

Palestinian Prison Break: Film Shows Resilience in the Face of Israeli Injustice

New documentary chronicles six escape attempts by Palestinian inmates from Israeli maximum-security prisons

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Stories revolving around prison breaks, such as [The Shawshank Redemption](#), [The Great Escape](#) and [Escape From Alcatraz](#), have long intrigued audiences with their adrenaline-fuelled narratives and raw human emotions.

But few films have been able to capture [Palestinian](#) prisoners' sheer audacity, spotlighting their ongoing yearning for freedoms that have been taken away.

Palestinian Prison Break, a new documentary by the visionary filmmaker Mohammad Sawwaf, follows six attempts to escape from maximum-security [Israeli](#) prisons between 1987 and 2004, taking us on a journey that delves deep into the meaning of freedom for Palestinian prisoners. It explores the psyches of the imprisoned and prisoner alike.

The prisoner's mind is like a whirlpool, turning and turning, trying to deal with one key dilemma: how to reclaim one's stolen freedom. As freed Palestinian prisoner Imad al-Din al-Saftawi, who was held in [Israeli](#) occupation [jails for 18 years](#), said in the film: "To be imprisoned is the worst thing that could happen in your life."

The Israeli prison system has been using ever-more punitive measures to make its jails - which are located at remote, isolated sites - even more secure.

These include dogs trained to detect suspicious activity, surveillance equipment and watchtowers. Given such tough measures, one might think escape sounds far-fetched. But do such strict conditions deter or break prisoners' wills? Unlikely.

Human Spirit

At its heart, *Palestinian Prison Break* is a testament to the resilience of humans in their fight for freedom. The human spirit does not accept imprisonment. Likewise, Palestinian prisoners do not accept all the structural injustices that they endure.

The director weaves together personal stories, interviews, testimonials and reenactments to create an authentic portrayal of their escape attempts.

Watching this film, I was immediately reminded of the brave [Gilboa prison break](#), where [six Palestinian](#) political [prisoners escaped in 2021](#), tunnelling their way out of the prison with a spoon. It served as a stark [reminder of the determination](#) of those seeking freedom, even from seemingly impregnable confines.

The film explores the deprivation that the featured prisoners endured, which drove them on in their desire to escape. And these were not only material deprivations and restricted access to personal belongings and resources. [Mohammad Abu Jamous](#), one of the ex-prisoners interviewed, perfectly summed it up: “I was deprived of my dad and mum, my family, my youth. My life was wasted in prison.”

The film reminded me of these lines from a poem by [Mahmoud Darwish](#), widely considered the national poet of Palestine:

My home has changed,
And when I eat
And the amount of tobacco has changed
And the colour of my clothes, and my face, and my figure
And even the moon

This profound poem and the film both vividly capture the changes that suddenly occur in the lives of political prisoners, and the deprivation that they endure.

Remarkable Luck

The six meticulously devised escape plans were diverse, creative and used simple tools, the only ones accessible to the prisoners. One involved sawing through the steel bars of a window in the toilets with a smuggled hacksaw. Another saw prisoners cutting the metal bars of a prison gate during break time, taking advantage of temporary chaos in the facility due to ongoing construction work.

Other cases involved prisoners tunnelling under a bed to the visiting room’s toilet, while dressing as women so they could leave along with visiting families; or digging a tunnel with rudimentary tools, such as steel nails.

I was struck by how remarkable luck combined with the forces of nature helped prisoners navigate their way to freedom. Saftawi tells of how a dense fog suddenly descended on their escape day, blanketing the prison and momentarily distracting the guards.

“The moment I started climbing down [from a prison window to the ground], the guard dogs left at the same time,” he said.

The escapees recognised all too well the risks they were taking; that they might be captured and their sentences lengthened, or that they could suffer additional punishments, such as restrictions on family visits. But the taste of freedom was worth it, and they would rather fight than surrender. They sacrificed much for their freedom.

In one case, Saftawi's hand was injured on a barbed-wire fence surrounding a prison facility in Gaza while he was escaping in 1987. He recalls: "That was the most painful moment. To be free, I would have dismembered my hand in the barbed wire."

Watch the trailer below.

Wasted Lives

While incarcerated, the prisoners often found solace and support in one another during their relentless pursuit of freedom. If one prisoner hatched a plan, everyone would support it.

Those forced from their homes and families, locked up in hostile places, said they felt compelled to tell their stories.

"It is our duty to share these narratives in all media, not to entertain but to educate," Sawwaf told Middle East Eye.

At the film's end, the director highlights how the prisoners' wishes were reduced to only meeting their mothers, as both suffered the weight of longing and absence.

Tears fell down my cheeks as I watched a prisoner ask his mother not to die. His mother replied: "I am putting a sword by my hand, and if the angel of death comes, I will tell him not to take my soul before my son comes home."

I loved this film, and it's vital that more documentaries and films about Palestinian prisoners' experiences are made. This is the least we can do to honour their lives and struggles.

These wasted lives should be written about, read about and made into films. We need to ensure that their stories and their voices are not silenced.

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Featured image: A reenactment from the film Palestinian Prison Break shows a prisoner trying to dig a tunnel out of a facility (Alef Multimedia Company/Mohammad Sawwaf for MEE)

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