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Between "Joseph's School" and "Jonah's Whale" Palestinian women's coping strategies and the temporal politics of incarceration

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Abstract

This article examines how Palestinian women navigate imprisonment under shifting carceral regimes, focusing on the relationship between political context, prison temporality, and strategies of survival. Drawing on 65 testimonios with formerly imprisoned women, alongside published carceral narratives and archival accounts, the study challenges approaches that treat coping as a stable psychological disposition. Instead, it conceptualizes endurance as a historically contingent practice shaped by transformations in the prison itself. The article develops two analytical concepts grounded in women's own narratives: the *School of Joseph*, which captures periods in which minimal order, collective organization, and temporal continuity allowed prisoners to invest captivity with meaning, cultivate solidarity, and sustain future-oriented projects; and the *Whale of Jonah*, which describes moments of intensified repression marked by suspended time, bodily vulnerability, and the collapse of relational and ethical horizons. Through close engagement with testimonios spanning multiple periods—from the late 1960s to the aftermath of October 7, the article traces how practices such as learning, symbolic resistance, intimacy, marriage, and reproductive struggle became possible, and later structurally foreclosed. By centering Palestinian women's voices, the article contributes to carceral studies by foregrounding the temporal and relational dimensions of imprisonment in colonial and wartime contexts. It argues that the disappearance of outward-oriented practices of resistance signals not a decline in women's agency, but a transformation in the carceral regime itself, from one that sought to discipline life to one increasingly hostile to life-making altogether.

Keywords

Carceral time, Palestinian women, testimonio, gendered imprisonment, survival and endurance

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Introduction

Since the establishment of the Israeli state, incarceration has functioned as a central technology of colonial governance over the Palestinian population. Between 1948 and 1967, Israeli authorities arrested an estimated 100,000 Palestinians under a range of emergency regulations inherited from the British Mandate period (American Muslims for Palestine, 2025: 6). Following the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967, imprisonment expanded dramatically in both scale and scope. Approximately one million Palestinians were arrested between 1967 and 2021, including more than 16,000 Palestinian women, according to data compiled by the Palestinian Prisoners' Club (Abu Samra, 2021). Arrest and detention have thus become not exceptional events but recurring features of Palestinian life, shaping political consciousness, family structures, and collective memory across generations.

This carceral regime has intensified sharply since October 7, 2023.[1] Palestinian and international human rights organizations report the arrest of more than 650 Palestinian women in the months that followed, the majority of whom were held under administrative detention without charge or trial (B'Tselem, 2015; United Nations Committee against Torture, 2025). These arrests occurred alongside a broader transformation in detention practices, marked by prolonged incommunicado detention, the suspension of family visits, denial of legal access, and widespread reports of torture and ill-treatment. According to findings presented to the United Nations Committee against Torture, allegations of severe beatings, stress positions, starvation, sexual violence, and threats of rape have escalated to unprecedented and systemic levels, particularly affecting women and other vulnerable groups, including minors, elderly detainees, and individuals with serious medical conditions (United Nations Committee against Torture, 2025).

While the quantitative scale of Palestinian imprisonment is increasingly well documented, far less attention has been paid to how Palestinian women endure incarceration as the prison itself changes across historical moments. Existing scholarship on Palestinian prisoners has primarily focused on legal frameworks, military courts, and violations of international law (Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association, 2017; Hajjar, 2005). This body of work has been crucial in exposing the juridical architecture of Israeli domination. However, it has often foregrounded institutional analysis over lived experience, and collective political resistance over the everyday practices through which prisoners preserve their psychological and social integrity. When women appear in these accounts, they are frequently framed either as symbols of national sacrifice or as exceptional figures whose endurance confirms broader narratives of resistance.

This article argues that such approaches are insufficient for understanding women's carceral experiences under conditions of escalating colonial violence. Palestinian women's survival in prison cannot be reduced to individual resilience, nor can it be adequately captured through static psychological models that abstract suffering from its political and temporal context. Instead, women's modes of endurance must be understood as historically contingent responses to shifting regimes of incarceration that alternately allow and foreclose possibilities for collective life, meaning making, and agency.

This article intervenes in this gap by foregrounding Palestinian women's own accounts of survival under incarceration and by posing a different set of questions than those that have dominated the literature. Rather than asking whether women resist or succumb to imprisonment, it asks: How do women cope when the prison itself changes over time? What strategies become possible when limited organizational margins exist, and what forms of endurance emerge when those margins collapse entirely? Instead of approaching coping as a psychological disposition or a moral attribute, this study treats it as a historically contingent practice, shaped by transformations in the carceral

regime and by the shifting relationship between violence, regulation, and collective life inside prison.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with 65 formerly incarcerated Palestinian women who experienced imprisonment across multiple periods, ranging from the First Intifada (1987–1993) to 2025, this study examines how women interpret, inhabit, and respond to incarceration as both a personal and structural condition. Many of the women interviewed were arrested more than once, allowing for a comparative analysis of how changing prison conditions shape strategies of coping over time. Their testimonies reveal that women do not experience "the prison" as a singular or stable institution, but as a space whose character shifts dramatically depending on broader political developments, internal prison policies, and the degree of violence exercised by the authorities.

To conceptualize these dynamics, the article introduces two analytic constructs derived inductively from women's narratives: the School of Joseph and the Whale of Jonah. These concepts draw on Qur'anic narratives that are widely mobilized within Palestinian cultural and religious imaginaries to make sense of suffering, endurance, and moral survival. Their use here is not theological, but sociological. They function as heuristic tools for identifying distinct orientations toward incarceration that emerge under different historical and structural conditions.

The School of Joseph refers to a mode of endurance in which imprisonment, while recognized as profoundly unjust and violent, remains a space where limited forms of collective life, learning, and ethical self-fashioning are possible. The term draws on the Qur'anic account of the Prophet Joseph, who, despite wrongful imprisonment, sustains his moral clarity, forms relationships, and transforms confinement into a site of knowledge and interpretation. In women's testimonies, this orientation appears most clearly in periods when prison life is governed by relatively stable rules and when collective organization, such as informal education, cultural activities, and mutual care, remains feasible. Women who experienced incarceration during these periods described teaching one another, organizing study circles, and engaging in cultural or religious practices that helped sustain a sense of purpose and continuity.

By contrast, the Whale of Jonah captures a radically different condition of endurance. Drawing on the story of the Prophet Jonah's entrapment in the belly of the whale, a space of darkness, suspension, and isolation, this concept refers to moments when imprisonment becomes an all-encompassing experience that forecloses collective life and collapses temporal horizons. In such contexts, women describe deliberately withdrawing from interaction, suspending emotional investment, and "freezing time" as a means of self-preservation. Rather than engaging the prison as a space of learning or struggle, they experience it as a void to be survived until release. Several women emphasized that this mode of endurance was not chosen freely, but imposed by conditions of extreme violence, unpredictability, and humiliation.

Crucially, these two orientations are not expressions of personality, political commitment, or moral strength. Nor do they correspond neatly to binary categories such as resistance versus passivity. Instead, they reflect the structural possibilities and constraints produced by the prison regime at specific historical moments. Women who embraced collective practices during one period often shifted toward withdrawal in another, particularly following the deterioration of prison conditions after 2019 and the dramatic escalation of violence after October 2023.

Reports by B'Tselem (an Israeli human rights organization) describe this period as one in which Israeli prisons were transformed into spaces governed almost entirely by emergency regulations, where oversight was eliminated and violence normalized as a tool of management (B'Tselem, 2015). Testimonies document the confiscation of personal belongings, prolonged isolation, denial of medical care, and systematic humiliation. The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights has further recorded cases of sexual violence, harassment, and threats of rape used as instruments of control

against detainees, including women, reinforcing conditions in which withdrawal and psychic self-protection become necessary strategies of survival (Public Committee Against Torture in Israel (PCATI), 2024).

This analysis is informed by Michel Foucault's understanding of punishment as a historically shifting technology of power that operates through the regulation of bodies and time (Foucault, 1977), but it departs from Foucauldian frameworks by centering colonial domination rather than disciplinary normalization. It also draws on Angela Davis's insistence that survival under carceral regimes constitutes a form of struggle, particularly for racialized and colonized populations whose incarceration is tied to broader systems of dispossession (Davis, 2003). Finally, it resonates with Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian's work on colonial violence as an assault on livability itself, an effort to destroy not only bodies but the temporal and relational conditions that make life meaningful (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2019).

Scholarship on prison temporality has emphasized that incarceration is not only a deprivation of liberty but a reconfiguration of time itself, in which the passage of time becomes uneven, abrasive, and often disorienting. Drawing on ethnographic accounts of imprisonment, Ian O'Donnell (2014: 86–92, 148–153) shows that prisoners actively develop strategies to endure this temporal disruption, reorganizing daily routines, cultivating social relations, and recalibrating their mental horizons in order to render time more inhabitable. These practices do not eliminate the violence of confinement but mediate its effects, allowing prisoners to maintain a sense of continuity and self under conditions designed to fragment both.

Recent scholarship on temporality and confinement further underscores the extent to which time itself is governed, disrupted, and unevenly distributed within regimes of control. Andrew M. Jefferson's work on carceral environments highlights how confinement operates not only through spatial restriction but through the reorganization of everyday temporal rhythms, shaping how detainees experience duration, anticipation, and uncertainty (Jefferson, 2022). Similarly, Bhatia and Canning's concept of "stealing time" draws attention to the active role of the state in appropriating and fragmenting the temporal horizons of those subjected to detention, producing forms of waiting, suspension, and temporal dispossession that extend beyond the prison itself (Bhatia and Canning, 2021: 9–12). This insight resonates with Alice Elliot's notion of "paused subjects," in which lives are held in abeyance within bureaucratic and coercive systems, particularly in ways that are gendered and relational (Elliot, 2016: 5–8).

The analysis developed in this article builds on these contributions while departing from them in two key respects. First, it situates temporal disruption within a settler-colonial carceral regime in which time is not only governed but periodically collapsed through intensified violence. Second, it demonstrates that temporal strategies are not merely imposed but are actively reworked by prisoners themselves through practices that seek to reclaim continuity, meaning, and futurity. This is particularly evident in practices such as sperm smuggling, which has been analyzed as a form of embodied resistance that challenges carceral attempts to sever reproductive and generational time (Rexer, 2023: 312–316). Read through the analytic distinction between the School of Joseph and the Whale of Jonah, these interventions reveal that carceral time is neither uniform nor absolute, but contingent, contested, and differentially lived.

The testimonios examined in this article extend this insight by demonstrating that such temporal strategies are not uniformly available, but are themselves structured by shifting regimes of carceral power. Under conditions approximating what is conceptualized here as the School of Joseph, time can be collectively organized, shared, and invested with meaning. By contrast, in moments of totalized repression, described as the Whale of Jonah, the very conditions that make temporal structuring possible collapse, forcing a turn toward withdrawal, suspension, and the minimization of

temporal consciousness as a strategy of survival. In this sense, prison temporality is not simply endured but differentially produced, reshaping the horizon of what kinds of coping remain possible.

By situating Palestinian women's testimonies within this conceptual framework, the article seeks to move beyond narratives that romanticize resistance or pathologize withdrawal. Instead, it offers a historically grounded account of endurance as a relational and adaptive practice, shaped by the evolving architecture of colonial incarceration. In doing so, it contributes to feminist prison studies, Palestinian sociology, and broader debates on carcerality by foregrounding women's voices and by theorizing survival not as a static trait, but as a practice forged in relation to violence, time, and collective possibility.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, feminist, and decolonial research design grounded in testimonio, critical carceral studies, and historical analysis. Rather than treating participants' narratives as neutral recollections of past events, the study approaches them as testimonios: acts of political witnessing produced under conditions of ongoing colonial violence, incarceration, and silencing. This methodological choice reflects both the nature of the data and the ethical commitments of the research, particularly in a context where imprisonment is not a closed chapter but a recurring and unfinished condition.

The research draws on three interrelated sources of data: a systematic review of relevant literature, in-depth testimonios with formerly incarcerated Palestinian women, and archival testimonios from earlier generations of women prisoners. These components are not treated as discrete methodological stages, but as mutually informing layers that allow for a historically grounded and relational analysis of women's coping strategies across shifting carceral regimes.

The study began with an extensive review of academic scholarship on carcerality, colonial governance, and gendered imprisonment, alongside reports by human rights organizations documenting detention practices and prison conditions. In keeping with a feminist epistemological approach, memoirs, autobiographical writings, and published testimonios authored by women with lived experiences of political imprisonment were treated as central analytical texts rather than supplementary sources. Materials were reviewed in English, Arabic, and Hebrew to capture regional specificities, contest dominant narratives, and ground the analysis in Palestinian-produced knowledge as well as critical international scholarship.

The primary empirical material of the study consists of 65 in-depth testimonios with Palestinian women who experienced incarceration under the Israeli carceral system. These testimonios were collected through semistructured interviews conducted after receiving ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board at Ibn Haldun University. Interviews took place in occupied Palestine and were conducted primarily in Arabic. While interviews followed a flexible structure guided by thematic prompts related to imprisonment, everyday life inside prison, bodily and psychological endurance, social relations, and strategies of coping, participants were encouraged to shape their narratives according to what they considered most significant. The testimonio framework legitimized fragmentation, repetition, silence, and emotional intensity as meaningful elements of narration rather than methodological shortcomings.

Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling strategy, which proved essential given the sensitivity of the topic and the structural barriers to accessing formerly incarcerated women. After completing each interview, participants were asked whether they knew other women who might be willing to share their testimonios. This approach enabled the research to reach women who were not publicly visible, politically cautious, or socially isolated due to the long-term effects of

imprisonment. Snowball sampling in this context functioned not merely as a recruitment technique, but as a relational method grounded in trust, shared networks, and ethical responsibility, allowing the sample to expand organically across different generations, political backgrounds, and periods of incarceration.

The researcher's positionality played a significant role in shaping access, trust, and interpretation. As the daughter of a former Palestinian woman prisoner, the researcher has long-standing ties to prisoners' families and communities, including sustained engagement in solidarity practices and everyday encounters with prisoners' relatives. This positionality facilitated access to otherwise closed networks, but it also required continuous reflexivity regarding emotional proximity, expectation, and power. Rather than assuming shared meaning, the research process emphasized careful listening and participant control. Women retained full agency over what they chose to narrate, revise, or withhold, and silence was treated as an integral component of testimonio rather than a gap to be filled.

To extend the temporal scope of the study beyond contemporary experiences, the research also incorporates unpublished archival testimonios with Palestinian women prisoners from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. These materials, held in private and institutional archives in Jordan, document the experiences of the first generation of women incarcerated under Israeli rule, many of whom are no longer alive. Permission to access and use these materials was obtained from archive holders. Including these archival testimonios allows the study to trace continuities and ruptures in women's coping strategies across generations and to situate contemporary testimonios within a longer history of gendered incarceration.

Analytic concepts central to this study, the School of Joseph and the Whale of Jonah, did not originate as abstract theoretical impositions by the researcher. Rather, they emerged inductively from the language, metaphors, and interpretive frameworks used by participants themselves. During testimonios, multiple women explicitly or implicitly invoked Qur'anic narratives to explain how they understood imprisonment, endurance, withdrawal, and survival. The researcher adopted these terms as analytic categories to remain faithful to participants' epistemic worlds and to treat their modes of meaning-making as sources of theory rather than as raw data.

References to religious figures and narratives in this article are not deployed as normative theological claims, but as historically and socially situated languages through which imprisoned women interpret their experience of confinement. Islamic intellectual history itself offers divergent engagements with incarceration. While figures such as Ibn Taymiyya articulated imprisonment as a space of ethical cultivation and productive withdrawal, famously describing prison as a form of spiritual retreat, others, such as Ahmad ibn Hanbal, endured prolonged incarceration without transforming it into a site of discursive or pedagogical production, embodying instead a mode of moral steadfastness rooted in endurance rather than reinterpretation (Ibn Taymiyya, 1995; Melchert, 2006). These divergent historical trajectories underscore that incarceration does not inherently generate meaning, growth, or ethical transformation.

Building on this insight, the concepts of the *School of Joseph* and the *Whale of Jonah* are not theological metaphors imposed by the researcher, but analytical categories distilled from women's own testimonios. Across political, ideological, and generational differences, including secular, leftist, and Islamist participants, women repeatedly drew on shared religious narratives to make sense of radically different carceral conditions. In periods characterized by relative organizational stability, collective life, and temporal continuity, imprisonment was narrated through the figure of Joseph, whose confinement becomes a site of ethical agency, learning, and future-oriented meaning. Conversely, moments of intensified repression were described

through the figure of Jonah, emphasizing suspension, darkness, and the near erasure of time and agency.

Several participants, for instance, described repeatedly invoking the Qur'anic supplication of the Prophet Jonah, "There is no god but You; glory be to You; indeed, I was among the wrongdoers" (Surah Al-Anbiya 21:87), during moments of extreme confinement and sensory deprivation. Women recalled reciting this prayer while held in sealed, narrow, and dark interrogation rooms, as well as during transfers in the bosta, the prison transport vehicle, which they described as a cramped, freezing, and painful metal enclosure used to move prisoners between facilities. In these accounts, the invocation of Jonah's prayer functioned simultaneously as a ritualized act of piety and as a survival practice, offering spiritual anchoring and moral orientation while also enabling women to endure spaces experienced as suffocating, disorienting, and temporally suspended. The recurrence of this supplication across testimonios further underscores that the Whale of Jonah reflects an emic framework through which women themselves interpret and survive moments of total enclosure, isolation, and existential threat.

Crucially, this study does not treat religious language as a substitute for sociological explanation. Rather, it approaches these narratives as culturally embedded interpretive frameworks through which women articulate historically specific shifts in the carceral regime. In line with feminist and interpretive approaches to lived religion, religious discourse is understood here as a social resource that mediates experience rather than determines it (Mahmood, 2005). The analytical force of these concepts lies precisely in their capacity to bridge lived religious meaning with structural analysis, revealing how transformations in political violence and prison governance reshape not only material conditions but the moral and temporal horizons through which imprisonment is experienced.

All testimonios were transcribed and analyzed using an iterative thematic approach. Analysis focused on how women narrated time, bodily endurance, withdrawal, collective practices, and changing prison conditions across different periods of incarceration. Rather than imposing predefined categories, analytic concepts were refined inductively through sustained engagement with the testimonios and then situated within feminist and carceral theory. Ethical considerations extended beyond formal consent, particularly given the ongoing nature of repression and surveillance. Identifying details were removed or altered, and particular care was taken in selecting excerpts to avoid exposing participants to risk. Throughout the research process, testimonio was treated not as extractable data, but as a shared ethical encounter that demands accountability to those who speak.

The researcher's positionality also shaped both access and interpretation. Being the daughter of a former Palestinian woman prisoner facilitated relational access to communities that are often difficult for researchers to reach, while simultaneously requiring sustained reflexivity regarding emotional proximity, expectations of solidarity, and the ethics of representation.

Empirical analysis: Coping, time, and the shifting architecture of the prison

Survival under incarceration is conceptualized here as a historically contingent and structurally mediated practice shaped by changing configurations of carceral power rather than as an individualized psychological trait (Davis, 2003; Foucault, 1977). Prisons are not static institutions; they move through phases of regulation, predictability, and relative stability, as well as phases of arbitrariness, intensified violence, and totalized repression. Women's coping strategies fluctuate accordingly.

Women's testimonios reveal that coping under incarceration is neither static nor evenly distributed across time. Rather than describing "the prison" as a singular or stable institution, participants repeatedly emphasized that imprisonment changes across historical moments, and that survival strategies shift accordingly. As one participant who experienced multiple arrests explained, "Each prison period was not like the one before it. The place was the same, but everything inside it was different, how they treated us, how we treated each other, even how time passed" (L. K, interview, October 23, 2025). This insistence on temporal rupture forms the empirical backbone of the analysis.

Women who were incarcerated during periods marked by relative stability, particularly before 2019,[2] frequently described the prison as violent yet still partially legible. One former prisoner reflected, "We knew it was prison, we knew it was occupation, but there were rules. You could organize your day. You could study. You could help the others" (M. Q., interview, November 25, 2025). Another participant arrested in 2019 described how collective learning became a central survival practice despite official prohibitions: "In the women's prison, studying was officially forbidden, but the girls prepared for the high school exam secretly. Prisoners who had skills or certificates in a certain field would organize circles and teach. Personally, I taught Qur'anic recitation" (S. B., interview, November 30, 2025).

Another participant imprisoned in 2014 similarly described how incarceration became a space of unexpected skill formation: "In prison I learned some Hebrew, I learned embroidery, and how to make art from tools you would never imagine. When I was released, I started my small project, embroidering bags and small purses and selling them" (R. Ha., interview, January 11, 2026). These testimonios illustrate what this study conceptualizes as the School of Joseph: a mode of endurance grounded in collective meaning-making, learning, and the reorganization of time under constraint. Importantly, women framed these practices not as self-development detached from politics, but as ways of maintaining dignity, continuity, and mutual responsibility in a space designed to fragment social life.

At the same time, women were keenly aware of how fragile these practices were. One participant emphasized, "None of this was guaranteed. Any small thing we built could be taken away at any moment" (B. R., interview, November 26, 2025). This awareness became central in testimonios describing incarceration after 2019, when women consistently spoke of a sharp deterioration in prison conditions and the systematic dismantling of collective life. These experiences closely mirror documentation describing Israeli prisons as having shifted into regimes of intensified abuse, humiliation, and deprivation (B'Tselem, 2015).

Women detained after October 2023 described this transformation in stark terms. One participant who was arrested four times between 2018 and 2025 stated: "In every sense, prisons have reached rock bottom. They have left the human being with nothing but her heart. I miss myself deeply, and with every new arrest I relive the entire cycle of post-trauma again" (I. L., interview, December 14, 2025). This expression, "nothing but the heart," captures the contraction of survival into an inward, defensive space and marks the transition into what this study conceptualizes as the Whale of Jonah.

Another woman who experienced imprisonment both before and after October 7 articulated the temporal rupture clearly. Reflecting on earlier periods, she explained that incarceration once allowed limited educational and cultural activity: "In 2018–2019 I supervised an educational program inside prison. We coordinated with the Ministry of Education, submitted names through a lawyer, and taught different subjects. We didn't even have a board, so we wrote on notebooks, and other prisoners helped copy lessons. Some girls had left school in ninth or tenth grade, so we focused on basic knowledge, especially languages and mathematics" (M. Q., interview,

November 25, 2025). She contrasted this with the postwar period, stating, "Before prisons turned into slaughterhouses, into camps of starvation, torture, and total humiliation, it was possible to see prison as another arena of struggle. Today, that space has almost completely disappeared" (M. Q., interview, November 25, 2025).

For women incarcerated after October 2023, endurance increasingly took the form of bodily preservation and psychic withdrawal. One participant described her strategy during detention and interrogation: "I was trying as much as I could to keep my body from collapsing. During the Maskobiyya[3] we were placed near the section where Palestinian children were held. If we raised our voices, they could hear us. We used to sing with them, 'Oh mother, the darkness of prison has not weakened my resolve.' We would start the song and wait for them to respond. Even when the guards tried to stop us, we kept going" (Z. B., interview, December 1, 2025). This testimony reveals how traces of collective life persist even under extreme repression, not as sustained organization, but as fleeting acts of connection aimed at protecting both self and others.

Testimonios from women imprisoned after October 7 point to a sharp deterioration in prison conditions marked by unchecked violence, sexualized humiliation, isolation, and the collapse of temporal continuity. R.H., arrested in the aftermath of the war and the sister of a martyr,[4] described being subjected to collective strip searches conducted by Nahshon unit[5] as a punitive policy rather than a security measure. Following one such strip search, she recalled uncontrollable crying continuously for 3 days, overwhelmed by feelings of humiliation, rage, and internal collapse. As she explained, she was unable to regain any sense of balance until another woman prisoner spoke to her and reframed the violence she had endured:

> I don't want to say they "disciplined" us, but the level of repression they practiced against the women was extremely high and very harsh. No one can endure it. Women's bodies are physically weak. You try to resist, but I'll tell you, once when the *Nahson* unit entered, I was standing at eye level, and I saw their knees. Human knees! Their bodies were massive, not like ordinary people. Like slabs. You can't resist them. And the way they deal with you, their manner itself, really creates fear. They exploit this point to intensify the repression and strike that nerve to create deterrence. I don't know how to explain it, but we tried not to break, to create a supportive environment among us women. For example, when I was strip-searched, I entered a state of depression. One of the women came to me and said: "They DO mutilate the bodies of the martyrs." So, you start comparing. You tell yourself they won't humiliate us or break us in this way. That's how we resisted. But honestly, I was afraid. Truly afraid. The issue of physical or sexual assault terrified me deeply, because I cannot endure beating. (R.H., interview, October 4, 2025)

This testimony lays bare how strip search operates not merely as a security procedure, but as a technology of terror aimed at producing bodily vulnerability, sexual fear, and anticipatory obedience. R.H.'s description of the guards' bodies "massive," "like slabs," underscores how physical domination is staged visually and spatially to render resistance unimaginable. Fear here is not incidental; it is deliberately cultivated as a method of control, particularly through the gendered threat of sexual violation.

Crucially, R.H.'s account also illustrates the moment at which individual collapse is interrupted, not by institutional intervention, but by intra-prison solidarity among women. The statement offered to her by another prisoner, "they DO mutilate the bodies of the martyrs" did not deny the violence of the strip search. Instead, it re-situated R.H.'s suffering within a moral and political hierarchy of harm that allowed her to regain a sense of dignity and proportion. This comparison did not erase humiliation; rather, it rendered it survivable.

Analytically, this moment captures the essence of what this study conceptualizes as the Whale of Jonah. The strip search, followed by days of uncontrollable crying, represents entry into a space of total enclosure, psychic, bodily, and temporal, where the self is suspended and agency collapses. Survival does not emerge through organized resistance or structured activity, as in the School of Joseph, but through a fragile, relational act that prevents complete disintegration. The intervention by another woman prisoner functions as a lifeline inside the "whale": a minimal yet decisive gesture that allows the subject to endure without being annihilated.

R.H.'s testimony also foregrounds the cumulative dimension of fear under intensified repression. Her explicit reference to terror of sexual and physical assault reveals how women's endurance after October 2023 is increasingly oriented toward bodily preservation rather than political engagement. In this context, survival itself becomes the horizon of action. As prisons move deeper into regimes of humiliation and unchecked violence, women's strategies shift accordingly, from cultivating meaning inside confinement to simply preventing the self from collapsing under sustained assault.

The experience narrated by R.H. finds a powerful historical parallel in the memoir of Aisha Odeh, a Palestinian freedom fighter, who was imprisoned in the late 1960s and early 1970s, before the emergence of the Palestinian prisoners' movement and its hard-won gains. Writing about her early days in detention, Odeh describes incarceration as a space of unrestrained physical force, sexualized threat, and radical isolation. "From the very first moment," she recalls, "they sought to break the human being … to make you feel that you were no longer a person but an exposed body," adding that the only remaining task was "how to keep oneself from complete collapse" (Odeh, 2014: 133). Elsewhere, she reflects on retreating inward as a survival necessity, learning to regulate her breathing and speak to herself in order to remain internally composed in a world that had become "entirely hostile" (Odeh, 2014: 148).

Odeh's account demonstrates that Jonah's Whale is not a new or exceptional condition, but one that historically emerges during moments when incarceration operates through naked domination rather than regulation. The absence of collective organization, legal protections, or predictable routines renders the prisoner radically alone, suspended in darkness and uncertainty. When read alongside contemporary testimonios from after October 7, Odeh's narrative suggests that what appears today as unprecedented brutality is, in fact, a return to an earlier carceral logic, one that predates prisoners' collective struggles and dismantles the infrastructures that once enabled more outward-facing forms of endurance.

A similar sensibility permeates the contemporary narrative of Lama Khatir, a writer and politician detained after October 7 whose account was later published through the Al Jazeera Media Institute. Khatir explicitly frames the post-October 7 prison as a rupture rather than a continuation, describing it as "a completely different regime" from the prison she had known in 2018–2019, one in which the occupation appeared "stripped of all moral disguises and human-rights pretenses" (Khatir, 2024: 2). Central to her testimony is the collapse of time itself. "We were no longer living time; we were merely staring into emptiness," she writes, noting that the absence of books, paper, news, or routine transformed time into an oppressive force rather than a neutral passage (Khatir, 2024: 11). In Khatir's account, endurance becomes inseparable from the labor of inhabiting suspended time, where survival is measured by the ability to withstand the weight of emptiness.

This pattern is further sharpened in Widad Barghuthi's carceral narrative al-Buyūt (The Houses), which documents her arrest after October 7 as a form of coercive pressure on her detained son. Barghuthi's account exposes how the carceral regime weaponizes kinship itself, transforming the maternal body into a site of political leverage. Her descriptions of the bosta, the prison transport vehicle, depict it as a moving enclosure marked by suffocation, disorientation, and sensory assault, a mobile extension of the prison's logic of domination (Barghouti, 2025). Within this space, fear is

intensified by the knowledge that detention serves not punitive justice but familial extortion. Yet even here, Barghuthi emphasizes the fragile forms of solidarity that emerge among women, shared words, fleeting gestures of care, as the only forces capable of interrupting total collapse. Her narrative completes the temporal arc traced in this study: when regulation gives way to naked power, Jonah's Whale re-emerges through the simultaneous targeting of bodies, time, and family bonds.

One of the most striking recurring practices across testimonios was the invocation of the Qur'anic supplication of the Prophet Jonah, "There is no god but You; glory be to You; indeed, I was among the wrongdoers" (Surah Al-Anbiya 21:87). Several women described repeating this prayer while held in sealed, narrow, and dark interrogation rooms, as well as during transfers in the bosta. As one participant explained, "The bosta is like a narrow metal fridge. You can't move, you're freezing, and everything hurts. I kept repeating the du'a so I wouldn't collapse" (I. Z., interview, December 12, 2025). Another recalled, "In the dark rooms, I felt like I was inside the whale itself. Saying the prayer was the only thing that kept me connected to myself" (Sh. N., interview, October 30, 2025).

In these accounts, the prayer functioned simultaneously as a ritualized act of piety and as an embodied survival practice. It offered spiritual anchoring while enabling women to endure spaces described as suffocating, disorienting, and outside of time. The recurrence of this supplication across testimonios underscores that the Whale of Jonah is not a metaphor imposed by the researcher, but an emic framework through which women themselves interpret and survive moments of total enclosure. These experiences align with extensive documentation of extreme confinement (detention conditions characterized by prolonged isolation, restricted movement, deprivation of basic needs, and continuous surveillance), humiliation, and bodily assault in Israeli detention facilities, particularly since October 2023 (PCHR, 2024; United Nations Committee Against Torture, 2025).

Read together, these voices demonstrate that Jonah's Whale is not an individualized coping style but a historically recurring condition activated during periods of extreme repression. Its reappearance after October 7 signals a decisive regression in the carceral regime, returning imprisonment to a logic that predates prisoners' collective achievements. In such moments, resistance is not absent but reconfigured into the minimal labor of survival itself. As I.L. succinctly observed, "The prisons today are at their lowest point; they left the human being with nothing but her heart."

Women who experienced repeated arrests emphasized that strategies which sustained them during earlier detentions often became impossible later. "Before, we could hold each other," one woman reflected. "Now, everyone is just trying to survive alone." Repeated incarceration did not produce familiarity or resilience in a linear sense; instead, it intensified vulnerability and eroded the possibility of recovery between arrests. This cumulative dimension of trauma echoes analyses of colonial violence as an assault on time, livability, and the conditions necessary for sustaining social life (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2019).

Following these testimonios of bodily exposure, isolation, and temporal collapse after October 7, it becomes necessary to situate women's experiences within the longer history of torture as a structural feature of the Israeli carceral regime. Human rights documentation has consistently shown that torture, through painful stress positions, sleep deprivation, sexualized threats, humiliation, and sensory assault, has constituted a routine practice rather than an exceptional response (HaMoked, 2009; PCATI, 2024). The persistence of these practices across decades underscores that the women's accounts do not reflect a sudden deviation, but a historically embedded system of control.

What distinguishes different periods of imprisonment, however, is not whether torture occurred, but how it was temporally organized and politically deployed. During earlier phases of incarceration, corresponding to what participants described as periods in which collective life and routine

could still be reconstructed, torture functioned primarily as an instrument of interrogation and deterrence. While deeply traumatic, it was often temporally bounded, allowing women to later reassemble daily rhythms, social relations, and future-oriented projects once the interrogation phase ended.

Materials documenting detention practices after October 7 reveal a marked shift in this logic. Legal amendments and emergency regulations dramatically expanded state authority to detain individuals without charge, deny access to legal counsel, and hold detainees in military facilities under conditions amounting to continuous torture (PCATI, 2024). In this context, torture no longer appears as a discrete phase but as a totalizing environment that saturates everyday life, through constant restraint, enforced immobility, extreme temperatures, prolonged isolation, and sexualized violence (PCATI, 2024).

This transformation is central to understanding the emergence of what participants describe as the Whale of Jonah. When torture becomes temporally unbounded and structurally omnipresent, it annihilates the very conditions under which time can be inhabited, routines rebuilt, or meaning reconstituted. The contraction of survival into an inward struggle is thus not a reflection of diminished resilience, but a consequence of a carceral regime that increasingly operates through the suspension of time itself.

In contrast, testimonios from periods marked by relative stability inside the prison reveal a different mode of endurance, what this study conceptualizes as the School of Joseph. This mode does not deny the violence of incarceration but operates within limited organizational margins that allow prisoners to rework time, meaning, and social relations under constraint. Women imprisoned during the period following the 2015 Jerusalem Uprising repeatedly described the prison as a hostile yet partially governable space, one in which collective initiative, symbolic action, and outward-oriented solidarity remained possible.

The testimony of M.B., imprisoned in 2015 and held for 8 years before her release in the post-October 7 exchange, offers a striking illustration of this mode. Reflecting on the initiative known as "the rebellious braids," through which women prisoners braided and sent their hair to women undergoing chemotherapy outside prison, M.B. emphasized that the act was never about hair itself, but about sustaining ethical and emotional connection across carceral boundaries. "The rebellious braids and the symbolic acts we carried out were not merely forms of defiance," she explained. "They were a heartfelt language we sent across distances and locks to reach those who needed it most." Each braid, she noted, carried a message: "You are not alone. We are thinking of you. We are with you in your struggle, even from behind walls." These gestures countered the isolating effects of prison routine and silence, restoring a sense of agency, dignity, and participation in a world presumed inaccessible (M.B., Interview, November 23, 2025).

What distinguishes this moment analytically is not the symbolism alone, but the structural conditions that rendered such symbolism possible. The act of cutting, braiding, and sending hair required time, coordination, relative bodily autonomy, and the presence of a collective infrastructure capable of organizing meaning beyond immediate survival. As M.B. observed, these practices transformed "constraints into opportunities for connection, fear into empathy, and enclosure into a message of life," allowing women to experience themselves as ethical actors rather than merely as objects of punishment. This interpretation is further supported by journalistic documentation of the initiative. Writing about the "Thirteen Braids" campaign, Safa Khatib underscores how the women's action pierced the prison's symbolic closure by redirecting bodily sacrifice toward care rather than self-negation, creating "a rare breach in the prison's logic of isolation" (Khatib, 2022).

Participants were explicit that such outward-facing practices belong to a specific temporal and political moment. As M.B. emphasized, actions like the rebellious braids were conceivable only under the conditions of the School of Joseph. Once prisons descended into the regime described

earlier as Jonah's Whale, marked by unchecked violence, strip searches, isolation, and the collapse of temporal continuity, such gestures became impossible. In the belly of the whale, survival contracts inward; the labor of endurance shifts from communication to containment, from symbolic generosity to bodily preservation. The contrast between these two modes thus reflects not differences in women's consciousness or will, but transformations in the carceral regime itself.

One of the most telling indicators of the structural distinction between what this article conceptualizes as the School of Joseph and the Whale of Jonah lies in the realm of intimacy, emotional attachment, and future-making. During earlier phases of incarceration, particularly before the systematic deterioration of prison conditions after October 7, several women prisoners were able to form emotional relationships and even marry fellow prisoners despite long sentences and complete physical separation. These relationships were sustained through letters, mediated family connections, and shared political and social networks inside prison.

Interview participants recalled marriages that took place without physical meetings, including the marriage of Ahlam al-Tamimi to Nizar al-Tamimi, both serving life sentences, and that of Mona Qa'dan to Ibrahim Ighbarieh, despite the multiple geopolitical and carceral barriers separating them. Such unions constituted more than personal commitments; they represented acts of temporal defiance. Love, marriage, and the deliberate decision to build a shared future challenged the prison's attempt to suspend life and foreclose continuity.

Similarly, the practice of sperm smuggling, through which imprisoned men enabled the birth of children while serving life sentences, functioned as a direct confrontation with the carceral logic of slow death and generational erasure. These practices were only possible under conditions in which a minimal sense of time, relationality, and collective organization remained intact. They depended on the belief that the future was still imaginable, even from within prison walls.

After October 7, these practices disappeared almost entirely. Participants emphasized that neither emotional relationships nor projects of family formation were conceivable under the current regime of isolation, deprivation, and fear. This disappearance is analytically significant. It signals not a decline in emotional capacity or desire, but a transformation in the prison itself, from a space in which life could still be imagined, however precariously, to one in which survival contracts inward and the future becomes structurally unthinkable. In this sense, the end of prison marriages and reproductive resistance marks the full emergence of the Whale of Jonah: a carceral condition hostile not only to resistance, but to life-making itself.

If intimacy, reproduction, and future-making mark the outer limits of carceral endurance, their disappearance signals not merely intensified repression, but a transformation in the prison's relationship to life itself.

Conclusion

This article has approached Palestinian women's imprisonment not as a uniform or static experience, but as a historically contingent condition shaped by shifting political, legal, and institutional regimes. By tracing women's testimonios across different periods of incarceration, it has shown that coping, endurance, and resistance cannot be understood as stable psychological traits or moral dispositions. Rather, they emerge, and recede, within specific carceral configurations that expand or constrict the horizons of time, relationality, and future-making.

The distinction developed here between the *School of Joseph* and the *Whale of Jonah* is therefore not intended as a typology of personalities or responses. It is an analytical attempt to capture how women's strategies of survival are recalibrated when the prison itself undergoes structural transformation. In moments where minimal order, continuity, and collective organization existed,

women were able to invest time with meaning, cultivate ethical projects, sustain intimacy, and even imagine life beyond confinement. Learning, symbolic solidarity, marriage, and reproductive resistance were not peripheral practices; they were indicators that the carceral regime had not yet succeeded in fully severing prisoners from the future.

By contrast, the testimonios gathered from periods of intensified repression, particularly after October 7, reveal a carceral condition in which such practices become structurally untenable. Here, survival narrows into an inward struggle to preserve the self amid suspended time, bodily vulnerability, and the collapse of relational anchors. The disappearance of outward-oriented practices is analytically significant not because it signals resignation, but because it marks a transformation in the prison's function: from a site that sought to discipline life to one that actively works to exhaust it.

This shift carries important implications for how endurance and resistance are conceptualized in carceral studies. Much of the existing literature presumes that prisoners confront an excess of time that must be managed, reinterpreted, or domesticated. The experiences examined here suggest that under conditions of naked repression, the problem is not how to fill time, but how to survive its annihilation. In such contexts, practices of coping cannot be evaluated against normative expectations of agency or resistance. They must instead be read as responses to a regime that systematically erodes the very conditions under which meaning making becomes possible.

Finally, centering Palestinian women's testimonios foregrounds the ethical stakes of studying incarceration in colonial and wartime settings. These narratives do not simply expand empirical knowledge; they challenge analytic frameworks that treat prisons as closed systems detached from broader political violence. The oscillation between the *School of Joseph* and the *Whale of Jonah* underscores that the carceral experience is inseparable from the political moment in which it unfolds. Recognizing this is essential, not only for understanding how women endure imprisonment, but for confronting the conditions that render endurance itself an ever more fragile achievement.

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Notes

1. "The events of October 7, 2023, referred to as 'Tufan al-Aqsa: Operation Al-Aqsa Flood,' are scholarly defined as a pivotal rupture in the long-standing context of settler-colonialism and the 17-year blockade of the Gaza Strip (Al-Shabaka 2023; Khalidi 2024). This incursion is characterized as a 'prison break' from an enclave described as the world's largest open-air prison (Pappe 2023). Within Palestinian academic discourse, the operation is framed as an assertion of the indigenous right to resist foreign occupation and a direct response to the 'Ongoing Nakba,' aimed at re-centering the Palestinian cause on the global agenda (Erakat 2023; Finkelstein 2024)." These events were followed by a large-scale Israeli military assault on

Gaza and a profound intensification of military violence, mass arrests, and detention practices across the occupied Palestinian territories, particularly in the West Bank.

2. The year 2019 marked a turning point in prison conditions not only due to administrative or regulatory shifts, but because of a qualitative expansion in Israeli arrest policies within the West Bank. During this period, practices associated with the strategy often described as "mowing the grass" were extended to target women more systematically, particularly in cities such as Hebron and Ramallah. A significant number of women were arrested and accused of reconstituting the women's organizational infrastructure of Hamas, alongside a broader wave of arrests targeting female student activists following the decision of the Islamic Bloc to re-enter student elections across Palestinian universities. This expansion of arrests into previously less-targeted constituencies reshaped both the demographic composition of detainees and the social and organizational dynamics within prisons, contributing to a noticeable deterioration in carceral conditions.
3. References to "Maskobiyya" in participants' testimonios denote the main Israeli interrogation and detention facility located in the Russian Compound in Jerusalem. Known in Palestinian collective memory as a site of extreme violence, Maskobiyya functions as a central hub for Shin Bet interrogations, where detainees are subjected to prolonged questioning, solitary confinement, sleep deprivation, strip searches, and other forms of physical and psychological abuse. Human rights organizations have consistently documented the use of torture and ill-treatment in this facility, particularly during periods of intensified security operations, rendering Maskobiyya a paradigmatic space of carceral violence rather than a conventional detention center (B'Tselem 2015; HaMoked 2009).
4. Martyr (shahid) used in its local socio-political sense to refer to Palestinians killed by Israeli forces.
5. The Nahshon Unit is a special intervention force within the Israel Prison Service, tasked with suppressing protests, conducting forced cell extractions, and carrying out violent raids inside prisons. It is frequently deployed against Palestinian political prisoners during periods of heightened repression, where its operations include mass beatings, strip searches, and the use of excessive force as a collective punitive measure (Public Committee Against Torture in Israel 2024).

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