

Israel sentences Palestinian prison escapees to five more years



An artist works on a mural painting glorifying six Palestinian prisoners who escaped from Israel's Gilboa prison in September 2021 with the help of spoons [Mahmud Hams/AFP]

Tel Aviv, May 22 (RHC)-- An Israeli court has sentenced six Palestinian prison escapees to five years in prison for tunneling out of their cell last year and escaping from a high-security facility in what became Israel's biggest prison break in decades.

The daring jailbreak sparked a massive manhunt in Israel's north and the occupied West Bank as Israeli forces tried to recapture the men, who were members of Palestinian armed groups.

The bold escape dominated newscasts, sparked heavy criticism of Israel's prison service, and prompted the Israeli government to launch an inquiry. The escapees were recaptured several days later.

A judge ruled on Sunday that the sentencing of the six took into account the fact that the prison break had paralysed Israel for days, the financial costs involved in recapturing the escapees, and the harm to public security caused by prisoners, under life sentence and convicted of serious crimes, escaping.

The five-year sentences will be added to the prison terms the prisoners are already serving. Five other inmates charged with assisting the men escape were sentenced to an additional four years in jail.

According to various reports, the escapees used kitchen utensils to dig a tunnel through the floor of their shared cell undetected over several months. They then managed to slip past a sleeping prison guard after emerging through a hole outside the prison facility.

Israel considers all six escapees to be "terrorists". Palestinians consider many prisoners held by Israel to be heroes of their national cause, and many on social media celebrated their breakout and held demonstrations in support of the escaped prisoners.

Five of the escapees are from the Islamic Jihad armed group, with four of them serving life sentences. The sixth escapee, Zakaria Zubeidi, is a member of the secular Fatah group of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

Zubeidi was a leader during the second Palestinian uprising in the early 2000s and well known in Israel both for his activities and his love for giving media interviews.



Palestinian prisoner Mohammad al-Ardah, one of the six who escaped from Israel's Gilboa prison, during his trial [File photo: Ahmad Gharabli/AFP]

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