

Two Palestinian girls detained in Israel without trial for months

By Fadi Eyadat
16 October 2008
Haaretz

On the night of June 5, someone knocked on the door of the Salah house in Khader, near Bethlehem. Had it not been 2 A.M., nobody in the family would even have been suspicious. Nevertheless, said Siham Salah, her eldest daughter, Salwa, opened the door.

"Soldiers and a [Shin Bet security service] officer entered," Siham related. "They sat down calmly and began to ask questions about members of the household. They asked how many children we had and about the fact that there are problems in our neighborhood. Suddenly, they went outside, brought in female soldiers and took my daughter.

"I told the officer she's a girl, all of 16, studying for her matriculation exams, and that she never had any involvement in politics or belonged to any organization. He ignored me. I began to scream; Salwa began to cry and shouted at me: 'Mother, don't let them take me!' But the soldiers shut me into an inside room and kidnapped her."

Only two months later did Siham finally see her daughter again, in the Damoun Prison near Haifa. There, she discovered that her 16-year-old cousin Sara had also been arrested. Both girls were being held in administrative detention, or detention without trial.

Since then, four months have gone by. Last week, the girls' detentions were extended by another three months. But the Salah family still does not even know why their daughter was arrested, and all their efforts to find out have been in vain.

According to attorney Sahar Francis, who is representing both girls, the security services "claim they are dangerous, based on classified information. We tried in court to ask the prosecutor the nature of their 'dangerousness': Did they act alone? What was their role? But we didn't receive any answers. And other than an initial interrogation at the time they were arrested, neither has been questioned."

Altogether, some 600 Palestinians are in administrative detention in Israel, including about 15 minors who do not even know why they are being detained.

Some 100 people organized by the Coalition of Women for Peace protested Wednesday opposite the prison to demand that Salwa and Sara be released. "We oppose the use of administrative detention, because it is undemocratic," said Adi Dagan, one of the demonstration's organizers. "It is part of the occupation and oppression of the Palestinian people. And we're talking about two schoolgirls. No one even knows why they are being held in jail."

The Re'ut-Sadaka youth movement has collected some 500 signatures, mostly from other youths, on a petition demanding that the girls either be indicted or released.

Siham Salah said that the first time she saw her daughter in jail, "she was in a difficult emotional state. She cried and asked us to get her out of there. She's a baby, a girl who lived from school to home and back again. That very day [of her arrest], she had signed up for matriculation prep classes in English and math. Today, when I see the girls of her class going to school, I burst out crying."

<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1028979.html>