

Narratives Under Siege (13): “We are Still Waiting to Visit Our Sons and Daughters in Jail”



Mothers in Gaza hold a weekly vigil at the Red Cross, to highlight the number of Gazan men and women held in Israeli jails, and to demand the right to visit their jailed husbands, sons and daughters.

Every Monday morning a crowd of women gather in the courtyard of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Gaza city. Most of the women arrive carrying a framed photograph of one or two men. When journalists start to arrive at around 10am, the women ask them to take pictures, and to film the vigil. “Some of us have been waiting more than six years to visit our sons in Israeli prisons” says one woman, “and we have all been forbidden to visit the prisoners in Israel for a year now. So we want our jailed husbands, sons and daughters to see us in newspapers and on television. They will then know that we haven’t given up.”

This vigil first started thirteen years ago in 1995, when two women, Um Jaber (Mother of Jaber) and Um Ibrahim stood together outside the ICRC, holding photographs of their imprisoned sons. “My four sons have all been in prison in Israel” says Um Jaber. “I had this idea to hold a vigil with photographs of the prisoners, to make sure they were not forgotten. It was just the two of us standing outside the ICRC the first time - but we knew the next week there would be three or four of us, and then, slowly, more mothers would come.” Around two hundred and fifty women now attend the vigil every week, and a contingent of men stand alongside them. It has become a Gaza institution.

The ICRC building is symbolic for the mothers of the prisoners because since 1967 the International Committee of the Red Cross has been assisting Palestinians to visit relatives held in Israeli jails. Despite serious obstructions by the Israeli authorities, the family visits program continued until June last year, when the Gaza Strip component of the program was suspended by the Israeli Government. According to Iyad Nasr, head of the ICRC Media Relations Department in Gaza city, Israel claimed it had no

Palestinian coordination partner to facilitate the program in the wake of the Hamas takeover of Gaza. "Israel is entitled to take measures to ensure its security" he says, "but it is not entitled to prevent Palestinians from visiting their relatives in jail in Israel. At ICRC we are deeply concerned about this situation." This week marks a year since the Gaza family visits program was suspended, and the ICRC has publicly urged the Israeli Government to resume the program immediately, saying the suspension is "Depriving both detainees and their relatives of an essential life line."

Um Jaber's son was released in 1999, after serving more than fourteen years in jail in Israel. Um Ibrahim's son, Ibrahim Mustafa Baroud, who was 23 years old when he was arrested in 1986, remains in jail and is one of the longest serving Palestinian prisoners. "Israel has prevented me from seeing my son for six years" says Um Ibrahim. "I finally got permission to visit him in jail in Israel last year, and the ICRC escorted me to Erez Crossing. But the Israelis ordered me to strip down to my underwear, and I refused. So they sent me back to Gaza." Um Ibrahim, who is seventy years old, had already been manually searched, and x-rayed, before she was ordered to strip. "They [the Israelis] had seen everything, even my bones" she says. "They claimed it was for security – but I am entitled to protect my dignity and my rights."

There are approximately 9,500 Palestinians in Israeli jails, including 950 men and four women from the Gaza Strip. The mothers of Palestinians imprisoned in Israel have all endured years of humiliating treatment in order to visit their jailed sons, husbands and daughters. For women from Gaza, Israel's 'security procedures' have involved them being routinely searched at Erez Crossing, sometimes by specially trained dogs, being questioned for long periods, waiting for hours - and sometimes arriving at the prisons only to be told their husband, son or daughter has been transferred without notice.

Every woman at the ICRC vigil in Gaza has a story. Um Imad, who is sixty five, has been coming to the vigil for more than twelve years. "My son, Imad has been in prison for nineteen years, and my brother, Hattim, for fourteen years" she says, holding up a photo of each man. "We used to visit the prisoners every two weeks, but now we cannot see them at all, and any communication is very difficult. We are all being denied our human rights. What is happening [to us] is a catastrophe." Um Imad's words underline the strong unity between the Gaza mothers: they are demanding their collective rights to visit their husbands, sons and daughters, as enshrined in international law.

Under Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, individual or mass forcible transfers, or deportations of protected persons from occupied territory to the territory of the Occupying Power are prohibited. Since 1967, Israel has been forcibly transferring Palestinian prisoners to Israel, and has consistently obstructed families from visiting their jailed relatives. "If Israel is either unable or unwilling to fulfil its obligations regarding Palestinian prisoners, then we at ICRC are obliged to facilitate the process" says Iyad Nasr. "In this instance, Israel is able, but remains unwilling."

The Gazan prisoners are jailed in a foreign country and are already extremely isolated. Their families are now forced to rely on the ICRC relaying messages back and forth in order to maintain any contact. Before the family visits program was suspended on June 6 last year, the ICRC was relaying around ten messages a month from Gaza: now

they are relaying more than 300 messages a month. The ICRC has just released a statement, reiterating that “Whilst we acknowledge Israel’s security concerns, we strongly believe that they alone cannot justify the al-out suspension of family visits to detainees.”

Fatima Abdullah, whose son, Abdul Halim Abdullah, has been in jail in Israel for nineteen years, sums up why the mothers of the prisoners welcome journalists into their midst. “My son saw me once, on television” she says. “He managed to call me at home, and he said, “Thank you for supporting all of us – but don’t look so sad mother - I am still alive.””