

We Who Are in Prison Escape Every Day

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Over the last couple of years, there has been an intensification of Israeli repression aimed at Palestinian student activists. Many students at Birzeit University outside Ramallah in the West Bank have been arrested for organizing on campus, accused of absurd infractions like selling falafel at student fairs and organizing book sales. Layan Kayed, a leftist student activist at Birzeit, was arrested last year and spent 15 months in jail. In this interview she talks with Brian Bean and Shireen Akram-Boshar about the long history of Palestinian student activism, why this has become such a target for Israel, the gendered dimension of Israeli incarceration and violence, and the harrowing details of her arrest and organizing behind bars.

brian bean and Shireen Akram-Boshar: *In June of last year you were kidnapped at an Israeli military checkpoint by Israeli security forces, arrested, and tried under the occupation's sham military courts. In your 15-month imprisonment, you experienced the egregious conditions that face Palestinian political prisoners, especially women prisoners. Can you talk about that experience and what it says about the barbarity of the occupation and the gendered dimensions of Israeli imprisonment of Palestinians?*

Layan Kayed: The Israeli roadblocks scattered across the West Bank are used as an easy and inexpensive way to carry out arrests. Instead of mobilizing large forces of the Israeli army to storm a Palestinian town, subjecting itself to people's resistance like stone throwing, this allows them to simply activate one of their many existing checkpoints, or install a new one (a flying checkpoint) on your daily route, after a quick monitoring of your smart devices and personal calls. This has transformed the West Bank into a big trap. I was arrested at one of the checkpoints that separates my home from Birzeit University while I was in the family car with my mother on my way to the university to accept my [Bachelor of Arts] certificate.

After my arrest, I was left outdoors at the Zaatara Israeli military checkpoint for eleven hours, handcuffed and shackled.

I was then transferred to Hasharon ("the crossing" in Hebrew) Prison and placed in a section

dedicated to isolating Israeli criminal prisoners. During this time, I was moved between two solitary confinement cells. One never received any sunshine and was fully monitored by security cameras around the clock. In this “crossing” I was subjected to sexual insults, constant swearing, and verbal abuse from the Israeli male criminal inmates, under the watch of the Israeli guards who did not intervene. Instead, some of the guards who spoke Arabic came to tell me that I should pay more attention to my “honor” (code for my virginity), in a manipulative attempt to make me feel that this situation is an issue of my “reputation.” These are the same guards who routinely invade our privacy as women political prisoners and check our cells every half an hour while we sleep at night, and enter them without notification or permission to perform searches and other invading practices.

This was not the only time the jailors tried to use the concept of “honor.” In one of the interrogation sessions, while charging me with “organizing camps” for the members of Al Qutub, the student arm of the PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine), the detective asked me, “What will people say about you when they know you were organizing mixed camps for both genders?”

Many of my female comrades were also subjected to similar attempts by the detectives to pressure them and extort them, using the concept of social disgraces and making them feel that the Palestinian society that they fight for will renounce them for their clothing choices or nose piercings. They also attempt to deceive us into thinking that the other Palestinian prisoners are also going to reject us, saying things like, “These political prisoners will force you into hijab and praying.”

The colonizer-as-jailor always tries to make us believe that the enemy is our own society, not the Zionist colonization that is stealing our land.

After 17 days of isolation in Hasharon Prison, I was still in the same clothes. My clothes had started to loosen up due to the inedible and filthy prison food. I was later transferred in “al Bosta” to Al Damon prison. “Al Bosta” is the vehicle used to transfer political prisoners to their trial sessions and to hospitals; it is a small van that contains very tight cells painted in grey or black, with metal seats. It has one miniature window, which is covered in steel and perforated with small holes. We were handcuffed and thrown into these tight cells for the duration of the trip. Trips like these sometimes take more than 20 hours. The driver often deliberately drives recklessly, making constant sudden turns and stops to purposely injure us

Of the other women imprisoned, a number were arrested as minors and were given long sentences. These women lived their childhood and youth in prison. They have managed to complete their general school certificate [roughly equivalent to a U.S. high school diploma] and are now enrolled in university from prison. The majority of them were shot and injured during their arrest, denied proper medical care as a part of the prison’s deliberate medical neglect. This is a form of daily torture; those who are severely sick are transferred to a Ramle prison, lacking life’s minimum necessities and often shackled to their beds. The medical care offered is extremely poor and has led to the death of several prisoners, many of whose bodies are still being held by Israel.

bb/SA-B: *The pretext of your arrest was your involvement in student politics at Birzeit University (in the West Bank), where you are a student. Why were you targeted? What is the context for the increasing Israeli repression of Palestinian student activity and the violations of the basic semblance of political free expression, association, and organization of student union that it represents? Why does student politics make Israel feel so threatened?*

LK: The Palestinian student movement has always been a lever for the Palestinian national struggle. Historically, the General Union of Palestinian Students was the nucleus of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Student organizations inside the occupied territories were in turn an essential and active component of both the First and Second Intifadas.

However, there are two dangerous turns that affected the student movement:

First, with the signing of the Oslo Accords there was a major shift in the work of the committees in the occupied territories. The newly formed Palestinian Authority—with its political and social project—tried to transform these popular structures into civil society institutions within a state-building project, as opposed to a liberation project, which created real challenges for continuing grassroots mobilization.

Second, the internal Palestinian division between Fatah and Hamas—the Palestinian Authority and its ruling party, Fatah, took control of the West Bank, while Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip—has further hindered freedom and democracy, which by nature affected universities.

Birzeit University is the only Palestinian university that still holds student council elections every year, which means its student movement is politically active. Moreover, its proximity to Ramallah, the administrative capital of the Palestinian Authority, gives it a central political influence, all the while preserving the campus as a safe space of political freedom for parties, particularly as the spaces for political freedom have shrunk in the West Bank.

All these factors pushed the student movement to resist the expected outcomes of political life under the Oslo authority and go beyond the “new Palestinian” project, with its core idea of individual salvation. The student movement also resisted the colonizer’s desire for stability in the West Bank by not becoming a dead political front. It also managed to rise above, to a lesser extent, Palestinian internal political divisions.

The student movement has been able to build a common base of political resistance against colonialism, derived from the shared belief in the rights of the Palestinian people as an indigenous colonized people. Therefore, Birzeit University has witnessed a continuous movement represented by sit-ins and protests that focus on contact points with the Israeli occupier.¹ It links the university to the key Palestinian issues, including that of the martyrs, political prisoners, and the fight against settlements. Through it all, Birzeit University’s political arena has been able to build a model for progressive Palestinian groups that are educated and involved in politics and resistance.

Birzeit University is famous for its voluntary work committees. For example, thousands of students annually volunteer to harvest olives on endangered lands threatened with confiscation.

Birzeit University students have also paid the ultimate price for their political activity, including recently the martyr Fadi Wahsha, who was martyred in the events of Saif al-Quds.²

All of these manifestations threaten the project of a “stable West Bank” under occupation, and this is why we face the constant threat to the student movement. The colonizer wants to ensure that this model of resistance is not generalized widely among Palestinians and works to break the current activist students from carrying on the struggle beyond their university years.

For Israeli colonialism, mass arrests are not enough; they have stormed the university campus a number of times, carried out arrests from inside the buildings’ corridors and in front of the student council building, and arrested the head of the student council, Omar Kiswani, on March 7, 2018, by undercover forces. Israel also issues ban orders for student activists from entering the campus.

Intimidation is also carried out through official summons and threatening calls, not only to student activists but to the general body of students, in order to demoralize them from joining the student movement.

Most importantly, Israeli colonialism is increasing pressure on the university—citing the presence of

the student movement—by launching a campaign targeting benefactor countries and institutions with the goal of defunding Birzeit University.

bb/SA-B: *While Israel has arrested student activists of various stripes, Al Qutub (the Progressive Democratic Student Pole)—the leftist student group you are involved in—is prohibited as an “unlawful association” by the Israeli occupation, despite having no history of involvement in military activity. Can you talk about the activities and politics of the left in the student movement?*

LK: We at Al Qutub adopt the political vision of the PFLP and its main slogan, “liberating the land and the people.” Our union vision, however, was inspired by the slogan of the General Union of Tunisian Students: “A popular university, democratic education, and national/patriotic culture.”

A Popular University

The struggle for a popular university is divided into two parts. The first has a political aspect related to the Palestinian Authority’s (PA) annual budget. We mobilize to increase the budget for higher education, which usually does not exceed 2 percent of the general budget, while more than 40 percent of the PA’s budget is allocated to the security sector. Ironically, all of these “security” agencies align themselves with the Israeli aggression during any raids of Palestinian cities and in arresting whomever they want. This lavish spending is only observed in the suppression of peaceful Palestinian marches demanding freedom and democracy, like those recently held in the West Bank on the heels of the horrific killing of the activist Nizar Banat. I was in prison at that time, but many of my comrades told me about a list circulated to all PA security agencies, containing the names of our comrades, with the order to beat them even if on the university campus.

The struggle in its second part is one we have inside the university itself.

We fight against the privatization of university facilities. Every year, the university campus witnesses strikes and sit-ins organized by the student movement and the workers union to push back against privatization. Al Qutub organizes around establishing alternative models, like an alternative cafeteria and an alternative printing shop that sells photocopied books—which the university does not provide despite their inaccessible high prices.

Al Qutub also works to end the class discrimination policies at the university and for universal free education. We seek to pressure the university to decline any kind of conditional financial grants from international or local funders, against external dictates to educational programs, and to reject naming buildings after Palestinian capitalists and to name them instead after fellow students who were martyred.

Democratic Education

At Al Qutub, we strive to achieve a democratic education and fight for the democracy of the educational institution. We fight for its democracy by presenting university decisions for discussion and then bringing them to a vote by students and their representatives in the student council, opening a dialogue between the university administration and students about university policies and directions and participating in university decision-making.

The democracy we speak of cannot exist without establishing the independence of the democratic process, its independence from all sorts of interventions, from PA security agencies as well as from the reactionary tribal and regional structures. Democracy is impossible without ensuring the freedom of unionization and political expression of Palestinians. In addition to Israeli repression, the PA routinely arrests student activists. Several years ago we discovered that we could not print a

single paper in any printing shops in Ramallah due to orders from the security agencies. And for years now, many of us, and our parents, have been summoned for a “cup of coffee,” the intelligence services’ code for interrogation, as part of their intimidation tactics.

The democracy we believe in is not separate from social justice or gender equality. Democracy must first work according to these values and strive to achieve them.

National/Patriotic Culture

We set out to see education as a liberating process. For us it is not just about the quality of education and the university’s position within international rankings but rather whether we can use our academic knowledge to change our reality and assist in our liberation from colonialism.

Currently, all our colleges have adopted international curricula without answering the questions of our Palestinian reality and our liberation project.

Therefore, we fought to institute a course on “the Palestinian cause” as a university requirement, after it was removed in 1993 following the Oslo Accords. It was reinstituted, as a result of our struggle, in 2013. Likewise, we mobilized to start a course centered on political prisoners, which was recently approved.

Our struggle is not limited to the university curricula. We also face a constant struggle to keep the university and its campus as an independent national center. We fought against hosting institutions and companies that acknowledge Israel or have links with it. The same goes for representatives of imperialist countries or Arab reactionaries. We increasingly find ourselves radicalized, for example, on employment day, an event by the university. We resorted to smashing the booths of some companies like Rawabi, Asal, and Axlet.³

Outside the university, we are part of the Palestinian national liberation project, and part of a progressive social movement, fighting and demonstrating in the center of the cities, demanding the PA to lift the sanctions on Gaza, retribution for Nizar Banat, and rejecting the trial of the martyr Basil al-Araj.⁴

We are always present in every clash with the colonizer, on all contact points in front of the Ofer military court and in the Beit El settlement with the other students of our university, our movement, and our unions.

bb/SA-B: *The organizing of Palestinian political prisoners has always had a special position in the national liberation struggle. This dynamic was expressed again by the inspiring prison break from Gilboa Prison over the summer and the launch of a new prisoners’ hunger strike in mid-September. In this history, the organizing of women prisoners is often not talked about. Can you talk about women organizing behind bars?*

LK: Imprisonment is an intensification of the reality of oppression and colonization, its power relations, and reveals what is out of sight.

In prison, just as in life, you get used to oppression, despite its bitterness, and occasionally you forget the possibility of another world, one that is shaped by the will of resistance.

In those times, only the will of the powerful seems to exist.

On June 9 this year, we were woken up by the jailers at five in the morning for the “head-count,” but this was not the count’s usual time. After a while, we realized that six prisoners had escaped. The

female prisoners began circulating the news through closed doors. I was the one standing by the door at the time, so I conveyed the news to my comrades in the room, who were drowsy and said they must be Israeli criminal prisoners. I don't know where that reaction came from, the strange conviction that they weren't political prisoners like us who managed to escape.

But those who managed to escape were indeed political prisoners like us from our own, from the villages and towns we know well. The Israeli media began to blame the prison administration, which "gives the prisoners enough freedom, enabling them to escape" and started talking about the crumbs of life we had as "privileges from the prison administration."

As for us, these events helped us realize that life in prison deserves nothing but escape and that this reality must be overcome and resisted, but most crucially, that we are still able to resist.

We who are in prison escape every day, perhaps not by digging a tunnel, but by reshaping the prison, the prison that the enemy designed as a coffin for us, we turn it into a place of life and change.

Political prisoners do not consider themselves isolated from the Palestinian people's struggle, and they do not wait for support from outside, as much as they exchange support and backing from broader Palestinian society.

Political prisoners have always played an important role in the Palestinian cause. They have undertaken many initiatives to end the political division and worked to educate generations of young men and women who were imprisoned and produced many important writings, academic and otherwise. They offered hope, with every escape and act of defiance.

Palestinian women prisoners have been a component of the Palestinian political movement, from the beginning of the contemporary resistance. Women political prisoners have participated in the general hunger strikes. The most recent of these was the strike of Islamic Jihad prisoners in rejection of the measures taken against them after the escape of the six prisoners. Three female prisoners went on this hunger strike. Women prisoners also went on individual strikes in rejection of the administrative detention policy, the last of which was the now-liberated prisoner Heba Al-Labadi.

Life inside the women's prison is organized and managed by the women political prisoners themselves. There is a library committee, for example, as one of the prison rooms was converted into a library. There is a cultural committee, which issues a magazine for the writings of female prisoners and prepares courses, like languages courses, as well as organizing cultural events and competitions. There is a special committee for the management of the canteen, which studies the needs of the women's section and purchases the required items from the shared general account, which everyone contributes to.

We have a representative and a deputy representative in charge of conveying our demands and rights in front of the prison administration. There are also a number of women prisoners deputized to distribute food and clean the facilities we use. Moreover, there is a special education committee, where female prisoners learn and earn their secondary school degree inside the prison. Recently we started providing university education in the prison. These structures are flexible.

The experience of the women prisoners is slightly different from that of the men, due to the comparatively small number of women prisoners. Most of the women were liberated in prisoner exchange deals with Israel, which in a way disrupted the accumulated experience of organizing within. The most recent Gilad Shalit exchange did not include Palestinian women prisoners from cities occupied in 1948, so Lina Al-Jarbouni remained alone in prison.⁵ Through her, and those who

were re-arrested later, some of this accumulated experience and structure was transferred to the new generation of female prisoners. This loss of accumulated organizing experience meant that we lost many previously earned rights, most notably the means of communication among the women prisoners; this was increasingly felt during the complete ban on visitation under the pretext of Covid.

There is an important dimension to the women's struggle in prisoners in that it presents a challenge to the social system and showcases models of feminist resistance, parallel with the national struggle.

bb/SA-B: *On October 22, Israel declared six more Palestinian human rights organizations as terrorist organizations. This includes some of the oldest Palestinian human rights organizations (Al-Haq) and notably Addameer Prison Support, which provides a large section of the legal support that Palestinians like yourself utilize when under threat of apartheid military courts. What is the significance of this increased repression, and what challenges does it raise?*

LK: The essence of the Zionist existence is the colonial settlement-substitution project. This project is based on the mass extermination and expulsion of the indigenous people. The Zionist project sees Palestinians only as an enemy, whose existence must be eliminated, their ability to resist—in all its forms—paralyzed, until they completely disappear. For the origin myth of their colonial project of “a land without a people” to be consistent with itself, any other narrative must be erased, you as a colonized must be killed silently, as if you had never been. Therefore documenting their crimes becomes a crime, and defending a detainee is something that condemns the defenders.

In 2016, the Zionist Knesset passed a law to “combat terrorism” that set the precedent for the current repression.⁶ The danger of this law isn't just the criminalization of these organizations by classification of being “terrorist,” nor is it even the ease with which public and student institutions have been criminalized. Rather, its true danger is reflected in the attempt to separate these organizations from their popular incubator on one hand and isolate them from the world and international organizations.

The law not only criminalizes members of these targeted organizations, but also anyone who dares to provide services or support, even if merely offering moral support. To even praise one of these organizations or attend an event they organized is enough to get you arrested. The classification of organizations as terrorist makes even spending time in the corridors of your university campus dangerous. Once an Israeli district officer called and threatened a young freshman at Birzeit University because he had participated in a lottery organized by one of the student groups and had won a laptop.

These laws are an attempt by the colonizer to raise the cost and risk of struggle and of resistance. Now, being arrested for being an activist or a supporter, you can face a travel ban or you may discover that many international organizations will dismiss you if you try to work for them or [you may] get fired if you are already an employee, and many other costs. The sole task is to make the Palestinians ask themselves, what is the great price for a small act of solidarity or for your support to someone else's act? The occupation once arrested a whole bus carrying male and female students from Birzeit University on their way to visit the family home of the prisoner Montaser Shalabi, after it was demolished by the army. Many of the students were indicted just for visiting the families of prisoners and martyrs.

With the criminalization of institutions, being an employee has become a crime. For example, Shatha Odeh—who is 60 years old—is being prosecuted because she continued to work in the Federation of Health Work Committees despite its closure by Israel.

The second function of this criminalization is to isolate public institutions and frameworks internationally, to cut financial support and sever relations with world institutions. Juani Rechmawi, a Spanish woman married to a Palestinian, was arrested for fundraising for the Health Work Committees Foundation, which was her job description as an employee.

The Zionist state is not satisfied with declaring the institutions and frameworks terrorist. They also arrest their employees or members, raid and seal their offices, confiscate their equipment, are engaging in an international campaign to prevent support and communication, and threaten everyone who might work with or support them that they will pay the price.

In the absence of any international accountability for the Zionist colonizers, and in light of the blatant support by Western governments—led by the United States—it is easy for our oppressors to label any institution, even if it is a human rights organization with a strong reputation and established international links and relations like Al-Haq, as “terrorist.”

The closure of these institutions creates an absence of organizations responsible for documenting human rights violations and of legally defending Palestinian rights, at the local and international levels. For example, Addameer is the only nongovernmental organization that advocates for prisoners without any financial return. The closure of other nonhuman rights institutions, such as health work committees and agricultural work committees, means effectively undermining structures of steadfastness and resilience for the Palestinian people. These organizations provide crucial tools that enable people to survive under the constant threat of the Israeli army and violent settlers. Their resources are particularly needed because most of the recipients of these services live in Area C, areas threatened by confiscation, theft of land and resources, and other arbitrary measures.

Furthermore, the closure of public structures working on the social level with the Palestinian people, such as the Union of Women’s Committees, is an attempt to impose reactionary and disruptive positions on women’s social and political resistance.

bb/SA-B: *All of this takes place in the wake of the explosion of the Unity Intifada, the complete bankruptcy of the PA, the continual normalization of Arab states’ relations with settler-colonial Israel, and the looming possible annexation of the West Bank by the occupier. What do you see as the current state of the Palestinian struggle? What role do you think the international left and student organizations should play in building solidarity?*

LK: Palestinian fragmentation is not limited to internal political divisions, but extends also to geographic divisions that affect all segments of the Palestinian people, Gaza, the West Bank, the territories seized by Israel in 1948, and diasporas, in addition to a sharp class division that is the product of “economic peace” projects. Because of these conditions, a true collective and inclusive Palestinian project is absent today, one that is well defined with clear goals and tasks, as it was previously with the PLO.

Moreover, it is clear that after nearly 28 years of Oslo and the Palestinian Authority, even the projects that were meant to turn the Palestinian cause into a managed conflict, and prolong it until it is forgotten, failed miserably. In the coming years, the number of Israeli settlers in the West Bank will reach the number of the indigenous Palestinian population there. This means that the form of confrontation will differ, and it will turn into a face-to-face confrontation, as we have begun to notice, especially in a city like Jerusalem, this increasing pressure in the West Bank by the occupation projects of land theft and the construction of settlement units, in addition to the violent practices of settlers who continue to encroach on Palestinians’ lives and property. But most importantly, by stopping the funding of the Palestinian Authority, the main income source for

families in the West Bank, and the new attack on civil society institutions, all these violent practices threaten to make the situation explode at any moment. The Oslo project was meant to maintain the minimum necessities of life in the West Bank to keep people quiet, but this project failed. Our conflict is an existential struggle; it is impossible to find half-solutions. They want to kill us, and people will not remain silent any longer. They have nothing to lose.

For the Palestinian people as a whole, the events of Saif al-Quds constituted a new awareness, proof that there is a common awareness of the Palestinian people, regardless of the many different contexts. We have proven that we are one people with shared goals that unite us, and that projects of normalization and neutralization have failed.

The need today is to transform this awareness into a working program, into a revitalized Palestinian liberation project and charter. I believe we must reactivate the PLO and its popular frameworks and agree on a liberation program, by integrating all Palestinian frameworks and parties, and reconsidering our existence as a people, as an indigenous anti-colonial liberation movement, necessarily linked to the broader Arab context and to the global struggle of all oppressed peoples of the earth.

At the Arab level, the Arab world is being destroyed, whether through wars, as is happening in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, or liberal development and economic dependence, as happened in the Gulf States. This makes the normalization process—best exemplified by the Bahrain conference—today an extension of that state of destruction. It helps transform the Zionist entity into a political and economic partner. However, normalization is taking place at the level of governments; the Arab people still see the Zionist entity as an illegitimate one. There is no liberation of Palestine without liberating the region from colonial relations and economic, political, military, and cultural dependency.

The Palestinian issue is not just a local one. As a Palestinian people, we are facing the Zionist entity, which is organically linked to all imperialist interests in the region and the world. This means that the conflict with the Zionist project is not limited to the land of Palestine.

In addition to boycotting Israel in all respects, economically, academically, and culturally, and launching pressure campaigns on governments and their pro-Israel policies, such as arms sales, trade exchange, or policies that adopt the Israeli discourse, we see that fighting injustice and oppression anywhere is part of our struggle against Israel. It is blatantly clear that Israel is not only the product of imperialist interests and the protector of its influence in the global south, but it also actively contributes to supporting oppression around the world. Israel is a laboratory for weapons, surveillance, and military technologies, which it exports to oppressive governments around the world.

Notes

1. “Contact points” refers to protests that focus on places where the Israeli occupation is present in the West Bank: road blocks, check points, etc.
2. Saif al-Quds—the “sword of Jerusalem” battle—is a term used describe the events of Israeli bombardment and Palestinian resistance in May-June 2021, also known as the Unity Intifada.
3. Palestinian companies that have business relationships with Israel.
4. Basil al-Araj was assassinated by Israel in 2017. It is broadly believed that the PA was complicit in his killing. The PA continued to try al-Araj after his death, despite popular outcry.

5. This is in reference to the 2011 prisoner exchange in which roughly 1,000 Palestinian political prisoners were released in exchange for Gilad Shalit, an Israeli Defense Forces soldier who had been captured.

6. This is in reference to the June 2016 “Combating Terrorism Law” that laid out a host of draconian repressions especially targeting Palestinian citizens of Israel under the pretext of “fighting terrorism.”