

For Israeli police, humiliating Palestinian women is a tool of collective repression

Monday 23 December 2024, by [FARAH Mariam](#) (Date first published: 20 December 2024).

Political arrests of Palestinian women in Israel — who face strip-searches, blindfolding, and doxing — aim to send the community a clear message.

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Israeli police arrest a Palestinian woman in Karmiel, northern Israel, July 3, 2024. (David Cohen/Flash90)

The first time Palestinian actress Maisa Abd Elhadi was arrested was just days after the October 7 attacks. At 11 a.m. on Oct. 12, 2023, the police showed up at her home in Nazareth, illegally confiscated her phone, and proceeded to take her to the city’s central police station.

There, she learned that she was being investigated over two posts she had shared on Instagram on October 7. The first showed civilians near a bulldozer at the Gaza fence, which the accompanying text compared to the fall of the Berlin Wall. “There were no armed individuals in the image,” she clarified. The second was a picture of Yaffa Adar, an elderly Israeli woman kidnapped that day, with the caption: “This lady is on the adventure of her life.”

“I shared this story early in the morning without really understanding what was happening or how serious the situation was,” Abd Elhadi explained, regarding the latter post. “When I later learned of the full context and saw the videos being shared that day, I immediately deleted it myself.” But by that point, it was too late.



At the police station, a female police officer ordered Abd Elhadi to remove her clothing and conducted a strip-search. “While I was unclothed, she physically assaulted me, verbally abused me with derogatory terms including ‘terrorist,’ and made threatening statements about further actions she would take against me,” Abd Elhadi recalled. “I then waited three hours for an Arabic-speaking interrogator and my lawyer, but the actual interrogation lasted only a few minutes.”

After being interrogated about her social media posts, Abd Elhadi told +972 that the police refused to return her mobile phone, threatening to hold her in detention if she didn’t give them the passcode. Eventually, Abd Elhadi was released to house arrest, and she later initiated legal proceedings to retrieve her phone.

But just two weeks later, in the early morning hours of Oct. 23, Abd Elhadi was arrested once again.



Maisa Abd Elhadi. (Mehran Falsafi/CC BY-SA 4.0 DEED)

“I later learned that my arrest followed a social media post by a prominent Israeli actor who had shared my story and encouraged one of his followers to file complaints against me,” Abd Elhadi explained. “Once the Israeli media picked up the story, things escalated.”

Israeli media outlets published Abd Elhadi’s private information, including her home address, along with the indictments and a nudity scene from her movie “Huda’s Salon” — what she described as an orchestrated smear campaign to erode her support among fellow Palestinians. Moshe Arbel, the interior minister, even moved to try to [strip her of her Israeli citizenship](#) and deport her.

After arriving at the police station, Abd Elhadi was taken to an office near the lobby by the same female officer who strip-searched her during her first arrest. In that room, which was accessible to male officers, the officer forced Abd Elhadi to undress, handcuffed her, physically assaulted her — and then photographed in front of an Israeli flag.

Abd Elhadi was detained for two days, during which she remained entirely cut off from the outside world. “They then transported me to another prison in order to appear in court via Zoom, during which I was subjected to further physical assault and body searches. After the court appearance, the officer assaulted me again, dragging me by my hair. I was transferred first to Sharon Prison and then to Damon Prison before they released me,” Abd Elhadi recounted.

On Nov. 9, 2023 an indictment was filed against Abd Elhadi, accusing her of expressing support for a terror organization and incitement to terrorism. “Under the specific circumstances, there is a real possibility that her publications will lead to the commission of an act of terrorism,” the prosecutor’s office stated. Following the indictment, Abd Elhadi was put on house arrest — and was only [released a year later](#).

“The experience left me in a state of constant terror,” Abd Elhadi, who remains barred from using social media, said after her release. “I felt I was entering the unknown, unsure if I would ever be free again or if I would face perpetual persecution by state institutions.”

View of Damon prison, located in Northern Israel, August 1, 2012. Moshe Shai/Flash90)

According to the Haifa-based Palestinian legal center Adalah, Abd Elhadi is one of 127 Palestinian women — from prominent actresses to teachers and students — who were arrested or questioned by Israeli police over social media posts between October 7, 2023 and March 27, 2024. Their testimonies about what they went through in custody — including repeated strip-searches, staged photographs in front of Israeli flags, and the distribution of arrest images — reveal a disturbing pattern: the systematic use of degrading practices against individual Palestinian citizens to instill collective deterrence.

“We consistently receive reports from women detainees about systematic humiliation, including multiple strip-searches at various [police] stations, excessive handcuffing, and unauthorized cell

phone searches,” Nareman Shehadeh Zoabi, an attorney at Adalah, told +972. “Beyond that, they endure verbal abuse, inappropriate comments, and mockery about their bodies intended to cause shame.”

Arrest images and state repression

The drastic escalation in arrests of Palestinian citizens of Israel by police in the weeks following October 7 was made possible, in part, by a task force established by Israeli National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir earlier in 2023 that specifically aimed to go after alleged incitement on social media. In addition, Israeli State Prosecutor Amit Aisman issued regulations that [made it easier](#) for police to detain Israeli citizens suspected of incitement — the vast majority of whom were Palestinian.

The May arrest of Rasha Karim Harami, a beauty salon owner from the town of Majd Al-Krum in the Galilee, was another case that sparked controversy over police procedures. Initially detained for incitement over social media posts critical of Israel’s war in Gaza, Harami was later charged with “disturbing the peace” after police failed to secure preapproval from the prosecutor’s office for the original charge.

Harami’s case drew widespread attention when police released footage of the arrest, which showed her handcuffed with plastic restraints and blindfolded with flannel cloth — treatment typically reserved for Palestinian “security suspects.” The video was [widely shared on social media](#), drawing condemnation from Palestinian MKs and prompting the prosecutor’s office to [issue a harsh response](#) criticizing police conduct.

Following her interrogation, Harami was placed under house arrest for five days. Shehadeh Zoabi told +972 that in the wake of this case, Adalah submitted a formal complaint to senior Israeli law enforcement officials demanding “the immediate cessation of illegal practices including blindfolding and excessive restraints.”



Rasha Karim Harami (Oren Ziv)

But beyond the legal questions, it’s clear that such practices are part of broader campaign against Palestinian citizens. “These photographs of arrested citizens — handcuffed with plastic restraints and blindfolded with flannel cloth — send a message from the state to the entire Palestinian community,” explains Dr. Honaida Ghanim, a Palestinian sociologist, anthropologist, and director of the Palestinian Forum for Israeli Studies (MADAR). “They showcase the state’s tools of oppression, suppression, and humiliation, while simultaneously delineating the boundaries of freedom of expression.”

Nor can these actions be seen, Ghanim argues, in isolation from the wider context of Israel’s genocidal war in Gaza, where images of dead, maimed, and traumatized Palestinians proliferate. “These images are designed to impact Palestinian collective consciousness. They form part of a larger visual narrative — a collage through which the state attempts to reassert its authority and deterrence, showcasing complete power through control and oppression.”

Another case that gained attention due to questionable police actions involved [Intisar Hijazi](#), a 41-year-old Palestinian teacher from the city of Tamra in northern Israel. She was arrested on Oct. 7, 2024, for sharing a video of herself dancing to an English song on social media. The video, filmed at her school in Nazareth on October 7, 2023, contained no reference to the Hamas attacks of that day.

Attorney Ashraf Hejazi, who represents Hijazi, spoke to +972 about the case. “When we arrived at the police station, they were unable to substantiate any terrorism-related charges, instead accusing her of endangering public safety,” he explained. “The court initially granted police a two-day extension to establish evidence for their accusations, but after two days in detention, she was released as police failed to produce any evidence supporting their claims.”

Before any official police statement was issued, Ben Gvir posted images of Hijazi during her arrest, blindfolded in a police vehicle. Another unauthorized photograph circulated on social media as well, showing her handcuffed in front of an Israeli flag. “We later discovered that Ben Gvir had personally requested her arrest on terrorism charges,” Hejazi said.

Similarly, in the case of Abd Elhadi, Ben Gvir shared staged photos of the actress standing in front of an Israeli flag while in police custody. He subsequently launched a [public attack](#) on the judge who ordered her release, Judge Arafat Taha, labeling him a “domestic enemy.”



The arrest image of Intisar Hijazi, Oct. 8, 2024. (Social media; used in accordance with Clause 27a of the Copyright Law)

“The [distribution] of these arrest images, especially of well-known figures, represents a form of societal abuse,” explains Dr. Maram Masarwi, a lecturer and researcher at Al Qasemi College of Education and Tel Aviv University. “The state’s message is unambiguous: we can reach anyone and silence any voice, even prominent artists like [Dalal Abu Amneh](#). No voice is permitted to rise above the state.”

“When we see a person photographed beneath the flag in a humiliating pose, we unconsciously internalize this power dynamic,” Masarwi continued. “Not everyone has the immunity or ability to confront this power, leading most to practice self-preservation through avoidance. This oppression becomes unconsciously embedded in our collective psyche as a society.”

Abeer Baker, a lawyer representing Abd Elhadi, told +972 that she has observed an increase in indictments against Palestinian women in particular over the past year. “This isn’t random,” Baker argued. “The arrest of women, particularly students and well-known figures, creates social anxiety and intimidates other women.”

“If you want to increase pressure on a community, you target its women. Women are more vulnerable during investigations due to various forms of blackmail, especially privacy violations like phone searches,” Baker explained. “There’s also an element of revenge linked to the sexual violence of October 7 — Palestinian women are being treated as if they were guilty by association.”

‘The fear never leaves me’

In August, Israeli human rights group B’Tselem published [“Welcome to Hell,”](#) a groundbreaking report detailing the systemic abuse of Palestinians and inhuman conditions inside Israeli prisons since October 7 — what they describe as a “network of torture camps.”

The report notes that, despite their different legal status, the hundreds of Palestinian citizens of Israel who were arrested were “subjected to the same conditions [in prisons] as their West Bank counterparts and suffered similar abuses,” including severe physical abuse, sexual humiliation, and denial of basic rights.

Prisoners seen at a courtyard in a prison in southern Israel, February 14, 2024. (Chaim Goldberg/Flash90)

Among the testimonies gathered in the report was that of I.A. — a Palestinian-Israeli university student in her 20s who was arrested in November 2023 over a social media post. She recounted being repeatedly mocked for her appearance by officers and prison guards, and being forced to undergo strip-searches in front of male guards. “The female guard made fun of my clothes, the shape of my body, and my body hair. She made it clear that I disgusted her,” she recalled.

After her release, I.A. returned to university, but she continued to face a hostile environment. “I was really scared Jewish students would attack me,” she said. “Many students now attend classes armed with rifles and guns ... I often [find myself] sitting next to someone armed during a lecture. It’s a really scary situation, especially in the face of ongoing incitement against Arab students.”

Like others in the report, this testimony illustrates how the Israeli prison system serves not only as a tool for physical oppression, but as a method of instilling lasting psychological trauma that extends far beyond prison walls, aimed at suppressing Palestinian citizens’ participation in civic life.

According to Dr. Marwan Dwairy, a clinical psychologist from Nazareth, in the wake of October 7, some Palestinian citizens in Israel “believed they still had [some] democratic space to express their feelings, [even if] minimally or indirectly.” The war on Gaza, he argued, “intensified their feelings of frustration and helplessness, triggering fear for their safety and guilt over their inability to help their people.”

But within days or weeks, they found themselves persecuted by their universities, workplaces, and courts. The psychological impact, Dwairy argued, has been profound: the shrinking space for freedom of expression, combined with war-related anxieties and fear of prosecution, has led to “a significant increase in cases of depression, anxiety and psychosomatic disorders” among Palestinian citizens.

For Abd Elhadi, anxiety was a constant presence during her year under house arrest, especially as Israeli social media users threatened to assault her in her home. “I didn’t feel safe, knowing they had published my address,” she told +972. “Every approaching car made me anxious.” She also began sleeping fully clothed with emergency supplies nearby for fear of being arrested again.

Abeer Baker, Abd Elhadi’s lawyer, noted that the police are continuing to conceal crucial information in her case, including the identities of the two officers who filmed her, and how her photos were leaked to the media. “This case is significant because it exposes state practices, particularly those of the police, and of the prosecution—whose role should be to oversee police conduct, but has instead become complicit in these illegal practices,” she explained. “We’re working to transform the indictment against Maisa into an indictment against the police for their treatment

of female prisoners.”

Even though Abd Elhadi was released from house arrest last month, she cannot escape the psychological toll of the past year. “To this day, I fear for my life,” she said. “I only go to familiar places where I have friends. The fear never leaves me.”

Mariam Farah

P.S.

- +972 Magazine. December 20, 2024:
<https://www.972mag.com/israeli-police-palestinian-women-humiliation-arrests/>
- Mariam Farah is a Palestinian journalist from Haifa.
- Mariam Farah’s articles in +972 Magazine:
<https://www.972mag.com/writer/mariam-farah/>
- Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war – the atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas’ murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel’s retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli society’s growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment – but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is the leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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