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Article in *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* · October 2013

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Journal of Middle East Women's Studies, Volume 9, Number 3, Fall 2013, pp. 54-80 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press



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“OUR LIFE IS PRISON”
THE TRIPLE CAPTIVITY OF WIVES AND MOTHERS
OF PALESTINIAN POLITICAL PRISONERS

RITA GIACAMAN AND PENNY JOHNSON



ABSTRACT

In focus groups and individual interviews with the wives and mothers of Palestinian political prisoners, we find that their narratives describe a triple captivity—of the Israeli colonial system, the Israeli prison, and the post-Oslo Palestinian political landscape with its isolating effects in their own communities. Wives and mothers of prisoners mediate between prison and family life by navigating through the multiple dynamics of Israeli securitization and geographic incarceration, political invisibility in the Palestinian field, and social isolation in their communities. In particular, the visit from the West Bank to prisons inside Israel emerges as an ordeal that haunts and structures daily life. We draw on Jacques Rancière’s notion to highlight the vanishing of the political, the dominance of policing, and the diminishing value of imprisonment in the post Oslo years, signaling an absence of the Palestinian emancipatory project.

INTRODUCTION

In a small chilly room in a Palestinian refugee camp in the northern West Bank in late January 2011, fifteen wives and mothers of Palestinian political prisoners gather to tell us and each other about their experiences and problems. Amid tales of family survival in difficult circumstances, women return over and over again to “the visit” to prison—from their quest to receive or be denied the necessary permits, to the arduous

bus journey from the West Bank to prisons located inside Israel, to the humiliations of searches and the heartbreaking brevity of a visit conducted through thick glass and an often faulty telephone. In group discussions and individual interviews throughout the West Bank in 2011, wives and mothers of prisoners framed themselves as prisoners as they encountered what we term triple captivities: the Israeli colonial system, the Israeli prison, and the post-Oslo Palestinian polity and its isolating effects on their own communities. All three sites have experienced dramatic shifts over the last decade with accompanying implications for prisoners, mostly male, and their relatives, mostly female. In this article, we argue that the narratives of wives and mothers of political prisoners provide telling insights not only into their own experiences, but also into the Israeli colonial present and its uneasy shadow in the Palestinian political field. Women clearly see the continuum between prison and Palestinian life outside. After one woman says softly, “Our life is prison, prison, prison,” another ends with this chilling conclusion: “Outside is no better than inside.”

How can we understand these two statements? Throughout the last dangerous decade in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, descriptions of life as prison and Palestinian space as a “big prison” (most commonly used for the Gaza Strip, but also for the West Bank) gained common currency. But women relatives of political prisoners encounter the Israeli prison system not as a metaphor, but as a painful reality. It is also mostly women who move between their communities in the West Bank and prison sites in Israel through numerous checkpoints and barriers. These women strive to assist their relatives in prison and families in home while almost universally expressing a reduction in the “value” of political prisoners in Palestinian politics and government and a sense of isolation and lack of solidarity in their own communities. The bitter continuum between outside and inside prison takes on deeper and multiple meanings.

PERVASIVE PRISON, INVISIBLE WOMEN

Maya Rosenfeld (2011) observes that the high proportion of incarceration in Israeli jails experienced by Palestinian families under occupation¹—amounting to about 800,000 persons since 1967—points to “the

persistence of an Israeli policy of mass imprisonment” as an “overriding structural factor” in Israel’s occupation. In the first nine years of the Second Intifada, from October 2000 to November 2009, Israel imprisoned about 69,000 Palestinians, of which 7,800 were children under the age of eighteen and 850 were women (Rosenfeld 2011, 4). Prior to the two-stage release of 1,027 political prisoners in exchange for Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, about 6,000 political prisoners were incarcerated in Israeli jails;² in late December 2011 about 4,250 prisoners were being held.

While both researchers and human rights advocates have addressed a range of topics on the violation of rights of Palestinian prisoners,³ the experiences of their family members, especially of women and children, are relatively unexplored, including the violations of their rights, their economic and social suffering, and their survival and solidarity strategies. Described as secondary (and largely invisible) victims (Buch 2010), the new roles and added burdens of wives and, to a lesser extent, mothers, is still not well recognized, even though the mothers of martyrs and prisoners have been symbolically portrayed as national icons by the Palestinian national movement (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2005). Indeed, the roles women and the family play in the Palestinian colonial struggle have been insufficiently studied during the past decade of the Second Intifada, from 2000 to the present, perhaps because patriarchal (and militarized) models of the national struggle seem to have dominated this period (Johnson and Kuttub 2001). It has also been noted that scholarship in the Arab region focuses on either war or families, without due regard to the ways in which gender roles and family dynamics are restructured in war (Johnson and Joseph 2009).

In an April 2012 panel on “Carceral Politics in Palestine: Gender, Vulnerability, Prison” at Columbia University, both Judith Butler and Lena Meari (2012) offered incisive insights into the experience of Palestinian political prisoners and the relation between imprisonment and occupation, with Butler asking a series of questions important for our analysis: “Is imprisonment an intensification of occupation? Does it reiterate strategies and techniques of occupation in another modality? Does incarceration give us the logic of occupation?” Meari’s (2011, 14) ethnography of the Palestinian political prisoners’ practice of *sumud* (steadfastness) in their encounters with Israeli interrogators and of the interrogation encounter as an “epistemic space that absorbs and radiates

political ideologies/discourses and relations” opened up ways of investigating the encounter that is our focus: the prison visit. But it is telling that both presenters explored gender almost solely through the lens of women political prisoners: Wives and mothers were not mentioned. In their Columbia presentations, both scholars highlighted the centrality of the policy of mass imprisonment as a key “colonial technique,” in Meari’s words, that “affected the intimate lives” of Palestinians, but there was no further exploration of these affects in the intimate realm of the family. Our investigation, we hope, is a modest contribution to understanding gender and prison in our context and elsewhere in a wider framework.

Butler offers an observation on the modes of Israeli power, whether operating on political prisoners or the Palestinian population that is crucial for our analysis. The aim of that power, she argues, is not to produce “Foucauldian disciplinary subjects” but rather to “deconstitute (or destitute) the Palestinian subject,” and thus break down Palestinian resistance. The notion of the deconstitution or destitution of the subject, in our view, provides a productive avenue to consider the modes of power operating in the sites we are considering, including the post-Oslo Palestinian polity. The latter site tends to be excluded by analysts who, considering the contemporary colonial context in Palestine, reverse Michel Foucault’s key notion of biopower, or the management of life, by proposing “the management of death and destruction” (Ghanim 2008, 67). Considering the operation of biopower in the “late model of colonial occupation,” Achille Mbembe (2003, 27) proposes “necropower,” arguing that “the most accomplished form of necropower is the continued colonial occupation of Palestine.”

This is a powerful statement and particularly compelling when considering such events as the assault on Gaza in 2008 and 2009, the policy of targeted assassinations, or the slow death of Arab East Jerusalem (Shalhoub-Kervokian 2011)—or indeed the reversal of necropower when Palestinian political prisoners go on extended hunger strike to the point of death. But necropolitics alone does not explain the critical and complicated shift in the deployment and forms of Israeli colonial power in the post-Oslo era and its Palestinian counterpart. In brief—and the subject deserves more analysis that we can offer here—Israel has outsourced a limited version of biopower, in its aspect of managing

the population and producing governable subjects, to the Palestinian Authority. The Oslo agreements—principally the 1993 Declaration of Principles and the 1995 Interim Agreements—transferred powers and responsibilities for the welfare of the Palestinian civilian population to the Palestinian Authority and, significantly, mandated the creation of a “strong police force,” which we discuss below utilizing Jacques Ranciere’s wider notion of the police versus politics. Politics—or the Palestinian emancipatory project—is blocked both by Israeli power’s processes of deconstitution of the subject and, to some extent, by the Palestinian Authority’s production and policing of new subjects. That there are important tensions in this process is revealed both by the narratives of wives and prisoners and by unfolding events, such as the sustained hunger strikes of Palestinian prisoners in 2011 and 2012. But it was evident that Israel’s “colonial governmentality,” to use David Scott’s (1999, 25) term, no longer aimed to produce “new forms of life” in its colonial subjects, relegating this to the Palestinian Authority: Instead its post-Oslo colonial calculation finds no productive use for Palestinian life and instead operates by destitution, exclusion, separation, and security and insecurity. As Neve Gordon (2008) observes: “Thus, in the first two decades [of the occupation] Israel attempted to manage the population by sustaining some form of security, while currently it controls the occupied inhabitants by producing endemic insecurity.”²⁴ Placing the wives and families of Palestinian political prisoners back into the Palestinian history and current dynamics of political struggle and incarceration both allows a gendered understanding of these dynamics and illuminates the troubled Palestinian present. Wives and mothers of prisoners mediate between prison and family life by navigating through the multiple dynamics of Israeli securitization and geographic incarceration, political invisibility in the Palestinian field, and social isolation in their communities. The lack of analysis, or even descriptive information, on their complicated trajectory motivated the current research.

METHODOLOGY

Our article, focusing on the narratives of prisoners’ wives and mothers, is one outcome of a multi-faceted research project on the families of political prisoners at Birzeit University’s Institute of Community and

Public Health, in cooperation with the university's Institute of Women's Studies. After piloting our questions and developing a semi-structured interview guide we conducted ten exploratory focus group discussions in the period January-May 2011, in the north, center, and south of the West Bank, as well as in East Jerusalem and in urban, rural, and Palestinian refugee camp settings. All focus group discussions were organized with the active cooperation of a member of the community, frequently an ex-prisoner. The research team (the authors and four research assistants) discussed the themes that emerged from these discussions which shaped our questions for the next phase, from May to June 2011, of thirty semi-structured interviews with the wives of political prisoners distributed in the same way as the focus group discussions (three urban, three rural, three in a camp in each of the north, center, south of the West Bank, and three in urban, rural, and refugee camp locales in East Jerusalem).⁵ Most of the wives interviewed had husbands serving long sentences, with a majority arrested during the first four years of the Second Intifada. We also interviewed institutions providing support to prisoners and their families and selected informants, such as the director of the Independent Commission for Human Rights, the Palestinian Minister of Prisoner Affairs and ex-Prisoners.

"I AM A PRISONER ALSO": PRISONER FAMILIES AND THE POST-OSLO SPATIAL LANDSCAPE

Commencing in the post-Oslo period and escalating since 2000 and the eruption of the Second Intifada, the Israeli colonial system has increasingly embraced separation as its Palestinian strategy (see Gordon 2008) and cast Palestinian mobility as a privilege that can be awarded through "good behavior" (often read as submission or humiliation) or taken away: Palestinian mobility itself becomes a "suspect practice" (Shamir 2005, 211), which is always subject to revocation. The movement of a wife or mother of a prisoner through the post-Oslo spatial landscape in order to visit prison thus mirrors the prisoner's situation inside prison: privilege, rather than right, also operates, as it has in the past, for "security prisoners"⁶ as a means through which discipline is instilled and wills broken (Nashif 2008).

In contravention of international law,⁷ Israel transferred almost all

Palestinian political prisoners from prisons in the occupied West Bank and Gaza to Israeli prisons during the Oslo period and particularly during the second Palestinian intifada. Today all Palestinian “security prisoners,” as they are classified by the Israel Prison Service (Harel 2011, 37), are held in twenty-two prisons within Israel, with the exception of the Ofer Detention Center near Ramallah where visits are largely forbidden. Israeli attorney Michael Sfard (2011, 188) offers the vivid analogy of a forced mass transfer to “a penal colony somewhere across mountains and oceans, mountains of movement prohibitions and prevention and an ocean of walls, checkpoints and a bureaucracy of segregation.”

The consequences for women and families as Israel responded with draconian measures to the Second Intifada have been dire. By the end of October 2000, all family visits were barred. Limited visits were renewed only in March 2003, following “repeated requests of the [International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)] and the intervention of human rights organizations” (B’tselem 2006, 3). Even so, visits were allowed from only three of the sixteen districts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip). By 2005, visits from other districts were permitted but, even then, only a quarter of eligible first-degree relatives applying for permits were granted them in 2005 (Btselem 2006, 14 – 6). Umm Taysir, a mother of three prisoners from Amari refugee camp interviewed in 2005, was consistently denied visit permits for security reasons. Her response is grammatically incorrect but effective in conveying how she feels that she has been reduced from a person to a “security” issue: “They said I am refused ‘security.’ What are they saying that I am refused ‘security?’ What ‘security’ did I do?” (Johnson 2009, 34)

The narrow criteria for eligibility slightly expanded in the next five years with a number of Kafkaesque twists on degrees of kinship. Prior to July 2005, no one between the ages of sixteen and forty-six, except wives, could visit. At present, sisters and daughters in this age category may obtain permits, and sons (with no record of detention) may visit an imprisoned father twice a year and an incarcerated brother once a year (Ben-Ari and Barsella 2011, 204). Our respondents, who are generally not informed of these twists, are nonetheless correct in calling them arbitrary. As a result, many family members have not seen their imprisoned relatives for years at a time. For Gaza Strip residents there was only small window for prison visits before it was slammed shut by

the closure and siege commencing in 2006. It is no wonder the renewal of visits from the Gaza Strip was a central demand of the mass hunger strike of about 2,000 Palestinian prisoners in the spring of 2012. In the agreement that ended the strike, the Prison Service agreed to these visits, a major accomplishment of the hunger strike. However, in the first visit, almost two months after the agreement was concluded, the Prison Service allowed only forty relatives of twenty-four Gazan prisoners (out of 554) to visit—and barred all children (*Guardian* 2012).

Denials for security reasons, never explained, ran like a dark thread through almost all our accounts. A woman living in a village in the southern West Bank reported that a major psychological problem is “prohibiting mothers and fathers from visiting due to security reasons.” A mother from a North West Bank refugee camp with a son and a daughter in prison reported, “I cannot visit either of them. They took my permit. I have to get friends or other relatives to bring them things. I went to al-Dameer (an institution caring for prisoners) and they promised to help but still no permit.”

It is the transformation of Palestinian persons into “security,” in Umm Taysir’s words, that is the underlying logic of Israel’s policies on family visits. In her extensive work with prisoners wives and families in the southern West Bank, anthropologist Lotte Buch (2010, 11) observes how Israeli “securitization procedures never permit the absence of the women’s husbands to fade into the background” and that the practices women have to engage in to stay in touch with their husbands make them “captives of the immediate present,” perhaps an overriding feature of our three forms of captivity. This is most often expressed as double imprisonment, as wives say “I am a prisoner also” (see Shalhoub-Kervokian 2005, 330). One rural woman from the north of the West Bank summed it up: “You are going to visit a prisoner while you are imprisoned.”

Buch’s insight helps us understand how “the visit” pervades the daily lives of wives of political prisoners. While, Israel’s securitization procedures in relation to Palestinian political detainees are multi-faceted and affect almost all conditions of prison life—as well as arrest, interrogation, and trial—it is in the more ordinary routine of prison visits that we can see how Israel’s re-definition of Palestinian life, including social and family relations, as a security issue shapes everyday life and vitiates the most elemental rights of prisoners and their families to stay in contact.

The sharp differences in regulations for security prisoners and for ordinary prisoners in the Israeli system make this clear. Communication is a good example: While ordinary prisoners can receive an unrestricted amount of mail, security prisoners may send only two letters and four postcards per month. And the use of the telephone is denied to security prisoners, except in the case of death or terminal illness of an immediate member of the family and subject to the approval of the prison head.⁸

LIVING FROM VISIT TO VISIT

When we began our investigation we were not surprised to find out that the financial crisis worsened the consequences of imprisonment for families, especially when the prisoner was the main breadwinner. International literature reports the impact of financial loss on families of prisoners, whether through loss of income, legal fees, and costs of maintaining contact (Cunningham 2001, Hairston 2001). More particular to the contemporary Palestinian scene, however, was the centrality of the visit not simply as a specific problem of the financial and emotional costs of the visit day itself as in the literature (McEvoy, et al. 1999), but as an ordeal that structured and haunted daily life, whether in the seeking permits, the fear of obstacles and checkpoints on the way, the humiliating search at the prison, or simply the day of the visit, dreaded in its length and miseries and poignant in the brevity and inadequacy of the visit itself. One prisoner's mother from a northern West Bank town succinctly summed up how the ordeal of a prison visit distorts daily life: "The visit makes me psychologically *ta'baneh* (exhausted), I keep thinking from visit to visit."

The one word that was repeated over and over again in relation to the visit is "ta'baneh" a word literally meaning "tired" but deployed for all the illnesses, aches, pains, and distress of daily life. Its repetitive use by prisoner's wives indicates a process of destitution at work, and in dealing with the daily difficulties they encounter. A prisoner's wife from East Jerusalem stated: "We are all ta'baneh (from visitation), and it takes three days to recover. I cannot sleep the night before." A woman from a northern West Bank refugee camp expresses a classic double bind—the visit makes both the family and the prisoner tired, but it is even worse when there is no visit:

Our psychological state becomes *ta'baneh* when we visit, even the *asir* [prisoner, used for political prisoner] becomes *ta'ban*. Once we were not able to visit and I went crazy. He was terrified; he thought I died or something happened because he knows that whatever happens I come to visit him. He was not able to sleep for two weeks until we visited him.

GETTING THERE:
"IT'S LIKE GOING TO PUERTO RICO, NOT THE NAQAB"

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) functions as an intermediary between families and the Israeli authorities in order to obtain visitation permits to families and organize the buses that take families to and from prison. Given the difficulty of obtaining permits for male teenagers and adults, women with no security suspicions and children are left for this arduous task. Children may be sent without their mother if she is refused a permit. A northern West Bank woman explains why she sent her children to visit:

I am refused [visitation permits] for security reasons. Once a woman from Tulkarm came to me and told me that my husband [in prison] misses the children a lot and that he beats his head on the metal [in agony], and that he wants this woman from Tulkarem to take the children for a visit with her.

The journey begins at dawn and women and children rarely return home before late at night. A man from a southern West Bank refugee camp explains: "Families leave for the visit at dawn and come back home at the end of night. There are no toilets or umbrellas to protect them from the sun or rain." The journey has a geography that has little to do with physical distance, as a father in a central West Bank refugee camp commented bitterly: "It's like going to Puerto Rico, not the Naqab." Other relatives of prisoners chimed in to count the "six gates" (Israeli army checkpoints) to the Naqab (Negev Desert), and a mother added sadly: "Sometimes you don't get past Qalandia [a checkpoint and terminal]." Lotte Buch accompanied families from the southern West Bank on the bus journey and offers this vivid description:

The passengers have been on their feet since four in the morning... Despite the permits it takes two and a half hours before the passengers are all in place on the bus on the Israeli side of *Qalandia* Terminal. In situ are also the Israeli discretely armed police officers who will be escorting the bus through Israel to *Bersheva* Prison in Ashkelon... A main task of the police officers is to make sure that no one gets off the bus during the trip. Whether the trip takes two or five hours the bus is not allowed to stop. (Buch 2011, 113)

Visitation denial even after going through the ordeal of obtaining a permit was corroborated by several of our interviewees, as a woman from a south West Bank refugee camp described: "They returned at the checkpoint, it was very difficult, me and my children's psychological state is destroyed."

Indeed, relatives can arrive at the prison gates only to find that their relative has been transferred to another prison without notification. A woman from a northern West Bank refugee camp says there her son was moved three times in one month—from Megiddo in the north to Bir al-Sabe' (Be'er Sheva) and then to Nafha Prison in the Naqab Desert. A former prisoner, a student at Birzeit University at the time but now once again in prison, explained to us that the Israeli authorities keep transferring detainees from prison to prison as punishment for the prisoner and their families, even deliberately scheduling a court hearing on the day of the family visit, a practice confirmed in another interview with an ex-prisoner. Transfers are also used to disrupt prisoners' organization and thus target prison leaders.

When there are emergencies, such as a health crisis of a prisoner, families find themselves lost in a maze as they seek to see their loved one. A woman from Hebron was told by a hospital visitor that her imprisoned husband was in a hospital but then faced an ordeal trying to see him:

My husband became sick when he was in prison; he had water around the heart. He could no longer withstand the pain, so all the prisoners demanded that he goes to hospital. They took him to a hospital in Lyd (Lod). We tried to visit him. We contacted the Red Cross and the prisoners' club but they could not help us. It was Physicians for Human Rights (an Israeli human rights organization) who got us permits and

remained with us when we went to visit my husband. But when we got there and wanted to see Ayman, the soldier told us, “*Khalas* (finished, or enough),” because there is no coordination with the prison administration. But Ayman saw us and raised his hand to me.

TORTURE DAY: THE BURDEN OF HUMILIATION

“Only the last item remained,” said a middle-aged woman in a North West Bank refugee camp with an embarrassed giggle, as she recounted how she had to take off her *jilbab* (long coat) and then “everything” before being allowed to proceed and visit her son in Israeli prison. She puts her hand to her face in a nervous gesture. What one man in a central West Bank refugee camp calls “sensitive searches” of Palestinian women is humiliating enough for his own wife to refuse to attend a court hearing for their imprisoned son. Indeed, the “strip search” was mentioned in almost all of our discussions, but the burden of humiliation extends to pettier forms of insult, denial, and the simple agony of a long bus journey where no stops are allowed and no toilet is on board. Several of our discussants have posited that a highly unequal exchange takes place: To be allowed to see the prisoner, the visitor must accept humiliation. As one ex-prisoner from a village in the north of the West Bank district explained: “Any mistake and they force the families to go back home. They humiliate the families and the families bear the humiliation and they lose their dignity in order to visit their son.” A woman from East Jerusalem sums up a shared feeling: “It’s not visit day; it’s torture day.” The equation between visiting and torture allows us to see parallels between women’s encounter with Israeli colonial power at prison and the checkpoint and the prisoner’s encounter in the interrogation room. Women’s “choice” to endure humiliation to visit their relatives then can be seen a gendered version of the *sumud* that sustains prisoners under torture, albeit a version heavily inflected with post-Oslo conditions and the lack of a collective context.

Intentional humiliation, a profound violation of dignity and basic human rights, is a central tactic of war and is often deployed as an instrument of political and other forms of control (Lindner 2001). In the Palestinian context, humiliation—in contrast to the shame and social stigma attached to non-political or criminal prisoners (Al Gharaibeh

2008, Hairston 2001)—is understood not only as a personal feeling, but also as a social process linked to the loss of dignity, honor, and justice (Giacaman et al. 2007a). Dignity is strongly linked to identity and self-worth (Giacaman et al. 2007b), especially among men, perhaps another reason why male relatives are reluctant to make prison visits. Palestinian women have frequently taken on the role of intercessors with hostile or indifferent authorities in order to advance child and family welfare, from standing in line for rations in the hard years after 1948, to waiting to enter Israeli military courts to attend trials of imprisoned children, to collecting food coupons from international agencies and non-governmental agencies in the Gaza Strip today (see Muhanna and Qleibo 2009). But the restrictions and repressive measures that dominate today's prison visits, since 2000, sorely test the resilience of Palestinian wives and mothers.

In group therapy sessions with wives and mothers of prisoners in the Jerusalem area conducted by Nadera Shalhoub-Kervokian in 2005, women told each other stories of humiliation: one forced to stand naked, another to show her menstrual pad. Kervokian observed: "Such stories spawned a group discussion about whether to accept such degradations or refuse to visit." But one woman raised her voice and declared: "I personally would be willing to stand in front of all the Jews in the world naked... in order to see my son" (331). Women set their own limits, however. In a discussion among women, mainly villagers, in the Ramallah area, one woman said: "At Qalandia that made me take off my *mandil* (scarf) and then they wanted me to take off the jilbab. I refused and went home."

The body search—sometimes a strip search—is clearly seen as the focal point of humiliations to be endured, although not the only one. Men are of course also subject to this search: An older man in the northern West Bank village noted, "Men take their pants off, and for women, they search their bras." However, both men and women tend to focus on the difficulties faced by women in the search. These can be compounded by age and illness. A Jerusalem mother attempting to visit her daughter in prison went through an extreme search because she was shaking caused by a diabetic condition, but she was unable to get the guard to understand her problem. A north West Bank urban mother of a prisoner was visiting along with her daughter when "they searched me in a strip search (*taftish 'ari*, a naked search) and they took my daughter, she is a

girl (*sabiya*) and strip searched her and then they detained her.” Complaints to the ICRC and the Prisoners Club about these strip searches did not seem to yield results. For the ICRC, it probably does not fall in their limited mandate; for the Prisoners Club it is not within their power.

THE VISIT: “YOU CAN’T EXPRESS YOURSELF”

Um Muhammad is from a Ramallah-area refugee camp; her son Muhammad has served fifteen years of a life sentence. Um Muhammad tried to visit him as often as possible. But, she says sadly, she can rarely hear his voice. Um Muhammad’s hearing is very poor—she is almost deaf—and she cannot understand his words on the often defective prison telephone that is her only way to communicate with Muhammed. “My son can hear my voice, but I don’t hear his.” She notes that an operation that could improve her hearing is too expensive. Her son has urged her to have the operation, but she says, “I am only living for you.”

While other women visiting prisoners do not share Um Muhammad’s physical disability, her inability to hear her son is a poignant symbol of the widespread inability to communicate freely and fully with loved ones. Prisoners and their families are separated by a glass partition and must speak only on a telephone with a prison guard in constant supervision. A recent Israeli High Court case⁹ won against the Israeli Prison Service is very revealing in its small but of course significant gain: Israel should allow security prisoners’ children under six years old to have physical contact with their prisoners during the last ten minutes of the visit but no more than once every two months. That this grudging permission for limited and infrequent contact between prisoners and young children required waging a battle in the High Court says much about the Israeli prison system vis-à-vis Palestinians.

Most cite the ordeal of a tiring and humiliating day’s journey, all for a mere forty-five minutes of talking with the prisoner. One rural woman from the south of the West Bank maintained: “After that (all the humiliation and suffering), forty-five minutes. The minute you see your son you forget... but you talk with him through a phone, and after forty-five minutes the phone disconnects. A central West Bank refugee camp woman lists the strip search, the glass separating the prisoner from the family, and the phone and concludes: “Like sheep they treat us.” For children, the

glass separating them from their father becomes another “checkpoint” in the words of a woman from a Jerusalem-area village: “[The visit] is difficult... the children behind the glass. The checkpoint is the glass.”

For mothers with more than one son in prison, visiting one son can mean denying another. Samira lives in a congested and un-serviced Arab suburb of East Jerusalem. She has two sons currently in prison, one in Nafha Prison in the Naqab Desert and one not yet sentenced. A frail woman with diabetes and hypertension, she cries intermittently during our visit but manages a wry comment that, with a third son also in and out of prison, she has “reserved a chair” in prison. But when it comes to her dilemma of which son to visit, she can only wipe away another tear: “I do not know what to do when the day of visitation happens to be the same day or the two boys. In my heart, I chose to visit the younger one, but I cannot say that.”

How to express affection in the presence of Israeli guards can be a painful and contested subject. A prisoner’s father describes reprimanding his wife: “The mother of the prisoner, when she visits him she starts to kiss him from behind the glass, and I tell her not to do this because the soldiers are behind us and I do not want them to see our weakness.”

PRISONERS AND THE POLITICS OF INVISIBILITY: FROM POLITICS TO POLICING

Prisoners’ wives and mothers in the Palestinian colonial present—characterized by political and social ruptures and fragmentation—remain proud of their husbands and sons but often cite that they acutely feel an absence of solidarity that is contrasted with the past, a solidarity that peaked during the First Intifada of 1987-1991. In all our focus group discussions, participants agreed that the “value” of political prisoners has diminished from the 1980s, and most felt an accompanying weakening of social support. For example, communal solidarity—described as neighbors leaving food, political organizations’ moral and material support, communities displaying pride in prisoners families—has been replaced by a “salary” given to prisoners through their families by the Palestinian Ministry of Prisoners, a healthy proportion of which, our discussants explained, is spent on the over-priced items for prisoners in the Israeli prison canteen. While this salary is acknowledged, wives

and mothers express a strong feeling of isolation that is not alleviated by government support. As a widow and mother of a long-term prisoner from Jenin refugee camp told us: “No one helps. No one. No institution. No shekel, nothing. In the world, no one asks about us.”

The radical shift in political, social, and economic conditions since the signing of the Oslo Accords is inscribed in the daily lives of the women we interviewed. The power and control Israel exerted on every aspect of life during the pre-Oslo period continued in a mediated form by the patronage structure and authoritarian and undemocratic Palestinian Authority (Roy 2001). In addition, during the post Oslo period, a dominance of the imperative of Israeli security prevailed, at the expense of the rule of law and human rights (Johnson and Kuttub 2001). While Israel attempts to control all Palestinians with invariably ambiguous and uncertain rules, the loss of the national project—politics out—and the mediation of securitization and policing by the Palestinian Authority has meant that the value of political incarceration held by communities and society in general has also diminished. In this light, the physical removal of prisoners from the Occupied Palestinian Territory has been paralleled by a movement of prisoners and their families to the margins of the Oslo “state-building” project where prisoners are re-configured as bureaucratic subjects or victims,¹⁰ rather than as political actors and bearers of the national cause (see Johnson 2012).

The de-centering of political prisoners from public life in the occupied West Bank and the isolation felt by their relatives represent an erosion of social solidarity but, also, we argue, a vanishing of the political in the sense used by Jacques Ranciere (1992, 59), where the political is “the process of emancipation, the name of politics.” Ranciere (2010, 36) opposes his emancipatory concept of politics with “the police,” where the policing is to maintain the status quo (the “what is”) through statist practices. Thus, while the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah provides lawyers and a salary to political prisoners, this functional approach (of the police in Ranciere’s term) is widely described by our interviewees as “nothing,” a nothing that, we argue, seems to refer not only to inadequate financial support but to the erasure, or erosion, of the collective project of liberation whose emblem was the liberation of political prisoners. A forty-five-year-old wife in a northern refugee camp succinctly expressed this transformation: “The prisoner became like any ordinary person.”

Despite the ongoing erasure of political prisoners as potent symbols of the national cause, their cause, at least momentarily, burst back on to the national scene in late 2011 and throughout 2012, most vividly, in the individual prisoner's hunger strikes—almost to the point of death—of Khader Adnan and Hanan Shalabi against their administrative detentions (imprisonment without trial or charge) and the subsequent mass hunger strike in the spring of 2012. Earlier, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's speech at the United Nations brought political prisoners, at least temporarily out of the political shadows,¹¹ as did the dramatic prisoner exchange negotiated indirectly between the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip and Israel, where Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit was exchanged for the agreed release of 1,027 Palestinian prisoners (of which 447 were released in October 2011), accompanied by an outpouring of public emotion and rallies. Nine months before, in our discussion in the Jenin refugee camp, the question of a prisoner exchange temporarily lightened the depressive mood. We think of it, one mother said, "hour by hour. And our prisoners follow the news hour by hour."

While moments of "the political," in our emancipatory sense, emerge in the actions of the prisoners themselves as they re-constituted themselves as political subjects, both the public activities in their support and the agreements struck for the prisoner exchange and to end the 2012 hunger strike, display a tension between the realm of politics and of the police. The prisoner exchange was a mere political calculation by governments—whether the Israeli government, the Palestinian Authority, or Hamas—to stay in power. Significantly, it left almost 5,000 political prisoners still incarcerated (and additional detentions continuing apace), and the mode of release—with many West Bank prisoners exiled to the Gaza Strip or abroad—brought another set of difficulties to spouses and family members. Even with the 2012 mass hunger strike, public solidarity was largely confined to urban centers, rather than involving confrontations with Israel, which the Palestinian Authority and its police force actively discourages. Indeed, ex-prisoners and relatives in the protest tent set up in Ramallah complained of public indifference to their cause. And both the Palestinian Authority and Israel rushed to conclude an agreement in the hours before Nakba Day when larger and more militant demonstrations might have erupted. At this writing, Israel has only implemented some of its clauses—and the fact that continued

implementation depends, in the Israeli interpretation, on “a complete cessation of political activity” (Adalah, Al Mezan Gaza, and Physicians for Human Rights-Israel 2012) by prisoners once again turns rights like family visits into revocable privileges.

SOCIAL ISOLATION AND COMMUNITY SURVEILLANCE

In the same political and social space, women relatives also experience concentric rings of isolation and exclusion—from the polity; from their communities, isolated physically by checkpoints; and socially by fragmentation and a decline in solidarity, and in their homes where, without a husband, women and their daughters are frequently captive, subject to community scrutiny and the power of rumor.

The imprisonment of the husband can increase the autonomy of the wife—at a high cost. But where she becomes responsible both for his needs in prison and sustaining the family at home, the absence of the husband from home can also reconfigure women’s social identity and change gender and family relations whereby women’s autonomy is further curtailed. In the absence of husbands, wives are usually placed under the authority of their in-laws. Their movements are controlled by their mothers, fathers, or brothers-in-law, as has been observed elsewhere, particularly among Iraqi young women in the period since the second Gulf War and the U.S. occupation (Al-Ali 2005). While the Palestinian situation differs, several of our informants reported the problem of increasing restrictions placed on their movements, dress, and freedoms by family and community.

We met Hanan in her modest home of two rooms and a kitchen and a toilet. Seating was on mattresses, and there was no furniture except plastic chairs. It was clear that she suffered financially and was anxious and trying to control herself. Her two sisters in laws were present and attempted to show support for Hanan, although their conversation gave a contradictory message. Her husband, a taxi driver and manual worker, was thirty-two years old when he was arrested and has been in prison for eight years. Hanan has three boys and two girls.

When her husband was arrested Hanan thought that life had stopped. It became difficult to stay in a rented house, so she fixed the storage rooms in her in-laws’ house. She told us that her in-laws own

apartments, which they gave to their children but not to her and that they do not help her. Although she at first had a nervous breakdown when her husband was arrested, she accepts the situation now. However, she had to change her behavior in public: "I do not wear makeup or nice clothes on social occasions because people will criticize me." The most difficult social occasion was the occasion of her brother's wedding, when she refused to dance, knowing that she would be the subject of gossip as the wife of an asir should not exhibit any form of happiness or care about her looks, nor go out and live a normal life.

Halimeh is another asir's wife suffering from social restrictions, gossip, and cruel behavior by her in-laws and community. At twenty-six years old, Halimeh lived in a central West Bank refugee camp but now lives with her parents in a nearby village. She was married for only one year and nine months when her husband when he was arrested and sentenced to five life sentences. The Israeli army destroyed her home. She was left pregnant with one little boy. The children are now nine and ten years old. She explained that she lived with her in laws for a year but could not tolerate the situation, so she moved to her parents' house:

When I lived with my in laws I felt like a maid. I would wake up early and work and continue to work. And the children stayed outside so I could not control them. I was not allowed to close the door of the house because this is how the camp is.

Halimeh continued to talk about the social restrictions imposed on her now because her husband is in prison: "They look at me like a divorced woman, who should not go out. What is this, go to the gym? [This is because] I am still young, and people have no mercy." Indeed the threat of gossip and the mercilessness of family and community is a repeated theme in our interviews, particularly with younger wives.

SOURCES OF STRENGTH: CHOOSING SURVIVAL

The unrelenting difficulties that prisoners' wives and mothers face in these three sites of captivity are not easily surmountable; rather, women negotiate them with varying degrees of success. But we also found sources of strength in women facing implacable odds that were hard to characterize simply as negotiation or adaptation. Let us consider the

narrative of one prisoner's wife. Ahlam describes a trajectory of arrest and imprisonment and its consequences on her and her children that are shared in many features by other prisoner's wives. But her story also allows us to question models of adaptation and acquiescence, whether to the colonial or prison system or to patriarchal practices, even when actual choices seem limited or nonexistent.

Ahlam ushers our researchers into her spotless salon. Although in a conservative rural setting in the northern West Bank and with a husband arrested as an Islamic militant, Ahlam shows no concern over the uncovered heads and fashionable youthful dress of her visitors from Birzeit University. Her mother-in-law enters the room, looking tired and miserable, but says little, only speaking to agree with Ahlam, who is strong and forceful throughout the interview. It is this strength that we wish to consider as we hear Ahlam's story, which on the surface offers only a repertory of oppressive events—a fugitive husband now serving three life sentences in an Israeli desert prison, an early marriage to the same husband (who is a cousin), who then wanted to marry a second wife, and her struggle to bring up two sons with an absent father, which has produced behavioral problems in both.

Ahlam is now thirty-two years old. She left school after eighth grade and had her first child at nineteen: When her husband was arrested in 2003, she already had two small children. That year, the Israeli army was pursuing a relentless campaign of targeted assassinations and arrests of wanted militants, with the Jenin area a particular focus. Raids and assassinations also brought civilian casualties, including the use of civilians as human shields. Ahlam's husband, previously a laborer in Israel, was among these militants and was a fugitive at the time of his arrest. She says: "He was a wanted fugitive in Jenin, and he called me and hinted he was coming. After a while, we heard gunfire at the checkpoint near the village. We went out and they had made a trap for us. Three days later, we heard he was arrested." Her account of detention is fairly typical, although it is in fact less harrowing than some others in our study, where soldiers threatened or beat family members, destroyed possessions, and in one case demolished the family house.

Ahlam's husband was sentenced to three life sentences and is currently in Nafha Prison in the Naqab Desert inside Israel. He was not released in the prisoner exchange. Although she now receives a permit to

make the arduous journey to Nafha “two or three times a year,” Ahlam was refused such permits on grounds of security for several years. Her daily concerns center around the children; the elder is clever but has trouble concentrating; the younger still wets the bed. As she talks, the “absent” father is clearly present in the children’s lives: The youngest sulks for two weeks after the father forgets his birthday; both use “strong language” whenever they see or hear Israelis.

Like other prisoners’ wives in this project, she says that “no institution helps us,” although, also typically, she notes that she receives the “allowance” from the Ministry of Prisoners of 2,400 Israeli shekels (about US\$640) per month. Like other wives, she does not feel the allowance relieves her isolation and need for community support. But she also has a more personal dilemma. Sometime before his arrest, she says, her husband informed her that:

He wanted to marry again and I agreed.... He was a fugitive, and he told me that he has a woman in Jenin and I have the children. So I didn’t object. If I agreed or didn’t agree, he would marry, and it was better for me to stay friends with him.

How can we read Ahlam’s sober assessment of her situation? It does not seem to have affected her support for her husband while he is in prison, and there is little resentment in her account. Interestingly—and in front of his mother—she expressed a worry about what would happen if he was released: “If he is released I am afraid that people will talk and say that she sacrificed and now he goes and gets married.”

Ahlam is not alone in expressing concern over the release of a husband, including a wife who found some economic independence in a home-based beauty salon and another who feared further maltreatment, although most wives (and all mothers interviewed) longed for an end to imprisonment. Yet Ahlam’s reasoned decision to “stay friends” with her husband differs from passive adaptation. Resistance is perhaps not the apt term for this kind of strength but neither is acquiescence, nor adaptation. Again, although more theoretical and empirical elaboration is clearly needed, we propose a gendered and post-Oslo version of *sumud*—a determination to persist and persevere.

While we heard stories of more conventional forms of resistance—from a ten-year-old daughter who resolutely took photos of soldiers

smashing household possessions during an arrest raid, to a mother flinging herself at a recalcitrant prison guard, to the smuggling of mobile phones—we also stress the psychological and physical toll that most women admit in terms of irritability, anxiety, and illness. Hanan, whose husband like Ahlam’s is serving multiple life sentences, finds even Ahlam’s stoic “choice” to persevere out of reach: “My days are all the same, and repeated.... Sometimes I humiliate (*babahdel*) myself and ask why I have to be different from others.”

RECOVERING THE POLITICAL?

Whether Ahlam’s “choice” or Hanan’s collapse, wives and mothers of prisoners navigate a triple captivity—from the Israeli colonial system of separation, inside the Israeli prison system of incarceration, and through the isolating and constricting effects of the post-Oslo Palestinian political and social landscape. They are thus subject to multiple forms of policing, in Ranciere’s broad use of the term. The political—the emancipatory project—is marked in their discussions mainly by its absence. Were Abbas’s words at the United Nations demanding the return to their homeland of all prisoners mere rhetoric? Abbas evokes a debt to prisoners for their sacrifice that has not been paid—a debt of which women relatives are acutely aware. Ahlam is worried about her growing responsibilities as the children grow older and is fierce in their defense: “I want my children to become the best people and not oppressed in their rights. My husband sacrificed for Palestine.”

The liberation of Palestine—that “which is not” in Ranciere’s language—is in many ways the absent present as women describe the travail of “what is,” the arduous bus journey with its series of checkpoints, the hardship of raising children without a father, the humiliation meted out by Israeli officials, or even the difficulties and tensions with their imprisoned husbands. A sacrifice for Palestine cannot be accommodated within the policing model—whether Israel’s colonial control or the best efforts of the Palestinian Ministry of Prisoners to meet prisoners’ financial needs. In this light, it is interesting to consider government policies towards the first group of released prisoners in October 2011. While relatively silent on the employment of ex-prisoners, both the de facto Hamas government in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah

waived marriage fees for released prisoners and in some cases, mostly in the Gaza Strip, paid for weddings and apartments. Both governments seem to offer (although perhaps not to fulfill) a dream of domestication in exchange for the prisoners' sacrifices. Marriage and a home are important to released prisoners, but the rapidity of this "solution" gives pause for thought. With several ex-prisoners already re-arrested and most without work, the consequences on the new brides and families of this exchange of sacrifice for domesticity may well be uneasy.

A mother from a north West Bank refugee camp concluded our January 2011 discussion by saying: "Our children did nothing wrong. What they did was not for them, but for the people. This gives us strength." Her moral claim places her prisoner son on one side of an exchange. He has acted "for the people." On the other side, the Palestinian government has responded so far with a salary, with declarations, and presently with a waiving of marriage fees. Perhaps it is both the people and the idea of an emancipatory Palestine who are the absent universal in this equation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We warmly thank the wives and mothers of Palestinian political prisoners who took the time to talk openly to us about their problems, their fears, and their hopes. Their words will stay with us. Our writing has relied on the excellent work of our research assistants at the Institute of Community and Public Health at Birzeit University: Samar Yasser, Kawthar Abu Khalil, Zeina Amro, and Hadeel Dalloul. We also thank Dr. Rema Hammami at the Institute of Women's Studies at Birzeit University for her incisive suggestions on an earlier draft. We dedicate our article to our colleague and friend Viet Nguyen-Gillham (1955-2011), who taught us how to listen.

NOTES

1. Since the military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip by the Israeli army in June 1967, it is broadly estimated that 650-800,000 Palestinians, mostly but not exclusively male, have been arrested and imprisoned by the Israeli military occupation authorities (Ferwana 2006, Nashif 2008).

2. On November 30, 2011, after the first prisoner release, the Israeli human right organizations B'tselem, using figures provided by the Israeli Prison Service and the Israeli army, reported that 4,803 Palestinian "security detainees and prisoners" were being held in Israeli jails. But these figures do not include Palestinians held by the police or by the Israeli army in short-term detention.

3. Such bodies at present include, for example, the Palestinian Ministry of Detainee affairs, established first as a program in 1995, then as a ministry in 1999 by the Palestinian Authority (<http://www.mod.gov.ps/>); Palestine behind Bars, which offers a range of monitoring statistics (<http://www.palestinebehindbars.org/>); Palestinian prisoners clubs, often associated with a political faction; Palestinian non-governmental organizations; the Israeli human rights organization B'tselem, which offers statistics and reports on human rights and other types of violations (<http://www.btselem.org/English/>); and Physicians for Human Rights Israel, which offers statistics and monitors human rights abuses with a focus on health (<http://www.phr.org.il/default.asp?PageID=22>).

4. The "outsourcing" of the occupation to the Palestinian Authority is found in a number of analyses, the earliest perhaps is Said (1996). See also Gordon (2008, 21).

5. Focus group discussions and interviews were conducted in colloquial Palestinian Arabic. Names and other leads to identity were not included in the transcripts, which are accessible only to researchers working on this project.

6. The withdrawal of "privilege" rather than the recognition of rights is evident in Israel's treatment of "security prisoners," termed prisoners of war (*asra* in Arabic) by Palestinians. Indeed, the classification of prisoners as security prisoners is an internal administrative decision of the Israeli Prison Service (Berda 2011, 46) from which there is no legal recourse.

7. The 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War forbids the occupying power to transfer occupied ("protected") persons outside the occupied territory and specifically affirms that "protected persons accused of offenses shall be detained in the occupied country and if convicted, they shall serve their sentences therein."

8. See www.nolegalfrontiers.org/en for more information.

9. Hakim Cana'ana et. al vs. the Israel Prison Service.

10. Avram Bornstein (2001, 562) witnessed this transformation at the beginning of the Oslo era. He worked with Palestinian mental health professionals in Gaza in 1995 and 1996 as they designed a rehabilitation program for prisoners and noted that the emphasis on "trauma and victimization... stripped [prisoners] of their status as the vanguard leadership of the Palestinian people and made them into dependents who deserve entitlements to benefits and rehabilitation."

11. Mahmoud Abbas told the General Assembly that peace required "the release of political prisoners and detainees in Israeli prisons without delays.... The time has come for the thousands of prisoners to return to their families and their children to become a part of building their homeland, for the freedom of which they have sacrificed" (*Ha'aretz* 2011).

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