

The Resistance of Palestinian Women and Girls Behind Israeli Bars

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The release of two hundred and forty Palestinian children and women detainees and political prisoners in a hostage exchange, between the occupying state of Israel and Palestinian militant armed resistance groups, between the 24th and 30th of November 2023 constituted an important victory that came at an unimaginably horrific cost. The return of prisoners, detainees and hostages to their families and communities, accompanied by a six-day truce, was a small reprieve for many amid the ongoing genocide being committed against the Palestinian people by Israel. Far from being a recent development, mass incarceration, administrative detention, solitary confinement and torture, all rooted in the legal and moral logic of Israeli apartheid and occupation, have been leveraged as tools of suppression and oppression against the Palestinian people and their struggle for liberation since the early days of Israel's inception as a settler-colonial occupying state. While the conditions of the Palestinians in Israeli prisons are ever worsening, this essay is not primarily concerned with their plight but instead their resistance, particularly that of women and girls, to their oppression. Palestinian women and girl political prisoners and detainees' identity and existence, their pride and steadfastness, their unique positionality as women and their collective care, are all forms of resistance that have always and continue to challenge the very foundations which uphold the genocidal settler-colonial apartheid state of Israel.

The first point of resistance that deeply threatens the genocidal settler-colonial apartheid state of Israel is the mere existence of Palestinian women and girl prisoners who celebrate their cultural and national identity, remaining "*Sumood*, or steadfast" in their homelands (Arat et al., 2004, p. 517). This was exemplified during the November hostage exchange when the Israeli government prohibited "expressions of joy" (Rmeleh & Ibrahim, 2023) upon the reunification of imprisoned and detained Palestinian women and children with their families and communities.

Of course, this order, accompanied by the threat of violence and arrest by the IDF and police, did not successfully stamp out the joyous celebration of loved ones reunited in most areas of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. These expressions of exaltation and joy were in of themselves direct resistance to the occupation and were shamefully met with extreme repression. Similarly, steadfastness is embedded in aspects of Palestinian women and girls' resistance to the imprisonment of the occupation both in and outside of literal prisons. Elia (2017) characterizes the resistance of Palestinian women as "a resistance that consists of an Indigenous woman's defiant persistence, a rooted resistance that stems from knowing every blade [of] grass" (p. 52). This pride in an identity that comes from the land, shakes the very foundation of Zionist nation-building that seeks to completely dispossess Palestinians of their land and culture, proclaiming that Palestinians had no claim to it in the first place.

Another form of resistance that is evident in the testimonies of Palestinian women and girls released from Israeli imprisonment during the hostage exchange, is the resistance to the dehumanization and demoralization of imprisonment by way of love, care and solidarity for their fellow political prisoners and detainees. Far from being individualized and isolated subjects under the brutality of Israeli imprisonment, Palestinian women and girls understand themselves to be resisting collectively, which requires collective care and love. From the most vital necessity of caring for the wounds of fellow prisoners who have been brutally injured during arrest in the face of routine medical neglect from prison staff; to organizing and collectively bargaining for improved conditions with the full commitment of all prisoners; to simply being a source of companionship and comfort for their fellow inmates, Palestinian women and girls in Israeli prisons consistently rely on each other. Whether it is a mother separated from her children finding solace in the presence of younger prisoners her own child's age (Rmeleh, 2023) or

children stolen from their families seeking comfort in the presence of older prisoners. The bonds of friendship, sisterhood, and solidarity between equals formed in Israeli prisons allow them to resist the cruelty and demoralization they face. The strength of this resistance is again corroborated by the actions of the Israeli regime which has, in recent months, intensified its efforts to suppress it through the increased employment of torture, deprivation, solitary confinement and sexual assault.

While every Palestinian political prisoner or detainee, no matter their gender or age, can exemplify pride, steadfastness and collective care in resistance to the state of Israel, women's and girls' resistance is unique precisely because of their gender positionality. The gendered dynamics of imprisoned Palestinian women's resistance function in dual contrasting ways. Firstly as women, they are understood socially and culturally to warrant a heightened level of protection and respect akin to the protected status of other potentially vulnerable groups like children, elders and disabled people. This makes the brutality of Israeli imprisonment and detention all the more morally abhorrent when it is enacted upon women, thus making Palestinian women prisoners a strong symbol of the horrors of Israeli occupation in the eyes of many in and outside of Palestinian society. This gendered construction and the powerful symbolic value it holds contextualizes the prioritization of the release of Palestinian women alongside children in the November hostage exchange. In contrast to this, the threat that the resistance of imprisoned women and girls pose to the Israeli apartheid state often has less to do with their symbolic value as women victimized by Israel and more to do with their position as women who are "active agents of resistance" (Sharoni & Abdulhadi et al., 2015, p. 659). Palestinian women and girls who participate in forms of resistance varying from sharing social media posts, defending loved ones from arrest and brutalization, politically advocating for respecting international law, being

part of the armed struggle and all other manifestations of resistance are all subject to targeted arrests and imprisonment by the Israeli state. This reality makes clear that imprisoned Palestinian women and girls aren't just part of the rationalization of Palestinian resistance but are in fact key resisters working toward liberation. It is evident that the resistance of imprisoned and detained Palestinian women and girls is both incredibly symbolically and practically powerful as it presents a great threat to the continued existence of Israel as a genocidal apartheid settler-colonial state.

This exploration of the resistance of Palestinian women and girls in Israeli prisons, which has been highlighted internationally during the November hostage exchange, barely scratches the surface of the myriad forms of struggle that imprisoned and formerly incarcerated Palestinians participate in. Relatedly, the focus on women and girls in this essay is not an attempt to essentialize their experiences or paint a picture of a more worthy or deserving victim of the genocidal apartheid settler-colonial state of Israel. This essay simply strives to highlight the agency, resilience, and resistance of Palestinian women and girls that the Israeli state desperately seeks to suppress and silence. In paying attention to the calls to action and leadership of the most suppressed and oppressed a path to ultimate liberation can be forged, it is undeniable that Palestinian women and girls who have been political prisoners or detainees are some of these vital voices that must be heard. Liberation within our lifetime. Free Palestine.

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