

Terminally ill Palestinian political prisoner Walid Daqqa dies in Israeli custody



Ramallah, April 8 (RHC)-- Imprisoned Palestinian novelist and activist Walid Daqqa, who was suffering from cancer, has died in Israel's Shamir Medical Center, according to the Palestinian Commission of Detainees and Ex-Detainees Affairs.

Daqqa was from Baqa al-Gharbiyye, a predominantly Palestinian city in Israel, and had served for 38 years in Israeli prisons, the commission added, before saying that he had died as a result of a "slow killing" policy carried out against ill prisoners by the Israeli prison administration.

Protesters have gathered in Ramallah in memory of one of the most prominent Palestinian prisoners, who was due to be released next year. The Palestinian state news agency Wafa described Daqqa as a "freedom fighter", while Hamas said that it was renewing its "covenant with the prisoners until they gain freedom", following the news of his death.

In a statement, Hamas noted how Daqqa's death "took place in the occupation prisons."

Israel's far-right Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir – who is responsible for the Israel Prison Service – said that Israel was “not crying” over the death of Daqqa, who he referred to as a “terrorist”. In a social media post, he said that Daqqa's life had ended naturally and that it was not a part of the “death penalty for terrorists” as it was “supposed to” be.

Daqqa is one of the most prominent and longtime Palestinian prisoners in Israeli custody. He was arrested by Israel in 1986 for killing an Israeli soldier and has remained in prison since then. While in jail, he wrote several books, including a children's story.

In 1999, he also got married while behind bars. Along with his wife, Sana Salameh, he welcomed a daughter – Milad – in 2020, conceived after his sperm was smuggled out of prison.

“The Israeli officers inside the prison told him they would not allow him to have a child, but he won by having Milad,” his wife told Al Jazeera. A year later Daqqa was diagnosed with myelofibrosis – a rare form of bone marrow cancer that disrupts the body's normal production of blood cells. Rights groups began pressuring Israel to release him on medical grounds.

Last year, Addameer, a rights group that supports Palestinian prisoners, said that Daqqa was in “dire need of urgent medical attention”, accused Israeli authorities of denying him the treatment he was prescribed, and called for his “immediate release.” But Israel refused to free him from prison early, setting his release date for 2025.

Israeli prison authorities regularly delay checkups and urgent surgeries for Palestinian prisoners for years, according to prisoner groups. Specialised doctors are not regularly available, except for dentists, and “over-the-counter painkillers are administered as a remedy for almost all health problems”, rights groups said in a joint report to the United Nations.

At least 10 Palestinians have died in Israeli prisons since the Israel-Hamas war began on October 7, according to Wafa. But a Haaretz investigation said that the number was actually at least 27.

Before that, in 2020, four Palestinian prisoners died in Israeli custody; and in November 2021, Palestinian prisoner Sami Umour, 39, died after a months-long delay of an urgently needed operation for serious heart problems from which he suffered.

The delay in deciding the case of Daqqa and other sick prisoners was described by Qadura Fares, the director of the Palestinian Prisoner's Society, the main Palestinian prisoner rights NGO, as a policy of “slow, systematic killing”.

On Sunday, after the news about Daqqa's death was announced by Israel, tributes poured in on social media in memory of him and his work. “He was among the most prominent prisoner intellectuals, with several works to his name, notably ‘Melting the Consciousness,’ ‘Parallel Time,’ and the novel ‘The Secret of the Oil Story,’ which received local and Arab awards,” Lema, a diplomat at the Palestine Mission to the European Union, said in a post on X.

“Daqqa leaves behind a legacy as a Palestinian hero.”

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