



Arab Organisation for Human Rights in UK

Jericho Prison

A Palestinian “Abu Ghraib”



Despite the distant location, torture is evident



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Introduction

The city of Jericho is located in Palestine, several kilometers away of the Jordan River, on the northern side of the Dead Sea. Jericho is the lowest ground spot on earth, and the most ancient living inhabited city since the rise of human societies. Politically, Jericho became the first city in the West Bank to be ruled by the Palestinian Authority in 1994, following the signing of the Gaza-Jericho Agreement -part of Oslo Accord, between Israeli Occupation Authority and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

Since then, the Palestinian security forces took control over Jericho Prison from the Israeli Occupation, who had earlier -in turn- took over the prison from the Jordanian Authorities, after the June 1967 war. Hundreds of Palestinians had been detained beneath the walls of this Prison, where they had been subject to various horrendous ways of torture. The majority of those detainees were set free after the Oslo Accord; however, and only few months later, the Prison halls were full again, this time by the dozens of political detainees arrested by the Palestinian Authority on the background of their political views and their refusal of the peace process. Once again, the detainees have been subject to violent and inhumane forms of systematic torture, that exceeded probably that practiced by the Occupation Authorities.



Jericho Prison...

Changing Times, but One Reality

It could be established that all of the Prisons under the control of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank have been subject of continuous concerns on issues of torture and corruption, with frequent violations committed against detainees. Yet, Jericho Prison is arguably of the worst records in this context, according to the testimonials of current and former detainees who refer to it as "*The Guantanamo of Palestine*", "*Abu Ghraib of Palestine*", or "*Abu Zaabal of the West Bank*¹".

Between 1994 and 2000, Jericho Prison has been a central spot for interrogating political detainees, classified by the PA as of serious cases or threat, being mainly those active in armed resistance and those who have been planning and implementing acts of armed resistance against Israeli targets, including those who have been sentenced for long jail periods.

The situation continued as such until the outbreak of the second *Intifada*² [*Intifadat al-Aqsa*] in 2000, when Israel have systematically targeted the majority of the PA prisons and security centers/institutions in the West Bank and destroyed them completely. Jericho Prison was an exception, deliberately, as suggested by many analysts who argued that the Israeli

¹ *Abu Zaabal* is an infamous Prison in Egypt, with a black reputation on horrendous acts of systematic torture against detainees.

² uprising

Occupation Authorities need the prison's continued role that support on both the near and far future the Occupation's political and military goals.

On 15/1/2002, Jericho Prison came back again to stir high controversy, when the PA arrested the Secretary General of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Ahmad Sa'adat, along with some of his companions, and detained them in Jericho Prison, after accusing them with the assassination on the Israeli Minister of Tourism, Rehavam Ze'evi. *Sa'adat* and his mates were transferred shortly after their arrest to Jericho Prison, as per the terms of a specific agreement sponsored by the US and UK. The agreement did not last long, when on 16/4/2006, the Israeli Occupation Authorities broke into the prison, arresting *Sa'adat* and his mates, in addition to *Fouad al-Shoubaki*, member of *Fatah's* revolutionary council. Israel claims that *al-Shobaki*, a former finance director of the Palestinian Security Services, bankrolled a foiled shipment of 50 tons of weapons from Iran, transported aboard the ship, the *Karine A*, with the latter seized by Israeli naval commandos.

Following the breaking into the Prison, the Palestinian Security services decided to limit the detainees of Jericho Prison to detainees of criminal rather than political record, transferring all political detainees. Yet this decision was reversed later, and again, in mid 2007, the PA started a wide campaign against Hamas movement and arrested large number of political detainees in Jericho prison, on the pretext of taking preventive measures against any potential takeover of the West Bank by the movement, as happened in the Gaza Strip. The pains and woes of political detainees revived back again in the corridors of the Prison, even at a worse scale than before.

Between 2007 and 2014, the Palestinian Security Services have transferred hundreds of political detainees from the various cities and towns of the West Bank to the Prison, in the context of a wider campaign to terrorize and immobilize all forms of opposition. Those who were freed from the prison were often immediately re-arrested by the Israeli Occupation Authorities, with the latter using accusations provided by the Prison Authority's Palestinian interrogators.

More alarming yet is that early in 2014, the Palestinian Security Services and especially the General Intelligence Services, have been transferring large number of detainees to Jericho Prison, regardless of the their charge or situation. Dozens of university students were transferred thus, mainly activists in student unions and assemblies, forcing them to stay in this distant prison, far away from their families, the media, and legal institutions. Similarly, political detainees were transferred especially to this Prison where the PA intends to keep them arrested for long periods without mobilizing opposition campaigns calling for their freedom.

Many eyewitnesses have stated that often at late night, they hear screams and calls for help by the prisoners while being subject to torture; at distances beyond 300 meters away from the interrogation centres.

Eyewitnesses and Evidence

According to the testimonies of several political detainees who were freed recently from Jerich Prison, the Palestinian Intelligence Service who runs this Prison, is still employing physical and psychological torture against the detainees there.

Former detainees, Jawad Bilal Shalbi (22 years), described to the organization the inhumane torture he suffered, including *al-Shabah* (forcing into a specific position for long hours) and forced standing for long hours while raising their hands and opening their legs wide, not to mention leaving them hung from the ceiling for long hours while pressuring the shoulder nerves; this is often accompanied by pouring cold water to deprive the detainees from sleep, and verbal insults.

Al-Shalbi remained in isolated detention in a small cell, 2*1.5 meteres, for five days, where he had to sleep on its cold floor without any mattress. He was also not allowed to bath or change his cloth for more than ten days; and deprived of family visits throughout the whole period of detention.

Shalbi, who is completing his PhD Pharmacology degree at *Al-Najah National University* in Nablus, added that he was arrested on 8/6/2014, and only one day following that, he was transferred to Jericho Prison where he stayed one week in isolation, before being transferred to other cells with inmates, spending a total of 38 days [he was released on 15/7/2014].



Shalbi stated that two weeks after his arrest, he stood before the Jericho court, where he was accused of stirring sectarian strife, thus remained in custody; adding also that while he was there, he saw one of the detainees from the village of *Beeta* in Nablus Governorate, with his hands "engraved" from being hung from the ceiling while handcuffed.

In the same context, another former political detainee and Pharmacology student at Al-Quds Abu Deiss University, Dia'a Hatem Qashou' (25 years), from the city of *Al-Beireh*, presented his testimony. Dia'a who had been arrested by the Palestinian Security Services ten times, and had spent a total of more than nine months in prison, stated: "On 19/10/2013, at ten am sharp in the morning, a Palestinian force from the intelligence service broke into my house in the area of Umm al-Sharayt in Al-Beireh city. They inspected the house and took my laptop, then they transferred me to a centre for the Palestinian Intelligence Services in the area of Al-Balou'. Five days later, I was transferred to Jericho Prison, following the start of my hunger strike. I remained in Jericho Prison for ten days, then I was released."

Al-Falqa [Spanking on the feet]:

A Common Interrogation Practice

Dia'a Qashou' added that he did not suffer direct physical torture there, yet, he met detainees who confirmed that they did suffer from grave spanking and torture, including the political detainee Baha'a Abu Shkheidem and his brother, who suffered from heavy spanking on their feet [*Al-Falqa*] hundreds of times, and from *Shabah* [forcing into a specific position for long hours] for several days, on the pretext of being active in student associations at the Polytechnic University in Hebron [*Al-Khalil*].

According to Qasho'u, the building of Jericho Prison is very old, and consists of one level, where the section of political detainees is located. This section includes five halls, each hall is almost an independent prison isolated from the other. The detainees in each hall know nothing about detainees in other halls, because they are not allowed to meet each other, neither during daily routine, nor while being outside.

Qasho'u detailed further that the doors of the halls are of heavy metal, bordered by strong elastic insulating layers, and with a small window that can only be opened by the Jail Officer from outside to monitor the mates while in their rooms. The hall itself does not include any windows except for a small one right up near the ceiling, but this is also closed with bored metal, thus allowing only little air and light. Beds are simply two leveled metal beds.



In turn, Former Prisoner in Jericho Prison, Mu'tasem Samir Saqf al-Heit (26 years), from the city of Nablus, provided his testimony: "On 13/1/2015, I was arrested by the Palestinian Intelligence Services in Nablus and transferred to Al-Junaid Prison in Nablus, where I suffered continuous torture and *Shabah* for days, regardless of bad weather conditions. Then I was transferred to Jericho Prison, where I had also suffered torture for days". He added: "For the detainees, the worst thing about Jericho Prison is psychological suffering, besides physical suffering. Detainees are deprived their names and called by the number of their cells, so my name was (6); similarly jail officers also are called by symbolic names: Adam 1, Adam 2; not to mention the distant location of the prison, the long distance separating between the prisoner and his family, and the complete absence of law and legislations. I have remained on custody as per the Governor's orders, until I was released on 9/2/2015 by a bail."

Al-Shabah, Forms and Flairs

On his behalf, Fawzi Beshkar (21 years), a former detainee in Jericho Prison, from the city of Nablus, described his detention experience: "On 23/12/2014, a large force of the Palestinian Intelligence Service broke into my house at Al-Askar refugee camp, where they took me to Al-Junaid Prison, and there I had been interrogated on issues related to my student activism at Al-Najah National University. Interrogation has been accompanied with torture, including *al-Shabah* and verbal insults; and on the next day I was transferred to Jericho Prison."

Beshkar added: "Following a short interrogation session, I came back to my cell to find out that they took everything from it except one bottle for water and another for urine. Then, *Al-Shabah* torture started, with my hands cuffed and my eyes folded; I was forced to stay standing from Al-'Ishaa [evening] to Al-Fajer [Dawn] time."

Beshkar continues: "During interrogation, I was forced to take off the majority of my clothes, except for a light shirt and pants; knowing that the weather in Jericho is very cold at night. I had suffered various forms of torture, including *Shabah* on chairs with eyes folded and hands cuffed under the chair which was defected; I had been kept there until I couldn't resist screaming from severe pain. I was deprived of sleep for five consecutive days once, and another time for three consecutive days, where interrogators take the mattress and linens, spill cold water all around the cell, and hit the cell door consistently throughout the night. I had spent 27 days in isolation, then had been transferred to a section



that included other detainees. I remained in Jericho Prison for 43 days, after which I was transferred again to Al-Junaid Prison, where I spent one week, then was released by bail on 10/2/2015."

Beshkar emphasizes that some detainees in Jericho Prison had been forced to admit committing acts they had not committed, just to relieve themselves from the heavy torture they had been suffering; as was the case of the detainee Abdul-Fattah Suwailem from Qalqilya, "who suffered way more painful torture compared to what I suffered" according to Beshkar.

No Mercy, even to the Ill

Former detainee Mahmoud 'Assida from the town of Tall in Nablus governorate, described his detention experience at Jericho Prison saying: "On 15/11/2014, I was ordered to see the Intelligence Services at their centre in the city of Nablus, and four hours after my arrival there, I was transferred to Al-Junaid Prison. When I was shown to the medical services section, a routine in the process of detention, I told the doctor that I suffer from sick sinus syndrome and that I had two heart surgeries performed, but none of these considerations were of regard to the merciless interrogators during torture."

'Assida added: "Several hours following my arrest, the interrogation process started, mainly about my student activism at Al-Najah National University. Interrogators adopted violent techniques; I had been subject to *Shabah* with my hand hung to the ceiling, and I lost my consciousness. I woke up to find myself at the National Hospital in Nablus, but that same evening I was transferred again from the hospital to Jericho Prison with no regards or mercy towards my health condition."

"In Jericho, I had been interrogated for four consecutive days from Saturday till Tuesday, then I was transferred to a round of consecutive *Shabah*, after forcing me to take off the majority of my clothes. The weather was harsh and very cold, yet I had been under *Shabah* for three consecutive days, not allowed to sit regardless of the severe pain. Few days later, another round of torture started again, where the interrogating officer cuffed my hands and folded my eyes, then I was transferred to

one of the toilets in the Prison; and to make sure that I never sat, officers would spill water on the ground every now and then. I remained standing as such for four consecutive days, deprived of sleep."

'Assida further added: "Interrogators went further with their torture aptitudes. Sometimes, they would cuff my hands to a high pipe, two meters above ground, and leave me hung as such for four consecutive hours, regardless of my severe pain and screaming. I had suffered that twice."... "On my sixteenth day in detention, the interrogating officer hit me six times on my face, kicked me on my head, and once while I was under *Shabah* in a toilet, a group of officers came and forced me to the ground while I am still cuffed and my eyes folded; they dragged me on the stinking wet toilet floor while I was screaming."

'Assida recalls that during one of the torture sessions, the interrogating officer ordered him to sit on a backless chair, tilted to the back, cuffed his hands to the legs of the chair, and pushed him into an obtuse angle position - *Shabha al-Mawza* [the banana-shaped *Shabah*]; this would persist for two hours. I had been suffering torture in different forms and flairs until my 22nd day in detention. I was allowed only few hours of sleep every four days."

A Death Case

One of the detainees, Ayman Muhammad Sharif Samara (40 years), from Al-Yamoun in Jenin Governorate, died while in detention at Jericho Prison on the first of March in 2013. Samara's family believes that Ayman died as a result of the torture he suffered, while the Palestinian Authority claims his death was natural as he had suffered from diabetes, high blood pressure and other diseases.

Varying Numbers

The number of political detainees at Jericho Prison varies continuously, while noting that it is around 20 to 25 detainee, amongst them are Islam Hamad and Atef al-Salhi from Salwad in Ramallah Governorate. Hamad and al-Salhi had been detained for the longest period compared to their mates at Jericho Prison, while the PA refuses to release them even though they had completed their three years jail sentencing several months ago.

Political detainees currently at the Jericho Prison also include: Bassem Hussein Dawoud, Hasan al-Salmi, Muhammad Nassoura, from Qalqilya Governorate; Ayman Abu Eid and Hussam Shamasneh from the village of Badou to the north-west of Jerusalem; and several detainees from Hebron, Ramallah and Nablus. The charges they face are often their



affiliation to Hamas or Islamic Jihad movements; while few ones are Fatah members who are affiliated with Muhammad Dahlan, such as Hazem al-Tatr, managing director of the Office of Fatah Parliament Members in Gaza Strip, whose residence was in the West Bank.

Families of detainees from all northern, mid, and southern governorates state that they are incapable of visiting their detained ones at Jericho Prison because of its geographically distant location. The Prison is at some 72 kilometers away from Nablus city, 75 kilometers away from Hebron, and 100 kilometers away from Qalqilya. One lawyer who represents political detainees in the West Bank (preferred not to disclose her name) stated that even she cannot attend the sessions that involve her clients at Jericho Prison because of the long distance.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Jericho Prison is considered an illegal detention center as per the laws and legislations of detention. Prisons inside the lands of the PA fall under the scrutiny of the Ministry of Justice, represented by the General Prosecutor. The latter is required by law to perform regular inspections on Prisons and to investigate on the Prisoners' complaints, which are tasks that the General Prosecutor cannot perform currently at the detention centres ruled by the Security Services, including Jericho Prison.

Such acts and practices by the Palestinian Intelligence Services, namely illegal detention at Jericho Prison, depriving the detainees from family and lawyer visits, and practicing physical and psychological torture, are considered grave violations to the Geneva Fourth Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War.

The head of the PA, President Mahmoud Abbas, is in turn fully accountable with regards to such acts of arbitrary detention, inhumane treatment, and torture. The Signing of Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) implies that the President and every official who shares the responsibility for acts of detention and torture, is thus accountable for acts of war crimes according to the eighth article of the Statute.

The international community, especially the European Union who maintains a special mission for the training of the various security services, shall pressure the leaders of the PA to stop transferring detainees to Jericho Prison, and to more generally stop acts of political detention and torture against civilians.
