
Experience of Imprisonment and Struggle

Yacoub Dawani was born in Nablus, Palestine. While still a student, he joined the Arab Nationalist Movement, the precursor of the PFLP. He was among those cadres assigned to its military wing, to prepare for the struggle to liberate Palestine. When the Zionists occupied the West Bank in 1967, Yacoub left his economics study in Cairo, to return to Palestine and engage in the anti-occupation resistance. He was part of a larger group working to create local cells, to further political mass activities, underground propaganda and armed resistance. Yacoub remembers, «Our experience was little, but our morale was high. Perhaps in our enthusiasm, we were not strict enough about security. Most of us were young, men and women, mostly students, but also some workers and peasants.»

Members of the group were arrested and the others wanted. Yacoub tried to go underground, but was arrested in October 1968. For fifty days he was interrogated and tortured heavily in the Nablus prison. He was then transferred to Ramle and kept in isolation for six months, then returned to Nablus and tried in February 1970, by a military court. He was defended by the progressive Israeli lawyer, Felicia Langer; together they aimed to prolong the trial as much as possible, to give a chance to speak out on the Palestinian cause. Yacoub asked us to include a special tribute to Felicia Langer, and to Lea Tsemel who was later also his lawyer, for the great efforts they have expended on behalf of thousands of Palestinian detainees.

Yacoub was sentenced to life imprisonment, plus 18 years, to be served concurrently, for membership in an illegal organization, possession of arms, receiving military training, and having relations with a Palestinian in 'Israel' for the purpose of endangering state security. He began serving his term in Ramle, was transferred to Askelon in 1970, to Bir Sheeba (the Naqab) in 1973, to Tulkarm in 1978, to Nafha in 1980, to Tulkarm in 1983, and finally released in the November 1983 prisoner exchange.

In this interview we decided not to deal with the question of torture in depth, for it has been documented in many places, but rather to focus on the conditions and experience of struggle in Zionist prisons.

How were conditions in the Zionist prisons at the time you entered, as compared to today?

I will begin with some basic facts: Overcrowding has always been a problem. Imagine a corridor-like cell of 30 sq.meters, including a water tap and toilet, where 20 prisoners sleep, eat, wash, etc. Their mattresses alone cover the space. This is today after much struggle. Until 1977, there were no mattresses, only four blankets per prisoner. Only in 1981 were bunk beds instated in some jails in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Now prisoners have only a two hour walk in the prison yard as relief. When I entered the prisons, this was only one hour, sometimes less.

Originally there were two different menus in the Zionist prisons, one for Israeli common prisoners, another for Palestinians. The stated pretext was that their taste was occidental, while ours was oriental. In reality, Palestinians received much less protein and vegetables. Fruit was first introduced, in theory, in 1972. Our diet was mainly starches. Starting in 1981, a single menu was instated, again in theory, for the food given to political prisoners is still less and worse. This aims to weaken them, providing less nourishment and making them lose appetite. Food is served in a degrading way, on the floor where we also slept, walked, etc. Meeting basic needs in a primitive way is part of the Zionist dehumanization process, to have the prisoners lose their self-respect. Even meals become a daily provocation, a form of torture.

When I entered the prison, there were virtually no reading materials. There was only *Al Anba** and a few books, mainly on religion or cheap novels which the Red Cross had convinced the Israelis to allow. Later we were 'allowed' *The Jerusalem Post*. Only after hunger strikes were we allowed to receive books from our families. Only after a hunger strike in Nafha prison in 1981, were we permitted the daily Israeli papers (Hebrew). Of course, books are subject to censorship. In addition to the thousands banned in the 1967 occupied territories, many legal books are held back by the prison authorities. Until now, an important demand of any prison struggle is the right to receive any book that is legally distributed in occupied Palestine. Radios are still forbidden, but they are often smuggled in. Prisoners are 'allowed', i.e. forced, to hear three hours of Israeli Radio (Arabic program) daily.

War of Attrition

All these details of prison life add up to a hellish war of attrition waged by the prison authorities. The prisoner is forced to struggle for every little thing; it is hoped that he will wear himself down in this way. Added to the practice of systematic torture, the living conditions in the prison are geared to reduce the prisoner to a nothing. In 1969, Moshe Dayan 'explained' to the Knesset why the death penalty was not necessary: His logic was to deprive the Palestinians of the chance to have martyrs in the prisons, while making sure that the political prisoners would be turned into «Swiss cheese»-more holes than cheese.

In this context, one sees the perspective of the prisoners' struggle for just the minimal conditions. Fighting to preserve their humanity is a form of resistance, to thwart the destructive aim of the prison service. In 1980, at the end of the prolonged Nafha hunger strike, we were visited in our cell by an Israeli doctor, who noted that Palestinians were kept in conditions unsuitable for animals. He asked why we were not in worse

* *Al Anba* was an Arabic daily published by the Israeli government. Its closure earlier this year proved that it never became popular among Palestinians despite the facilities it enjoyed, especially as compared to the Palestinian press under occupation.