

25% of Palestinian MPs detained by Israel

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Israel has arrested almost one quarter of the members of the Palestinian parliament as part of its campaign to free an Israeli soldier captured on the Gaza border in June.

Mahmoud Ramahi became the 33rd member of the legislative council (PLC) to be taken in by the Israelis during an operation yesterday.

Amani Rahami, 36, said her husband had been avoiding home for fear the Israelis would arrest him, but did not realise he was important enough to warrant surveillance.

"They came to arrest him many times but he was not here. This time they arrived minutes after he did. He is a father, an educated man and they take him away like a criminal. It is the Israelis who are criminals in this," she said.

Mr Ramahi is an anaesthetist at a Jerusalem hospital and is considered a Hamas moderate who opposes violence. When he arrived at his home in Ramallah yesterday, a squad of Israeli soldiers in jeeps were waiting nearby. They surrounded the house and summoned him by loudspeaker before tying him up and taking him away.

Mr Ramahi is the second Hamas representative to be taken into custody in Ramallah in as many days. On Saturday, Israeli soldiers detained Nasser Shaer, the deputy prime minister of the Palestinian Authority. Earlier this month, they arrested the PLC speaker, Aziz Dweik, a prominent political leader of Hamas in the West Bank.

After the capture of Corporal Gilad Shalit on June 12, Israel launched a series of military operations which left almost 200 Gaza residents dead and the territory besieged. Despite the damage, the militants holding Corporal Shalit continue to insist they would only release him in return for the liberation of Palestinian prisoners.

Since June, Israel has arrested 49 senior Hamas officials, including the 33 parliamentarians, as an extra bargaining chip in the prisoner exchange negotiations, which are being conducted by Egyptian mediators.

The officials are all from the West Bank and most have been a strong moderating force within Hamas, urging leaders in Gaza to recognise Israel and ensure the party is acceptable to the international community.

The Israeli government has arrested the men because it claims that technically they are members of "a terrorist organisation" although they may not be involved in terrorist acts themselves.

Mark Regev, a spokesman for the Israeli foreign ministry said: "The men who have been arrested are self-confessed senior members of Hamas which, in Europe, in Britain, in Japan, in Australia and in Israel is regarded as a terrorist organisation. They have been picked up and will be placed before a judge who will decide if there is sufficient evidence to try them."

Mr Regev would not confirm that their arrest was directly related to the detention of Corporal Shalit but added: "You cannot act like a terrorist and expect to be treated like a statesman. If Palestinian leaders act like statesmen and in accordance with conventional practices, they will earn the respect their position gives them."

Hamas has accused Israel of trying to destroy the Palestinian Authority, but members of the parliament said it is still managing to operate. PLC member Qais Abu Leila said that the arrest of PLC members was a show of force designed to demonstrate that Palestinians only have rights that Israel is prepared to give them.

"They have arrested as many as they can but still the PLC is working. It has more than 67 members out of 132 which is a quorum and the deputy-speaker is presiding over the sessions. The PLC is not working at the same tempo as previously but it is moving on although there is an agreement that controversial subjects will not be voted on," he said.

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