

Palestinians mark Prisoner's Day

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**Khawla Tawil is the mother of an imprisoned student who has spent the last six months in jail
[Mohammed Najib/Al Jazeera]**

Ramallah, April 18 (RHC)-- Mansour al-Shahatit was unable to recognize his mother and brothers following his release from an Israeli prison after 17 years. He was in a deplorable state after being freed on April 8, suffering from memory loss as a result of torture and solitary confinement for many years in Israeli jails.

His family from Yatta, near Hebron, was in tears as he was released and they witnessed his physical and mental condition. “Mansour’s condition was much better at the time of his arrest, and I hold the Israeli occupation fully responsible for the health and mental deterioration,” said his mother Fayza al-Shahatit, 64. She noted her son spent the last two-and-a-half years in solitary confinement.

“Mansour was punished twice – sentenced to 17 years in prison and the loss of his future because of his mental and psychological deterioration,” al-Shahatit said.

On April 17 of each year, Palestinians commemorate Palestinian Prisoner’s Day to express their loyalty to those imprisoned for defying Israel’s occupation, and as a reminder to the international community of their legitimate struggle for freedom.

Israel detains about 4,500 Palestinians in its jails, among them 41 women and 140 children below 18 years. Since the beginning of 2021, Israeli authorities have arrested nearly 1,400 Palestinians.

Nearly 550 inmates suffer from various diseases and require close monitoring and healthcare. At least 10 inmates suffer from cancer of varying degrees, including Fouad al-Shobaki, 82, the oldest of the prisoners. So far, 368 jailed Palestinians have been infected with the coronavirus. Some Palestinians have spent 40 years in captivity with 543 sentenced to several life sentences.

On Thursday, supporters lit a “torch of freedom” for the prisoners in front of the tomb of late President Yasser Arafat in Ramallah, marking the start of the annual commemoration. “The prisoners have their presence in all Palestinian life and they deserve from us all loyalty and continuous work to relieve them and their families because they sacrificed years of their youth for the freedom of Palestine,” said Sabri Sidam, a Fatah Central Committee member, during the ceremony.

An example of the prisoners held is that of Shatha Tawil, 21, a female computer student at Bir Zeit University who lives in Al-Bireh near Ramallah. On November 2, 2020, around midnight, Israeli security forces surrounded Tawil’s home and arrested her. Her crime: organising support for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (FPLP).

Her bedroom is elegantly arranged as she left it six months ago with teddy bears of different sizes, coloured pencils and notebooks alongside her laptop, and Arabic books and translated novels filling her small library. Tawil spent most of her time before her arrest helping neighbourhood children and fellow students adapt to the online learning process imposed because of the COVID-19 crisis.

“She was involved in public work and helping her colleagues in the field of education. We miss and hope that she will be released soon,” her mother Khawla Tawil told Al Jazeera. Tawil is still subject to court sessions for her student activity and her family has been unable to visit because of coronavirus restrictions. It is unclear when or if she will be released.

Qadoura Faris, the Palestinian Prisoners Club’s director and former detainee, told Al Jazeera the Israeli arrests are part of a systematic plan to deplete Palestinian communities of energy to resist the occupation and to create fear.

“Israel has arrested about a million Palestinians since its occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip in 1967, and no sun has risen since the beginning of the Israeli occupation to this day,” Faris said.

The Israeli security apparatus targets young Palestinians between the age of 19 and 25 to deter them from engaging in activism, officials say. The arrests also aim to impose exorbitant monetary fines ranging from \$600-\$70,000, with the total Israeli military court penalties against Palestinians at an estimated \$9.2m a year.

Marwan Barghouthi is a Fatah party leader currently serving five life sentences in an Israeli prison for leading in the second Palestinian Intifada from 2000 to 2004. While being held, he has spearheaded an education initiative for Palestinian prisoners. “The most important battle in Marwan’s life is the battle for education, so he devotes most of his time inside prison to educating the rest of the prisoners,” his brother Muqbil, 54, told Al Jazeera.

“The whole family suffers because of Marwan’s presence in prison. Our mother died and he did not bid her farewell. His two children married and he did not share their joy. He has four grandchildren whom he has yet see.”

Some Palestinian prisoners have run on different party lists for legislative elections scheduled for May 22. Marwan Barghouthi, meanwhile, plans to run in the presidential election, to take place on July 31.

“The representation of Palestinian prisoners through the lists of candidates for the Palestinian legislative elections reflects the Palestinian public’s interest in being an integral part of these people enjoying the same citizenship rights – even if Israel wants to neutralize them. Arrests do not prevent participation in political and national life,” Faris said.

Another former prisoner, Ra’afat al-Qarawi, is celebrating his first Ramadan in 21 years outside jail after being released in March. “At the age of 20, the struggle was militarily through the armed struggle. But now at age 40, I am required to struggle through the upbringing and education of my children,” he told Al Jazeera.

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