



# WELCOME TO HELL

## The Israeli Prison System as a Network of Torture Camps

August 2024  
Executive Summary

| **When we got off the bus, a soldier said to us: "Welcome to hell."**

From the testimony of **Fouad Hassan**, 45, a father of five and resident of Qusrah in Nablus District, who was held in Megiddo Prison. [Read the full testimony here](#)

This report concerns the treatment of Palestinian prisoners and the inhuman conditions they have been subjected to in Israeli prisons since 7 October 2023. B'Tselem's research for the report included collecting testimonies from 55 Palestinians who were incarcerated in Israeli prisons and detention facilities during this time. Thirty of the witnesses are residents of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem; 21 are residents of the Gaza Strip; and four are Israeli citizens.<sup>1</sup> The testimonies were given to B'Tselem after the witnesses were released from prison, the overwhelming majority of them without being tried.

**The testimonies clearly indicate a systemic, institutional policy focused on the continual abuse and torture of all Palestinian prisoners held by Israel:**

Frequent acts of severe, arbitrary violence; sexual assault; humiliation and degradation, deliberate starvation; forced unhygienic conditions; sleep deprivation, prohibition on, and punitive measures for, religious worship; confiscation of all communal and personal belongings; and denial of adequate medical treatment – these descriptions appear time and again in the testimonies, in horrifying detail and with chilling similarities.

Over the years, Israel has incarcerated hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in its prisons, which have always served, above all, as a tool for oppressing and controlling the Palestinian population. The stories presented in this report are the story of thousands of Palestinians, residents of the Occupied Territories and citizens of Israel, who have been arrested since the beginning of the war, as well as Palestinians already incarcerated on 7 October who experienced the massive increase in hostility from prison authorities since that day.<sup>2</sup>

In early July 2024, there were 9,623 Palestinians held in Israeli prisons and detention facilities almost double the number just before the war began. Of these, 4,781 were detained without trial, without being presented with the allegations against them, and without access to the right to defend themselves, in what Israel terms "administrative detention."<sup>3</sup> Some were jailed simply

1 Since October 7, hundreds of Palestinian citizens of Israel have been arrested for suspected incitement and support of terrorist organizations, sometimes over minor acts such as expressing solidarity with the Palestinian people or criticizing Israel, the war and so on. While the political persecution of Palestinians, and particularly Palestinian citizens of Israel, and the rampant incitement against them by public officeholders have grown steadily worse since 7 October and as the war continues, these lie beyond the scope of this report. Nevertheless, the report does present testimonies by three Israeli citizens who were incarcerated under the same conditions as Palestinian residents of the West Bank and faced abuses similar to those described by other inmates (from the West Bank, East Jerusalem included, and the Gaza Strip).

2 In this report, the terms "Palestinian inmates" and "Palestinian prisoners" refer to Palestinian detainees, convicted prisoners and administrative detainees classified as "security prisoners" by the state.

3 See [HaMoked: Center for the Defence of the Individual website](#). Among the 4,781 prisoners held without trial, 3,379 are defined as "administrative detainees," and 1,402 are defined as "illegal combatants."

for expressing sympathy for the suffering of Palestinians. Others were taken into custody during military activity in the Gaza Strip, on the sole grounds that they came under the vague definition of "men of fighting age." Some were imprisoned over suspicions, substantiated or not, that they were operatives or supporters of Palestinian armed groups. The prisoners form a wide spectrum of people from different areas, with varying political opinions and only thing in common – being Palestinian.

**The prisoners' testimonies lay bare the outcomes of a rushed process in which more than a dozen Israeli prison facilities, both military and civilian, were converted into a network of camps dedicated to the abuse of inmates. Such spaces, in which every inmate is intentionally condemned to severe, relentless pain and suffering, operate as de-facto torture camps.**

The abuse consistently described in the testimonies of dozens of individuals held in different facilities was so systematic, that there is no room to doubt an **organized, declared<sup>4</sup> policy of the Israeli prison authorities**. This policy is implemented under the direction of the Minister of National Security Itamar Ben Gvir, whose office oversees the Israel Prison Service (IPS), with the full support of the Israeli government and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The heinous attack by Hamas and other armed Palestinian organizations on 7 October and the widespread targeting of civilians deeply traumatized Israeli society, evoking deep-seated fears and an instinct for revenge among many. For the government and Minister Ben Gvir, this provided an opportunity to press harder with applying their racist ideology, using the oppressive mechanisms at their disposal. These include the prison system, for which they designed a policy aimed at trampling the basic rights of Palestinian prisoners underfoot.

On 18 October, the minister in charge declared a "prison state of emergency" as part of emergency legislation,<sup>5</sup> producing a serious, substantive violation of the most basic human rights of Palestinian prisoners. Koby Yaakobi, a close associate of Minister Ben Gvir appointed by him as IPS Commissioner in the height of the war, declared his intent to "revolutionize" the IPS in keeping with the minister's policies as soon as he took office, naming the downgrading of prison conditions a top priority.<sup>6</sup>

**As the testimonies reveal, the new policy is applied across all prison facilities and to all Palestinian prisoners. Among its main tenets are unrelenting physical and psychological**

4 [A Channel 14 televised report](#) (Hebrew) that aired on 1 February 2024 shows a tour of the Negev (Ketziot) Prison, during which Prison Commander Brigadier General Yosef Knipes was interviewed. The story described the harsh conditions in which Hamas operatives are incarcerated as a result of Minister of Public Security Itamar Ben Gvir's policies. See also, a [story](#) (Hebrew) in the ultra-Orthodox newspaper "Mishpacha," which contains impressions from a visit to Ketziot after October 7. The reporter notes he joined an IRF unit for one of four daily roll calls.

5 On 18 October 2023, Minister of National Security Itamar Ben Gvir declared a "prison state of emergency," which has since been extended every three months over the course of the war and into the present. See Amendment to the Prison Ordinance (No. 64 Temporary Order - Swords of Iron) (Prison Emergency) 5784-2023.

6 See a [ynet](#) (Hebrew) report regarding a letter sent by Lieutenant General Koby Yaakobi to the senior IPS command upon taking office. For an English language story, see [Haaretz](#).

**violence, denial of medical treatment, starvation, withholding of water, sleep deprivation and confiscation of all personal belongings. The overall picture indicates abuse and torture carried out under orders, in utter defiance of Israel's obligations both under domestic law and under international law.**

A clear indicator of the severity of the situation and the moral degradation of the Israeli prison system can be seen in the number of Palestinian prisoners who have died in Israeli custody – no less than 60. The report includes testimonies given to B'Tselem regarding three of these deaths. **Thaer Abu 'Asab**, a 38-year-old from Qalqiliyah held in the Negev (Ketziot) Prison, was found dead in his cell on 18 November 2023. On his body were severe signs of violence.<sup>7</sup> **'Arafat Hamdan**, a 24-year old diabetic from Beit Beit Sira who relied on insulin treatments, was found dead in his cell on 24 October 2023, two days after his arrest. The testimonies reveal he was denied proper medical treatment. **Muhammad a-Sabbar**, a 20-year-old from the town of a-Dhahiriyah who had an intestinal disease requiring a special diet, died at Ofer Prison on 8 February, according to testimonies due to lack of proper nutrition, poor medical care and brazen disregard for his condition.

The transition from what appears to have initially been spontaneous acts of vengeance to a permanent, systematic regime stripping away all protections designed to uphold and ensure the most basic rights of Palestinian prisoners was made possible when the government exploited its powers to enact draconian, injurious "emergency regulations" and applied them in a brazen, gross violation of multiple norms and obligations under Israeli law, international human rights law, the laws of war and humanitarian law. The violations included the widespread, **systematic and prolonged commission of the crime of torture**.<sup>8</sup> Equally important, in these actions, Israel is trampling basic human morality underfoot along with the most protected human rights of prisoners held in state custody.

The legal gatekeepers, such as the High Court of Justice and the State Attorney's Office, ostensibly entrusted with upholding the rule of law and protecting human rights, have bowed their heads in submission to Ben Gvir's agenda, and allowed abuses and the total dehumanization of these prisoners to become the premise for the entire system's operation. **The result is a system that specializes in torture and abuse, where, at any given moment, many thousands of Palestinians are kept behind bars, most without trial, and all in inhuman conditions.**

7 According to various media reports including a [story in Haaretz](#), 19 Negev (Ketziot) prison guards suspected of involvement in the affair were interrogated for the alleged offenses of causing injury, causing harm in aggravated circumstances and obstructing an investigation. To the best of our knowledge, at the time of publication, none of them have been prosecuted. Reports also indicate that five of the suspects were members of the IRF unit and had that they had been transferred out of the unit following the incident. Their appeal to reverse the decision was dismissed in court.

8 The prohibition on torture is one of the cornerstones of international law. Unlike other accepted norms in this legal field, the prohibition on torture is absolute, and no state may derogate from it or suspend it in times of peace, war or emergency. Over the years, this prohibition has been established as a customary rule incumbent on all countries, organizations and persons in the world, irrespective of the applicability of any particular international treaty.

## Testimonies from inside: The reality in Israel's torture camps

The testimonies given to B'Tselem reveal the following prevalent, consistent and widespread conditions.

**Overpopulation and crowding in cells:** The testimonies indicate that cell occupancy more than doubled. Cells intended for six prisoners held 12 to 14 prisoners at a time, with "excess" inmates forced to sleep on the floor, sometimes with no mattress or blanket.

**After 7 October 2023, [...] the prison administration collectively punished us on a regular basis. The first thing was increasing the number of prisoners in each cell from six to 14. This meant reduced privacy and a much longer wait to use the toilet in the cell. In addition, the new detainees who came to the cell had to sleep on the floor, because there were only three bunk beds.**

From the testimony of **S.B.**, a resident of East Jerusalem. [Read the full testimony here](#)

**No sunlight and no air to breathe:** Some prisoners found themselves locked in their cells throughout the entire day; others were allowed out for an hour once every few days in order to shower. Some never saw daylight during their time in prison.

**We were also forbidden to go outside to the yard, unlike before.  
For 191 days, I didn't see the sun.**

From the testimony of **Thaer Halahleh**, 45, a father of four and resident of Kharas in Hebron District, who was held in the Ofer and Nafha prisons. [Read the full testimony here](#)

**Violent roll calls, increased frequency:** According to the testimonies, roll calls and/or cell searches occur three to five times a day. In most cases, inmates were forced to crowd together, facing the wall, with their heads bowed down to the floor and their hands interlocked on the back of their necks, in some cases kneeling in prostration as during prayer. These practices no longer serve their original purpose, and have become an opportunity for prison guards to unleash severe violence and another tool for humiliating and degrading prisoners.

**We were counted three times a day. It was done in a humiliating way, with the guards shouting. The unit would come in heavily armed with gas and batons. [...] There was also a policy of collective punishment and random searches of the cells about once a week. They would force us to undress and then search us, take us out of the cells into the corridor and do a thorough search of the room. It could take an hour or even several hours, and included shouting, assaults and beatings with batons.**

From the testimony of **Muhammad Srur**, 34, a father of two and resident of Ni'lin in Ramallah District, who was held in the Etzion detention facility and in the Ofer and Nafha prisons. [Read the full testimony here](#)

**Withholding access to the courts, aid agencies and legal counsel:** As the Emergency Regulations permit,<sup>9</sup> the vast majority of the witnesses went days, weeks, and in some cases, months before being brought before a judge for the first time, and even then, the hearings took place remotely via Zoom. The menacing presence of the prison guards inhibited prisoners from complaining to the judges or reporting the torture they underwent.

**They took us one by one to a room where we attended our hearings via Zoom. On the way there, IRF members punched me very hard in the chest. An Arabic-speaking guard was in the room, and he listened to the entire conversation between me, the judge, and the lawyer. He threatened that if I complained to the judge, I would pay. The lawyer told me before the hearing that the judges already knew about everything that was going on in the prison, so there was no point talking about it. Still, in the hearing he asked me, "Have you been exposed to violence in prison?" I didn't dare answer, because I was afraid the guards would retaliate and beat me even more brutally. [...] Every time they took me to the room where we attended our court hearings on Zoom, I endured the same path of torture, beating and humiliation. All the inmates in the prison went through that.**

From the testimony of **Firas Hassan**, 50, a father of four and resident of Hindaza in Bethlehem District, who was held in the Negev Prison (Ketziot). [Read the full testimony here.](#)

Meetings with legal counsel were denied for increasingly long durations, reaching as much as 180 days, on the pretext of "dynamic needs on the ground."<sup>10</sup> Most of the witnesses interviewed for this report did not see their lawyers once during their entire incarceration. They were also prevented from meeting with representatives of the ICRC, aid and human rights organizations, the Public Defender's Office,<sup>11</sup> or other official oversight bodies.<sup>12</sup>

9 On 13 October 2023, the government enacted the Emergency Regulations (Time Frames for Processing Unlawful Combatants during War or Military Operations) 5784-2023. The regulations were enacted pursuant to Section 39(f) of Basic Law: The Government. They were initially valid for three months, up to January 2024, and have since been extended several times, most recently up to 31 July 2024. See on this matter, Response on behalf of the State, HCJ 1414/24 Public Committee Against Torture in Israel et al. v. Knesset et al. (pending), available [here](#).

10 The Incarceration of Unlawful Combatants Law (Amendment No. 4 and Swords of Iron Temporary Order) 5764-2023, dated 18 December 2023, stipulated the longest time frames, allowing 75 days before detainee is brought before a judge (compared to 14 days prior); temporary confinement order may be extended for up to 45 days (instead of 96 hours, as prescribed by law, Sec. 10(a)(a)(3)); meeting with legal counsel can be withheld for up to 45 days, or 180 with a supervisor's approval (compared to 10 and 21 days respectively). The Temporary Order has recently been amended again, providing a maximum period of 90 days for denying meeting with legal counsel (Incarceration of Unlawful Combatants Law (Amendment No. 4 and Swords of Iron Temporary Order) (Amendment) 5764-2024 (published on 7 April 2024, Book of Laws 3203, p. 780)).

11 The first Public Defender's report on IPS prisoners and prison conditions came out four months into the war, on 6 February 2024; see [Public Defender's Office website](#) (Hebrew).

12 As media reports indicate, the order to deny security prisoners visits with representatives of the ICRC and/or human rights organizations was a policy directive from the office of Minister of National Security Ben Gvir. See for example [here](#) (Hebrew).

**Confiscation of personal possessions:** One of the very first steps taken by prison authorities as soon as the war began was to confiscate all shared and personal property that Palestinian prisoners kept in their cells.

**We had no clothes other than what we had on, so we couldn't change or really wash them. We wore the same clothes all the time. They held a search every day, and if they found another piece of clothing, they confiscated it. They also carried out random searches at night and took anything they found. One prisoner stayed in the same clothes for 51 days.**

From the testimony of **Sami Khalili**, 41, a resident of Nablus who was serving a prison sentence from 2003 and was held in the Negev Prison (Ketziot). [Read the full testimony here](#)

## Unrelenting physical and psychological abuse

Institutional violence against Palestinian prisoners by prison authorities has become more frequent and more virulent since 7 October. Testimonies attest to physical, sexual, psychological and verbal violence, directed at all Palestinian prisoners and perpetrated in an arbitrary, menacing fashion, usually under a shroud of anonymity.

The scope of violence emerging from the testimonies clarifies that these are not isolated, random incidents, but rather an institutional policy integral to the treatment of prisoners.

**Physical violence and intimidation:** Pepper spray, stun grenades, sticks, wooden clubs and metal batons, gun butts and barrels, brass knuckles and tasers, attack dogs, beatings, punches and kicks – these are just some of the methods used to torture and abuse prisoners according to the testimonies. These assaults were described as a fixture of everyday life in prison and often led to severe injuries, loss of consciousness, broken bones, and in extreme cases even death.

**I leaned against a wall. I had broken ribs and was injured in my right shoulder, my right thumb, and a finger on my left hand. I couldn't move or breathe for half an hour. Everyone around me was screaming in pain, and some inmates were crying. Most were bleeding. It was a nightmare beyond words.**

From the testimony of **Ashraf al-Muhtaseb**, 53, a father of five and resident of Hebron District, who was held in the Etzion detention facility and the Ofer and Negev (Ketziot) prisons. [Read the full testimony here](#)

**We lived in fear and panic. The only expressions we saw on the faces of the guards and the special forces were anger and vengefulness. Even during roll call, they would taunt the prisoners, aiming laser beams at them. They just wanted the prisoner to open his mouth so they could pounce on him, beat him and crush him.**

From the testimony of **Khaled Abu 'Ara**, 24, a resident of 'Akabah in Tubas District, who was held in the Negev Prison (Ketziot)

**Extreme violence during transfers and travel:** The testimonies attest to severe violence used against prisoners during transfers: whether between prison facilities, in prison waiting areas used as way stations prior to admission into prison or travel out of it (also known as "transitions"), and sometimes during transitions between wings and other areas inside the prison itself.

**Sleep deprivation:** Sleep deprivation was an integral part of the daily abuses meted out on inmates. In some cases, the lighting in the cells is on throughout the night; in others, guards played loud music or unpleasant sounds to keep prisoners from sleeping. These are acts that sometimes amount to actual torture.

**The next day, two guards came and took me to a cell the size of 1.5 square meters with no toilet. I was in that cell alone for more than three months. [...] The light was on 24/7 and I lost track of time. I didn't know what time it was or what day was. I had no one to talk to. I almost went crazy in there.**

From the testimony of **M.A.**, Hebron District. [Read the full testimony here](#)

**Sexual violence:** Various testimonies revealed repeated use of sexual violence, in varying degrees of severity, by soldiers or prison guards against Palestinian detainees. The witnesses described blows to the genitals and other body parts of naked prisoners; the use of metal tools and batons to cause genital pain; the photographing of naked prisoners; genitals being grabbed; and strip-searches for the sake of humiliation and degradation. The testimonies also reveal cases of gang sexual violence and assault committed by a group of prison guards or soldiers.

**We were taken to a room which had a lot of clothes, shoes, rings and watches scattered in it. We were stripped naked and even had to take off our underwear. We were searched with a hand-held metal detector. They forced us to spread our legs and then sit half crouching. Then they started hitting us on our private parts with the detector. They rained blows down on us. Then they ordered us to salute an Israeli flag that was hanging on the wall.**

From the testimony of **Sami Khalili**, 41, from Nablus, who had been serving a prison sentence since 2003 and was held in the Negev Prison (Ketziot). [Read the full testimony here](#)

One particularly grave testimony, quoted at length in the report, describes the attempted anal rape with a foreign object of a Palestinian detainee by several prison guards. Similar incidents were mentioned in other testimonies.



## Absence and denial of medical treatment

Many witnesses said that prison guards and medical staff at the detention facilities and prisons refrained from providing essential medical care or refused to do so, even in life-threatening situations. In some cases, medics and other medical staff admitted to prisoners they had received instructions not to provide treatment and medication to inmates, even when the treatment in question was life-saving.

The denial of medical care and improper treatment of patients often led to horrific outcomes, causing long-term injuries. One example can be found in the testimony of **Sufian Abu Saleh**, a 43-year-old from Gaza who was held in the Sde Teiman military detention facility. Abu Saleh's leg had to be amputated as a result of injuries caused by soldier violence, harsh incarceration conditions, inadequate treatment, and indifference on the part of the facility's personnel.

## Food deprivation and starvation

The reduced amounts of food provided to Palestinian prisoners and limited calorie intake are part of the new policy declared by the Minister of National Security when he first took office.<sup>13</sup> The witnesses spoke about the extreme hunger they were forced to endure and the poor quality of the food, which was often undercooked or past its expiry date. The policy of starvation affected prisoners' health and physical shape. The profound lack of food resulted in significant weight loss, sometimes amounting to tens of kilograms.

**The food was terrible, both in quantity and quality. We were given portions that wouldn't satisfy anybody. Most of the time the food was rotten — for instance, the eggs and yogurt. Once, when a detainee in the cell next to ours asked to swap his yogurt because the expiration date had passed, they punished all the inmates in the cell: they set dogs on them, beat them with clubs, dragged them to the bathroom and beat them up. The next day, I could still see their blood on the floor.**

From the testimony of **Hisham Saleh**, 38, a resident of a-Sawiyah in Nablus District, who was held in Ofer Prison. [Read the full testimony here](#)

<sup>13</sup> Upon taking office in January 2024, incoming IPS Commissioner, Lieutenant General Koby Yaakobi, declared his number one priority for the IPS was downgrading prison conditions for Palestinian prisoners, according to the policy of the minister in charge (see: Meir Turgeman, "[Acting IPS Commissioner Presents: 'A Revolution per Minister Ben Gvir's Policy: 'Downgrading Terrorists' Prison Conditions: No. 1 Priority.](#)" Ynet, 24 January 2024 (Hebrew). On 9 November 2023, Minister Ben Gvir held a meeting to discuss the budgetary implications of the Gaza war for the IPS, including the cost of food for Palestinian prisoners: "At the conclusion of the discussion, the minister ordered to consider changes to security prisoners' menu. Accordingly, the logistics division chief made changes to the menu which entered into effect on 1 December 2023, per the Commissioner's orders of 16 October 2023". The minister's order to deny Palestinian prisoners meat products was explained as follows: "Our hostages in Gaza are suffering from hunger... As far as I'm concerned, they [Palestinian prisoners] will get the minimum we are obligated to give them." (see, Meir Turgeman, "[Ben Gvir v. IPS: Change Nukhba Terrorists' Menu](#)", Ynet, 31 December 2023, and a similar English language report available [here](#); see also, posts on the Minister's Twitter account [here](#) and [here](#) (Hebrew). See also, Josh Breiner, "[Israel Reduces Food for Palestinian Security Prisoners, Conceals Data, Sources Say](#)", Haaretz, 26 June 2024.

## Hygiene and cutting off the water supply

Witnesses spoke of being forced to live in filth during their incarceration, as a result of the blanket confiscation of bathing, cleaning and washing supplies, the water supply cut off in cells, and the limited access to shower facilities that were not meant for such a large number of prisoners in the first place. In many cases, toilet tanks had running water for only one hour a day as well. Prison cells were turned into a sanitary hazard and made unfit for human habitation. These conditions led to the development and spread of diseases and various health problems.

**We felt our bodies were rotting with dirt. Some of us had rashes. There was no hygiene. There was no soap, shampoo, hair brushes or nail clippers. After a month and a half, we got shampoo for the first time. There were no cleaning supplies either, and it was impossible to clean the cell or the toilet, or to wash clothes.**

From the testimony of **Muhammad Srur**, 34, a father of two and resident of Ni'lin in Ramallah District, who was held in the Etzion detention facility and in the Ofer and Nafha prisons. [Read the full testimony here](#)

**The cold water taps in the rooms ran only one hour a day, from 2:30 P.M. to 3:30 P.M. You could only use the toilet — which is inside the cell — during that hour, because otherwise, it was impossible to flush. But sometimes people couldn't hold it in and it was disgusting, causing a stench and bad hygiene conditions.**

From the testimony of **Z.A.**, East Jerusalem. [Read the full testimony here](#)

## Keter – the Israel Prison Service Initial Reaction Force (IRF)

Among the IPS's special units, the Initial Reaction Force (IRF), known in Hebrew as Keter, which operates at the Negev (Ketziot) and Ofer prisons, featured prominently in the testimonies given to B'Tselem. Two witnesses referred to it as the "death squad."<sup>14</sup>

The collection of testimonies given to B'Tselem shows the IRF has been heavily involved in the torture and physical, sexual and mental abuse of prisoners since 7 October. According to the witnesses, IRF personnel wear masks and black uniforms with no identification tags. They are armed with batons and firearms, and often accompanied by dogs. In one case, the unit reportedly used a stun grenade. Impossible to identify, and safe in the knowledge they would face no

<sup>14</sup> See the September 2010 issue of IPS magazine, Roim Shabas ("Seeing the IPS"). The commander of the Negev (Ketziot) Prison at the time, Brigadier General Shlomi Cohen, established the special unit in practice (see [here](#) (Hebrew)). Cohen currently serves as the IPS representative at the Security Secretariat of the Ministry of Public Security ([here](#) (Hebrew)). For mentions of the IRF's presence at Ofer Prison, see April 2012 issue of the IPS Magazine [here](#) (Hebrew). It is not clear when exactly the IRF was established at that facility, but a 2015 figure notes that the unit operating at Ofer Prison has 30 combatants out of a total of 300 prison guards (see [here](#) (Hebrew)). In 2019, members of the unit operating at Ofer Prison were described as a "unit of combatants responsible for the initial response during a riot in the facility and other emergencies," available [here](#) (Hebrew) and [here](#) (Hebrew).

consequences for their actions, members of the unit employed brazen, unbridled violence that amounts to abuse and torture.

## **The Israeli apartheid regime's incarceration project**

The story of Israel's incarceration project did not begin on 7 October, nor with Itamar Ben Gvir's appointment as Minister of National Security. The current situation, as horrifying as it may be, cannot be fully understood without examining the key role this project has played in the social and political oppression of the Palestinian collective throughout the years.

The prison system is one of several means of control and oppression used by the Israeli apartheid regime to preserve Jewish supremacy between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. For decades, Israel has used the incarceration of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from all walks of life to undermine and unravel the social and political fabric that binds the Palestinian population. According to various estimates, since 1967, Israel has imprisoned over 800,000 Palestinian men and women from the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip, which accounts for about 20% of the total population and about 40% of all Palestinian men.<sup>15</sup>

The scale of this incarceration project means there are hardly any Palestinian families without a member who has been through the Israeli prison system. The project is underpinned by the same repressive logic found elsewhere in Israeli apartheid. Here, too, Palestinians are completely dehumanized and treated as a homogenous, faceless mass, stripped of any individual identity. All are deemed "human animals" and "terrorists" simply because they are behind bars, whether their detention was justified or arbitrary, lawful or not. This is how their abuse and degradation, and the violation of their rights, become permissible.

The incarceration project is one of the most brutal and extreme manifestations of Israel's system of control over the Palestinians. The released prisoners who spoke to B'Tselem for this report described a wide range of measures used for control and oppression. The value of their testimonies goes beyond providing an account of the appalling reality inside Israeli prisons and detention facilities since October 7. They are a window into a much broader reality.

Given the political function that Israel's prison system fills, in the context of the accelerated dehumanization of Palestinians in Israeli discourse, a radically right-wing government, a weak judicial system swept up in public sentiment and a minister in charge of prisons who takes pride in violating human rights — this system has become an instrument for the widespread, systematic and arbitrary oppression of Palestinians through torture.

<sup>15</sup> See: [Ben-Natan, Smadar. "The Boundaries of the Carceral State: Accounting for the Role of Military Incarceration". Theoretical Criminology, 2023.](#)

**The testimonies presented in this report provide an account of how Israeli prison facilities have been turned into a network of torture camps.**

**Given the severity of the acts, the extent to which the provisions of international law are being violated, and the fact that these violations are directed at the entire population of Palestinian prisoners daily and over time – the only possible conclusion is that in carrying out these acts, Israel is committing torture that amounts to a war crime and even a crime against humanity.**

We appeal to all nations and to all international institutions and bodies, including the International Criminal Court, to do everything in their power to put an immediate end to the cruelties meted out on Palestinians by Israel's prison system, and to recognize the Israeli regime operating this system as an apartheid regime that must come to an end.

**[Read the full testimonies on B'Tselem's website](https://www.btselem.org/publications/202408_welcome_to_hell)**

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