

A Political Prisoner Testifies

By Myriam Sfeir



Following the 1948 Arab -Israeli war, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), was established by United Nations General Assembly resolution 302 (IV) of 8 December 1949 to carry out direct relief and works programmes for Palestine refugees. The Agency began operations on 1 May 1950. In the absence of a solution to the Palestine refugee problem, the General Assembly has repeatedly renewed UNRWA's mandate, most recently extending it until 30 June 2002. Since its establishment, the Agency has delivered its services in times of relative calm in the Middle East, and in times of hostilities. It has fed, housed and clothed tens of thousands of fleeing refugees and at the same time educated and given health care to hundreds of thousands of young refugees.

UNRWA is unique in terms of its long-standing commitment to one group of refugees and its contributions to the welfare and human development of four generations of Palestine refugees. Originally envisaged as a temporary organization, the Agency has gradually adjusted its programmes to meet the changing needs of the refugees. Today, UNRWA is the main provider of basic services - education, health, relief and social services - to over 3.6 million registered Palestine refugees in its five fields of operations: Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Some 1.1 million refugees live in 59 recognized camps, and UNRWA's services are located in or near these camps where there are large concentrations of refugees.

Unlike other United Nations organizations which work through local authorities or executing agencies, UNRWA provides its services directly to Palestine refugees. It plans and carries out its own activities and projects, and builds and administers facilities such as schools and clinics. The Agency currently operates or sponsors over 900 establishments with 22,000 staff throughout its area of operations. Because UNRWA services such as education and health care are the type of services normally provided within the public sector, the Agency cooperates closely with governmental authorities in the area of operations, who also provide some services to Palestine refugees. (<http://www.palestinehistory.com/refcamps.htm>)

I live, along with my family, in Camp Aida for Refugees in Bethlehem in the West Bank. It is a small camp built by UNRWA to accommodate the displaced refugees of 1948. I was brought up in a big family, I have eight brothers and three sisters. Our house was small given that we were extremely poor. My father was the main breadwinner in the family; however, all of us had to work hard when still young in order to earn our livelihood. Hence, from an early age we learned the importance of work. My family valued education tremendously and, despite the poverty surrounding us we all went to school. The displaced life we lead was a very difficult one because it meant being deprived of owning anything: a house, land, property, etc. Our life in the camp involved a lot of deprivation; we often felt uncertain about the future. Yet, all of this pushed us to try and struggle for change.

As early as the age of thirteen years, I became politically active. I was closely associated with a student society (body) that was part of the communist party. My tasks entailed distributing leaflets denouncing the

occupation and organizing demonstrations against the occupation, etc. During my first year at university I joined a military organization and took part in an armed operation that involved bombing an Israeli bus with settlers in it. I got caught, beaten by the settlers, tried and sentenced to three years imprisonment. By then I was 18 years old. I was held at an interrogation center and then sent to a central prison where I stayed the rest of my sentence. Even though my three year sentence was the longest and the only one that I served in a central prison, it was not my first imprisonment. In fact, I was captured and imprisoned in interrogation prisons three times, in 1979 at the age of 15 years, in 1982 at 18 years and in 1990 at the age of 26 years.

I was first jailed in January; the weather was very cold. We were forced to sit in an open space area in the middle of the winter, tied to a wooden chair in a very uncomfortable position. We were not allowed to sleep or eat for several days. During the first four days of my arrest I was not able to sleep. Whenever I dozed they would hit me to wake up. After four days, we were allowed to sleep for a limited number of hours. However, we still had to sit tied to a chair. Several days later I was moved to a tiny cell with a filthy bathroom; a mattress and a blanket were on the floor. The food offered to us was inedible and the portions were not balanced. I used to eat only to stay alive. All these techniques were meant to exhaust us physically and mentally and eventually force us to break down. But this did not work. Throughout my 22 days of imprisonment, I was occasionally dragged to an interrogating room and questioned. Yet, they were unable to obtain any confession, because I had nothing to tell them. Since they had nothing against me, at the end they were forced to let me go.

The interrogation period is very different from that of imprisonment. During the interrogation process suspects are detained in an interrogation prison where they are questioned before being either released or sent to a central prison. The interrogation process was very difficult and harsh because it forces prisoners to break down. I must admit, that I was not tortured physically; however, the interrogating officer concentrated on psychological torture that entailed solitary confinement, rape and sexual assault threats, invading my personal space, inappropriate fondling, forcing me to listen to tapes of people suffering, screaming, moaning, coughing, calling for help, etc. When I was first captured no one was

allowed to see me, not even a lawyer or the Red Cross. However, 14 days after my arrest I met with representatives from the Red Cross and, 18 days later I was able to meet with a Jewish lawyer.

In 1982, I was arrested again and this time I was sentenced to three years in jail. At that time, I was still unmarried and I was the second woman to be jailed from the camp where my family resided. I was very worried about my parents' reaction, because they are conservative. But they were very supportive and proud of me. In general Palestinian women who are active in the national struggle receive a lot of appreciation and respect. They are considered unique and there is no stigma attached to the fact of their being imprisoned. Being politically active, less restrictions are imposed on them and they have the freedom to attend university, work, travel, etc.

My imprisonment was a turning point in my life; it helped me grow and mature into an organized person capable of making informed choices in life. Prison life made me understand myself better and in turn, understand the world and the Israeli occupation. In prison, I was able to educate myself about the Palestinian/Israeli conflict by reading about it extensively. I also made friends with whom I am still in contact.

Our situation as political prisoners was very well organized. We had no time to loose because we had our daily routine. We were allowed three hours outside our cells, during which we exercised and walked in the sun. We also organized educational and literacy programs, reading sessions, as well as discussion groups on various topics such as the prevailing political situation, women's rights, and women's role in the national liberation struggle. The Red Cross along with the Prisoners Support Association (Gham'iyat Ansar Al-Sajeen) provided us with books, pens, and paper. Whenever our living conditions deteriorated we used to hold hunger strikes to force the prison administration to improve our status. Even though we were allowed two visits every 15 days, these visits would be discontinued when we were on hunger strikes.

I met my husband at university. We were colleagues and friends. Both of us were politically active and struggled together for national liberation. We were caught and imprisoned during the same period. We got

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Special Features

married in 1987, six years after we met. We lived together only for three months after which my husband was imprisoned. At that time I was pregnant with our first child. My husband saw our son only six years later after being released from prison. My relationship with my husband is very unconventional, in fact it has nothing traditional about it. Our relationship is mature and solid because it is based on respect. However, this does not mean that we do not disagree, but my husband never imposes his opinions. He supports me on all counts, we share the responsibilities of housework and of raising the kids. My husband strongly supports the women's rights movement for he strongly believes that women should have an active role outside the household.

At present, I am working on a part time basis for the sake of my children, with whom I try to spend as much time as possible. I am also active in a women's organization called the Women's Committee for Social Work. I have always been interested in women's issues. One cannot deny the active role that Palestinian women play in the Intifada. They have a truly revolutionary spirit and were able to fill the gap created by men's absence when those were arrested, detained and imprisoned; then women had to take on family and community responsibilities. Therefore, society cannot expect women to return to their traditional roles once the political emergency would be over. We should actively participate in shaping the features of our society, and in molding it to respect more women's rights, gender equality, justice and true partnership. This can

only be realized if women work hard to amend the existing discriminatory laws and legislations.

Once the Palestinian state was declared and after signing the peace accord with Israel, a new role for women became evident. A large number of specialized feminist organizations mushroomed in Palestine. Their objective was to formulate a feminist agenda aiming at raising the marriage age to 18 years, and increase women's political participation. Women's organizations started forming pressure groups that focused on drafting a new personal status law to replace the discriminatory Jordanian and Egyptian laws. At present, the law is ready for review.

The political, economic, social, and health conditions of the Palestine population is deplorable. Poverty is on the rise as a consequence of the territorial closures imposed by the Israeli authorities. Most Palestinians working in Israel lost their jobs due to the escalation of the conflict. Moreover, a large number of Palestinians are suffering from psychological and emotional difficulties. Reduced economic activity, higher unemployment rates, movement restrictions, as well as absence of vital needs, have all affected the general well-being of the Palestinian population. We Palestinians are pessimistic. It is obvious that there is no chance to reach a peace agreement in the foreseeable future. The ongoing violent confrontations between Israel and the Palestinians might go on for years and hence we believe that the prospects of renewing the peace process are nil.

Forthcoming

*Arab Women and
Civil Society*