

Palestinian Released From Israeli Prison Describes Beatings, Sexual Abuse and Torture

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Amer Abu Halil, a West Bank resident who was active in Hamas and was jailed without trial, recalls the wartime routine he endured in Israel's Ketziot Prison

Amer Abu Halil, who was recently released from Ketziot Prison, demonstrating how he was forced to walk, with hands bound behind his back. Credit: Alex Levac

There is no resemblance between the young man who sat with us this week for hours in his backyard, and the video of his release from prison last week. In the clip, the same young man - bearded, unkempt, pale and gaunt - is seen as barely able to walk; now he's well groomed and sports a crimson jacket with a checkered handkerchief tucked into its pocket. For 192 days, he was forced to remain in the same clothes in prison - maybe that accounts for his extreme elegance now.

Nor is there any resemblance between what he relates in a never-ending cascade of words that's hard to staunch - more and more shocking accounts, one after the other, backed up by dates, physical exemplifications and names - and what we knew until now about what's been happening in Israeli detention facilities since the start of the war. Since his release, on Monday of last week, he hasn't slept at night for fear of being arrested again. And seeing a dog in the street terrifies him.

The testimony of Amer Abu Halil, from the town of Dura, near Hebron, who was active in Hamas, about what is going on in Ketziot Prison in the Negev, is even more shocking than the [grim account reported in this column](#) a month ago, of another prisoner, Munther Amira, aged 53, who was incarcerated in Ofer Prison. Amira likened his prison to Guantanamo, Abu Halil calls his prison Abu Ghraib, evoking the notorious facility in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and later used by the Allies following Saddam's overthrow.

Among candidates for U.S. sanctions, Israel's Prison Service should be next on the list. This is apparently the realm where all the sadistic instincts of the minister of national security, Itamar Ben-Gvir, find their outlet.

We were accompanied on the visit to Abu Halil's home in Dura this week by two field researchers of B'Tselem, the Israeli human rights organization: Manal al-Ja'bari and Basel al-Adrah. Abu Halil, who's 30, is married to 27-year-old Bushra and is the father of 8-month-old Tawfiq, who was born while his father was in prison. Abu Halil met him for the first time last week, though it's still emotionally difficult for him to hold the infant in his arms.



Amer Abu Halil, with his son. Credit: Alex Levac

Abu Halil is a graduate in communications from Al-Quds University in Abu Dis, adjacent to Jerusalem, where he was active in the school's Hamas branch, and he is a former spokesperson for the Palestinian cellular communications company Jawwal.

Since his first arrest, in 2019, he's spent a cumulative period of 47 months in Israeli imprisonment, much of it in "administrative detention" - in which the detainee is not brought to trial. The Palestinian Authority also wanted to take him into custody at one time, but he didn't report for the interrogation. Like some of his brothers, Amer is active in Hamas but he's not a "senior figure in Hamas," he says in his few prison-Hebrew words.

The brothers: Umar, 35, lives in Qatar; Imru, 27, who is suffering from cancer, is incarcerated in Ofer Prison for his activity in Hamas and has spent seven years imprisoned in Israel and 16 months in a Palestinian facility; 23-year-old Amar is sitting with us in a white robe and a kaffiyeh - the imam of the mosque in Dura, he hopes soon to hold the same position in a mosque in North Carolina, which he would like to immigrate to. Not since 2013 have all the brothers - Amer, Amar, Imru and Umar - sat together for a holiday meal. Someone was always in custody.

On one occasion, Amer Abu Halil was summoned to an interrogation by the Shin Bet security service, through a call to his father: "Why haven't you been praying in the mosque lately?" the Shin Bet agent asked him. "Your quiet is suspicious." "When I'm quiet you suspect me, and when I'm not quiet - the same," he told his interrogator. That's how they "sat on" him, as the term goes.

He was in and out of interrogation rooms up until December 4, 2022, when his home was raided in the dead of the night, he was again arrested, and again he was sent into administrative detention with no trial. This time it was for four months, which was extended twice, each time for an additional four months. Abu Halil was slated to be released in November 2023. But then the war broke out and the prison underwent a radical change. The terms of all the Hamas prisoners who were scheduled for release - Abu Halil among them - were extended automatically and sweepingly.

In his latest term, he worked as a cook in the prison's Hamas wing. On the Thursday before the war broke out, he thought of preparing falafel for the wing's 60 inmates, but then decided to postpone the falafel until Saturday. On Friday he delivered the sermon in the afternoon prayers and talked about hope. On Saturday he awoke at 6 A.M. to prepare the falafel. Inmates there were no longer allowed to prepare their own food or deliver sermons. Not long afterward, Channel 13 broadcast images of Hamas pickup trucks driving through Sderot, and a barrage of rockets fired from Gaza fell in the area of the prison, which is north of Jerusalem, in the West Bank. "Allahu akbar" - "God is greatest" - the prisoners said accordingly, as a blessing. They hid under their beds from the rockets; for a moment they thought Israel had been conquered.

Around midday, the prison guards arrived and impounded all the televisions and radios and the cell phones that had been smuggled in. The next morning they didn't open the cell doors. The shackling, beating and abuse began on October 9. On October 15, large forces entered the prison and confiscated all personal items in the cells, including watches and even the ring Abu Halil wore that

had belonged to his late father. That marked the start of 192 days during which he was unable to change clothes. His cell, which was meant to hold five inmates, now held 20, afterward 15 and more recently 10. Most of them slept on the floor.

On October 26, large forces of the Prison Service's Keter unit, a tactical intervention unit, accompanied by dogs, one of them unleashed, stormed into the prison. The wardens and the dogs went on a rampage, attacking the inmates whose screams left the whole prison in a state of terror, Abu Halil recalls. The walls were soon covered with inmates' blood. "You are Hamas, you are ISIS, you raped, murdered, abducted and now your time has come," said one warden to the prisoners. The blows that followed were brutal, the inmates were shackled.

Ketziot Prison, in May. Credit: Eliyahu HersHKovitz

The beatings became a daily affair. Occasionally the guards demanded of prisoners that they kiss an Israeli flag and declaim, "Am Yisrael Chai!" - "The People of Israel live." They were also ordered to curse the prophet Mohammed. The usual call to prayer in the cells was prohibited. The prisoners were afraid to utter any word starting with the sound "h" lest the guards suspect they had said "Hamas."

On October 29, the supply of running water to the cells was halted, except between 2 P.M. and 3:30 P.M. And each cell was permitted only one bottle for storing water for an entire day. That was to be shared by 10 inmates, including for use in the toilet inside cell. The doors of the toilet were ripped off by the guards; the inmates covered themselves with a blanket when they relieved themselves. To avoid a stench in the cell, they tried to contain themselves until water was available. During the hour and a half when there was running water, the prisoners allocated five minutes in the toilet to each cellmate. With no cleaning supplies, they cleaned the toilet and the floor with the bit of shampoo they were given, using their bare hands. There was no electricity at all. Lunch consisted of a small cup of yogurt, two small, half-cooked sausages and seven slices of bread. In the evening they received a small bowl of rice. Sometimes the guards delivered the food by throwing it on the floor it.

On October 29, the inmates of Abu Halil's cell requested a squeegee to wash the floor. The response to that was to send the terrifying Keter unit into their cell. "Now you will be like dogs," the guards ordered. The prisoners' hands were cuffed behind their back. Even before they were shackled, they were ordered to move only with their upper body bent over. They were led to the kitchen, where they were stripped and forced to lie one on top of the other, a pile of 10 naked prisoners. Abu Halil was the last. There, they were beaten with clubs and spat on.

A guard then started to stuff carrots into the anus of Abu Halil and other prisoners. Sitting at home now, reciting his story, Abu Halil lowers his gaze and the flow of words slows down. He's embarrassed to talk about this. Afterward, he continues, dogs hunched over them and attacked them. They were then allowed to put on their underwear before being led back to their cell, where they found their clothes thrown into a heap.

The loudspeaker in the room wasn't silent for a second, with curses of Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar or a sound check in the middle of the night to the tune of "Get up, you pigs!" to deprive the prisoners of sleep. The Druze guards cursed and abused in Arabic. They underwent checks with a metal detector while naked, and the device was also used to deliver blows to their testicles. During a security check on November 2 they were made to chant "Am Yisrael am hazak" ("The people of Israel is a strong people"), a variation on a theme. Dogs urinated on their thin mattresses, leaving an awful smell. One prisoner, Othman Assi from Salfit, in the central West Bank, pleaded for more gentle treatment: "I am disabled." The guards told him, "Here no one is disabled," but agreed to remove his handcuffs.

Yet the worst was still to come.

November 5. It was a Sunday afternoon, he recalls. The administration decided to move the Hamas prisoners from Block 5 to Block 6. The inmates of cells 10, 11 and 12 were ordered to come out with hands bound behind their back and the usual hunched-over walk. Five guards, whose names Abu Halil provides, took them to the kitchen. Again they were stripped. This time they were kicked in the testicles. The guards would lunge at them and kick, lunge and kick, again and again. Nonstop brutality for 25 minutes. "We are Bruce Lee," the guards proclaimed. They shook them and shoved them around like balls from one corner of the room to the other, then moved them to their new cells in Block 6.

Guards claimed that they had heard Abu Halil saying a prayer on behalf of Gaza. In the evening the Keter unit entered his cell and began beating everyone, including 51-year-old Ibrahim al-Zir from Bethlehem, who is still in prison. One of his eyes was almost torn out from the blows. The prisoners were then forced to lie on the floor as the guards stepped on them. Abu Halil lost consciousness. Two days later came another round of blows and he passed out again. "This is your second Nakba," the guards said, referring to the catastrophe experienced by Palestinians at the time of Israel's founding. One of the guards struck Abu Halil on the head with a helmet.



Abu Halil. Credit: Alex Levac

Between November 15 and 18 they were beaten three times a day. On November 18, the guards asked which of them was Hamas, and no one replied. The blows weren't long in coming. Afterward they were asked, "Who here is Bassam?" Again, no one replied, because none of them was named Bassam - and again the Keter unit was called in. They came that evening. Abu Halil says that this time he passed out before being beaten, from sheer fright.

Around this time, Tair Abu Asab, a 38-year-old prisoner died in Ketziot Prison. It's suspected that he was beaten to death by guards for refusing to bow his head as ordered. Nineteen guards were detained for questioning on suspicion of having attacked Abu Asab. They were all released without any charges.

In reply to a request for comment, a Prison Service spokesperson sent Haaretz the following statement this week:

"The Prison Authority is one of [Israel's] security organizations, and it operates in accordance with the law, under the strict supervision of many oversight authorities. All prisoners are held in accord with the law and with strict protection of their basic rights and under the supervision of a professional and trained corrections staff.

"We are not familiar with the claims described [in your article], and to the best of our knowledge, they are not correct. Nonetheless, every prisoner and detainee has the right to complain via the accepted channels, and their claims will be examined. The organization operates according to a clear policy of zero tolerance of any action that violates the values of the Prison Service.

“With regard to the death of the prisoner, you should be in touch with the unit for the investigation of prison officers.”

Gideon Levy, Alex Levac

P.S.

• Haaretz. Apr 28, 2024 12:05 am IDT:
<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/twilight-zone/2024-04-28/ty-article-magazine/.premium/palestinian-released-from-israeli-prison-describes-beatings-sexual-abuse-and-torture/0000018f-15e9-d2e1-a7df-15efb6590000>