

# Those Without Shadows

*By Umm Rashid For Cageprisoners.com*

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Face scrubbed clean of emotion, Asma Abdur Razaq, a Palestinian woman editor who spent nearly a year in an Israeli detention center without trial, describes her descent from "hell". Jailed for over a year without access to lawyers or family in an attempt to coerce her husband to surrender, she was released as part of a prisoner swap between the Israeli government and Hezbollah and deported to Jordan.

Asma said she was arrested after 20 Israeli soldiers accompanied by sniffer dogs, raided her house in Ramallah. "They put me into a narrow cell after six hours of interrogation. Throughout the detention period, they tortured me with beatings and humiliations and threatening sexual assault. They took me into an isolated room and switched on a cassette recorder with the voice of a prisoner calling for help as she was being tortured."

At other times, she and the other women prisoners were forced to listen to loud music and given low-quality, poorly-cooked food in their airless, rat and cockroach-infested cell. A few weeks before her release, a new prison director was appointed who, she says, was "very strict." He did not allow workers to bring in food and handicraft materials for the prisoners, made changes in the visitors' rooms so that the prisoners could not even see or hear their visiting relatives and rationed the few rays of sunshine that entered the prison cells, making the airless, dank cells completely dark.

Asma was not allowed to meet her relatives for more than six months, and denied a court translator while the court proceedings were all in Hebrew. According to Asma, more than 300 Palestinian women have been imprisoned since the beginning of the Al-Aqsa intifada in 2000. Of that number, 200 have been released with the remaining 100 still in prisons. The prisoners included 22 married women as well as 16 teenagers aged between 15 and 19 -- captive pawns in the hands of a lawless State that will stop at nothing in its cruel war aimed at dispossessing the innocent.

Palestinian women have always been the wellspring of support and strength for their families and have played a vital role in resisting Israeli occupation. The present head of State, Ariel Sharon has been quoted as saying that Israel's **"real enemies"** are not the freedom fighters it exterminates with ruthless impunity, **but the women and children of Palestine who represent hope and normalcy.**

It is with the intention of extinguishing this hope in the hearts of the Palestinian people that the State targets the wives, mothers and daughters of Palestine; detaining them in solitary confinement, forcing them to give birth in their prison cells and then taking away the babies; torturing them verbally, physically and emotionally;

abusing them sexually and psychologically.

Palestinian women prisoners -- jailed for being related by marriage or blood to someone on the Israeli hit-list -- have been subjected to brutal conditions, deprived of basic human needs and prisoners rights in violation of major international declarations, agreements and principles. Since its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, Israel has carried out over 600,000 arbitrary arrests. During the current September 28th, 2001 intifada, Israeli occupation arrested 1,900 Palestinians; approximately 1,000 of which are still held in custody.

Women prisoners are subjected to inhuman beatings by sadistic Israeli interrogators; once, two detainees-- Amna Mona and Sawsan Turki -- were admitted to Abu Kbir hospital for medical treatment as a result of beatings. Another detainee, Obeida al Wazani was transferred to military hospital from her solitary confinement cell because she inhaled a poisonous gas sprayed by soldiers and was in excruciating pain due to a merciless beating by the jail warden. They were lucky --most prison illnesses are ignored and treatment or access to doctors usually denied.

One such detainee denied medical treatment was Asma Abu al Hajja, who was called out of her house in the middle of the night ostensibly for a "two-minute talk" by Israeli soldiers; but was taken to the IDF detention facility in Salem and detained for nine months. At Salem, as soldiers bound her hands and legs and blindfolded her, she tried to explain that she gets severe headaches from a brain tumor. The soldiers replied: "It's the law here. We have to." When she asked to see a doctor, they brought her a female prison warden, who attested to the presence of scars on her head from her two surgeries after Asma took off her scarf.

She was later shifted to Neve Tirza women's prison in Ramle, where she met the prison doctor and complained of pain and dizziness because of her brain tumour. The doctor asked her if she had children, and then advised: "*Don't think about the children. If you think about the children - it causes headaches.*"

"*Do you have children?*," Asma asked her.

"*That's different. **You're in prison** and **your situation** is different,*" was the reply.

In an effort to break the women and humiliate them into making confessions --never mind the fact that confessions under torture stand no legal ground -- Israeli General Security Services [The Shin Bet] systematically subjects prisoners to a variety of torture tactics including threatened and attempted rape, along with physical and psychological torture. Physical torture includes being forbidden to see their family, to

eat, to sleep, to socialize and even to sit when they want to. Many women have been made to stand for a long time with a dark dirty bag covering their head and face, with hands and legs cuffed. Psychological torture includes the use of loud music euphemistically termed "white noise", and being forced to listen to the amplified voices of women shrieking and crying in response to physical torture and beatings.

Although torture of this kind does not leave physical marks on their bodies, the psychological scars are permanent. The painful humiliation and its memories cause different long term diseases such as post traumatic stress disorder, rheumatism, slipped disks, ulcers, blood pressure fluctuations and heart problems.

Since 1968 about 10,000 Palestinian women have been detained by Israel and most of these "political detainees" were placed in the same jails as common Israeli criminals. In an effort to improve their conditions the women organized hunger strikes to negotiate their rights with the Israeli prison administration - rights, which the Israeli government has ironically "pledged to uphold" in various international forums.

In 1996, following the signing of the Oslo Peace Agreement, the women detainees took a legendary stand: no peace without the release of all women and men detainees; they refused to accept release in small groups. The result? Their release was delayed an extra four months, and the amnesty extended only to women prisoners - the men stayed where they were.

These are the stories of the women who have been incarcerated themselves, who have been to hell and back. *What of those who were left behind, who carry their prisons with them like flightless birds and can visit only their loved ones in their memories and minds?*

On March 5, 2003, the door to Salah Kardoomi's home was kicked open at 2 am by Israeli Occupation Force soldiers. Salah's wife and children were made to stay in one room while he was handcuffed and placed in a jeep waiting outside. The IOF only said: "he was wanted and they needed to search the home" -- a recurring tactic used by them to enter homes without warrants and take away occupants on the pretext of "asking a few questions".

At first, soldiers told Salah's family that they would only hold him for two hours, nobody knows how and why those two hours extended to 10 months, and then turned to a sentence of up to 7 years. He has not been formally charged with any crime. His wife only saw him 11 months after his arrest, after crossing the many checkpoints on the road to Meggido; enduring humiliating prison searches for a mere 45-minute visit across two separating fences.

Salah's family is only one of thousands in Palestine; estimates say one in three of every Palestinian family has had a member detained at some point since the beginning of the occupation.

Israel's continued and ever-intrusive siege of Palestinian territories is taking a particular toll on women. Since the military controls the roads in both Gaza and the West Bank, mothers cannot take their children to school, doctors cannot reach their clinics in the smaller towns, pregnant women and the sick – no matter how desperate -- cannot pass the checkpoints to reach a hospital in time. Incidents of women giving birth at checkpoints and of infants dying from lack of medical attention are countless.

Palestinian women also suffer because of the plunging standard of living, with most families losing their breadwinner. According to the United Nations, unemployment jumped to 38 per cent and the World Bank reports that one out of every three Palestinians is living in poverty, surviving on less than \$2 per day. Most of them are families of workers kept from their jobs in Israel, widows and their children and the wives of illegal detainees.

In spite of all their troubles, Palestinian women are adept at the system of survival -- they cope with erratic curfews, roadblocks, unemployment, stretch meals when supplies are scarce, care for traumatised children and keep the youngsters' morale high – with equal ease. One researcher calls it "the 'Palestinian Super-Woman Syndrome' – where a woman is still tied to her traditional role as mother, protector, unifier of the home and raiser of children. But the enormous political and social pressures in Palestinian society have forced her to add new responsibilities without relinquishing old roles."

During the first intifada, Palestinian women were instrumental in the success of the 1987 boycott campaign against Israel products in the Gaza Strip and West Bank. One of the obstacles to the boycott's success was the unwillingness of Palestinian families to boycott Israeli products due to the lack of alternatives. Palestinian women therefore began to establish indigenous industries, including cheese and jam production, bread baking and community gardens, to encourage the boycott and simultaneously create an infrastructure base for a home-grown Palestinian economy.

Continuing the tradition of self sufficiency, when Umm Suhaib's husband, Shaikh Taissir Omran, imam of Al-Ruda mosque in Nablus was detained by Israeli occupation forces, she took up the responsibility of providing for the family. She launched a small pastry-making business, setting up a small, low-cost oven with the family's savings.

Starting with her neighbours, she participates in various fairs and distributes her products among several schools in Nablus. Working from 6 a.m. to 12:30 p.m, she juggles her time between housework and the business, satisfied that she has to seek favours from none except Allah.

The women of Palestine are the living epitome of courage, showing tremendous grace under unrelenting pressure. As Randa Siniari Al Haq, a Palestinian activist says: "There is much more than what we daily see on televisions, newspapers and the media. While what is being reflected addresses direct human rights violations which all Palestinian men, women and children face under occupation, there is the indirect and long-term social and psychological impact of the occupation on our daily lives that is subtle and does not receive enough media attention.

Sufferings of the Palestinian people generally, and those of the more marginalized within the society, such as the elderly, the disabled, women and children are not given enough attention and care. I believe what needs to be emphasized here is that our sufferings should not only be reflected in numbers and statistics. It is important to put a human face to it, after all we are human beings with feelings of happiness and sadness, and we, like others long for a better future for us and our children.

Some of us have lived most of their lives under occupation, while our children knew nothing beyond the occupation and the daily sufferings entailed due to the violations of Palestinian rights by the military occupation; on a daily basis our children witness the killing and injury of their beloved ones, the demolition of their homes, the restrictions on their movement to and from schools, the imposition of the curfew for over long periods (three months last year) depriving them of their summer vacation, the arrest and detention of their beloved ones, and the list is endless.

During Mr. Kofi Anan's visit to Gaza, a child Kifah Wishah was nominated to reflect on her sufferings and deprivation due to arrest of her father and the fathers of many other children, Kifah called Mr. Kofi Anan "father", and told him that she had not felt what it is like to have a father since she was two years old when her father was arrested.

Kifah told him in simple language:

*"When the occupation stole my father*

*they stole my toy*

*my laughter*

*my happiness*

*my hopes and dreams*

*the warmth of life around me*

*they stole the word 'father' and held it captive behind the bars."*

May the day dawn soon when the women and children of Palestine are restored all that has been illegally stolen from them : the right to a father's unconditional love, the right to a mother's undivided care; the right to security that only a family can bring; the right to a restful night's sleep without the menacing spectre of a midnight break-in by soldiers taking away that to which they have no right