

5 October 2011

To: The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

### **Joint Open Letter on the Collective Punishment of Palestinian Political Prisoners Held in Israeli Prisons**

As Palestinian human rights organizations dedicated to the promotion and protection of human rights in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), the Palestinian Council of Human Rights Organizations would like to raise its concern about a series of collective and punitive measures taken by the Israeli Prison Service (IPS) against Palestinian political prisoners in Israeli prisons in recent months, prompting the latter to launch a campaign of disobedience, including a hunger strike, on 27 September 2011.

Although Palestinian prisoners' detention conditions have gradually deteriorated for many years, with many of the prisoners' movement's achievements overturned by prison administrations, the recent escalation comes on the heels of a speech by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on 23 June 2011, during which he announced a change in policy aimed at collectively punishing Palestinian prisoners for the continued incarceration of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.

Since then, the IPS has notably cancelled all prisoners' access to university education, newspapers, and book from outside prison, in addition to limiting the number of TV channels available to prisoners to three Arabic-language channels. The IPS has also started shackling all prisoners' hands and legs to and from all visits, and in some prisons, the duration of family visits has been shortened from 45 to 30 minutes, with children under the age of 8 unable to have physical contact with incarcerated parents as they were before. In that context, it should also be noted that since June 2007 Israel has implemented a complete ban on family visits to prisoners from the Gaza Strip. Perhaps most importantly, in recent months the IPS has increased the frequency of its punitive use of isolation for so-called "security" reasons, a policy that has long been decried by prisoners. While 12 prisoners were held in isolation for "security" reasons in May 2011, 7 additional prisoners were placed in this form of isolation in June alone after Netanyahu's speech. As of September 2011, there were 20 prisoners in isolation for "security" reasons, some of whom have spent several years in isolation. The IPS has also intensified the frequency of night raids and cell searches, including individual strip searches, another long-time grievance of the prisoners.

As a result of this worsening situation, Palestinian prisoners held in various Israeli prisons announced the launch of a campaign of disobedience starting on 27 September 2011 to protest the measures taken against them by the IPS. The campaign will comprise a hunger strike and refusal to cooperate with a number of IPS rules, such as wearing prison uniforms and participating in multiple daily roll calls. Although the campaign was launched by prisoners affiliated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, prisoners from other factions are gradually joining the call and will participate in various aspects of the campaign three days a week. The prisoners' primary demands focus on ending the IPS's abusive and punitive use of isolation for "security" reasons and its widespread use of collective punishment. In that context, prisoners have called for the full reinstatement of their access to education, books and clothes from outside prison, newspapers and all TV channels; an end to the practice of shackling their hands and legs to and from visits; the removal of time limits placed on family visits; and an end to the IPS's excessive imposition of fines on entire cells, sections or political parties and its frequent night raids and searches.

We welcome your recent decision to grant the Palestinian National Council status as a “partner for democracy” and note that one of the key issues that the Parliamentary Assembly will monitor in the coming two years will be progress toward freeing Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. In that context, we feel compelled to raise the issue of the 5,374 Palestinian political prisoners who remain in Israeli prisons, and in light of recent developments, we urge to immediately take up the question of their deteriorating detention conditions. We emphasize that the measures adopted by the IPS at the Israeli government’s behest constitute a clear form of collective punishment, which is prohibited under Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention law. As such, we ask that you use all tools at your disposal to pressure the Israeli authorities to meet the rightful demands of the prisoners and ensure that until all Palestinian political prisoners are released, they are afforded the treatment they are entitled to under international law. Israel should be reminded that it is bound to respect the Geneva Conventions in the oPt, including with regard to the treatment of prisoners and detainees.

Sincerely,

**The Palestinian Council of Human Rights Organizations:**

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