



Israel to return the remains of 119 Palestinians

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Palestinian boys from the Bakr family, who survived an Israeli military strike on a beach in Gaza that killed four of their relatives visit the graves of their loved-ones (AFP/Mahmud Hams, File)

BETHLEHEM (Ma'an) -- Israeli authorities have pledged to return the remains of 119 Palestinians killed by Israeli forces, an official Palestinian spokesperson said on Wednesday.

Salim Khillah, from the Palestinian national campaign to restore martyrs' bodies, told Ma'an that the remains, currently held in "numbered graves," are expected to be returned to family members before the end of 2015.

According to Khillah, Israeli authorities have promised to "abstain from keeping the bodies of Palestinian martyrs from now on," however, he said his campaign has documented at least 242 bodies in Israeli custody, while Israeli authorities claim they are only holding the 119.

Khillah explained that he was told by legal adviser, Suleiman Shahin, of the Jerusalem Center for Legal Aid and Human Rights, that the decision to return the bodies, as well as the promise to abstain from continuing the practice of withholding remains, came directly from a ruling in the Israeli High Court.

Khillah said the bodies will be returned to families after a few months, as Israeli authorities plan to conduct DNA tests to identify each remain.

Israeli authorities have reportedly released a list of the 119 victims' names.

Khillah said his campaign will also deliver a list of the remaining 123 bodies thought to be held in Israeli custody.

Since the 1960s, Israel has withheld the bodies of hundreds of Palestinians, interred in numbered -- rather than named -- graves in a cemetery in the occupied West Bank's Jordan Valley.

In 2013, Israeli authorities released the bodies of 36 Palestinians previously held in Israeli custody, some of which had been held for up to 15 years.