



Samidoun

Palestinian Prisoners,
Leading with Steadfastness



By Charlotte Kates

Every day in Palestine, the morning dawns with dozens of news reports of night raids, arrests, and invasions by Israeli occupation forces. This is not only the case amid the recent uprising in which over 2,400 Palestinians have been detained and 500 Palestinians from 1948 occupied Palestine – Palestinian citizens of Israel – were targeted for arrest under the so-called Operation Law and Order. Indeed, imprisonment has formed a fundamental part of Israel’s colonial arsenal since 1948. Despite the intention to use political imprisonment to suppress Palestinian resistance and frustrate the Palestinian liberation movement, however, Palestinian prisoners have remained political leaders and symbols of steadfastness for the struggle as a whole.

Imprisonment as a colonial technique did not begin with Zionism; even in occupied Palestine, many of the most infamous practices used today – such as administrative detention, imprisonment without charge or trial, which can be repeatedly renewed for up to years at a time – were introduced by the British colonial mandate and then enthusiastically adopted by the Zionist project. Much like the home demolitions used today to target the families, communities, and loved ones of Palestinian prisoners and resistance fighters, British colonizers earlier exploded the homes of Palestinians fighting colonialism.

Imprisonment is not only used as a weapon against the Palestinian movement inside occupied Palestine. Imperialist powers such as the United States, France, and the United Kingdom provide nearly unlimited political, economic, and military support to the Israeli state – despite the mass revulsion of much of their citizenry, vividly revealed by the hundreds of thousands in those countries who took to the streets throughout May in support of Palestine.

Alongside Black, Indigenous, and other political prisoners in the United States, there are also Palestinian political prisoners: the Holy Land Foundation Five,



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sentenced to up to 65 years in prison for their charitable work for Palestine under bogus “material support for terrorism” charges. In France, Georges Ibrahim Abdallah, the Lebanese Arab struggler for Palestine, has been imprisoned for nearly 37 years. In the north of Ireland, Dr. Issam Hijawi, a Palestinian doctor, is imprisoned alongside Irish republicans in an entrapment sting arranged by the British security services.

The story of Palestinian prisoners is one of suffering, injustice, and collective punishment: from brutal torture under interrogation to parents and children forcibly separated by a “security” regime focused on breaking Palestinian social ties, to the unending psychological pressure of administrative detention and never knowing when or if a detainee will be released. Palestinian prisoners receive poor, if any, medical care, and Israel continues to imprison the bodies of Palestinians who died behind bars.

However, the story of Palestinian prisoners is also one of steadfastness, leadership, and resistance. The prisoners play a prominent, indelible role in Palestinian political life, organizing behind prison bars and turning the dungeons of the occupier into revolutionary schools of struggle. Young activists learn from elder leaders behind bars; prisoners organize reading circles, and artists and writers have

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created internationally awarded masterpieces, from the artwork of Zuhdi al-Adawi to the novels of Walid Daqqa. When Palestinian girls were denied a teacher to complete their high school education, the imprisoned Palestinian women – led by Palestinian leftist, feminist, and parliamentarian Khalida Jarrar – developed classes of their own. In fact, Jarrar delivered over 32 hours of self-organized classes on international law and human rights to her fellow women prisoners of all ages, despite repression targeting the activities by Israeli jailers.

It is that resistance and organizing that inspired Samidoun Palestinian Prisoner Solidarity Network to take its name – *samidoun* meaning “those who are steadfast.” After all, perhaps no one embodies that term more accurately than the Palestinian prisoners, their families, their comrades, and the Palestinian people as a whole. Founded ten



■ Berlin, May 2021.

years ago, when it was often difficult to find news on Palestinian prisoners' current experiences and struggles translated into English, Samidoun today has chapters and affiliates inside occupied Palestine as well as in Canada, the United States, Germany, France, Sweden, Spain, the Netherlands, Greece, and Brazil.

Taking inspiration from the lives and struggles of the Palestinian prisoners themselves, Samidoun's activities emphasize that Palestinian political prisoners are resistance leaders and that campaigning for the liberation of political prisoners is an integral part of supporting Palestinian resistance. Further, the prisoners are a unifying symbol of leadership that represents a broadly embraced alternative to the concessionary

path of Oslo and the so-called peace process. These campaigns also provide an opportunity to develop mutual solidarity and joint struggle with other justice movements, from the Black liberation movement to struggles in the Philippines, Turkey, and Colombia, forging alliances based on the leadership and liberation of imprisoned political leaders.

Samidoun's organizing focuses on grassroots activism to internationalize the cause of Palestinian prisoners and escalate pressure for their release, including the cases of Palestinians jailed throughout occupied Palestine, from the river to the sea, as well as prisoners of the Palestinian cause in Arab and international jails. Its

activities emphasize the unity of the Palestinian cause inside Palestine and among Palestinians in exile and diaspora, and of the land of Palestine from the river to the sea.

In recent years, Samidoun's work and membership has grown substantially, with activists in various areas developing chapters to build campaigns, including efforts to boycott Israeli products, cultural and academic institutions, and complicit corporations, especially those – such as HP and G4S – that profit from their ties to the Israeli “security” sector. Most recently, in February 2021, Israeli “Defense Minister” (and war criminal) Benny Gantz labeled Samidoun a “terrorist organization,” openly admitting that this designation was for organizing “anti-Israel demonstrations and campaigns.”

Rather than suppress Samidoun's organizing, however, this declaration only provided renewed inspiration to escalate and expand our work. After all, the Palestinian political prisoners themselves continue to struggle behind bars on a daily basis despite facing torture, abuse, and all forms of repression. Further, Gantz' declaration indicated that the growing campaigns being organized to support the prisoners – certainly not only by Samidoun, but by many organizations in Palestine and around the world – present a growing challenge to the Israeli occupation.

The current uprising in Palestine only underlines the need to campaign for imprisoned Palestinians, not as an isolated file but as an integral part of the Palestinian liberation struggle. As people of conscience around the world increasingly consider abolitionist approaches to

According to statistics published by Addameer (addameer.org), as of May 1, 2021, there are 4,400 Palestinian political prisoners in Israeli jails; 450 are jailed without charge or trial under administrative detention. There are 160 child prisoners and 39 imprisoned Palestinian women. Twenty-five Palestinian prisoners have been jailed since before Oslo, and there are 543 Palestinian prisoners serving life sentences in occupation prisons.

imprisonment, appalled by the crisis of state racism, police brutality, and mass incarceration, the Palestinian political prisoners remain *samidoun* – leading, struggling, and pointing toward a path of freedom for all.

Charlotte Kates is the international coordinator of Samidoun Palestinian Prisoner Solidarity Network (<https://samidoun.net/>).