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## **Statement – Israel/OPT: Deep concern at the enforced disappearance, detention and ill-treatment of human rights defenders in Gaza Strip**

Front Line Defenders expresses its deep concern at the escalating trend of enforced disappearance, detention and ill-treatment of Palestinian human rights defenders, including healthcare workers and journalists, in the Gaza Strip, Occupied Palestinian Territory.

On 17 December 2023, at approximately 1 pm, Israeli military forces unlawfully detained and forcibly disappeared human rights defender and head of Al Awda Hospital [Ahmed Muhanna](#) from the hospital in the Northern Gaza Strip. The hospital has been under siege for the past 16 days, surrounded by Israeli tanks and snipers. At the same time, 21 other people, including staff members, were initially detained, bound, stripped of their clothes, and released after several hours of interrogation and ill-treatment, except for Ahmed Muhanna, who remained in custody.

The situation intensified on the day following the unlawful detentions when Israeli forces returned to the hospital, bringing the human rights defender with them. Subsequently, 11 people were unlawfully detained, including 5 staff members, and Ahmed Muhanna was once again taken to an unknown location. At the time of writing this, the human rights defender remains in incommunicado detention.

On 7 December 2023, at approximately 10 am, Israeli military forces stormed the Beit Lahia area and detained hundreds of Palestinians present in the area. The mass detention of persons, among them human rights defenders, saw families separated and men stripped of their clothing. Men, along with a few women and children, were bound, blindfolded, and bundled into the backs of trucks, before being transferred to a detention camp where they endure ill-treatment, hunger and cold. [Photos and videos published on social media depicted Palestinian men being paraded in the streets](#), heads bowed, while others showed Israeli military trucks carrying detainees in the same degrading conditions. The names of those unlawfully detained were not disclosed. However, human rights defenders have been identified by their family members and other civilians recognized them. Eyewitnesses said they heard some soldiers saying that the detainees would be transferred to the “Zikim” area, north of the Strip.

On 7 December 2023, [Ayman Lubad](#) a Palestinian human rights defender who is part of [Palestinian Centre for Human Rights \(PCHR\)](#), was unlawfully detained when Israeli military forces conducted a mass detention operation in his hometown, Beit Lahiya. Ayman Lubad, along with dozens of other Palestinians, was also stripped of his clothes, blindfolded, and had his hands tied behind his back before being moved to a detention camp. On 14 December 2023, the human rights defender was released after over a week of incommunicado detention, interrogation, and ill-treatment.

Upon his release, the human rights defender headed to the south of the Gaza Strip, while tragically, his family home in Beit Lahiya was targeted with Israeli shells, resulting in many of his family members being killed or injured.

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According to [PCHR](#), the family of the human rights defender Ayman Lubad received no information about his fate, place of detention, or the circumstances of his detention. The PCHR stated that "[t]he arrest of Ayman and other Palestinian civilians is a clear example of the arbitrary and illegal detention to which thousands of Palestinian civilians have been subjected in the Gaza Strip since Israel began its bloody war 63 days ago."

It has been [documented](#) by Palestinian human rights organizations that human rights defenders and other citizens who were released reported being interrogated by Israeli authorities in relation to Hamas's movements, as well as the location of Israeli hostages. In some instances, human rights defenders and civilians reported being used as human shields. Human rights defenders remain in enforced disappearance in what is likely to be similar inhumane conditions.

Since 7 October 2023, human rights defenders, including journalists and healthcare workers, along with their families, continue to be killed, injured, or have their homes destroyed. Palestinian human rights defenders report an increasingly hostile and horrifying situation of despair, risking their lives to report and document the situation. These human rights defenders emphasize that no place is safe, having had to evacuate at least two to three times since the beginning of the hostilities. There are no shelters or electricity. Moreover, there is a lack of food and water, and an absence of healthcare facilities, in addition to recurring communication blackouts.

Alongside human rights defenders, Front Line Defenders calls on the Israeli authorities to cease targeting Palestinian human rights defenders, to put an end to enforced disappearances and ill-treatment, and to disclose the names and whereabouts of those who remain in unlawful detention, including human rights defender Ahmed Muhanna, clarifying what charges, if any, have been brought against them. Front Line Defenders reiterates its urgent call for an immediate ceasefire and adherence to international humanitarian and human rights law.