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The Spread of Scabies among Palestinian Prisoners in Israeli Prisons

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Recently, an alarming spread of scabies (*Sarcoptes scabiei*) has been reported among prisoners in all Israeli occupation prisons. Scabies is a skin disease characterized by intense itching caused by mites, which can spread rapidly through close contact. The Palestinian Prisoner Society and Commission of Detainees and Ex-Detainees have issued warnings about this situation, particularly in Ofer Prison, where minors are at grave risk due to the rapid transmission of the disease (AlQuds, 2024).

Scabies has been declared by the World Health Organization to be the most common Neglected Tropical Disease with skin manifestations (Cox et al., 2021). Scabies mites spread through direct contact with infected individuals and can also spread via shared personal items such as towels and bedding (Delie et al., 2024). Scabies is a troublesome disease caused by an ectoparasitic infestation of the skin by the obligate human parasite mite *Sarcoptes scabiei* (Chosidow, 2006; 2012). It is common, highly contagious, and affects all age groups (Chosidow, 2012; Romani et al., 2015). One of the primary symptoms is severe itching, especially at night, along with the appearance of small, wavy tracks of blisters or bumps on the skin (Hay et al., 2012). Classic scabies is characterized by an erythematous papular eruption, serpiginous burrows, and intense pruritus. Sites of predilection include the webs of the fingers, volar wrists, lateral aspects of fingers, extensor surfaces of elbows and knees, waist, navel, abdomen, buttocks, groins, and genitals (Leung, Lam, & Leong, 2020). As the most common manifestations, intense pruritic skin lesions can profoundly impair quality of life. Infection with scabies not only causes local irritation but also induces host systemic inflammatory responses. The pathophysiology of scabies infection is mediated through hypersensitivity-like reactions and immune responses (Walton & Oprescu, 2013). Patients with scabies have higher serum levels of interleukin (IL)-2, IL-4, IL-6, and IL-17 (Mounsey et al., 2015). Increased risk of systemic disease is also reported in patients with scabies, as well as higher risks of chronic kidney disease and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease subsequent to infection with scabies (Chen et al., 2016; Chung et al., 2014; Turkmen, Erdur, & Kucuk, 2013). More recent studies suggest that scabies is associated with acute myocardial infarction and higher rates of all-cause mortality

(Ko et al., 2022). The long-term impact of scabies on other systemic diseases remains largely unknown.

The spread of scabies in Israeli prisons has been exacerbated by punitive measures imposed by the Israeli Prison Service (IPS) following October 7, 2023. Prisoners live under conditions that are not only unsanitary but also aimed at weakening them physically and mentally. These retaliatory measures include denying prisoners access to hygiene products, limiting their water supply, and overcrowding them in small spaces, all of which have accelerated the spread of diseases like scabies (Sajrawi, 2024).

The Prisoners and Freed Prisoners Affairs Authority has specifically raised concerns about the spread of scabies among minors at Ofer Prison. Of the 260 prisoners, 150 are minors who are particularly vulnerable to the disease. Symptoms such as painful boils, pimples, and skin irritation have appeared on the bodies of these young prisoners, making sleep impossible due to the constant itching (AlQuds, 2024). The Authority has called on the World Health Organization (WHO) to intervene and address the dire conditions in these prisons, where a lack of hygiene materials and sufficient time for washing is turning prisoners' bodies into fertile grounds for the spread of diseases (AlQuds, 2024).

A highly contagious disease, scabies constitutes a major health problem that extends to mental health and well-being. Several studies have shown that scabies causes impairment in the quality of life in adult patients. Scabies patients often suffer from social stigma, isolation, sleep disruption, as well as difficulties in concentration and productivity (Cox et al., 2021; Jin-Gang et al., 2010). In a recent study of 85 adult patients with scabies, researchers assessed the impact of scabies on the quality of life of patients and evaluated the relationship between depression and anxiety levels and impairment in life quality (Koç Yildirim et al., 2023). It was found that scabies has a moderate to severe effect on quality of life, with a positive correlation between quality of life impairment and anxiety and depression scores. Another study of over 7000 patients with scabies by Chien-Yu Lin and colleagues (2017) discovered a moderately increased risk of Bipolar Disorder. Perhaps the most common effects of scabies on mental well-being are related to how uncontrollable and unbearable itching causes insomnia and distress (Trettin et al., 2019).

Al-Shawamreh confirms that scabies has spread in several prisons, including Naqab, Megiddo, Nafha, and Rimon. Abu Safiya described how prisoners were deliberately denied access to basic hygiene materials such as soap and water, making it impossible to maintain personal cleanliness. He remarked: "We couldn't shower or clean ourselves for weeks. Without soap or clean clothes, the disease spread fast among us" (AlQuds, 2024). Abdullah Jaradat added that the overcrowding in cells only worsened the situation: "Twenty of us were crammed into a space meant for ten, and with no proper hygiene or ventilation, everyone started getting sick" (AlQuds, 2024).

Tamer Al-Shawamreh spoke about the lack of medical attention, saying: "They knew we were suffering from scabies, but instead of treating us, they just isolated us and ignored our pleas for help. It felt like the disease was being used as another tool to break us down mentally and physically" (AlQuds, 2024).

These accounts suggest that the IPS is using scabies as a form of punishment by deliberately refusing to provide medical treatment and prevent its spread.

According to Middle East Monitor (2024), IPS officials have deliberately isolated infected prisoners and denied them access to medical care. Reports from Ofer Prison, where minors are also held, highlight the severe skin conditions affecting detainees due to these unsanitary conditions. A released prisoner recounted how they were forced to live in overcrowded cells, deprived of basic medical care, and left without clean clothes for extended periods, further contributing to the spread of scabies (Middle East Monitor, 2024).

Delie et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review and noted that the global prevalence of scabies in prisons is a significant concern, with rates as high as 6.57% in some facilities. Overcrowding, poor hygiene practices, and the lack of access to healthcare are key factors contributing to the spread of scabies in prisons around the world. In Israel, this is further exacerbated by intentional policies designed to increase suffering among Palestinian prisoners.

One former prisoner, Mohammed Al-Bazz, described the deplorable conditions inside Ktzi'ot Prison: "We are locked up over an honorable cause, but at the end of the day, I'm flesh and bones, with dignity and emotions — a human being that gets tired and feels pain when beaten and feels despair when sick" (Sajrawi, 2024). Another prisoner, Mo'ath Amarnih, a Palestinian photo-journalist, was similarly affected by scabies during his detention. Upon his release, he warned those around him, "Stay away; I don't know what disease I'm carrying," reflecting the widespread fear of contagion among released prisoners (Sajrawi, 2024).

The Physicians for Human Rights – Israel (PHRI) has raised alarms over the IPS's refusal to provide adequate medical care for prisoners suffering from scabies. They have reported instances where prisoners were given ointment without proper disinfection of their living quarters, allowing the disease to spread unchecked. Testimonies from prisoners confirmed that even when some treatment was provided, it was inadequate, leaving many inmates to continue suffering from the effects of the disease (PHRI, 2024).

As the situation worsens, the Prisoners and Freed Prisoners Affairs Authority continues to call for international intervention, particularly from the WHO, to address the appalling conditions in Israeli prisons, where scabies has become not just a health issue but a weapon of control and degradation (AlQuds, 2024).

The spread of scabies among Palestinian prisoners in Israeli detention centers highlights the inhumane conditions and deliberate neglect imposed by the Israeli Prison Service. Testimonies from released prisoners, combined with reports from human rights organizations, paint a grim picture of how disease is being weaponized to break the spirit and health of detainees. Denial of medical care, unsanitary living conditions, and overcrowding serve as tools of punishment, exacerbating the suffering of prisoners. Urgent international intervention is needed to address these violations and ensure that basic human rights, including access to healthcare, are upheld for all prisoners.

Biography

Bilal Hamamra has a PhD in Early Modern Drama from the University of Lancaster, UK and is currently an associate professor of English literature in the Department of English Language and Literature, An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine. His research interests are in Early Modern Drama, Shakespeare, Palestinian literature, women's writings and gender studies.

Michael Uebel has taught theory and literature at the University of Virginia, Georgetown University, and the University of Kentucky. One of his reputations is that of a medievalist. As a clinician, he practices with the Veterans Health Administration, U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs. He works primarily on the philosophical dimensions of psychology and psychoanalysis (theory and therapy). His current book project is on ethical, ideological, and psychocultural understandings of equanimity.

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