

Palestinian families of escaped prisoners targeted by Israelis

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Israeli troops arrest a Palestinian near the occupied West Bank City of Jenin in May [Alaa Badarneh/EPA-EFE]

Ramallah, September 8 (RHC)-- Israeli forces are arresting relatives of Palestinian prisoners on the run after their brazen escape from a high-security prison in Israel. Addameer, the Palestinian prisoner support and human rights association, said on Wednesday at least seven family members of the escapees were detained by Israeli soldiers throughout the occupied West Bank, though some were held only briefly.

As the taxi approached the home of Zakaria Zubeidi, in the rebellious camp in the northern West Bank, his brother Yahya watched suspiciously and appeared tense before ascertaining the press credentials of several journalists who wanted to interview the family.

Zacharia is one of six high-profile Palestinian prisoners evading Israeli authorities after escaping from Israel's Gilboa Prison in the early hours of Monday. Jamal Zubeidi, 65, the uncle of Zakaria, said the family expected Israeli soldiers to invade the Jenin refugee camp at any time.

"They will come to our house and probably arrest us and interrogate us as well as damage the contents of the house," said Jamal, who has been arrested eight times since 1996.

Yahya Zubeidi told Al Jazeera the family home had been destroyed twice by Israeli forces and most of the male family members had been arrested and imprisoned in Israel. Zakaria's mother was shot dead by Israeli soldiers on one of the occasions they tried to assassinate him, while he suffered a serious arm injury and shrapnel to his face.

Most of the camp was levelled by the Israeli military in 2002 after several suicide bombers originating there targeted Israelis in deadly suicide attacks.

But it is Zakaria's escape and his history of fighting against the occupation that makes the family a prime target for Israeli retaliation. His status has reached legendary proportions in the camp.

A former member of the Fatah-affiliated Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades he, together with the other five escapees from Islamic Jihad, has continued to elude the hundreds of Israeli security forces scouring West Bank villages and towns, while soldiers are concentrated at, and surveillance cameras monitor, entry points into Israel.

The Israeli authorities have stated they want the men -- who they say are armed -- dead or alive and their escape presents a major security threat as four are serving life sentences and have nothing to lose in any future confrontation.

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