

“Denying healthcare to Palestinian prisoners”, Oneg Ben-Dror, Physicians for Human Rights, 28.7.2025

Introduction

Welcome back to the second session this week of *Eyes on Gaza*. As always, these gatherings aim to keep our focus and attention on the war of extermination in Gaza. At the same time, we also seek to examine the broader contexts and the deeper mechanisms of dehumanization and control that make such horrors possible. Today, we will focus on one such aspect. Our guest is Oneg Ben Dror, project coordinator in the Prisoners Department at Physicians for Human Rights–Israel. She will speak with us about the denial of medical treatment to Palestinian prisoners as a tool of punishment. Thank you, Oneg, for joining us today.

Lecture

Thank you for inviting me. I think it is important to begin by saying that the denial of medical treatment in prisons is not some kind of mishap or neglect—it is an official policy. Even before October 7, Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir was pushing forward various legislative proposals to formalize it. After October 7, he found the door wide open to implement this policy without any oversight—no judicial review, no parliamentary scrutiny, no checks from the Israel Prison Service itself or the public health system.

What does “denial of medical treatment” actually mean in practice? For many months since the beginning of the war, all medical care outside the prison system has been halted. That includes referrals for imaging, consultations with specialists, surgeries, and even life-saving treatments such as chemotherapy for cancer patients. In addition, medication for chronically ill prisoners has been cut off. Access to prison clinics is virtually non-existent and has been so for nearly two years. This means that anyone wounded or is suffering from a chronic illness receives no follow-up, no specialist care. Today, the Prison Service refers prisoners only in the most critical cases—and even then, not always, and often far too late. The result is that dozens of Palestinians have died in prison from medical neglect, when appropriate treatment could have kept them alive. In practice, prisoners requesting to see a doctor almost never encounter one, unless there is external intervention, such as from Physicians for Human Rights.

It is also important to stress that the denial of medical care is part of a broader official policy, one that includes appalling conditions introduced by the Prison Service under the minister’s directives: severe overcrowding, lack of hygiene and hygiene products, and starvation. This has left every Palestinian prisoner vulnerable to infectious and contagious diseases such as skin conditions. The scabies epidemic has been raging in prisons for over a year now. Thousands have been infected, many have developed secondary infections and skin inflammations, and all have suffered unbearable itching for more than a year without receiving any treatment to relieve it. Despite repeated petitions and legal appeals, the Prison Service has refused to provide adequate medical care to contain the disease and stop its mass spread. In fact, this has become a tool of torture. Prison doctors are thus part of this official policy against Palestinian prisoners—a policy of torture and punishment carried out through the withholding of medical treatment.

Another example we have seen of how this policy plays out is in the spread of an intestinal disease in one prison. Dozens of Palestinians, including minors, suffered for weeks from diarrhea, stomach pain, and prolonged vomiting without receiving treatment. Some lost so much weight that within a month they weighed only 40 kilos, shedding dozens of kilograms both due to starvation and untreated illness. One of them, a 17-year-old boy named Walid Ahmad, died in Megiddo prison. He had contracted the same disease, and after months of complaining of hunger, diarrhea, and dehydration without any response, he reached a state of severe malnutrition and eventually died.

It is crucial to understand that this method of torture—denial of medical care—is not a figure of speech. It has real, devastating consequences on the ground. Patients have suffered irreversible damage. Some have been left with permanent disabilities, including paralysis that began with untreated scabies and exposure to additional infections. And alongside this, the reality is that dozens upon dozens of Palestinian detainees and prisoners have died directly as a result of lack of treatment.