

Israeli prisons - I Felt Fear Run Like Electricity Through My Body. I Knew Exactly What Was About to Come"

Friday 24 January 2025, by [POLLAK Jonathan](#) (Date first published: 16 January 2025).

Brutal beatings, diseases, starvation - my Palestinian friends in the West Bank who served time in Israeli prisons since late 2023 returned with appalling reports of what can only be called systematic torture

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When I returned to the West Bank last year, after a lengthy term of detention and house arrest that followed my arrest at a demonstration in the village of Beita [[1](#)], the West Bank was very different from what I had previously known. Killing of civilians, attacks by settlers operating in tandem with the army, large-scale arrests. Fear and terror around every corner. And quiet, a chilling, grim quiet.

Even before my release, I began to realize that something fundamental had changed. A few days after [October 7](#), 2023, Ibrahim al-Wadi, a friend of mine from the village of Qusra, was murdered by settlers, together with his son, Ahmed. They were shot while attending the funeral of four other Palestinians who had been shot to death a day earlier - three by settlers who raided the village, the fourth by soldiers who were accompanying them.

I quickly perceived that something horrific was taking place in the prisons where Palestinian political prisoners are held. During the past year, as I was regaining my freedom, countless Palestinians, including many of my friends and acquaintances, had been arrested by Israel. As some began to be released and to emerge back into the world, they told stories that [painted an appalling picture](#) of systematic torture.

Brutal beatings are a recurring motif in each story. They happen during roll calls, during searches of the cells, whenever detainees are being moved from one place to another. For the past year, court hearings mostly took place via video conference with the prisons, without the defendants being brought physically to court. But so bad is the situation, that some of the prisoners are requesting of their lawyers to hold their court hearings with them in absentia, because even the way from the cell to the room in which the camera is installed is a Via Dolorosa of physical abuse and humiliation.

None of the stories that follow reveal anything that was previously unknown. Everything, down to the minutest detail, already fills volume upon volume in the reports of human rights organizations. But what I have to tell are not [testimonies in a report](#), but the product of intimate, heartfelt conversations with people I knew who survived the inferno. Not one of them is the person they were before. What I heard from my friends is the lot of many thousands of others, and it is told with

names changed and identifying details blurred because of the fear of revenge, which came up in every conversation.

Audio: The voice of Munther Amira.

Beatings and blood

I went to see Malek a few days after his release. A yellow gate and a watchtower blocked the road that in the past led into the village from the highway. Most of the other access roads, via the neighboring villages, are similarly blocked. Only one winding road, which passes close by the Byzantine church that Israel blew up in 2002, remained open. For years this village was like a second home to me, and this was the first time I'd been back there since my release.

Malek was in custody for 18 days. He was interrogated three times, and each time he was questioned about utterly trivial matters. He was certain then that he would be placed in administrative detention - without charges or trial, without evidence, under a cloak of secret suspicions unknown even to him or his lawyer - which can be indefinitely extended. After all, such is the fate of most Palestinians arrested these days.

After his first interrogation, he was jailed at the notorious Russian Compound, in downtown Jerusalem. During the day the guards would remove the mattresses and blankets from the cells, bringing them back only in the evening, damp and sometimes thoroughly soaked. Malek likens the cold nights of the Jerusalem winter to arrows that pierced his flesh down to the bones of his limbs. He described how he was beaten, like the other inmates, at every opportunity. Every roll call, every search, every move from one place to another - each occasion was an opportunity for beating and humiliation.

"One time, during morning roll call," he told me, "we were all on our knees with faces to the beds. One of the guards grabbed me from behind, shackled my hands and legs, and spit at me, in Hebrew, 'Come, a trip.' He picked me up by the handcuffs from behind my back and led me, bent over, through the open space that is alongside the cells. In order to leave the ward, there is a small room you have to go through, between two doors, each of which has a small window."

I know exactly what room he's talking about - I passed through it dozens of times myself. It's a security passage in which only one door can be opened at a time.

"So we got there," Malek continued, "and they stood me against the door, face to the window. I looked inside and saw that the floor was totally covered with clotted blood. I felt the fear pass like electricity through my body. I knew exactly what was about to come. As they opened the door, one went in and stood next to the far window, blocked it, and the other threw me inside onto the floor.

"They kicked me. I tried to protect my head, but my hands were shackled, so I didn't really have a way to do so. The blows were brutal. I really thought they were going to kill me. I don't know how long it went on. At some point I remembered that the night before someone told me, 'When they hit you, scream your lungs out. What do you care? It can't be worse, and maybe someone will hear and come to help you.' So I really began to shout, and sure enough, someone came. I don't understand Hebrew, but there was an exchange between the two of them. Then they left, and he took me out of there. I was bleeding from the mouth and the nose."

Khaled, one of my closest friends, also suffered violence at the guards' hands. When he came out of prison after eight months of administrative detention, his son didn't recognize him from a distance. The way between Ofer Prison and the Beitunia checkpoint, where he was picked up, a distance of a

few hundred meters, he did running. Afterward he related that he hadn't been told that his administrative detention had ended, and he was afraid that his release was a mistake and that he would immediately be rearrested. That too had already happened to someone who shared a cell with him.

In the photo his son sent me a few minutes after they met, Khaled looked like the shadow of a person. Signs of violence marked his entire body - his shoulders, his arms, his back, his face, his legs. When I arrived to visit him that evening, he got up to hug me, but when I pressed him to my chest he groaned with pain. A few days later, tests showed edema around his spine and a healed rib fracture.

I heard more testimony from Nazar, who was an administrative detainee even before October 7, and had since then passed through several prisons, including the Megiddo facility. One evening, guards entered the adjacent cell, and Nazar heard blows being delivered, and cries of pain. After a time the guards took an inmate from that cell and threw him into an isolation cell. All through the night, and the following day too, he groaned with constant pain, screaming "my belly" and calling for help. No one came to his aid. It continued the following evening. Toward morning the cries stopped.

hoto: Megiddo Prison in September. Every roll call, every search, every move from one place to another - each occasion was an opportunity for beating and humiliation.

The next day, when a medic arrived to do his rounds in the wing, they understood from the melee and the guards' shouts that the inmate had died. Nazar still has no idea who he was. After his release, he came to learn that during the period of his incarceration in Megiddo Prison this was not the only inmate who died there.

Tawfiq, who was released from Gilboa Prison this winter, told me that during an inspection of the wing by the prison's officers, an inmate complained that the prisoners were not being allowed to go out into the yard, to which one of the officers replied, "You want yard time? Be thankful you're not in the Hamas tunnels in Gaza."

After that, for the next two weeks, the inmates were taken to the yard and made to lie on the cold ground for two hours, even when it was raining. While they lay there, the guards walked around with dogs. Sometimes the dogs passed between them, sometimes they walked across the inmates on the ground, stepping on them.

According to Tawfiq, every meeting of an inmate with his lawyer exacted a price. "I knew every time that the way back, between the visiting room and the wing, would add at least three bruises. But I never refused to go. You were in a five-star prison," he said to me. "You don't understand what it is to be 12 people to a cell that was already crowded when there were only six in it. I didn't care in the least what they were going to do to me. Just to see someone else who would talk to you like a human being, to maybe see someone in the corridor on the way, that was worth everything to me."

The prisoners' mattresses and blankets are wet. Malek likens the cold nights of the Jerusalem winter to arrows that pierced his flesh down to the bones. Every roll call, every search, every move from one place to another was an opportunity for beating and humiliation.

Munther Amira - the only person to appear here with his real name - was released unexpectedly before the scheduled end of his administrative detention. To this day, no one knows why. Contrary to many others who were warned not to talk about what they had undergone in prison, and who still fear retribution, as soon as he was released, Amira went before a camera and spoke on the record about the catastrophe in the prisons - calling them "graveyards for the living."

He told me that one night a first responders unit burst into their cell in Ofer Prison, accompanied by two dogs. They ordered the inmates to strip down to their underpants and lie on the floor, and then they ordered the dogs to sniff the inmates' body and face. Afterward they ordered the inmates to dress, took them into the showers and doused them with cold water while they were clothed.

Another time he tried to summon help after an inmate attempted to kill himself. The punishment for calling for help was another raid by the first responders. This time everyone in the cell was made to lie one on top of the other, and they were beaten with truncheons. At some point, one of the guards spread their legs apart and struck them on the testicles with a club.

Starvation and disease

Munther lost 33 kilos (73 pounds) during his three-month detention. I don't know how much weight Khaled lost - he was always thin - but in the photograph that was sent to me, I saw the skeletal remains of a person. In the living room of his home afterward, the light of the ceiling fixture revealed two deep craters where his cheeks used to be. His eyes were red-rimmed, like those of someone who hasn't slept for weeks. The slack skin that dangled from his thin arms looked like it was attached to them artificially, like cellophane wrapping. The blood tests of both men showed severe deficiencies.

Everyone I spoke to, no matter which prison he'd been in, described almost exactly the same diet, though it occasionally underwent an update or, more accurately, a downgrade. The latest version I heard, from Ofer Prison, was: Breakfast - 1.5 packets of cheese for a cell of 12 inmates, three slices of bread per person, two to three vegetables, usually a tomato or a cucumber, per cell. Every four days, 250 grams (8.8 oz.) of jam per cell.

For lunch, per person: a small disposable plastic cup filled with rice, two teaspoons of lentils, a few vegetables, three slices of bread. For dinner - two teaspoons (not tablespoons) of hummus and tahini, a few vegetables, three slices of bread, per person. Occasionally another cup of rice, sometimes a lone falafel ball or an egg, which was usually rather foul smelling, sometimes with red dots, sometimes blue. That's it.

Nazar said about this, "It's not just the quantity. What they bring also isn't fit for human consumption. The rice is only half cooked, almost everything is spoiled. And you know, there are also actually real kids there, who were never in prison before. We tried to look after them, to give them some of our rotten food. But if you give away any of your food, even a drop, it's like you're committing suicide. There's a famine in the prisons now, and it's not due to a natural disaster, it's Israel Prison Service policy."

Of late, the hunger has even increased. Because of the overcrowding, the prison service is finding ways to make the wings even more cramped. Public spaces, such as the commissary, or anywhere the prison administration could claim, they transformed into an extra cell. The number of inmates in the wards, packed to the brim even before, only increased. There are wings that received 50

additional inmates, but no additional food for them. It's no wonder, then, that inmates lose a third or even more of their body weight within a few months.

Audio: The voice of Munther Amira.

Food is not the only thing in short supply in the prisons. The inmates are forbidden, for example, to have anything in their possession other than one set of clothes. One shirt, one pair of underpants, one pair of socks, one pair of pants, one sweatshirt. That's all. For the entire period of their incarceration. I remember that one time when Munther's lawyer, Riham Nasra, came to see him, he arrived in the visiting room barefoot. It was winter and freezing cold in Ofer. When she asked him why he was barefoot, he said only, "There is none."

About a quarter of all Palestinian prisoners suffer from scabies (a contagious, itchy skin condition), according to a court statement by the prison service itself. At the time of Nazar's release, his skin was already in stages of healing. His lesions were no longer bleeding, but the scabs still covered large parts of his body.

"The smell in the cell is something words can't describe. It's like rot, we sat there and rotted - our skin, our flesh. We are not human beings there, we are rotting flesh," he said. "But, how could it be otherwise? Most of the time there is no water at all, usually just one hour a day, and we sometimes had no hot water for days. There were weeks on end when I didn't shower. It took more than a month before I got soap. We sit there, in the same clothes, because no one has a change of clothes, and they are covered with blood and pus, and there's a stench - not of waste but of death. Our clothes were soaked with our rotting bodies."

Tawfiq related that, "There was only one hour of running water a day. Not only in the shower, everywhere, including the toilets. So in that one hour, 12 people in the cell had to do everything that requires water, including to relieve themselves. Obviously that's impossible. And also, because almost all the food had gone bad, most of us had an upset stomach all the time. You can imagine for yourself how much our cell stank."

In these conditions, inmates' physical states naturally deteriorate. Such rapid weight loss, for example, causes the body to consume muscle tissue. When Munther was released, he told his wife, Sanaa, a nurse, that he was so dirty while he was inside that the sweat had stained his clothes orange. She looked at him and said, "And your urine?" To which he replied, "I also pissed blood." "Ya ahbal!" she shouted at him - "You idiot. That wasn't dirt, it was your body excreting the muscles it consumed to survive."

About a quarter of all Palestinian prisoners suffer from scabies. "The smell in the cell is something words can't describe. It's like rot, we sat there and rotted - our skin, our flesh. We are not human beings there, we are rotting flesh," Nazar said.

The blood tests of almost everyone I know showed that they were suffering from malnutrition and from severe deficiencies in iron and other essential minerals and vitamins. But medical treatment was also a luxury. What actually goes on in the prison infirmaries nowadays is beyond me, but from the inmates' perspective, they do not exist. For those who had been receiving ongoing treatments, they simply stopped. Occasionally a paramedic makes the rounds of the prison, but no treatment is administered, and the "examination" is no more than a conversation through the door of the cell. Sometimes a week or more can pass without the visit of a paramedic.

The medical response, at best, is paracetamol, and in most cases it is more along the lines of an instruction to "Drink water." Of course there isn't enough water in the cells, because there's no running water most of the day.

Rape and sexual assaults are talked about almost solely as rumor, as something that happened to others. The only person who told me about it explicitly was Burhan. He was in Ketziot Prison, in the Negev, and there was a raid on his wing. The guards took them out of the cell one by one, after handcuffing them with plastic cuffs. While he was waiting his turn, he heard pleas for help and cries of pain, along with cursing by the guards.

When his turn came, he was led to a public area in the wing. There he saw the inmates who had been taken out of the cell before him lying on the floor on top of each other, naked and bleeding. A guard stripped him, blindfolded him, and then, with kicks, curses and threats, pushed him to the floor. They were beaten, he relates, as they lay there, naked and unseeing, while dogs walked around them and sniffed their bodies.

Audio: The voice of Munther Amira.

At one point he felt a terrible pain in the rectum as an object of some sort was thrust into it. He doesn't know or doesn't want to say how long this went on, or how exactly, or if others were also assaulted. Back in the cell, they all just sat and stared. No one said a word. He does relate that walking was difficult for some time afterward, partly due to the blows, and that for a week after the incident there was blood in his stool and his urine. Medical treatment was not in the cards.

While accounts of rape are taboo, and rarely discussed, sexual humiliation is out in plain sight for all to see - videos of inmates being led completely naked by prison service personnel have been posted on social media. This could only have been documented by the guards themselves, who took pride in their deeds. The use of a body search as an opportunity to perpetrate a sexual assault, usually by means of a blow to the groin with the hand or the magnetometer, is an almost standard experience, which is mentioned regularly by inmates who served time in various prisons.

As a male, I heard nothing firsthand, of course, about sexual assault of women. What I did hear, and more than once, is that there's a shortage of menstrual hygiene products, and the use of the period as a means of humiliation. After the first blows she endured on the day of her arrest, Munira was taken to Hasharon Prison, in central Israel. Everyone undergoes a body search at the prison entrance, but a strip search is not the norm - according to prison service regulations, that requires a reasonable suspicion that the inmate is concealing a forbidden object, and the authorization of the officer in charge.

During the strip search Munira underwent, however, there was no ranking officer present, and certainly no orderly procedure regarding reasonable suspicion. She was pushed by two female guards into the small room used for security checks, where she had to remove her clothes, including panties and bra, and kneel. After leaving her alone for a few minutes, one guards returned, hit her and left. Eventually, she had her clothes thrown back at her, and was able to dress.

The next day was the first day of her period. She received one hygienic pad and had to make do with it for her whole period. It was the same for the others. When she was released she was suffering from infection and serious inflammation of the urinary tract.

Epilogue

[Sde Teiman](#), an army detention camp near the Gaza border, was clearly the worst place to be imprisoned, and that presumably is why it was shut down and turned into a temporary holding center. Indeed, it's hard to think of the descriptions of horrors and atrocities that emerged from that torture pen without thinking it was designed to serve as the center of the ninth circle of hell. But it's not by chance that the state agreed to transfer those held there to other places, mainly Ketziot and Ofer, which aren't much better.

Sde Teiman or not, Israel is holding thousands of Palestinians in torture pens; at least 68 have been killed since October 7. Of them, the death of at least four inmates took place since early December alone. One, Mohammed Walid Ali, 45, from the Nur Shams refugee camp, near Tul Karm in the West Bank, was killed just one week after being taken into custody.

The torture, in all its forms - starvation, humiliation, sexual assault, beatings, killings and being forced to live in overcrowded cells - are not acts of mere coincidence. Viewed as a whole, as they should, they constitute Israeli policy.

Jonathan Pollak

P.S.

• Haaretz. Jan 16, 2025:
<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2025-01-16/ty-article-static/.premium/blood-covered-the-floor-f-ear-ran-like-electricity-through-my-body-i-knew-exactly-whats-coming/00000194-6044-d2ad-a19d-764d0f860000>

Footnotes

[1] ['Meager Suspicion': Israeli Left-wing Activist Jonathan Pollak Released From Custody](#)