joined the search effort, officials said. Sniffer dogs were deployed and checkpoints set up in the area surrounding Gilboa.

The army said its forces were "prepared and deployed" in the occupied West Bank as part of the operation. Local media reports said the men, who likely shared the same prison cell, escaped through a tunnel and apparently received some outside help. The tunnel appeared to have been dug from below a toilet in the cell, from which the prisoners crawled their way out of the facility.

The prisoners included Zakariye Zubeidi, 46, a former Fatah party leader in the northern West Bank city of Jenin, as well as five Palestinian Islamic Jihad members serving life sentences for involvement in attacks on Israelis during the Palestinian Intifada – or uprising – in the early 2000s.

The other detainees were identified as: Monadel Yacoub Nafe'at, 26, Yaqoub Qassem, Yaqoub Mahmoud Qadri, 49, Ayham Nayef Kamamji, 35, and Mahmoud Abdullah Ardah, 46. At least four men were serving life sentences, according to local media reports.

The men were believed to have been headed for Jenin, where the internationally recognised Palestinian Authority wields little control and where Palestinians in recent weeks have confronted Israeli forces – some of whom were from the police's Musta'ribeen – an undercover unit made up of Israelis disguised as Palestinians.

Qadura Fares, head of the Palestinian Prisoners' Club, described the brazen escape as a victory against the Israeli security system. "We are happy with this escape. We have called a lot for the necessity of liberating all Palestinian prisoners. If the prisoners can free themselves, this is a great thing," Fares, who himself spent 18 years in prison, told Al Jazeera.

Al Jazeera's Walid al-Omari, reporting from Ramallah, said Israeli authorities discovered the prisoners' escape at about 3:30am. He said police launched a widespread search operation involving helicopters in towns and villages near the northern area of the West Bank, as well as an area bordering neighbouring Jordan.

The detainees could have escaped to Jenin, Jordan, or could be hiding out in the agricultural lands surrounding the prison, al-Omari added.

Islamic Jihad spokesman Dawood Shehab, described the breakout as a "heroic act" that was a "severe blow" to the Israeli army and Israel's entire "security apparatus." "This is a long and open struggle … The occupation must understand the lesson well, our people will never surrender," Shehab said in a statement carried by the Palestinian news agency Maan.

Israel holds some 4,750 Palestinians across dozens of prison facilities, including 42 females, 200 children, and 550 administrative detainees, according to prisoners' rights group Addameer.

While rare, it was not the first escape of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli prisons. In 1995, three Palestinians broke out from the Kfar Yona facility, and in 2014 Shata prison, near Gilboa, discovered an escape attempt similar to Monday's through tunnels.

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