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My Brother's Prison Life

BY HISHAM H. AHMED

JERUSALEM, Israel July 1995

Last month, thousands of Palestinian prisoners conducted a hunger strike which lasted for over two weeks. This measure was a protest against the various kinds of harsh treatment they systematically face in Israeli jails. Their outcry resounded throughout Palestinian society; everybody became interested in the dilemma of the prisoners. After all, most Palestinian families have at least one member in prison. Thus, most people are somewhat familiar with the kind of life Palestinian prisoners are reduced to.

The following interview was conducted with the interviewer's brother, Mr. Muhammad Husein Fararjeh, at his home in the Deheisheh refugee camp near Bethlehem. The story he tells reveals some dimensions of daily life in prison.

HHA: Would you introduce yourself, please?

Muhammad: I was born in 1966 in the Deheisheh refugee camp where I spent the first part of my life. I then went to a special boarding school for the blind, located in Al-Beereh city. After I had finished the fourth grade there, the school was moved to Bethlehem where I spent an additional five years.

At the age of 16, I moved back to the camp and entered the public school system. I attended Al-Khader Secondary School for boys, where I completed tenth grade. In addition to trying to finish school, I ran a small business next to my house.

HHA: When and how did you establish your business?

Muhammad: I started in a very simple way when I was 12 years old.

The story of how I began is rather strange and ironic: My mother was unfortunately ill. My maternal uncles came to pay her a visit, bringing some boxes of chocolate and candy. Upon seeing those boxes, I decided that they would not become the property of the house and insisted on selling them. Against everyone's desire, I displayed them at the entrance to our house. Children started to come and go: They bought all that I had to sell. I found the idea fascinating. So, I bought new boxes to sell. They, too, were soon gone.

Thus, at the age of 13, I became a distributor of goods in the camp. Two years later, I bought a car and became one of the main distributors of goods to small shops in the Bethlehem area. I even went beyond this, reaching as far as the environs of Hebron and Ramallah. As a result, I became known throughout the region, not only to numerous businesses, but also at the colleges and universities.

This phase lasted roughly from 1980-81 until 1986 when I was arrested.

Hisam Ahmed is an ICWA Fellow compiling oral narratives of the Palestinian People.

HHA: Could you tell us about your imprisonment?

Muhammad: On December 22, 1986, I was arrested when Israeli soldiers raided our house close to midnight. I was extremely tired after a long day of hard work. Half an hour after I went to sleep, I was awaken by an intelligence officer known as Captain Karim.

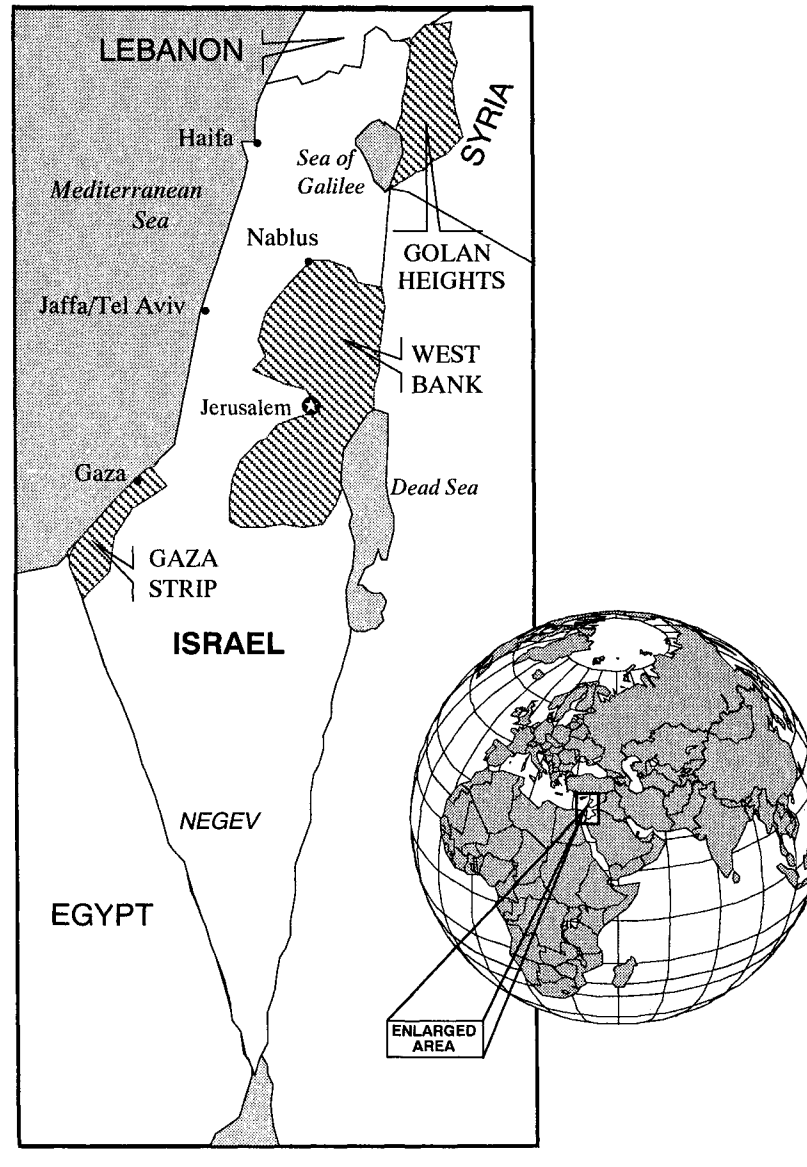
On that day, I had unloaded two trucks full of goods at my shop. It was a small shop without a storage area. I had to organize everything on the shelves. It was too wintry outside to leave any of the goods in front of the shop.

It was 11 at night when I finally left the shop and went home. I had something quick to eat, falling asleep while having the last bite. I was too exhausted and fatigued to use the water my mother had heated for me to take a shower. I don't think that I bothered to put on my pajamas.

I couldn't tell what was going on when Karim woke me up. It really felt like a dream. Someone ordered me: "Get up. Get up. Are you Muhammad?"

"Yes," I said.

"Your ID," he ordered. I gave it to him while I wasn't yet fully awake.



"We want to talk to you for a short while," he said. "Get ready to come with us."

I put on the same clothes I was wearing for work that day. I washed my face and as a result started to wake up. "May I know who you are?" I asked.

"I am Captain Karim," he said.

"What do you want from him?" my mother cried with tears running down her face.

"We are just going to talk to him for half an hour," he replied.

I knew, however, that this was not the truth.

"No! You are going to take me for 18 days, probably even for 78 days. At the end, though, I will come back," I said.

Karim walked with me for about 20 meters. He then handcuffed me and handed me over to the soldiers. Two of them grabbed me and ushered me into the middle of a small group of soldiers. They all started to run. I had no choice but to do the same.

At the entrance of the camp, a military vehicle and two Jeeps were waiting. Two soldiers lifted me and tossed me in the back of the car, the way you would a bag of trash. I sat on the floor of the car, surrounded by soldiers. Some of them rested their army boots against my stomach; others against my back. I could move neither forward nor backward.

The car stopped a short while later and I knew that we were at Al-Bassa military center in Bethlehem. The soldiers threw me out of the car, injuring my foot against the edge of the vehicle in the process. The soldiers surrounding me made fun of my blindness: They made me run into one of the walls. As a result, I bruised my forehead.

We got to what is known as the cage, a room made

up of two cement and two metal walls. A young boy was waiting there as well. He was astonished to see me coming in: That the occupation would arrest a blind man was too much for him to stomach. He tried to figure out the reasons for my arrest. Not knowing who he was, I chose not to converse with him.

About an hour and a half later, we heard a car pull up out front. The hands of the young man and mine were handcuffed crisscross behind our backs. We were thrown together in the car, starting a journey whose destination was totally unknown to us. Needless to say, we were neither allowed to make any move nor to speak with each other.

I thought that we were heading towards Al-Masskubiyya [the Moscowbites] Prison in Jerusalem. The trip, however, was taking too long. Then I thought that it might be Al-Fara'a prison: I didn't know other prisons at that time. At one point, I heard them mention Nablus. A while later, the car stopped at a prison and the soldiers began negotiating with the prison authorities in an attempt to convince them to receive me. The car then drove on a little bit farther to what turned out to be Jenin Prison. Some more negotiating took place concerning the fact that I was blind. The other young man was taken in immediately. From what I could understand, the medical staff on duty at the prison even refused to examine me. I was handcuffed and taken into an isolated room. After half an hour, I asked a soldier who was continually going in and out about what was happening. He said that very soon it would be clear whether I would stay or go home.

"A soldier, however, handed him a piece of paper: Immediately, he grabbed my hair and brutally knocked my head against the wall."

After the soldier left the room, I heard quite a bit of noise outside, coming from some sort of a big meeting. I am almost sure that Karim was present at that meeting: Arresting a blind person was not something typically done by the prison authorities.

Around 7 in the morning, one of the soldiers came and escorted me to another area of the prison. On the way, he kept wondering aloud why I was brought to prison. "They must be crazy," he kept saying. He took me where all new prisoners turn over their belongings. The moment the person in charge saw me, he expressed astonishment and dismay. A soldier, however, handed him a piece of paper: Immediately, he grabbed my hair and brutally knocked my head against the wall.

This was the turning point. I realized then that anything was possible. I knew what it meant to be imprisoned by the Israeli occupation. I was taken inside where I was handed over to a huge prison guard. He handcuffed me again, placed a filthy sack on my head and started climbing me up the stairs to the prison. I told him that I urgently needed to go to the restroom, which I had not used for many hours. He ignored my request completely. It was about 8:30 in the morning.

He took me to a room where *shabh* [tying one by the hands either to the wall or to a metal rod] is conducted. I was kept in that room until about 3 in the afternoon. I was very tired, bored and anxious.

An interrogator approached me and threateningly asked whether I wanted to confess to the activities I had performed. He undid the handcuffs, removed the blindfold and took me to another room for questioning. "I neither play football nor basketball," I mockingly said to him.

"Political activities is what I am referring to," he angrily said.

"I quite understand that," I responded. "I have nothing to which I can confess."

The interrogator then simply ordered that the handcuffs and the blindfold be placed on me again and that I be taken back to the *shabh* room. I was subjected to this form of torture for four days. During that time, I was kept standing for many hours with my face against the wall and with my hands tied to the rod, which stretched across the ceiling. At other times, I was thrown in a very small closet, especially designed for this purpose. They would bring me food, but I didn't even explore it to find out what it was.

Following this, they moved me to a cell where I was kept for two days. The cell was very small. Two people could hardly fit there. Yet there were six of us jammed inside. This was the first time I was brought into contact with other people.

The cell served as a form of torture in two ways: First, the tightness and the harshness of the place is meant to break you down. Secondly, the interrogators calculate that bringing you into contact with other human beings, after a period of isolation, might entice you to talk about your "activities" in the pre-imprisonment phase. Some of these people that you come into contact with are collaborators, *Assafir*[1] in prison jargon. They are deliberately placed there by the prison authorities to help extract confessions from prisoners. Most likely, one of the other men kept in that cell was a collaborator. His manner seemed to indicate so.

1. *Assafir* is the plural of *assfour*, which means bird in Arabic.

After those two days, I was moved to a cell by myself. I was exhausted beyond words. When the time came for the regular count at 7PM, the guard kept screaming and shouting at me to respond. I couldn't. I was deeply asleep after having been deprived of sleep for close to a week. They thought that something was wrong with me. They sent for a nurse. The moment he saw me, collapsed like a dead body, he said that I should either be released or be taken to stay with other prisoners.

I felt rather relieved, thinking to myself that he was a humane and reasonable person. A short while after he left, the guards came and informed me that I was to be taken down to the regular prison rooms. For me, this was like going home. The cell is a very difficult place.

They took me into a room which had about 20-25 people. I felt rather good. I exchanged warm greetings with the prisoners. They asked me whether I wanted to have dinner. I answered in the affirmative, especially since I hadn't eaten for over a week. I ate well and smoked all the cigarettes they gave me. We then started introducing ourselves.

One of them came to me and in an authoritative manner told me that he was in charge of security affairs in that room. He asked me about my activities before I was brought to prison. He specifically inquired about other people with whom I had worked. In other words, he wanted a full report on what I did before I came into prison.

"I said: 'Bye bye, *assafir*.' I could tell that they became angry and rather astonished with the fact that I knew that they were collaborators."

I responded in the negative: I told him that I had nothing to report on. He became somewhat angry and threateningly said that the person above him would talk to me tomorrow. "You will be tortured in the corner as a suspect unless you tell us about your activities. We have to inform those who worked with you outside the prison of the precautionary measures they need to take," he said. I started to become suspicious of the group. Until then, I didn't exactly know what *assafir* were and how they acted. I first thought that they would only infiltrate the cells. As a result, I became alert and put on my guard.

Fatigued and exhausted, I went to sleep. The following morning, another guy came to talk to me. It was the same type of discussion. Ten minutes later, the prison guard called my name: As he was closing the door behind us, I said: "Bye bye, *assafir*." I could tell that they became angry and rather astonished with the fact that I knew that they were collaborators. After all, most Palestinian prisoners do not collapse and confess before the interrogator: Rather, they ascribe to themselves more than their actual share in front of the *assafir*, thinking that they are fellow nationalists.

I was taken up to the interrogation room. Three interrogators were present. "Bye bye, *assafir*?" one of them asked. "You do not seem to be an easy case." The three of them tortured me for a long time. They ordered me to be taken to the *shabh* room. I was moved back and forth between *shabh* and actual beating for over a week. My whole energy was drained. I became frail.

At the end of that arduous week, they took me back to the cell. Other guys were there as well. Four days into my stay in the cell, I told the guys that I was rather bored. I didn't know what was happening, since they hadn't called me into interrogation for such a long time. No sooner had I finished my words than they called my name.

They opened the cell and I exited. Unlike previous times, they didn't handcuff me as we walked to the interrogation room. I found this quite odd.

The interrogators were welcoming and seemingly respectful. "You are a nice gentleman," one of them said. "Can we offer you a cigarette?" he asked.

"I quit smoking," I said with sarcasm.

"I want to do you a favor," he said.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I want to bring you one of the ten people who served as witnesses against you," he said.

"Indeed, you will be doing me a favor," I responded.

The interrogator had me sit under his desk. In Hebrew, he asked another interrogator to bring in the witness.

One of the interrogators kept looking at my face to see if my expressions would change. The other asked the witness about his relationship with me. The witness told the interrogator that I suggested and actually planned for him to do certain nationalistic activities. However, the witness went on to say that he refused to do what I had orchestrated for him.

I maintained my cool while the witness was speaking: I did not look affected at all. The interrogator kept looking at my facial expressions to see whether they would change. They simply wanted to frighten the hell out of me. But they couldn't.

The interrogator ordered that the witness be taken out of the room. He pulled me from underneath his desk and said: "Here is the favor I wanted to do you."

"You can't just bring a tape-recorder to serve as a witness against me and expect me to believe it," I responded. The interrogator got a bit angry. He acted, however, as if he believed that I meant what I said and that I wasn't making fun of him.

The interrogator ordered that the witness be brought in again. This time, I was not put underneath the desk. The interrogator grabbed my hand and squeezed it on the shoulder of the witness to convince me that this was a real human being testifying against me. Of course, I could tell beforehand that he was a real human being. I knew who he was from the very beginning.

The interrogator ordered the witness to be taken outside. He offered me a cigarette and asked me to take a rest. I kept cool and turned down his offer.

"You can't just bring one of your colleagues to serve as a witness against me and expect me to believe it either. You can neither fool me with a tape-recorder nor with a colleague," I said to him.

I hardly finished what I was saying. Like a gangster, he grabbed my shirt and tore it apart. He ordered me to be handcuffed right away. Beatings started to come at me from all directions. They focused on the genital and stomach areas. They brutally beat my head against the wall. This session of torture lasted for five hours, from 9 in the evening until 2 in the morning. The chief interrogator kept saying: "We presented you with irrefutable evidence. But you refused to confess."

"I told him that I had nothing to say. He would then pour a gallon of water on me in a slow manner. This phase lasted for three days."

My reaction to that session of torture was twofold: On the one hand, I knew that I could be killed at any moment. I further knew that most likely they were causing me irreparable damage. On the other hand, I felt somewhat relieved. When the interrogator engages in physical torture, it is indicative of the fact that he has given up on psychological torture, which is more powerful. When the interrogator starts beating you, it means that his psychological method of extracting information has failed.

HHA: How did you deal with the beating?

Muhammad: I basically felt like a ball. I was tossed around from one corner to the other. With my hands handcuffed, I could not defend myself against the beating. My main concern was to protect the stomach area from harsh hits. It wasn't always feasible to do so, however. There was more than one person engaged in the beating.

When the chief interrogator got tired, he removed the handcuffs for a moment and ordered me to take off my pants. All I had left on was my underwear. He put the handcuffs on again and placed a filthy blindfold on my head. He took me to the highest spot in the prison building, basically, to the rooftop. It was open from all directions. Keep in mind it was January, one of the coldest months of the year.

All I had on was my underwear. I was put in the *shabh* position. From time to time, the interrogator came and asked me if I wanted to confess: I told him that I had nothing to say. He would then pour a gallon of water on me in a slow manner. This phase lasted for three days.

At 10 PM on the third day, they took me down to the cell. I refused to eat when I was on the rooftop: They thought that by taking me down to the cell, I might regain some appetite.

I didn't know any of the guys in the cell. When I entered, I greeted them and asked them to keep me the cigarette each of us receives at 10 PM. I was beyond exhaustion. I crashed right away.

The guard brought the cigarettes and refused to give mine to the guys, thinking that they would smoke it. Therefore, they woke me up. Later, they told me that I smoked it and four others the following day, while I was asleep. I must have slept for about 36 hours. I don't recall smoking any cigarette or getting up for the prisoners' count at any time.

On day 36, they called me out of the cell to see Mr. Muhammad Na'amneh, the lawyer my family had hired to defend me. The lawyer informed me of the charges directed at me and of the fact that there was a witness who was willing to testify against me. The meeting with the lawyer lasted only for ten minutes.

I was taken back to the cell. Until day 48, it was a routine movement between the cell and the torturous interrogation room.

On my last day in the cell, they took me to a room where the charge sheet against me was read. I was accused of organizing political groups and of arranging for the writing of slogans on walls. I was also accused of organizing attacks on Israelis and was accused of responsibility for 90 percent of the attacks which took place in and around Deheisheh camp. They further charged me with encouraging students to go on demonstrations. I denied all the charges. The fact that I am blind did not make them believe that I didn't perform any of the activities they charged me with. To the contrary! They constantly made an association between me and an-

other well-known blind prisoner, Mr. Al-Bizyani, who was sentenced to many years in prison.

The day after they read me the charge sheet, they transported me and several others, including the witness who testified against me, from Jenin prison to the central prison in Nablus. On the way, we were handcuffed and a blindfold was put over our eyes. When we arrived, they took us directly to the prison rooms. While in the rooms, I was visited for the first time by my family. They told me that the Red Cross tried to visit me several times. At each instance, their request was turned down.

On the day of the trial, my lawyer tried to convince me to confess to the charges, corroborated by the testimony of the witness, in exchange for going home on bail. I utterly refused.

The lawyer went back to negotiate with the judge. He returned to inform me that the court decided to release me on bail. The amount required was 1,500 Shekels (roughly about $1,000 at the time).

I asked the lawyer about my family. He said that they were waiting outside to hear the court verdict. I asked him to tell my parents not to pay the money and, instead, to go home.

I was returned to the prison room. It must have been about 12 noon.

Around 3 PM, they called my name and announced that I was to be released. I knew that my family must have come back with the required amount in order to secure my release. I said farewell to my fellow prisoners and went to collect my ID and other personal effects. The prison authorities said that the person in charge was not there and that I simply had to come back later to collect all my belongings.

My father and brother-in-law were waiting outside. They told me that they had been there in the morning. Once they heard the court decision, they returned to the camp to bring the money. This was their second time in Nablus on the same day. It takes at least 2-3 hours each way to drive between Nablus and the camp.

We took the court receipt and left.

One week after my release, I went back to collect my belongings. They kept me waiting all day long. At the end, they gave me my ID and only one-fourth of the money I had on me the night of my arrest.

About one and a half years went by after my release. The case was in no way over. I must have traveled 40 times to Nablus during that period. Each time, they would say that the witness hadn't shown up. At the end, they said that the court file was lost.

HHA: What was your most painful moment during interrogation?

Muhammad: The whole period of imprisonment cannot be forgotten. For example, they didn't call me by name when I was in the cell. They constantly tried to humiliate me by making fun of my blindness. I certainly tried to defend myself against their mockery by belittling those bastards.

What I cannot forget at all is some of the moments of torture during interrogation, especially the *shabh*. Subjecting me to cold water and fierce attacks is impossible to erase from my memory. One particular event which I can never forget was when they pulled me out of the cell and took me for interrogation without blindfolding me. This was the night when they confronted me with the supposed witness. The torture that followed will always be vivid in my memory. I can clearly recall my state of mind.

"They constantly tried to humiliate me by making fun of my blindness. I certainly tried to defend myself against their mockery by belittling those bastards."

I remember some moments with my cellmates. Our communication system with other cells depended on knocking on the walls: The number and pattern of knocks determined the type of message we wanted to convey.

Every prisoner is bound to feel homesick. While in the cell, I used to sleep during the day to avoid communicating with others, in case they were collaborators. The nights, however, were very very long. Late in the evening, the prison guard would often let the smell of the delicious food he was preparing drift into our rooms. This reminded me of home, of my family and, especially of my mother's cooking.

What made it quite difficult for me when I thought of home was the fact that my father had gotten out of hospital just a couple of days before I was taken to prison. I didn't know how he was.

I had no idea what was happening with my family. I tried to resist thinking of the outside, but sometimes I couldn't. I hadn't seen my family for a long time. The earliest they managed to visit me was 52 days after I was imprisoned.

In retrospect, I now recall how I felt when my family came to visit me in Nablus prison. My mother was crying hysterically. My father was not feeling well at all. I had the difficult task of making them feel okay. I explained to them that I would be going home very soon. I assured them that I did not confess to any of the charges lodged against me. I

further explained to them that the guilty party was in fact the man who was brought as a witness to testify against me.

My family's visit was quite uplifting for me. It enabled me to know that things were somewhat okay on the outside. This gave me the peace of mind I badly needed in prison. After the visit, I managed to participate in some educational activities from which I benefited greatly.

At other times, I thought of my friends. In some respect, at night, I was torn between the world of the prison and the real world on the outside.

HHA: Did you ever cry while in prison?

Muhammad: I cried only once. I was by myself in the cell. I was physically worn out. Psychologically, I felt a tremendous degree of stress. I started thinking of my father just coming out of the hospital. I didn't know in what condition he was; they had wanted to operate on him. So, I cried and felt much better after that.

HHA: How do you view the whole experience?

Muhammad: The experience was like a movie for me: You finish one scene and move on to the next. With all the pain involved, I kept evaluating the process constantly—the production and the performance.

HHA: How did the imprisonment affect you?

Muhammad: The prison experience was the worst and most pleasant phase in my life at the same time. It was as if you were on the battlefield. You knew that you could die at any moment. However, I felt that there was some meaning to life. Those very difficult days put me to the real test: I had no choice but to manage or fail. The whole experience created a lot of inner psychological strength in me. This enabled me to face the challenge successfully. Of course, I never wish to be imprisoned again. Nonetheless, I had always wanted to face life challenges on an equal footing with others, namely, sighted people. You either collapse or hold your ground in front of the interrogator, regardless of whether you are blind or sighted. I had the chance to prove myself. By all accounts, I did a lot better than all the sighted guys arrested with me. They collapsed quickly in front of their interrogators and confessed to charges they never committed. This experience, in other words, represented a tremendous psychological boost for me, in spite of all the pains involved. It lifted up my morale. I was also able to draw invaluable lessons out of the experience.

"You either collapse or hold your ground in front of the interrogator, regardless of whether you are blind or sighted."

The significance of the experience for me personally stems from the following: When I was in high school, I used to encourage my friends to go on demonstrations against the Israeli occupation. Unlike them, however, I couldn't participate in stone-throwing or the like. As a result, I used to get depressed. I used to board a taxi to go home as they were throwing stones against soldiers. I knew that I couldn't do what they were doing then.

In prison, however, all these feelings were dissipated. I had the chance, which I never wanted to have, to compete on an equal basis and I proved myself.

The prison affected me in quite negative ways as well. As I mentioned earlier, my health deteriorated badly. Two months before I was taken to prison, I had a hernia surgery. As a result of torture, the wound was opened all over again. I haven't been able to cure it since. I had all sorts of other pains in my stomach and in other parts of my body. They haven't been cured either. The awful financial situation and the overall state of affairs have not enabled me to be treated.

My business was also destroyed as a result of imprisonment. All products on the shelves rotted after two months of unairing. Everything had to be thrown away. This meant loss of capital, energy and market. It was devastating. I recall that I had, among other things, over 500 kilos of nuts to sell. I had to dispose of it all.

I arranged to get most of the products in the store on credit before I was taken to prison. When I was released, I neither had the products, nor the money to pay for them. I was in debt for some time. I also had to pay interest on late cheques.

I was so strong when I came out of prison, but unfortunately, without any means to work with. This meant that I had to start all over again. I had to sell my car for spare parts to get some money.

Another loss for me was one whole year of education. I was finishing 12th grade and was only ten days away from taking the *tawjihi*, the matriculation exams.

I have been trying to recuperate since then.

Just a few months after I got out of prison, the Intifada broke out. Since 1987, there has been no good moment to regenerate the business. Things have been getting worse daily.

HHA: At present, do you feel that your imprisonment went to waste?

Muhammad: What we have now is not compatible with our ambitions. We were willing to make more sacrifices, but not for what we are getting. I had hoped that the sacrifices we prisoners made would generate better results. Unfortunately, as time goes on, it appears that they haven't.

HHA: What do you do now?

Muhammad: Basically, I don't work at all. This is in part due to the negative trend in our current political and economic situation. As small businesses we greatly depend for our survival on money circulated within the market by daily laborers. The isolation of the West Bank from Jerusalem by the Israeli authorities prevents workers from getting to their jobs. The result is clear: people no longer have money to buy goods with. Our wares stagnate on the shelf. At the end, we are left without a job.

Moreover, the high rate of unemployment has, among other things, led some people to open small shops like the one I have. This has created very unhealthy competition. Not much money is available and the camp now has more shops than the market can handle. Although other shop owners are not necessarily doing much better, the lack of any source of income has led some of them to turn to this trade in order to kill the boredom they feel.

"Once you enter prison, you take off your personality. You have to give up your individuality."

On top of all this, I personally feel a great deal of frustration and discouragement. Our particular conditions and circumstances have diminished some of the incentives and stimuli that have kept us going over the years.

In spite of torture in the prison, my morale and that of many of my friends was higher then than it is today. The feeling of belonging to a group did not only enable me to survive through difficult moments. It also served as an excellent shield against despair.

Survival Through Belonging

A prisoner has to have a lot of strength to endure difficult times. Another Muhammad I interviewed, who spent many years in Israeli prisons, sheds some light on what prisoners have to do in an attempt to survive. The following analysis is taken from an interview conducted with him:

HHA: How do you deal with life in prison?

Muhammad: you de-personalize it. you start displaying all your inner strength to be able to withstand the psychological pressures. The way to do it is by belonging to a group. This gives you a sense of immunization against odds. You need the group.

Imagine that you are in a forest with a group. The first thing you do is to co-ordinate together. (This is what The Social Contract theory is all about).

Once you enter prison, you take off your personality. You have to give up your individuality. You are in a situation where you are not in control of your decisions. The teacher is not a teacher any more. The engineer is not an engineer anymore. You have to cater to the group. You simply have to give up yourself. Any other way is a failure.

If a decision is taken that you are selfish, you are doomed. If you do not share your cigarette with me, you are no good.

Survival Through Communication: Letters From Behind Bars

The following two letters were sent from behind bars by a man we'll call Akram to his wife and family. In them he informs the outside world of the harshness of prison life. Moreover, expressing himself on paper helps him deal with difficult times. Here is some of what he says:

July 13, 1988

To you my dear ones: To you my beloved: To you Firdous:

The time of silence approaches. Often, prisoners remember the midnight songs with which they infiltrate the quietude. There are all kinds of songs: There are songs of love and of emotions. There are words to the homeland and to the poor. They could not be suppressed by the observation towers with their phosphorous lights. It is, perhaps, this kind of atmosphere which has created reason for romance and love. Some happiness is felt, although our freedom is being denied by barbed wires and other things. I want to express myself to you in spite of the prison guard. He is posted at our door, trying to harass us even for our smile, for the quiet song and for the streak of light which has become yellow.

In this very letter, I want to try to paint a living portrait of the process of our transfer to the Naqab, Negev. It might have been 10 P.M., shortly before the last prisoners' count for the day. The *shutair* (officer) yells: "1961." It is the number that evokes distaste and takes my memory back into the depths of history, into the age of slavery. This is the time when a slave was stamped with his number. Other numbers were called.

The group got anxious. There was some noise. Some seemed happy. Others were questioning and wondering. Some were in a state of disbelief as their names were called out for release.

We started sorting out our clothes. It was very crowded. Our shoes were mixed together in the corner where the jar of drinking water and that of urine were kept. It was so smelly in that corner.

In the past, I knew all sorts of smells, even the worst. This one, however, was rather new. It was worse than the sewage of Deheisheh.

Our shoes got wet with water and urine in that corner. They were lost the same way we were. There were about 50 pairs competing for oxygen, again, the same way we were.

Finally, the voice of the guard on duty got louder and louder. He had no respect for our privacy at night. He violated the silence of the prison: With his banging on our doors, he kept screaming: "Hurry up." Many of us thought that this was the call for release. In spite of my yearning for freedom, I thought otherwise. It was only two days for us in Al-Dahiriyya prison.

I started raising all kinds of questions in my mind: Where could we be going this time? What will the next station be? Can there be a worse place than this? I tried to convince some of my colleagues that we were to be transferred. We went outside to the prison square.

> "In all certainty, this type of climate and this open desert leaves no doubt that this has to be the Negev."

Some replaced their prison clothes with civilian ones. There were tens of us crowded [together]. Some who were sick got examined by a nurse. What a strange nurse he was; I never saw anything like him before. He examined the heart and/or the stomach of the prisoners without any medical equipment. He simply looked at them.

Soldiers started yelling at us: "Go over there, you animals." They started kicking us and beating us with their sticks. In a most ugly way, they tied our hands behind our backs with plastic handcuffs, the way you would tie a donkey who has not aged yet.

I immediately started remembering images from my childhood. I thought of those donkeys who used to come from neighboring villages.

In spite of the tense atmosphere, there was some whispering and some humor among the prisoners. I immediately recalled a discussion I had some time earlier with a representative of the Red Cross, who told me about the opening of [a new] Negev prison. I whispered in the ears of one of my colleagues: "Surely [we're going], to the Negev." "Unbelievable," he replied with anguish and confusion.

They finished tying us. We started boarding the buses, which were waiting for us. We were ordered to remain standing. We hardly managed to do that while our hands were handcuffed. Three buses were loaded with prisoners.

I tried to figure out where we were going based on the movement of the bus. Listening to what the soldiers were saying to each other, I could tell that we were being taken on a midnight trip to the Negev prison, to that forgotten part of Palestine.

We started feeling some pain in our veins. The handcuffs got tighter and tighter. Soldiers cursed at us. They ordered us to keep our heads down, fearing that we would try to figure out which way the bus was going. They tried to humiliate us. The trip was long and so was our suffering. Our patience started to run out. The bus finally stopped.

A week after we arrived in the Negev, I found myself in the same tent with my brothers, Nasser and Burhan. We were all pleased about that. We started talking about family, about each and every member. We tried to paint a picture of life on the outside.

I was informed of some pleasant news and other news that was not so pleasant. I was told that you, Firdous, were taken to the hospital. I felt bad to hear that. When I knew that you were out of the hospital, I felt better.

Try to hire a lawyer for us. He might help with our case and might help us find out about how you are living on the outside.

• • •

August 27, 1988

My Dear love Firdous,

In this letter, I want to continue talking about the journey to the Negev.

Once the bus stopped, all prisoners felt some relief. Arrestees started conversing with each other, despite repeated warnings by soldiers. The prison authorities spent the first half hour taking care of administrative arrangements to receive us.

The group was made up of three busloads. We were the first ones to be detained in this prison at Negev. We started getting off the buses. Some soldiers removed the blindfolds and others cut off the handcuffs.

Everything looked strange. We all kept looking at our swollen hands. There was some breeze in the air on that early morning of April 1st. We all had a taste

of that early morning desert atmosphere. We couldn't tell whether this was reality or one of those April fools' day stories.

Daylight was coming. I started wondering to myself, Where are we? In all certainty, this type of climate and this open desert leaves no doubt that this had to be the Negev. It is exactly what the soldiers said.

The huge tents that stretched out through the prison camp touched a sensitive chord in my memory. It reminded me of the picture of a Vietnamese prison camp, I once saw in a film. The soldiers walked us in. They ordered us to sit on the floor and to place our hands on top of our heads.

The sun started to shine. How beautiful it was. It sent through us some warmth, especially after the cold morning breeze of the desert. We wanted to enjoy it: We wanted to sit comfortably on the floor. However, we started to feel tired after a while. Sitting still in the same place for a long time is bound to make you feel tired. This is what we felt, especially that our hands were placed on top of our heads.

We became rebellious at our situation. Some put their hands down, in spite of the loud yelling of the officers.

After the long journey, which took most of the night, we needed food to eat and something to drink. We needed rest. We needed to go to the bathroom. We asked the soldiers to let us do that. But they constantly refused. Out of necessity, we insisted. Finally, we were allowed to go to the bathroom one at a time. How strange it was: We went while accompanied by a heavily armed soldier. He waited for us outside.

The scene in the bathroom was even more astonishing than that of the poor man waiting outside. These bathrooms were something else. They [consisted of pits] two meters deep, seven meters long and one meter wide. Five Arab-style bathrooms were established. They covered the floor with pieces of wood. It was so easy for you to fall down in the hole.

Outside, one of the officers held a piece of paper: "All of you are administratively detained," he said. He tried to translate the paper from Hebrew to Arabic. One of our colleagues, however, who heard errors in the translation, asked for the paper in order to translate it himself. The officer agreed. The paper stated that all arrestees were administratively detained for six months, beginning on March 31, 1988, and ending on September 29.

I had been through administrative detention before. It was regulated by some legal code. At the time, we used to make fun of it. Every prisoner used to get an individualized order, stating the terms of detention. This time, more than 80 of us receive one collective order for detention, stating the same terms and reasons for the whole group.

Prisoners started talking with each other. Some did not understand what was going on. Others expressed astonishment at this kind of arrest. I, however, understood from the very beginning that we were to be administratively detained, under new conditions, in a manner consistent with the Intifada phase.

The prison camp was about 200 square meters in size. It had eight tents and two tables. Some soldiers were spread around. Officers were handling paperwork. One of them asked us to sign the administrative detention order. We were very hesitant to do that. Some of us agreed to do so, others did not. We started queuing for the signing.

My turn came. A female soldier opened an envelope they brought from Al-Dahiriyya prison. I started looking at my belongings — five shekels, a shoe lace, a belt, a watch and a ring. At that moment, I asked the soldier with astonishment about my wedding ring. She simply said that it wasn't there. I began to understand that it had been stolen at AL-Dahiriyya prison. It didn't really matter whether I understood that or not then. The fact of the matter is that it was not there.

The officer, who informed me again of the detention order, asked me to sign without any hesitation. So I did. Signing the orders, I thought, would not make any difference.

Several huge boxes of old clothes were lying in the prison camp. It seemed that Israeli soldiers had used them in the past. One of the soldiers asked me to replace my civilian clothes with some of those in the boxes. Every prisoner had to wear a pair of pants, a shirt and a jacket, all designed to be worn in the prison camp. The soldier standing by the boxes did not let any of us pick our own sizes. It felt as if he met the devil first thing in the morning.

Compared with others, I was lucky. Some of them put on what resembles clothes.

We moved to another corner in the camp. We each received a cup, a toothbrush, a tray and five blankets. We were extremely exhausted. We were in need of some rest.

Warmest greetings to you my dear Firdous and to the whole family. ❑

Current Fellows & Their Activities

Bacete Bwogo. A Sudanese from the Shilluk tribe of southern Sudan, Bacete is a physician spending two and one-half years studying health-delivery systems in Costa Rica, Cuba, Kerala State (India) and the Bronx, U.S.A. Bacete did his undergraduate work at the University of Juba and received his M.D. from the University of Alexandria in Egypt. He served as a public-health officer in Port Sudan until 1990, when he moved to England to take advantage of scholarships at the London School of Economics and Oxford University. [The AMERICAS]

Cheng Li. An Assistant Professor of Government at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY, Cheng Li is studying the growth of technocracy and its impact on the economy of the southeastern coast of China. He began his academic life by earning a Medical Degree from Jing An Medical School in Shanghai, but then did graduate work in Asian Studies and Political Science in the United States, with an M.A. from Berkeley in 1987 and a Ph.D. from Princeton in 1992. [EAST ASIA]

Adam Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey's regional role and growing importance as an actor in the Balkans, the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Cynthia Caron. With a Masters degree in Forest Science from the Yale School of Forestry and Environment, Cynthia is spending two years in South Asia as ICWA's first John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow. She is studying and writing about the impact of forest-preservation projects on the lives (and land-tenure) of indigenous peoples and local farmers who live on their fringes. Her fellowship includes stays in Bhutan, India and Sri Lanka. [SOUTH ASIA/Forest & Society]

Hisham Ahmed. Born blind in the Palestinian Dheisheh Refugee Camp near Bethlehem, Hisham finished his A-levels with the fifth highest score out of 13,000 students throughout Israel. He received a B.A. in political science on a scholarship from Illinois State University and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of California in Santa Barbara. Back in East Jerusalem and still blind, Hisham plans to gather oral histories from a broad selection of Palestinians to produce a "Portrait of Palestine" at this crucial point in Middle Eastern history. [MIDEAST/N. AFRICA]

Sharon Griffin. A feature writer and contributing columnist on African affairs at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Sharon is spending two years in southern Africa studying Zulu and the KwaZulu kingdom and writing about the role of nongovernmental organizations as fulfillment centers for national needs in developing countries where governments are still feeling their way toward effective administration. She plans to travel and live in Namibia and Zimbabwe as well as South Africa. [sub-SAHARA]

Pramila Jayapal. Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber and an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators, but most recently managed a $7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is spending two years in India tracing her roots and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

William F. Foote. Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the Buenos Aires Herald from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

Teresa C. Yates. A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a *juris doctor* from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. While with the ACLU, she also conducted a Seminar on Women in the Law at Fordham Law School in New York. [sub-SAHARA]

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