

International

Palestinians fathering children from inside Israeli prison walls

Women in Gaza and West Bank turn to IVF program

KHAN YUNIS, Palestinian Territories: Cradling her newborn son in a thick white blanket on the patio of her Gaza home, Iman Al-Qudra knows it will be years before her baby boy, Mujahid, meets his father.

Her husband Mohammad Al-Qudra has been imprisoned in Israel since 2014, and for Iman to get pregnant his sperm had to be smuggled out of jail to be used in an in-vitro fertilization (IVF) program. Iman is one of several Palestinian women in the Israeli-blockaded Gaza Strip and occupied West Bank who in recent years have turned to IVF using sperm from an imprisoned husband.

It is a complex endeavor—Israeli prison officials voiced doubt it was even possible—and success is not guaranteed. For the Qudras, another Palestinian, who was being freed from the same prison in southern Israel where Mohammad is held, had to first agree to smuggle out the semen on the day of his release. He then had to swiftly get it past the Gaza Strip crossing, tightly controlled by Israel.

Next came Iman's IVF treatment, and then an anxious wait to see if it had worked. A specialist in reproductive health at the University Hospital of Toulouse (CHU), Louis Bujan, said it was "plausible" for sperm to remain viable during such a journey, regardless of refrigeration conditions. "It all depends on the quality of the sperm from the start," said Bujan, adding semen can be held in a container for more than 24 hours and remain viable.

'I wanted a boy'

After three attempts, Iman conceived in 2020, five years after last being given permission to see her husband during a prison visit. "I was afraid of being too old for another pregnancy by the time my husband was released," she said, surrounded by her three daughters, all conceived before Mohammad's imprisonment. "I wanted a boy" which an IVF treatment allowed her to choose, she said.

Specialist Abdelkarim al-Hindawi performed the procedure in Gaza City, where he said he has carried out several fertilizations of prisoners' wives. "Usually the sperm arrives hidden inside a pen or a

small bottle, passed (secretly) during visits," or sneaked out by a freed cellmate, he said.

"It has to be here within 12 hours, or it will no longer be viable," he said, adding the semen is then frozen for preservation at the clinic. Each attempt costs \$2,000, a huge sum in poverty-ridden Gaza, which has been under an Israeli blockade since 2007 when Hamas Islamists took power in the territory. The peeling walls of the Qudras' home in Khan Yunis, southern Gaza, are covered with portraits of Mohammad, looking youthful in contrast to his dated weapon and military uniform.

A member of Hamas's armed wing, Qudra was captured by Israeli forces during the 2014 war in Gaza and later sentenced to 11 years in prison for belonging to the movement, said Iman.

'Hope for others'

Salaheddine and Muhammad Zibn, who live in the northern West Bank, have only met their father once, during a prison visit when one was five years old and the other just two weeks, said their mother Dalal. She told AFP her children were the first conceived via IVF from a father detained in Israel, a claim supported by the Palestinian doctor who performed the procedure, Ghosson Badran.

"I am very proud to be the first because it is our right to have children," she said. "I gave hope to many women." Her husband Amar has been serving a life sentence for planning anti-Israel attacks for Hamas since 1997, Dalal Zibn said.

When her husband first proposed IVF, she said: "I did not understand the concept." "Then he convinced me and the doctors reassured me." Like Qudra, Dalal Zibn had daughters before her husband was jailed. In 2012 she decided to try IVF, in the hopes of having sons. The Israeli Prisons Service (IPS) views the stories of sperm-smuggling with skepticism.

"We have no information or evidence to support these allegations," IPS spokeswoman Hana Herbst told AFP, characterizing them as "rumors". "We do not know how it is possible to pass sufficient semen for a medical procedure," she added. —AFP



GAZA STRIP: Palestinians holds portraits of men held in Israeli jails during a rally in solidarity with Palestinian prisoners as part of an event marking Land Day near the Israel-Gaza border, east of Khan Yunis town in the southern Gaza Strip. — AFP

Yes, Israel 'occupies' West Bank, US says

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden's administration said Wednesday that Israel's control of the West Bank is indeed "occupation," clarifying its stance after the release of a report that seemed to downplay the term, adopting language used by Donald Trump's government. The State Department's annual report on human rights "does use the term 'occupation' in the context of the current status of the West Bank," State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters.

"This has been the longstanding position of previous administrations of both parties over the course of many decades," he said. But under the staunchly pro-Israel Trump, the annual human rights report renamed the section on "Israel and the Occupied Territories" as "Israel, West Bank and Gaza."

The first of the reports issued under Biden, which was released Tuesday, kept the same formulation but stated that the language was not meant to convey any position. The top State Department official on human rights, Lisa Peterson, said that the report generally uses geographical names and that "Israel, West Bank and Gaza" was easier and clearer for readers. Trump's secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, broke past precedent by visiting a Jewish settlement in the West Bank and said he disagreed with the broad international consensus that such construction is illegal, with Trump signalling that Israel should be free to annex Palestinian land.

Trump also recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital as well as Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights from Syria. Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip in 2005 but maintains control over the crowded, Hamas-ruled territory's airspace and borders. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has indicated the United States will not reverse Trump's decisions on Jerusalem but will also do more to work toward an independent Palestinian state. — AFP

Lebanon in 'education catastrophe' with children out of school

BEIRUT: In crisis-hit Lebanon, the pandemic coupled with an economic downturn means that children left for months without schooling due to coronavirus restrictions may never return to the classroom, a UK-based charity warned. "The social and economic crisis in Lebanon is turning into an education catastrophe, with vulnerable children facing a real risk of never returning to school," Save the Children said in a report published yesterday. The risk is real not only for Lebanese families, more half of whom live in poverty, but also for the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian and Syrian refugees who already struggled to access education before Lebanon's multifold crisis made it more difficult, it said.

"Poverty is a steep barrier to children's access to an education, as many families cannot afford learning equipment or have to rely on children to provide an income," the charity said. More than 1.2 million children in Lebanon have been out of school since the country's coronavirus outbreak began last year, Save the Children said.

Those lucky enough to get any schooling received "an estimated maximum of 11 weeks of education," with even lower numbers for Syrian children, it added. Meanwhile, the country's worst economic downturn since the 1975-1990 civil war has made "remote learning out of reach for more and more children", with families unable to afford electronic devices and a reliable-enough internet connection, the charity said. —AFP



KHAN YUNIS, Palestinian Territories: Wife of Palestinian prisoner in Israeli jails Mohammad Al-Qudra, Iman, 30, holds their newborn boy — AFP