

Mobilization Behind Bars: The Political Relevance of the Inmate Educational System to the Palestinian Prisoners' Movement

THOMAS ABERS LOURENÇO, *Northwestern University*

Abstract

Following its victory in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Israel banned all Palestinian nationalist movements and adopted a policy of mass incarceration of civilians. Inside Israel's prisons, detained Palestinians built a highly organized movement, many members of which rose to prominence as grassroots activists during the first Intifada. The signing of the Oslo I Accord in 1993 was followed by mass releases of prisoners, and the movement ceased to exist. In the early 2000s, a rise in incarceration led to the reemergence of the prisoners' movement. However, inmates have since failed to influence politics on a sustained basis. Instead, their activism has been limited to occasional hunger strikes demanding improvements in living conditions. What explains variation in the degree and mode of Palestinian prisoners' participation in national politics? Contrary to existing explanations, I argue that the observed shift was a result of factors internal to prisons. Between 1967 and 1993, Palestinian inmates maintained a complex educational system inside Israel's jails. The system gave inmates opportunities to influence the public discourse and trained them to build a cohesive opposition movement. In the early 2000s, the educational system disappeared as a result of Israeli restrictions on prisoners' rights, as well as lack of support from the Palestinian Authority and geographic obstacles to family visits. In the absence of a system which can mobilize inmates behind bars, the political participation of jailed Palestinians has declined. I use evidence from newspapers and maps, as well as the work of ethnographers who conducted interviews with prisoners, to support this argument.

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What explains variation in the degree and mode of Palestinian prisoners' participation in national politics, while in jail and shortly after release? I define participation broadly as political acts which influence decision-making in a concrete and visible way, capture public attention, or elicit direct responses from leaders. Between 1967 and 1993, imprisoned Palestinians developed a highly organized movement inside Israel's jails. Following their release (and even while in prison), many members of the movement rose to prominence as grassroots activists and as leaders in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). During the period of the Oslo peace process, the prisoners' movement was dismantled as large numbers of detainees were set free. Since the second Intifada, Israel's mass imprisonment of Palestinians has led to the reemergence of the prisoners' movement. However, inmates and newly released prisoners have largely ceased to participate in Palestinian politics as activists, commentators, or party leaders. Instead, their participation has predominantly consisted of hunger strikes demanding better conditions inside prisons.

Despite its former importance as a mass participation structure of the PLO, the prisoners' movement has remained understudied by scholars. Those who have approached the question of why the movement's political prominence has diminished focus on factors like the disenfranchisement of grassroots movements by the Palestinian Authority (PA) leadership, changing power dynamics between the PLO's factions, and the schism between Hamas and Fatah.¹ Such explanations neglect how dynamics internal to prisons shape inmates' and former inmates' participation in national politics.

I argue that prisoners' prominent and sustained participation in Palestinian politics prior to 1993 was a product of the educational system they created in the region's jails.

Upon arriving in prison, young activists were inducted into a faction of their choice and taught the ideological tenets of their group through lectures, debates, and the reading of Marxist, anti-colonial, and Arab nationalist texts. At the same time, prisoners dedicated themselves to studying the institutions, politics, and history of Israel. This knowledge helped them craft sharp critiques of their state adversary, as well as of the violent tactics used by the PLO to combat it. Through direct and indirect channels, inmates were able to broadcast their political ideas to the Palestinian population – and thus became active participants in national politics.

After the second Intifada a variety of factors, including Israel's restrictive policies, the PA's waning support for the prisoners' movement, and logistical obstacles to family visits, obstructed or weakened these channels. As a result, the educational system withered. In the absence of the system, prisoners' only reliable tactic of contestation has been that of hunger strikes. Left with a limited political repertoire, prisoners have been less able to participate effectively in national politics than in the period prior to the Oslo peace process.

To articulate this argument, I draw upon journalistic and historical evidence, as well as the work of ethnographers who conducted interviews with former detainees. I examine the history of the prisoners' movement during two periods: between Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967 and the Oslo I Accord of 1993; and since the onset of the second Intifada in 2000. I do not include the 7 years of the Oslo peace process in this time frame because they were marked by an upheaval in the make-up of the prisoner community, which was accompanied by the dissolution of the educational system. Therefore, this transitional period is unsuited for comparison with the eras that preceded and followed it.

For lack of sufficient information on prisoners affiliated with Islamist factions such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), I focus predominantly on members of the secular-nationalist PLO.

This paper consists of six sections. Section one provides background on the history of the PLO and the prisoners' movement. Section two reviews existing explanations for the varying participation of prisoners in Palestinian politics and points to gaps in the literature. Section three examines the structure of the educational system between 1967 and 1993. Section four examines the ways in which the educational system contributed to the political participation of its members during this period. Section five examines prisoners' communication with the outside world since the second Intifada. Here I probe two complementary questions: What prevented the educational system from being reestablished after Oslo? How might its absence have reduced prisoners' political participation? Section six discusses the implications of Palestinian inmates' political activities on our understanding of prisoner mobilization and of social movements in general.

Background on the PLO and the Palestinian Prisoners' Movement

In 1948, approximately 700,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled from Palestine following the establishment of the state of Israel. The forced displacement of the Palestinian population by Israeli settlers and militias came to be known as the Nakba.² In 1959, University of Cairo student Yasser Arafat founded the Palestinian National Liberation Movement (Fatah) with the objective of liberating Palestine from the Israeli occupation. Fatah was soon joined by other nationalist factions, the most prominent of which were two Marxist-Leninist groups: the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front

for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP).³ Over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, Palestinian freedom fighters (*fedayeen*) from various factions launched over one hundred sabotage attacks on Israel, including bombing power plants, roads, and pipelines.⁴ In 1964, Palestinian nationalist Ahmad Shuqairi was commissioned by the Arab League to chair the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), a representative body created to build "foundations for organizing the Palestinian people."⁵ In its official charter, the PLO declared that "the partition of Palestine in 1947 and the establishment of the state of Israel are entirely illegal" and that "armed struggle is the only way to liberate Palestine."⁶ These principles reflected a dominant view among Palestinians: Israel was an illegitimate state with whom neither peace nor coexistence was possible, and only the use of force could free the homeland.⁷

The creation of the PLO spurred a rise in nationalism. Soon, the *fedayeen* began competing with each other and with Shuqairi's PLO for popular support. Seeking to establish Fatah's primacy over the national liberation movement, Arafat proposed that the *fedayeen* enter the PLO and elect their members to the Palestinian National Council (PNC). In February 1969, Fatah beat the PFLP and the DFLP to elect the largest bloc in the PNC; Arafat was appointed as the Council's speaker.⁸ With the entry of the *fedayeen*, the PLO became an umbrella organization comprised of numerous factions, but effectively controlled by Fatah.⁹ In June 1967, Israel defeated a coalition of Arab armies and captured the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as well as Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and Syria's Golan Heights. With the overnight expansion of its borders, Israel banned all Palestinian nationalist movements and adopted a policy of mass incarceration of civilians. During the following fifteen years, the PLO would continue to launch attacks on

Israel, first from Jordan and later from Lebanon. With the outbreak of Lebanon's civil war, however, the Lebanese government expelled the PLO from the country in 1982. The group's leadership re-established itself in Tunis where, distant from the Palestinian population, Arafat and his cadre saw their influence diminish.

Meanwhile in the Occupied Territories, Israeli-controlled jails became sites of intense recruitment and organizing by imprisoned followers of the PLO. Youths who found themselves behind bars between the 1960s and the 1990s encountered a bustling political environment which offered them frequent opportunities for socialization, ideological instruction, and classes in a variety of subjects.¹⁰ As pointed out by Bornstein, incarceration also gave prisoners a large number of political connections in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The extensive social networks and reputation Palestinians acquired while in prison enabled them to quickly rise through the ranks of the PLO and establish themselves as community leaders upon release.¹¹ The prisoner community was so effective in training activists that it was officially named by the PLO leadership as the Palestinian Political Captives' Movement.¹² Released activists such as Marwan Barghouti and Hussein al-Sheikh went on to play prominent roles as leaders in the first Intifada, a non-violent uprising against Israeli rule which began in 1987 and continued until 1993. Other members of the prisoners' movement became well-known even while under Israeli custody. Jibril Rajoub, who was imprisoned between 1970 and 1985, was one such individual. Respected by fellow inmates for his impressive fluency in Hebrew and encyclopedic knowledge of the Israeli security service and government, Rajoub published a series of texts from jail which captured the attention of the PLO leadership. After leaving prison, he fled to Tunis and became an advisor to Arafat.¹³

In August 1993, Arafat re-emerged from a period of relative obscurity by signing the Oslo I Accord, the first of two wide-ranging peace treaties with Israel. The Oslo Accords secured the release of the vast majority of detainees who formed the prisoners' movement in the previous decades. In September 1993, over 10,000 Palestinians were imprisoned; by 2000, only an estimated 400 prisoners sentenced before Oslo were still held in Israeli jails.¹⁴ The Oslo framework also led to the creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA), an interim self-government body which gained limited control over the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Many of the released prisoners went on to become officers in the Palestinian security apparatus, and the man in charge of the newfound Preventative Security Service was none other than Jibril Rajoub, who in 1992 had impressed the head of the Israeli Security Agency, Yaakov Peri, for knowing "so much about [him], even the name of [his] wife." By the late 1990s, however, Palestinians and Israelis alike had lost faith in the Oslo framework's capacity to create an autonomous Palestinian state or bring peace to the region. The failure of Oslo led to the outbreak of a second Palestinian Intifada in the year 2000.¹⁵ This uprising – which was far more violent than the first Intifada – led the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) to reestablish military control over the West Bank and Gaza Strip.¹⁶ As the peace process crumbled, Israel returned to its policy of mass incarceration of Palestinians after a 10-year hiatus. Before long, newly built prisons were filled with members of the PLO, including veterans of the pre-Oslo prisoners' movement like Fatah's Marwan Barghouti.¹⁷ However, as argued by Miodownik and Rosenfeld, the prisoners' movement has since failed to "achieve a dominant political position" or participate consistently in domestic politics.¹⁸

The most notable instance of collective action by prisoners after Oslo was arguably the 2006 National Conciliation Document, known simply as the Prisoners' Document. Written by leaders of Fatah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the PFLP, and the DFLP in various jails, the document proposed reforms in the PLO with the objective of including Islamist factions. It also called for a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders and for the right of return of refugees. The Prisoners' Document was published in May 2006 and met with initial enthusiasm by members of Fatah. However, the text soon became an object of disagreement between Hamas and the PLO. It was never implemented.¹⁹

Since the failure of the Prisoners' Document, inmates' political actions have consisted almost exclusively of hunger strikes demanding better living conditions inside jails. On some occasions, these acts of protest have captured public attention and elicited PA support for prisoners' demands. In 2012, for instance, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas pleaded the international community to act on behalf of the inmates after an estimated 1,550 prisoners went on a strike.²⁰ However, such episodes are usually followed by long periods of stillness, with few mentions of prisoners in the media until the next large-scale hunger strike breaks out, as one did in 2017. Thus, unlike during the pre-Oslo period, prisoners are unable to participate in Palestinian politics on a sustained basis.

Insufficiency of Existing Explanations

One of a small number of scholars who has offered an analytical assessment of the prisoners' movement's activities, Maya Rosenfeld proposes that the diminished influence of detainees on national politics in the post-Oslo area can be attributed to two factors: first, the political and ideological make-up of the prisoner population since the second Intifada; and second, the lack of a

unified Palestinian leadership capable of engaging with political prisoners on a sustained basis.²¹

Rosenfeld notes that the majority of Palestinians imprisoned since the year 2000 were born in the 1980s and grew up in the 1990s. Because they were raised during the period of the Oslo peace process, the current generation of inmates did not participate in popular movements to the same degree as people born in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. As a result, she argues, most members of the contemporary prisoners' movement lack the political education and training necessary to mobilize as effectively as their predecessors. Rosenfeld is correct in pointing out that the dismantlement of the popular structures of the PLO diminished the involvement of Palestinian civilians in politics. However, she does not account for the fact that prisons themselves were important sites of mass political participation during the pre-Oslo era. Indeed, many Palestinians first joined popular movements upon entering jail, and not before. A former inmate and activist interviewed by Collins recalled: "I was ignorant when I came to prison, but it changed me. We Palestinians think of the prison as a school or a university . . . and when you get out, you are like an expert."²² This account suggests that individuals' experiences prior to entering prison were often less relevant to their future participation in national politics than the opportunities for mobilization they found inside jails. By overstating the importance of prisoners' backgrounds, Rosenfeld obscures the impact of the prison experience itself on their political actions.

Rosenfeld's second argument attributes the decline of prisoners' participation to the factional and political divisions which afflict the Palestinian leadership. Pointing to the failure of the Prisoners' Document as an example, she notes that inmates' attempts to influence national politics are repeatedly cut

short by disagreements and disputes within the government and among parties. This argument helps us explain why the prisoners' movement's degree of participation in politics has diminished. However, it does little to explain the change in their mode of participation that took place in tandem. Rosenfeld does not address the fact that, since the publication of the Prisoners' Document in 2006, no similar initiatives have taken place. Instead, prisoners' collective actions have overwhelmingly consisted of hunger strikes.

Be that as it may, Rosenfeld is right to consider the way that leaders deal with grassroots activism as detrimental to prisoners' political participation. As argued by Brown & Nerenberg (2016), internal rivalries, the decline of parties, and the lack of a clear political program have rendered the PA a "set of Palestinian-staffed structures that stand on top of society with few links to it."²³ However, we still require an explanation for why the community of prisoners has become far less politically salient while movements like Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) find creative ways of participating prominently in national politics. This shift has taken place despite the fact that the prisoners' movement has a much longer history of activism than BDS, and thus presumably a larger institutional legacy to draw upon.

A third possible explanation, invoked in different forms by Rosenfeld (2004), Hill (2016), and Abdallah (2019), also deserves our attention. Perhaps variation in prisoners' degree and mode of political participation can be attributed to how factional dynamics affect relationships inside jails. Nashif points out that, although political prisoners developed their own traditions and activities, the internal organization of the pre-Oslo movement followed the model of the PLO. According to Rosenfeld, during this period the prisoners' movement was characterized

by a "tight, union-like, cooperation between political factions."²⁴ It is plausible that the internal fragmentation that has beset the PLO since the second Intifada, combined with the schism between Hamas and Fatah, have inhibited similar cooperation from taking place since then. These divisions, in turn, might spoil attempts at collective action and reduce the political capabilities of the prisoners' movement.

This argument obscures considerable variability in the relations between prison factions since the second Intifada. During the mass hunger strike organized by Marwan Barghouti in 2017, internal rivalries did indeed prevent the prisoners' movement from acting cohesively. On that occasion, all Islamist prisoners boycotted the strike because the Hamas leadership feared that its results would be credited to Fatah and the PLO.²⁵ However, in 2012 an even larger hunger strike organized by Hamas gained widespread adherence from members of the nationalist factions.²⁶ Rather than presuming that factionalism is the cause of the prisoners' movement decline, then, scholars should consider what factors contributed to sustained inter-factional cooperation before Oslo and to an erratic pattern of cooperation and competition since the year 2000.

The Political Relevance of the Inmate Educational System Between 1967 and 1993

During the first four years of the Israeli occupation, Palestinian prisoners were denied access to pens, paper, and books. In 1968, the first reported hunger strike under Israeli rule took place in Bit Lyd jail as a protest against cruel treatment by the prison authorities. Although prisoners' demands were largely ignored, the act gave rise to a wave of hunger strikes which spread across the Occupied Territories' jails to become, in Ismail Nashif's words, "political captives' ultimate weapon against the oppressive

conditions of their existence.”²⁷ In 1971, a new round of strikes pushed the Israeli government to make concessions such as granting access to writing utensils, newspapers, and books. This achievement was closely followed by inmates’ establishing of libraries inside every jail, setting the stage for the pursuit of learning behind bars.²⁸

This chain of events shows us that the educational system was not initially a cause, but a consequence of prisoners’ mobilization. Rosenfeld notes that veteran prisoners who were arrested in the late 1960s recount that the early prisoners’ movement centered mainly on the struggle to improve prison conditions. The educational system’s key contribution, then, was not to facilitate collective action (although it did this as well), but to enable inmates and former inmates to articulate demands which were too complex and varied to be expressed by hunger strikes. As a result, the prisoners’ movement gained the capacity to advocate not only for the rights of its own members, but of all Palestinians. This political versatility, in turn, propelled prisoners’ participation in national politics during the Occupation period.

Figure 1 diagrams the educational system’s crucial role in advancing prisoners’ political participation. This participation was a product of the specific interactions (arrows) it gave rise to. The material and logistical support of the PLO and of Palestinian families (blue arrows) enabled the growth and spread of the system. Inside prisons, the system provided factions with recruitment opportunities and a platform for negotiations. This in turn generated inter-factional collaboration and contributed to a relatively unified educational system which was resilient to

Israeli interventions. Prisoners’ participation in Palestinian politics (orange arrows) was advanced by the educational system in two central ways: first, as a result of the informal

curriculum known as the “Palestinian revolutionary pedagogy,”²⁹ which instilled detainees with strong ideological beliefs and trained them to work as activists upon release; and second, through the production of prison literature which was disseminated in the Occupied Territories.

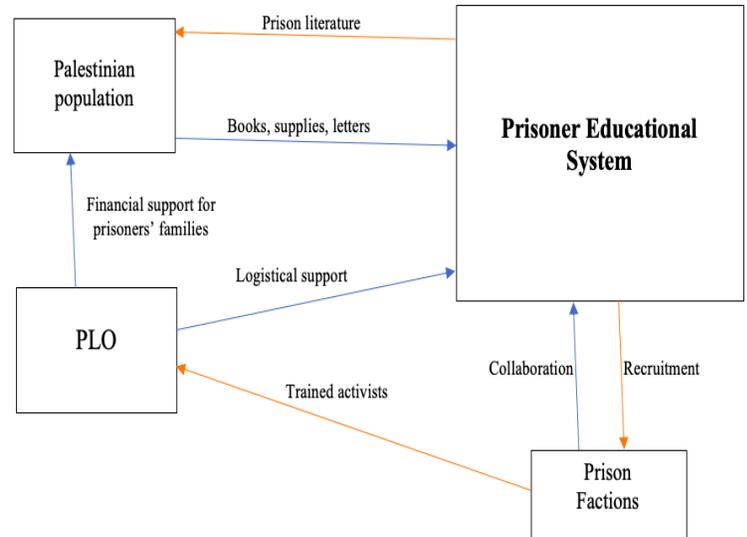


Figure 1: The Relevance of the Inmate Educational System for Prisoners’ Political Participation

What enabled the prisoner educational system to grow and complexify? Prisoners’ access to books and writing materials alone does not explain how the educational system came to be the backbone of an “internal order” which institutionalized these common activities.³⁰ Drawing upon a large number of interviews with former inmates, Nashif argues that the consolidation of the PLO’s social and political networks in the West Bank and Gaza Strip was the primary cause of the growth of an organized movement inside jails.³¹ However, Nashif does not offer examples of how these networks supported prisoners. Anecdotal evidence from interviews conducted by Bornstein (2004)

indicate that one way the PLO's networks contributed to the development of the prisoners' movement was by reducing the chance of Israeli infiltration in the community of inmates. Outside members of the PLO provided leaders of the prisoners' movement with background information on new arrivals, thus helping them identify Palestinians who were arrested for non-political crimes (like stealing cars), recruited by Israel as informants, and "planted" in the political prisoner community.³² This account is echoed by Harlow (1990), who posits that external support from the PLO helped prevent prison authorities from learning the tactics inmates relied on to circulate texts between jails.³³

Israel's relatively lenient restrictions on family visits allowed for the establishment of sophisticated communication channels. These channels, in turn, enabled individual jails to become headquarters of the entire prisoners' movement, from which leaders (who kept their identities largely secret) coordinated educational and protest activities that were adopted throughout the prison system. On a bi-weekly basis, "tens of thousands of visitors from the West Bank and Gaza Strip" received and delivered information on plans for upcoming hunger strikes, the names of inmates who had fallen ill, and banned books to be sent to different jails.³⁴ The PLO helped sustain the educational system that emerged at the confluence of these channels by providing \$50 million in annual aid to Palestinian families.³⁵ Connected and supported by external solidarity networks, the prisoners' movement came to dominate virtually all of the 22 jails used by Israel to detain Palestinians between 1967 and 1993.³⁶

By organizing inmates according to their ideological affinities, technical skills, and academic interests, the structures of the educational system lent themselves to inter-factional collaboration. Upon arrival, new

prisoners were invited to join Fatah, the PFLP, the DFLP, the Communist Party, and later, Hamas. Once integrated in the prison community, detainees were placed under a hybrid system where their faction of choice was responsible for delivering ideological instruction while a council of leaders from all factions coordinated prisoners' sleeping schedules, distributed food, and mediated disputes.³⁷ General education classes were open to all inmates, regardless of political affiliation.³⁸ Describing the division of tasks between factions in prison, former detainee Hasan Abdallah recalled: "Fatah was concerned with the organizational side, how to attract new members. The Left was investing a lot in the cultural dimensions. Always the Left led the *thaqafah*³⁹ in the prison."⁴⁰ As pointed out by Nashif, the creation of an inter-factional system in the prisons thus demarcated the "whole community of captives as a distinct Palestinian national community."⁴¹

I would add that internal cohesion made the educational system resilient to Israel's transferring of inmates to other jails. Described in a different context by Biondi as one of the most traumatic experiences in a prisoners' life, the forced transfer of a Palestinian inmate from one community to another might have significantly disrupted his educational pursuits and even threatened his survival.⁴² Yet, although most former inmates interviewed by Nashif, Bornstein, and Collins were held in several jails, none found that transfer halted their learning process or removed them from the prisoners' movement. On the contrary, as noted by Abdallah, "transfers of prisoners are regularly orchestrated [by factions] to influence the results of internal prison elections and reinforce geographical, statutory or family solidarity."⁴³ The endurance of the prisoner educational system, therefore, can be attributed in part to

the pattern of inter-factional cooperation it gave rise to.

The Prisoners' Movement Between 1967 and 1993

In what ways did the educational system contribute to the political participation of its members during the pre-Oslo era? Education enhanced detainees' political prospects by introducing them to a variety of academic subjects which were inaccessible to Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. Students in the schools of the West Bank and Gaza Strip faced harsh restrictions by Israeli officials, who prohibited any extracurricular activities and banned a large number of books.⁴⁴ By contrast, imprisoned youths received peer instruction on nationalist, Marxist, and anti-colonial thought, as well as Zionism, Jewish history, and Hebrew.⁴⁵ Looking back on his time in jail during the 1970s and 1980s, a former inmate was quoted as saying: "before prison I was a porter who could neither read nor write. Now, after 14 years in prison, I write in Arabic, I teach Hebrew, and I translate from English."⁴⁶ Among the members of the prisoners' movement who became influential leaders after long spells in jail were Jibril Rajoub, Marwan Barghouti, Hussein al-Sheikh, and Sufian Abu Zaida. These former detainees set themselves apart from the rank-and-file of the PLO for their impressive fluency in Hebrew and extensive knowledge of Israeli politics and institutions.⁴⁷ When combined with the ideological instruction they received in jails, this nuanced understanding of Israel's strengths and weaknesses put such activists in a unique position to craft stinging critiques of their state opponent. In the late 1970s, Rajoub and his cellmate anonymously published an Arabic translation of Menachem Begin's "The Revolt," in which Israel's then-Prime Minister recounted his violent targeting of Palestinians as a member of a Zionist paramilitary group, the Irgun.

In this way, inmates devoted considerable efforts to "making Israelis and their language objects of constant study," an experience which helped shape their political beliefs. Rosenfeld notes that, years before Arafat renounced armed struggle, freed political prisoners' vocal support of non-violent tactics as the most efficient means of resisting Israel became prominent in nationalist circles. Looking back on the time of his release in 1985, Rajoub echoed this view: "The target the whole time [in jail] was to live in peace and security in an independent state next to Israel. I have always been among those who adopted pragmatic political tactics. In Tunis, we had people among the Palestinians who knew nothing about Israel."⁴⁸

Members of the prisoners' movement also distinguished themselves for their exceptional familiarity with the history and ideology of the PLO. Referring to the Fatah constitution, a Palestinian interpreter sharply noted that "one could be arrested for possessing such a document, yet the only way to read it "legally" was precisely to get arrested."⁴⁹ Entire reading groups were organized by factions to analyze and propose alternatives to the violent tactics defended by PLO luminaries like Yasser Arafat and George Habash.⁵⁰

Well-acquainted with Israel's policy of collective punishment, inmates developed playful tactics, such as songs and jokes, to protest against the prison authorities without offering them justification to retaliate with violence. An Israeli officer working in the Ansar II detention center prior to the outbreak of the first Intifada complained: "The prisoners behave as though it is a holiday camp and think that they are in a kindergarten. Sometimes we tell them to sit with their face to the wall and to keep quiet, and then they start to laugh in our faces and break out into Palestinian songs." Inmates' spontaneous acts of peaceful defiance led the

Ofer detention center, which held thousands of Palestinian minors as young as twelve, to be appropriately dubbed by older prisoners as “the kindergarten of the Intifada.”⁵¹

Once released, former detainees made use of the extensive networks they built in jails, as well as their local prestige as “vanguards,” to become leaders among the PLO foot soldiers known as the *shabab*.^{52,53} The tactics adopted by the *shabab* and by Palestinian civilians in the first Intifada were surprising both for their nonviolent departure from the PLO’s norm and for their astute targeting of IDF soldiers. Released prisoners such as Barghouti and al-Sheikh played an important part in the popular uprising by acting as “bridges” between the *shabab* and the PLO leadership in Tunis.

Yet, as shown by the published translation of Begin’s notorious memoir, the educational system offered prisoners opportunities to influence national politics even while behind bars. “Prison literature” was a widely consumed genre in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and a comparison between two of the most well-known prison books, Jibril Rajoub’s “*al-Zinzanah raqm 704*” (1986) and Ahmad Qatamesh’s “Introductions to the Carving of the Alternative” (1994), reveals notable ideological diversity. A member of Fatah, Rajoub published “*raqm 704*” shortly after his release from prison. In this highly nationalistic text, he argues that “struggles and prisoner revolts are the natural extension of the struggle of our revolt and our people.”⁵⁴ The PFLP’s Qatamesh (an academic and writer) published “Introductions” in 1994 while in jail; the book is based on a series of lectures he delivered to other prisoners in the Ansar 3 detention center. A class-based critique of the Palestinian national movement, the “alternative” referred to in the title is an alternative to the Oslo I Accords, which he opposed.⁵⁵

For all the success of both volumes, the flagship text of the prisoners’ movement was another book, “The Philosophy of Confrontation Behind Bars” (PCBB). Attributed to the PFLP, this manual instructed Palestinians on how to endure the cruel Israeli interrogation process and resist the urge to reveal information under torture. It also functioned as the social contract of the prisoners’ movement: if recent detainees followed the tactics laid out in the book and remained “steadfast” under Israeli pressure, they would be accepted into their faction of choice and, by extension, offered a chance to join the PLO upon release.⁵⁶ The PCBB’s target audience was young Palestinian males likely to fall victim to Israel’s policy of mass incarceration, and the text was so broadly circulated in the Occupied Territories that Hill noted that hardly any prisoner could have failed to come across it in the last quarter century.

It should be noted that the growth of an educational system that equipped prisoners to participate in national politics did not make hunger strikes obsolete. Inmates continually struggled with the prison authority for better conditions, and the communication channels and cohesion of the prisoners’ movement helped inmates coordinate strikes with mass adherence.⁵⁷ Over the course of the past fifty years, Palestinian prisoners have staged 14 major hunger strikes, several of which mobilized over 2000 inmates in at least 10 different jails.⁵⁸

Starting in 1988, Palestinian women prisoners also began launching hunger strikes in Israel’s prisons. Although these demonstrations typically mobilized fewer inmates than the male hunger strikes, they were considerably more successful in achieving their demands. Schwaikh (2020) attributes the efficacy of female strikes to women prisoners’ ability to use gender as a “motivational factor in which self-sacrifice to protest injustice is far superior to enduring

the wrongs of political imprisonment.”⁵⁹ Yet, despite the frequency and size of Palestinian hunger strikes – by prisoners of all genders – inmates have continually suffered trauma and even death under Israeli custody. According to human rights group Addameer, 73 inmates died from torture in Israeli prisons between 1967 and 2013.⁶⁰

However, as noted by Nashif, prisoners tended to distinguish between protests against state treatment and living conditions (which often took the form of hunger strikes) and protests for political demands. According to Qaraqi, the first “political hunger strike” only happened in 1994, in reaction to the Cairo Agreement, which determined the release of almost 5000 inmates but excluded over 2000 others. By then, however, the educational system which propelled prisoners’ participation in national politics was being quickly dismantled as its constituents left jail.⁶¹

The Prisoners’ Movement Since the Year 2000

What prevented the educational system from being reestablished after the second Intifada? I propose that the lack of prisoner-led education is a consequence of inmates’ extremely limited interactions with the outside world. I identify three important causes for their isolation after 2000, which I present in turn: harsh Israeli restrictions on prisoners’ liberties, the PA’s wavering support for inmates, and geographic and logistical obstacles which prevent civilians from helping detained relatives and friends. As a result, prisoners have become largely detached from inmates in other jails, the PLO leadership, and Palestinian society at large. This detachment weakens the interactions which supported the educational system and helped prisoners become vocal participants in national politics. As a result, inmates are left with few political alternatives other than

demanding their own rights by way of hunger strikes.

Israel took control of Palestinian prisoners’ education by allowing inmates to join the correspondence program of the Open University in 1992. This concession gave way to tight regulation of the academic pursuits of detainees, who were denied access to all science and mathematics programs and only allowed to be delivered books by the Israeli Prison Service (IPS). Following Hamas’s kidnapping of IDF soldier Gilad Shalit in 2006, Israel revoked most prisoners’ educational rights as part of a policy of collective punishment. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu escalated measures in 2011 and implemented a full ban on prisoners’ education, declaring that “we [Israel] will stop the absurd practice in which terrorists who murdered innocent people enroll in academic studies. There will be no more ‘doctors of terror’.”⁶² Since then, prisoners’ attempts to build libraries in jails have been repeatedly obstructed by the Prison Service. In 2018, the IPS allegedly confiscated over 2000 hidden books from a single prison north of Tel Aviv. Inmates who attempt to independently pursue education are immediately transferred to other prisons or to solitary confinement. Adding to these headwinds is falling international support: since the mid-1990s, the International Committee of the Red Cross has almost entirely ceased to provide books for Palestinian detainees (Addameer, 2020).⁶³

Apart from Israel’s policies, prisoners have not found a reliable partner in the PA. The PA’s complacency with Israel’s mass imprisonment of Palestinians is an outgrowth of its own policy of security collaboration with Israel.⁶⁴ The case of PFLP leader Ahmad Sa’adat is illustrative of how this policy has strained the relationship between the PA and jailed political leaders. Arrested by PA security forces in 2002 and detained in an Israeli jail, Sa’adat declared to an

international court that the PA, the United States, and Britain were conspiring to stop him from participating in the Palestinian struggle against the occupation.⁶⁵ Barghouti's own loyalty to PA President Mahmoud Abbas has been frequently called into question by pundits since his short-lived split from Fatah in 2005, when he founded the al-Mustaqbal party from the confines of Hadarim prison. Contributing to these tensions, the funds allocated by the PA to inmates' relatives have not proven effective in meeting their needs. This appears to be the result of an Israeli crackdown on banks which process payments to prisoners' families.⁶⁶ Finally, inmates have suffered from a weakening of the crucial link which enabled the establishment and spread of the educational system: frequent interactions with family members. Giacaman and Johnson offer an in-depth account of the obstacles faced by prisoners' wives to communicate with their husbands in jail. In 2000, Israel banned all family visits in response to the second Intifada; even after visiting rights were granted back to prisoners in 2003, visits were limited to every two months. To make matters worse, families' access to prisons became extremely difficult after the second Intifada, when the IPS transferred a large number of political prisoners from West Bank jails to maximum-security detention centers in Israel-proper.⁶⁷ These tribulations are compounded by Palestinians' low levels of mobility, a consequence of Israel's escalating policy of territorial closure.⁶⁸

Figure 2 is a map of the prisons used by Israel to hold Palestinian political prisoners between 1967 and 1993, based on a list compiled by Nashif. Figure 3 shows the location of the prisons currently in use, based on a list compiled by Addameer.⁶⁹ There is a notable decrease in the number of prisons located inside the West Bank, despite an increase in the total number of prisons. It

frequently takes families an entire day to reach jails, hindering any attempted movement of written materials or goods between Israel's detention centers.

Despite harsh restrictions, prisoners have on some occasions created robust educational programs. In 2014, *Yes!* magazine interviewed 14 inmates who described a highly organized system in one (unidentified) Israeli jail. The system resembled the pre-Oslo model: prisoners chose between Hamas, Fatah, and the PFLP upon arrival; elected leaders represented their factions inside the facility; and prisoners adhered to a strict schedule of reading activities. However, this success story appears to be an outlier – the authors note that the layout of each jail affects its internal organization, and that their account is not representative of other prisons.⁷⁰ I found no evidence of similar arrangements elsewhere. This variation is telling of how the weakening of prisoners' communication channels, combined with an Israeli "policy to de-educate,"⁷¹ has severed the chain of interactions which fed the expansion of the educational system and of the movement as a whole. The outcome is a lack of sustained political participation by the community of prisoners and ex-prisoners.

In sum, prior to 1993, the educational system not only prepared inmates to mobilize politically after release but enabled them to engage directly with the events of the day by publishing their writing in books and newspapers. Since the second Intifada, prisoners' only reliable option to capture public attention and elicit responses from political leaders has been hunger strikes. Not only is this tactic unsustainable by definition, but it also does not allow protesters to articulate their demands. The opportunity to do so falls to leaders like Barghouti who, in letters read out by his wife Fadwa, has little choice but to focus on a grievance unifying all the hunger strikers: discontent with living conditions inside prison.

Thus, even when protests gain public support, as they did in 2012 and 2017, inmates' political participation is limited to their grievances as prisoners, and not as Palestinian citizens. Deprived of political participation – by Israel, the PA, and logistical obstacles – inmates can no longer act as representatives of the Palestinian people. The educational system, by contrast, gave voice to a multitude of ideological, political, and cultural opinions within the prisoner community. As a result, prisoners became active participants in national politics.



Figure 2: Location of Prisons Before 1993⁷²



Figure 3: Current Location of Prisons⁷³

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued for the importance of the educational system in mobilizing Palestinian inmates in Israeli prisons. Starting from scratch, jailed activists built a pedagogic structure which promoted inter-factional cooperation, fostered learning and debates, and provided opportunities for prisoners to broadcast their views to the Palestinian population. Through the writing and publication of political texts, as well as the direct participation of released inmates in the first Intifada, the prisoners' movement became a leading proponent of non-violent tactics to combat the Israeli occupation. After the 1990s, the channels which supported the educational system collapsed under the pressure of Israeli restrictions, lack of support from the Palestinian Authority, and

geographical and logistical obstacles. In the absence of a system that could mobilize them behind bars, inmates' political participation declined. This decline is reflected in the movement's reliance on hunger strikes as its sole tactic of contestation – a striking shift from the experience of Palestinian prisoners in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

The limited political influence now exerted by the Palestinian inmate community might strike many as unsurprising. After all, there are few historical examples of incarcerated groups which participate actively in the politics of any country, let alone of an occupied and divided state like Palestine. Far more common, however, are examples of

prisoner communities which, placed under oppressive conditions and denied political representation, have resorted to violence as a means to achieve their goals and demands. Before 1993, the Palestinian prisoners' movement distinguished itself from such groups, and indeed from much of the PLO, for its use and advocacy of non-violent tactics. By examining the causes and consequences of these tactics, this paper provides insight into how groups with decentralized internal structures and few resources at their disposal can influence politics on a sustained basis without resorting to violence.

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