

KEEP THE FIRES BURNING

A NEWSLETTER BY AND FOR CALIFORNIA PRISONERS

¡Tenemos una versión en español de este boletín informativo! Por favor escribanos si quiere una copia de esta edición o una edición previa, o si quiere ser agregado a nuestra lista de correo.

We have a Spanish translation of this newsletter! Please write us for a copy of this or previous editions, or to be added to our mailing list.

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NOTE FROM THE EDITORS, ADAPTED FROM OUR OUTSIDE NEWSLETTER:

We are sometimes at a loss for what to say. The genocide in Gaza continues, an entire people on the verge of death as we write this. Things in the U.S. have escalated in intensity and pace since our last newsletter. Material conditions tighten, we keep doing triage, but part of the escalation is that it's a shock-and-awe campaign that makes it hard to not simply traffick in victimhood and outrage.

Well, know this: we at AboSol are steadfast and growing. We're only getting sharper. And whatever we report on here isn't merely another outrage or calamity but a chapter or opening in a fight already engaged. These are battlefield reports, community bulletins. These are opportunities, not epitaphs.



IN THE NEWS Leonard Peltier Is Home!

Good news is precious! Political prisoner Leonard Peltier was released to home confinement on February 18th. He was a dedicated organizer with the American Indian Movement (AIM) who was framed for the killing of two FBI agents in 1975. After 49 years inside prison and following a commutation of his life sentence, Leonard returned home to his family and community. The act of clemency permits Peltier, who is 80 and has been in declining health for years, to serve his remaining days in home confinement.



RIP Bilal Sunni Ali

Baba Bilal, a former Black Panther, member of the Black Liberation Army, and political prisoner, transitioned this past December. Bilal Sunni-Ali was a Muslim New Afrikan revolutionary, and accomplished jazz, blues, and spoken word artist who used creativity to inspire and challenge the status quo.

Chuckawalla Closed. Or Is It Really?

Another prison closure that raises questions is that of Chuckawalla Valley State Prison in November. Although the facility itself is emptied out, CVSP is following the pattern of previously shuttered CDCr facilities by entering a “warm shutdown” mode, in which a skeleton staff remains to keep the physical facility maintained. On paper the closure of CVSP appears to paint CDCr’s capacity

as eroding, but like all of the CDCr facilities in “warm shutdown” mode, it protects carceral capacity and the option of being reopened if demanded by the powers that be. In anticipation of this closure, the town had already started to explore how else to boost the town’s viability via the carceral economy:

One such recent article describes the imminent closure of Chuckawalla Valley State Prison near the town of Blythe in Eastern Riverside County which borders the Colorado River. The author writes: “Two things bring people here, prisons and water, and this tiny desert town is losing both.”

Town officials have hired a PR firm for the first time ever and are lobbying the state to instead close CRC-Norco, another prison also in Riverside County, in an attempt to save “Chuck.” They also imagine alternative futures, such as reopening as an immigrant detention facility (and presumably locking up migrants fleeing increasingly hostile living conditions back home, climate breakdown, land theft, violence, and lack of economic opportunity fueled by US imperialism).”

Hundreds Turn Out Against ICE Detention at FCI-Dublin

ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) officials have toured the now closed federal prison in Dublin several times to gauge the feasibility of reopening it as an ICE detention center. There has already been a protest at Dublin, part of a national push against the expansion of violence against and imprisonment of “non-citizens.” FCI-Dublin is only available because of its recent closure due to widespread and longterm sexual abuse of its women prisoners by guards and the cover up of this by the administration. This is further proof that prison closures are never victories in and of themselves until they are physically dismantled, until then they are prison capacity in reserve.

A photo taken at the Dublin protest on March 1st. About 100 people from several different groups and communities rallied outside the facility. Photo by Brooke Anderson



Urgent! CDCr Is Trying To Ban Physical Mail

We've gotten word that CDCr is trying to do what we've long feared: banning physical mail. This is incredibly serious and dangerous.

In February, CDCr signed a new 189 million dollar, 6+ year contract with Aventiv/Securus. As far as we understand it so far, CDCr is planning to implement a pilot program in 10 facilities that will start this summer, where the current tablets will be replaced by newer versions, and it *seems* that the plan is for all mail in all of CDCr to be accessed only through these tablets by early 2026. Many details are not yet clear to us, *because with all the things that CDCr does, it does without any real transparency or accountability.*

Physical mail bans have been spreading across prisons and jails across the country since 2018 in the wake of the last national prison strike and with them a trail of increased censorship, surveillance, institutional control, and misery. Some places in the U.S. have all mail scanned and reprinted, and some have even now put a complete ban on all physical letters whatsoever. Many places first attempted to ban all physical mail including books, and were forced to walk back their policies only by pressure from outside families and abolitionists.

The banning of physical mail is done under the guise of stopping contraband, but we all know how most contraband gets in- through the guards and staff. What it really is about is tightening the vice around prisoners necks even more than it already is, keeping prisoners isolated, and opening up new avenues for the prison system to surveil, censor, and retaliate.

The use of mass surveillance has been increasing on the outside just as on the inside. Digital tools are becoming more powerful and easier to use, which gives the oppressive police state previously unheard-of capacity to aggregate and analyze data. By forcing all mail to be digital, this allows it all to be easily fed through and stored in censoring and surveillance systems. The content of people's messages and calls is collected and analyzed in order to build profiles on people and make it easier to monitor and retaliate against those who are speaking out or pushing back.

Tablets have been rolled out using the lure of increased access to media and other positive and fun things to use to engage with the world and pass the time- who wouldn't want this! But the normalization of the use of this technology on the inside (just like the outside) also serves to increase the ease with which people's activities, interests and messages can be logged- and what people have access to can be controlled.

When we've investigated these companies that contract with the prisons to give tablets and phone services, we've found that they often actually sell themselves not as communications companies, *but as surveillance companies that use communications provision to gather intelligence.*

On the outside, we've experienced an increase in online censorship that is often being done by automated systems that punish you or prevent you from sending messages if those messages meet some unknown criteria, and without any clear recourse. Automated censorship often involves major decisions being made by a secret, extremely biased algorithm that is often almost impossible to appeal or even understand. Beyond being scary, it's also endlessly infuriating and stupid.

On the inside, we've heard reports of messages being automatically blocked from being sent because they contain words relating to the facility conditions, such as the word "lockdown," and experienced seemingly completely mundane letters being rejected with no explanation or way to prevent it. These companies often employ lists of banned words that can be customized to individuals.

We're seeing calling systems in other states where you have to register a number to even be able to call it. We're hearing in different places in and out of California about strict word limits on messages, applications to send messages that are almost impossible to use, that lose your messages, that can only be downloaded on smartphones. People are forced to register their information to be able to use the applications or they can't write to people inside, which creates huge barriers and gives much more control and surveillance over who can send letters to prisoners than is the case with traditional physical mail.

These apps that the prison systems are forcing people to download have even shown evidence of being essentially spyware on the devices of the people using them on the outside, looking at all of the private data on these people's phones, such as texts and pictures!

On top of that, physical mail bans are cruelty beyond belief. To never touch what a loved one has also touched. To sentence someone to never be able to hold a card by their kid, or a letter from their lover, or to put a piece of art on their wall...

If letters are scanned and reprinted, they are often done badly- just one side of two sided letters, blurry, parts cropped out, only in black and white, etc- and then the originals are often destroyed! In many places, all the mail is kept only as digital copies, only accessible on tablets. But as we know - tablets are treated as a privilege - *and any privilege can and will be taken away when it serves the institution!*

We've now heard of at least one jail in the country that now scans all mail, destroys it, then uploads those scans to tablets, where those scans are accessible to those prisoners for only 30 days- and then it's deleted forever.

We all know that there is no real accountability behind prison doors and prison systems do whatever they can get away with. Even those on the outside who are watching as closely as we can are often unable to figure out what's going on, much less force the prisons to stop. And the more the prisons have control over how and what information gets in and out, the worse that will be.

This MUST be opposed. Once they have something like this in place, they will never willingly go back. This would mark a change

in prisoners' ability to communicate forever, and would likely have downstream consequences we can't even yet imagine.

We're still trying to understand fully what's going on, so please send us any further information you have, as well as any thoughts and experiences you want to share. Please indicate if what you share is something you're willing to have published publicly, and if you'd want your name attached to it if so.

We are working hard to spread the word on the outside, please help us spread the word on the inside.

This can't be allowed to stand.

'I Was Silenced': San Quentin News Editor-In-Chief Fired for Prison Reform Efforts

Below are passages from the above-titled article published on April 7th in Prism by Steve Brooks, the former editor of San Quentin News. We had to excerpt it for space, but please write us if you would like to receive the full original article.

"When I took over as editor-in-chief of San Quentin News (SQN) in early 2023, I was at the height of my rehabilitative journey. I was disciplinary-free, I had a college degree and vocational

training, and was part of many self-help groups. (...)

On March 17, 2023, Gov. Gavin Newsom came to San Quentin and announced his plans for a historic transformation of San Quentin State Prison (SQP). As editor-in-chief of the newspaper, I was able to attend. (...)

(...) For the first time, it seemed the system was acknowledging the damage it was doing to its own people. Newsom sounded like he sincerely wanted to transform San Quentin's hyper-punitive environment into one based on humanity and homecoming.

(...) A reporter from KQED behind me asked the governor whether the advisory group he planned to create as part of this rebranding would include people currently incarcerated in SQP. Newsom replied yes, stating they wanted to incorporate our views in their reform efforts.

Hearing this, I thought: I have 30 years of lived carceral experience. I should galvanize a group of incarcerated stakeholders to vocalize our issues. So, that night, along with my cellmate Arthur Jackson, I co-founded The People In Blue (TPIB), a group dedicated to reducing harm, creating safer communities, and minimizing California's need and overreliance on prisons.

(...) I told reporters who asked what we thought of the California Model that a new building was not enough to change the culture in prison.

In June 2023, I expanded on these thoughts in an article published in Marin Independent Journal, stating that instead of sinking more money into a wasteful \$14.2 billion annual budget, the California



Image from article.

Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation should be investing in community-based resources to increase the likelihood of incarcerated individuals returning home. Around this time, TPIB also started writing its own report and recommendations for reform in order to provide an incarcerated perspective to the governor that were based around collaborative conversations between TPIB members and correctional staff. In September 2023, TPIB released this report, which identified concrete reforms such as implementing mandatory financial literacy programs, providing healthier foods through the institution's culinary system, and bringing back wellness initiatives like weightlifting programs, food co-ops, and gardens. Meanwhile, Newsom's 21-member advisory council continued to meet in secret, eventually delaying the release of their report.

(...) Some prison administrators were referring to TPIB as a security threat because our preliminary report cited history dating back to George Jackson, a Black activist killed in SQP in 1971.

But TPIB is not a security threat. It is a diverse coalition of incarcerated people using lived experiences to speak truth about prison reform. The truth is that some administrators just don't want incarcerated people to be able to express their opinions.

(...) The situation only worsened when some members of Newsom's advisory council acknowledged that they were impressed by our work. (...)

On Dec. 8, 2023, I was sitting at my desk in the newsroom when custody staff came and asked me to step outside. Two custody staff members told me to gather all my things and leave the media center, which I was then banned from. I was told I could no longer write for SQN. I was banned from participating in the Ear Hustle and Uncuffed podcasts. I was even banned from attending meetings with the San Quentin chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists that met in the media center. I was silenced.

Three weeks later, I received a rules-violation report alleging "overfamiliarity" with a prison volunteer. I knew it was a false report, but I was found guilty anyway. I filed an appeal, and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation overturned my conviction and ordered the violation to be reheard or dismissed in the interest of justice. I received a new hearing in June 2024 and was found not guilty six months later. Despite this, upon my exoneration, I was told by an angry custody officer that I would not be going back to my job.

As Newsom admitted in his March press conference, incarcerated people and staff alike have suffered trauma from the toxic prison system. We suffered through a fatal COVID-19 outbreak. We suffered through being warehoused in dangerously overcrowded facilities without enough rehabilitation programs. As someone who has been a part of this suffering, I wanted to help create real reforms. I wanted to create a healthier system for public safety, healing, and getting people home to their families. I used my voice and my pen to help facilitate change, and some prison administrators didn't like it. They didn't want to hear what I had to say, so they took away my platform and labeled me a danger to the prison. What are these calls for reform but smoke and mirrors if we're silenced when we try to make them a reality?"

Update on Repressive Policy Changes in the U.S.

From January to present, Donald Trump has issued presidential decrees to restrict civil rights and increase mass deportations. Executive orders were also used extensively by previous presidents like FDR, Obama, and Biden. Order 9066 in 1942 stated that anyone considered a "threat to national security" could be detained and forcibly removed to concentration camps. The basis for this order was the Alien Enemies Act of 1798, invoked once again by Trump on March 15, 2025.

Executive orders can be overturned if a judge decides that they violate a law or the Constitution. But as anyone caught up in the American legal system knows, reversing decisions can take years. Executive Order 9066 was not terminated until 1976. Knowing this, Trump's approach has been to issue decrees first and fumble for legal justifications later – and as a result, he's gotten the jump on opposing forces that are struggling to keep up. This is an overview of some recent policies.

TARGETING TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

The novelist Umberto Eco grew up in Fascist Italy. In 1995, he listed common characteristics of fascist societies in his essay *Ur-Fascism: Fourteen ways of looking at a blackshirt*. Number 12, he writes, is machismo: "since both permanent war and heroism are difficult games to play, the Ur-Fascist transfers his will to power to sexual matters. This is the origin of *machismo* (which implies both disdain for women and intolerance and condemnation of nonstandard sexual habits, from chastity to homosexuality.)"

On his first day in office, Trump issued Executive Order 14168 withdrawing federal recognition of transgender people. The order denies the existence of both trans and intersex people, stating that gender is based on biological sex at birth and cannot be changed. Subsequent orders have targeted trans people's healthcare funding, civil rights protections, and their participation in school and sports.

Order 14168 also called to amend the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) to ensure that "males are not detained in women's prisons or housed in women's detention centers." The order eliminates funding for trans medical care in federal prisons. Currently, PREA (28 CFR, Section 115) requires prisons to account for LGBT prisoners' perception of their own safety when placing them into housing. PREA also prohibits policies that house transgender and intersex prisoners based "exclusively on external genital anatomy."

Widespread sexual abuse at the Central California Women's Facility in Chowchilla and at FCI Dublin shows that state and federal compliance with PREA is poor, and its enforcement mechanisms are weak. Punishment for noncompliance consists only of small reductions in grant funding from the U.S. Department of Justice. In California, SB132 is intended to provide an additional layer of protection for trans prisoners, allowing them to request appropriate housing and to be searched

in accordance with their gender. Prisoners requesting a transfer through SB132 must go through an interview process, and the transfer is still subject to a vote by the Institutional Classification Committee (ICC).

Anti-trans groups in California lobbied against SB132 by claiming it would endanger women who are not trans. This divide-and-conquer strategy is false and harmful - and it has now endangered the rights of *all* prisoners regardless of their gender. On April 23, the DOJ terminated all funding for the National PREA Resource Center, which tracks the results of PREA investigations.

The ACLU, GLBTQ Legal Advocates and Defenders (GLAD), and the Transgender Law Center (based in Oakland, California) filed several lawsuits challenging Order 14168: *Kingdom v. Trump*, *Moe v. Trump*, *Doe v. Bondi*, and *Jones v. Bondi*. A D.C. court issued a restraining order to block the transfer of trans women to men's prisons. In March, *The Guardian* reported that at least two trans women had been transferred anyway. In March, the court ordered the Bureau of Prisons to return them. *Kingdom v. Trump* now seeks class action status to represent all prisoners in BOP custody who experience gender dysphoria and are receiving gender-affirming health care. Another lawsuit, *Orr v. Trump*, challenges the State Department's refusal to issue passports for transgender people. On April 18, a federal judge issued a preliminary injunction requiring the State Department to allow the plaintiffs to obtain passports with their correct gender.

A lawyer with GLBTQ Legal Advocates & Defenders wrote in April that while challenging anti-trans policies in court is important, "the people may ultimately be the ones who adjudicate justice with their voices and actions."

OUTSOURCING MIGRANT PRISONS

Trump campaigned on the promise to deport 1 million people within his first year in office. His administration's attempt to make good on this promise has resulted in fewer *removals* than under Obama and Biden's deportation machines, but many more people incarcerated. The U.S. Congress is fully complicit, authorizing \$485 million in March to expand Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) operations.

Deportations that have occurred have been media spectacles – intended to cause fear and lead people to leave "voluntarily." In March, Trump invoked the Alien Enemies Act to justify the abduction of over 280 people to El Salvador, including sheet metal worker Kilmar Abrego García and professional soccer player Jerce Reyes. Many were Venezuelan citizens seeking asylum. In their deportation cases, the government argued that they were gang members based on confidential information and supposedly gang-related tattoos including the Real Madrid Club de Fútbol logo, the Chicago Bulls logo, and an autism awareness ribbon. The administration later admitted to "administrative errors" but insists that it is powerless to return the abductees.

The U.S. government is paying the government of El Salvador millions of dollars to house abductees in its prisons. Both Trump and Salvadoran president Nayib Bukele proclaimed the operation

as a victory against gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), which Trump recently declared a "foreign terrorist organization." But reports from Salvadoran newspaper *El Faro* and U.S. journalist José Olivares revealed that behind the media spectacle, this was a mutually beneficial deal between two authoritarian presidents. Trump deported at least two members of MS-13 who could have testified about secret negotiations between the Bukele government and MS-13, which agreed to reduce violence and to back Bukele in the 2019 presidential election in exchange for financial incentives.

On May 2, a federal judge ruled that the administration's use of the Alien Enemies Act is unconstitutional. It remains to be seen what impact this decision will have, beyond confirming what we already know is unjust - the federal government has still made no attempt to return Kilmar Abrego García from El Salvador, despite an order from the U.S. Supreme Court.

USING ICE TO SUPPRESS PALESTINE SOLIDARITY

Local opposition to the ongoing Palestinian genocide has been rebranded as a U.S. immigration issue. Shocking images of abductions by ICE agents have been used to intimidate people into silence. They are also a move to regain control of the narrative, said journalist Sam Hussein in April, by "turning the page" on genocide just as Israel intensifies its blockade and aerial attacks on Gaza. "Rubio, Trump and company are obviously attacking the First Amendment in service of Israeli genocide," Hussein wrote, "but their strategy is politically effective: Cast Palestine as another immigration issue, so they can pretend to be America First and not — as even some rightwinger critics are charging — Israel First."

On January 29, Trump issued Executive Order 13899, "Additional Measures to Combat Anti-Semitism." This order blamed the U.S. student movement against genocide in Gaza as the cause of an "unprecedented wave" of antisemitic discrimination. Order 13899 builds upon the Biden administration's hostility to the student anti-war movement, as well as the groundwork laid by Zionist lobbyists to redefine speech critical of Israel as an antisemitic act. The current administration has taken this a step further, decreeing that solidarity with Palestine is equivalent to "endorsing terrorist activity."

Equating dissent with terrorism turns activism into a deportable offense. Beginning in March, the administration began revoking visas and detaining students using ICE agents, who in many cases have been masked and wearing plain clothes. ICE abducted Columbia student activists Mahmoud Khalil and Mohsen Mahdawi, who are both Palestinian green card holders; as well as Boston graduate student Rümeyşa Öztürk, who published an article calling for her university to cut its financial ties to Israel. All of them were sent to ICE detention in Louisiana. Several other student visa holders were detained after Columbia University allowed ICE on campus to execute search warrants.

Mahmoud Khalil's case has drawn mainstream media coverage. His green card was revoked under the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952, which permits the government to deport immigrants if the U.S. Secretary of State determines that their activities support "world communism" or would have "adverse foreign policy consequences" for the United States. No evidence is required to justify these claims. An immigration judge determined that Khalil may be deported after Secretary of State Marco Rubio declared that his presence in the U.S. creates a "hostile environment for Jewish students." Unfortunately, this decision is not surprising: immigration judges are not part of the judicial branch of U.S. government—they serve at the pleasure of the president and are employees of the Justice Department, an executive branch agency. For now, Khalil remains in ICE custody in Louisiana with a pending writ of habeas corpus in New Jersey federal court. ICE denied his request to be present at the birth of his first child. In a letter to his son, Deen, Khalil wrote:

"I have come to recognize the look in the eyes of every father in this detention center... But my absence is not unique. Like other Palestinian fathers, I was separated from you by racist regimes and distant prisons. In Palestine, this pain is part of daily life. Babies are born every day without their fathers – not because their fathers chose to leave, but because they are taken by war, by bombs, by prison cells and by the cold machinery of occupation."

On April 30, Mohsen Mahdawi was released on bond. Rümeyşa Öztürk was also released in early May while her case is pending in Louisiana.

FINAL THOUGHTS

We've been watching these developments from our vantage point in California, where politicians have attempted to play on both sides in the unfolding chaos. Newsom announced in April that California surpassed Japan as the fourth-largest economy in the world and that California will challenge the Trump administration over its restrictions on free trade. Meanwhile, Newsom has hosted right-wing figures on his podcast and suggested that trans women should be barred from sports. Attorney General Rob Bonta has also fashioned himself as a champion of immigrants and the working class who is unafraid to sue the Trump administration. Yet both these figures preside over CDCr : the largest law enforcement agency in the United States after the NYPD and U.S. Customs and Border Protection, a laboratory of cruelty that uses "gang validation" techniques akin to those employed against Venezuelan migrants to justify solitary confinement and torture. We view California as "exceptional" at our own peril – and we won't be satisfied with self-congratulatory claims of "resistance" from its leaders.

What do you think? Let us know your thoughts on these policies, and if you would like to receive more information about the policies themselves or the litigation against them.

Prisoners and Hostages: Notes on the Ceasefire in Palestine

AN INTRODUCTION AND UPDATE FROM THE EDITORS:

This is a piece we wrote for our February outside newsletter. We've republished it here in full, with more pictures. Since this piece was originally written, israel has broken the ceasefire agreement, ceasing the exchange of prisoners and resuming its horrific genocide. At the time of us writing this, in early May, the people in Gaza are being starved to death by the israeli blockade, with many on the verge of death. Words continue to elude us to describe the sheer scope and horror of what is being done.

In this piece, we tried to speak specifically to the resistance's successes in pursuing a strategy of prisoner exchanges to free its people. This is not the first time the resistance has successfully captured israeli soldiers and forced israel to release people from its torture dungeons, and it is likely not the last.

Israel continues to refuse to accept the terms required to free all of its own prisoners, because to do so requires agreeing to stop their genocide. We are shown over and over how there is no just or lasting peace for Palestinians without liberation from israel. We think now of times when resistance fighters have been asked why they have taken up arms, and many have said that it was because they realized israel was going to kill them regardless- so why not fight back?

"As we make this call to you, we do not ask you to free us from prisons: that is the task of the resistance and it will take care of it."

*- Letter from the National Prisoners' Movement
in Palestine, November 29, 2023*

The resistance keeps its promises. A ceasefire went into effect in Gaza on the morning of January 19th which promises the cessation of military operations, withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza, and the release of thousands of Palestinian captives from Israeli detention centers. This is a monumental achievement for the forces that have been bravely and steadfastly fighting the US backed, funded, and enabled zionist genocide, and a relief to the approximately two million people who've been living under Israeli bombs for 15 months.

There is much to be said about this agreement, and still many looming uncertainties. At the time of writing, Jenin is under siege as zionist forces escalate violence in the West Bank, and alarming proclamations about Gaza are coming out of the Trump admin. We want to celebrate the achievement of the Palestinian fighters, and will limit our analytical purpose here to some reflections on the Toufan al-Ahrar, the "Flood of the Free", prisoner exchanges. These releases are a prominent part of the ceasefire agreement, a clear point of victory for the Palestinian resistance, and there is much to be learned from this for our own context. Settler colonial narratives about captives, for example, are similar in all parts



"Palestinians celebrate the release of some 90 prisoners set free by Israel in the early hours of Jan. 20, 2025 upon their arrival aboard a Red Cross bus in the occupied West Bank town of Beitunia, on the outskirts of Ramallah." (CBSNews), Photo by ZAIN JAAFAR / AFP via Getty Images

of the so-called "West" and we have to continue exposing and deconstructing them. There is also much to be learned from the way that the Palestinian resistance steadfastly centers its captive peoples, and fights for their freedom.

NOTABLE FACTS ABOUT THE PRISONER EXCHANGE AGREEMENT IN THE CEASEFIRE

In the weeks since the agreement was reached, trucks full of humanitarian aid are finally starting to enter the Gaza Strip and enormous caravans of displaced people have begun to return to their homes in the North of Gaza. In keeping with the substantial prisoner exchange aspects of the agreement, buses of freed captives, operated and escorted by the International Committee of the Red Cross, are beginning to arrive in Gaza and the West Bank, greeted by fierce celebration.

Things to know about the prisoner exchanges that are already underway (from Palestine Chronicle):

"During the first phase, Israel will release approximately 2,000 prisoners, including 250 serving life sentences, and around 1,000 prisoners detained after October 7, 2023. Hamas will

release 33 Israeli detainees (alive or dead), including civilian women, soldiers, children under 19, elderly individuals over 50, and wounded or ill civilians, in exchange for the release of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails. For every Israeli detainee released, Israel will release 30 Palestinian children and women from prison.

In exchange for the release of 30 elderly and ill Palestinian prisoners, Hamas will release all living Israeli detainees who are elderly, ill, or wounded civilians. Israel will release 50 Palestinian prisoners for each Israeli soldier released by Hamas. In the sixth week of the agreement, Israel will release 47 prisoners from the "Shalit Deal," who were re-arrested after their release in 2011.

If the number of living Israeli detainees released does not reach 33, the remaining number will be made up of bodies. In return, Israel will release all women and children detained after October 7, 2023, by the sixth week.

Palestinian prisoners released under the agreement will not be re-arrested for the same charges for which they were previously detained. They will not be re-arrested to complete the remainder of their sentences. Palestinian prisoners will not be required to sign any documents as a condition for their release."



An Al-Qassam fighter (Hamas's military wing) letting a young child try holding his gun.

This series of releases will significantly reduce the population of Palestinians caged by the Israeli regime, which before the ceasefire numbered well over 10,000. There are many uncertainties around how these exchanges will continue to unfold, and what the increasing military aggression in the West Bank portends. On February 9th, as I'm completing final edits I'm seeing reports of a brutal IOF raid in Nur Shams. Still this ceasefire agreement must be seen as a victory for the Palestinian resistance. It is clear in the ratios of exchange that Palestinian fighters leveraged a substantial demand and secured the freedom of 30 - 50 Palestinians for every Israeli released.

DECONSTRUCTING THE NARRATIVE

Since October 7th the Zionist and mainstream media has paid undue focus on the "hostages" that were taken by Hamas while systematically minimizing and obscuring the ongoing brutality visited upon Gaza, and ignoring the thousands who have been held in Israeli "detention" centers before and since. Their message is clear, as always, that the violence against and caging of Palestinians is ever normalized. The use of "hostage" vs "prisoner" is strategic, it's one of many well-known and easily seen pieces of rhetorical trickery that perpetuate entrenched Western and Zionist narratives around Palestine. This difference in descriptive treatment (not to mention in actual treatment) is strategic precisely because it employs the cultural signifiers, so prominent



An Al-Qassam fighter posing with his fans. When the ceasefire went into effect, the fighters who had been forced into hiding were able to come out into the streets and were met with celebration.

and ever important in the West, of guilt and innocence. To media consumers in the imperial core, the concept of prisoner marks guilt at a deep, subconscious level, whereas the narrative import of hostage is that of innocence and victimhood.

The implications of pieces of narrative warfare like this are deep. Israeli citizens are given what western liberalism calls the presumption of innocence, while Palestinians are always already guilty. It is the same logic that allows the US and Israel to justify the genocide to itself and its constituencies. Palestinians are always already seen as criminals and combatants, and in a way they are, in that the stakes of their resistance are existential. But the western narrative colors this with the same signifiers of guilt and disposability that it uses against criminalized people and rebels here.

This narrative warfare is further evidenced in the way that Israeli prisoners have been placed at the center of so much, and are treated as individuals with complex stories and profiles. Palestinians, however, whether held in detention centers or living outside them under the reign of bombs and apartheid laws, are written about and understood in numbers and statistics. On the morning the ceasefire went into effect, NPR published an article profiling each of the 33 Israeli hostages set to be released with large photos evoking innocence, detailing their ages, genders, citizenship status, and miscellaneous personal details. Palestinians appear in the article only as "1900 Palestinians," despite an anonymous Hamas official being cited as the principal source for the article. Innocence vs guilt, individuality vs mass; the narrative distinction is very evident. And there are endless examples of this intentional narrative construction. In the spring of 2024, the Intercept obtained a leaked internal New York Times memo detailing language parameters for talking about the genocide or "conflict," notable among many instances of rhetorical manipulation is the instruction for writers to avoid the word Palestine "except in rare cases."

Beyond the narratives and categories deployed by the oppressors, where we clearly see the dehumanization and erasure of Palestinians, we must challenge the whole foundation of the settler colonial state of Israel. The framework of the settler legal systems has no legitimate basis yet grants Israel juridical power over stolen land and colonized indigenous people. The United States, itself a settler colonial state, uses its power to continue propping up this system. One challenge we face is that we still find ourselves using the term “prisoners” for colonized peoples fighting for liberation. If we are not continually deconstructing these terms, we perpetuate the narrative without interruption.

It is no wonder that there is a long tradition of solidarity between US and Palestinian prisoners. Palestinian prisoners have reliably expressed explicit and enthusiastic solidarity with prisoner resistance in the US. This was present during the hunger strikes in California in 2011 and 2013, as well as the national prisoner strikes in 2016 and 2018. There is an implicit and abiding understanding of shared struggle, shared reality, and shared colonial conditions between these sets of captives that continues.

CONSEQUENCES AND CONCLUSION

Beyond the ideological aspects and narrative warfare, the breakdown of the prisoner exchange says a great deal about the effectiveness of resistance. The Palestinian fighters never conceded or capitulated. They maintain a sober understanding of the existential stakes of the war they are fighting, and the motivations of their enemies. By holding out in this way they have achieved a scenario in which each released hostage earns the freedom of 30-50 Palestinians. In other words, they have succeeded in reversing the way that the West calculates the worth of the lives of its citizens as compared to all those that it dehumanizes and renders as Other. Israel and the US value the lives of Israelis over that of Palestinians in ways that are obvious in action and narrative. But Palestinian fighters have forced them to pay for those hostages disproportionately as well, thus turning the empire’s devaluation of their lives against it.

So much of this feels like stating the obvious. It’s crazy-making how power can manipulate so thoroughly and so obviously. It’s



A flood of people returning to northern Gaza.

like how the city’s public line, here in Oakland, was that the encampment sweeps are about “protecting public space,” and they do so by circling public parks with eight feet of chain link fence. The message is clear: Certain people count as citizens and individuals, all others are disposable, marked to be displaced, imprisoned, or simply annihilated. Fuck that. Down with the zionist entity and the empire that upholds it.

NOTE FROM THE EDITORS:

Hearing back from y’all is what helps keep us publishing this year after year. This newsletter is nothing without y’all’s ideas, submissions, and engagement with it on your own or with each-other on the inside. Because we had to cut so much content in this edition in order to fit in the more time-sensitive pieces, we’re planning to publish another newsletter soon this summer. We’d love to have your thoughts, writings or art in it.

LOVE & SOLIDARITY!

