PRISON CULTURE

Countering the Occupation

A "battle of the 'power of the will' against the 'will of power'"

by Barbara Harlow

Early on the morning of 3 October, Riad Malki, a professor of engineering at Birzeit University, was arrested by Israeli military authorities in the Occupied West Bank.

Malki, who was taken from his Ramallah home following a two-hour search of his premises by four Israeli intelligence agents, had been scheduled that day to attend a press conference at East Jerusalem's National Palace Hotel on the "tax war" that had been taking place since 20 September in the West Bank village of Beit Sahour. One hour before the conference, that would have begun to penetrate the communications barrier surrounding the besieged village, was to begin, the Israeli army declared the entire area surrounding the hotel to be a closed military zone, thereby condoning off public discussion as well as disclosure of the events ravaging the villagers of Beit Sahour. The simultaneous arrest of Dr. Riad Malki served as an additional stratagem in this military cordon designed to interrupt and ultimately foreclose alternative information, its political analysis, and their popular dissemination.

The forcible obstruction of communication, its coercive appropriation and the attempted reformulation of the organizational narrative of the Palestinian resistance has been a crucial and escalating dimension of the Israeli political and military response to the Palestinian intifada since it began on 9 December 1987. It targets as well cooperative efforts between Palestinians and progressive Israelis. Michal Warshawska, for example, the head of the Alternative Information Center, was recently, following a long trial, sentenced to a non-parole jail term of 20 months and ten months suspended arrest, with a fine of 10,000 NIS (US $2,500). His crimes were providing typewritten services to "illegal organizations" and holding printed material belonging to "illegal organizations." This printed material was a booklet for Palestinian activists that included guidelines on how to resist torture and interrogation by the secret service.

A critical and contested institutional site in this struggle over the control of the communication of information is the Israeli prison apparatus which, during the two decades of occupation, from June 1967, and preceding the intifada, had...
housed, for varying periods of incarceration, more than 20,000 Palestinian political detainees. In the first two years of the intifada this number has increased dramatically, with over 40,000 arrests, putting great pressure on the prison facilities themselves and necessitating the opening of new prison camps such as Ansar 3 (Kerzron) in the Negev desert, and detention centers like Dhaabriyya, just outside of Hebron, and even using the militarily closed Palestinian schools as temporary holding stations.

As a penal system, one of whose major targets is identified as the Palestinian people and its resistance to Israeli military occupation (and indeed the prison population in Israel can be largely distinguished as Israeli criminal and Palestinian political prisoners), Israeli prisons function on multiple levels not only to incarcerate individuals, but to destroy the collective and organized Palestinian popular resistance and its networks by isolating and containing alternative information systems through the imposition and attempted enforcement of bureaucratic, disciplinary and “official” channels of information and discursive exchange. From the inescapable location of Ansar 3 in the Negev desert, to conditions of detention that include holding the prisoner incommunicado, with no contacts with lawyer, Red Cross representatives, or family, for the first 18 days of arrest, to the practice of administrative detention that allows for the holding without charge of a suspected dissident for six months (renewable indefinitely), to the significance of the confession as constituting sufficient evidence in and of itself to convict the detainee, to the practice of torture during interrogation and the use of informers (‘aṣafir) inside the prison cells as a means of extracting information and undermining prisoners’ political solidarity, the Israeli prison apparatus is constructed in such a way as to perform the combined functions of both repressive and ideological state apparatuses.

In prison, however, and within the framework of the collective work of political opposition, counter-strategies of communication, instruction, mobilization and organization are exercised and developed as critical weapons in the struggle itself. The theoretical and practical reconstruction of the site of political prison as a “university” for the resistance, a training ground for its cadres, is more than a literary topos or metaphoric embellishment in the writings and “prison culture” of political detainees. This holds true whether in occupied Palestine, South Africa, El Salvador, Northern Ireland or in the United States. Examining the relationship, for example, between the policing system in Britain with its various definitions of criminality and the recent history of legal and cultural constructions of English national identity through and against the laws promulgated with respect to immigration, Paul Gilroy has argued in *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack* that “new kinds of struggle can be solidified by the very institutions which are deployed to answer their demands and to channel them into fragmented solutions into separate cases and claims.” Similarly, in his reading of “Marxist Theory and the Specificity of Afro-American Oppression,”
We organized ourselves collectively because the prison officials wanted us to remain as isolated individuals.

in his study of "culture and communication" in South Africa in the 1980s, "demand: acute peripheral vision."

While the dominant autobiographical tradition in western literary history has valorized the personal trajectory, the Bildung or socialization of the individual, prison memoirs, and in particular those of political detainees, reframe that trajectory as a collective and commemorative response to the ascendant forms of social and cultural domination that require privatization, isolation and atomization of the individual-oriented social system. "We organized ourselves collectively," wrote Nizar Aboulnahla in his Portrait of a Palestinian Prisoner, "because the prison officials wanted us to remain as isolated individuals." Two Palestinian prison memoirs from the pre-intifada period outline some of the issues at stake in political organization within and against the occupation prison forms of organization that served critically to maintain the resistance in a period of disarticulation.

One, Cell Number 7, is a story of apparent failure, the other, Cell Number 94, a history of success, but both are major contributions to a larger strategic narrative.

"The ratting of chains reached our ears, and then silence fell on our cell." Fadl Yunis' prison memoir opens with the transfer of himself and a group of his comrades from Asgalan prison to Gaza Central prison. In Asgalan Yunis had been among the organizers of a hunger strike and it was the intention of the prison authorities to undermine the solidarity of the prisoners by removing the "heads" or nech lampe, the ones who directed the prisoners. But it is only later that Yunis and his fellow prisoners understand the nature and full extent of these machinations. When the narrative of Zin-zen rega (Cell Number 7) begins, the prisoners are still in their cell at Asgalan, about to be shipped in preparation for the move. The fetters which bind the prisoners together by two make it difficult for them to move together, to walk in step with each other. The chains of bondage enforced by the prison system are still another manifestation of the regime's effort to undermine the prisoners' own forms of solidarity.

The gatekeeper fumbled with the heavy prison door and opened it in front of us. Several soldiers led us outside with several others walking behind us. One soldier opened the door of the bus (the cell used to transport prisoners) and with difficulty Adnan and Abdallah walked over to it, followed by Hasan and Muhammad. Musa and I dragged our heavy possessions toward the door of the bus. With his left hand Musa lifted up his belongings and put his foot on the first step, lifting his right foot, he had to yank roughly at mine which I then lifted and placed it next to his, so that he got to the second step. I pulled myself and my belongings up with great difficulty while the sergeant shouted "Heh... Heh..." It wasn't easy to make my steps match with Musa's...

The lessons of solidarity and collective action that had been learned in Asgalan prison are out of place in Gaza, which was repurposed in the prison system at that time for its last years.
for its lack of prisoner interaction, and Yunis wonders to himself on arrival, "Is this the way they're going to treat us, and will we remain silent like these others are silent?" Adnan, Abdallah, Hassan, Muhammad, Musa and Adel (Yunis's name in the narrative) adopt instead a policy of organization amongst themselves and a strategy of passive resistance in order to secure the minimum comforts they require—such as some fresh air fora Musa who suffers from asthma. Even this minor resistance is met by the intransigence of the prison guards and their superiors and two of the prisoners' number are transferred to another cell. The effort to divide the prisoners against themselves is endemic to the prison system, and in Gaza prison it is effected even in the questions put by the interrogators who seek to coerce the prisoners into accounts of themselves that would be consonant with the system's hierarchical and authoritarian narratives. "How many prisoners are in Asqalan?" "About 200." "No, 290. But how many of these would you suppose are hooligans?" Yunis answers, even to the question: "All the prisoners..."

Paramount among the issues that confront the newly arrived prisoners is the question of whether or not to continue in Gaza prison the strike they had left behind in Asqalan. But what can six of them do alone? Nonetheless, there can be a strike if no one has heard about it. Public awareness is required. The focus of Zizana raqam 7 is the issue of collective organization, how to develop it and then the struggle to maintain it against the dictatorial pressures exerted by the prison authorities. Separate interrogations, unanswered, for unpredictable reasons, at different times and of varying length, nights punctuated by screams of pain from the cell directly above; the use of female warders to tempt the prisoners into laxity and collaboration; visits from the families who try to convulse their sons to less "troublesome," and, finally, the permission to receive newspapers—so that the prisoners can learn of the Arab defeat in the October 1973 War. While the efforts on the part of the transfers from Asqalan to organize the Gaza inmates ultimately meet with failure, the internal cohesion within their own group and their ability to integrate into that group new prisoners introduced into their cell remains steadfast and effective. But in Asqalan prison too, the strike has failed to achieve any of the prisoners' demands, and the Egyptian prisoners captured in the October War are looking forward to their return home as the result of a prisoner exchange. The Palestinians remain behind; as the guard tells Yunis, "You're not prisoners of war." But in his final words, Yunis reminds him, "I've learned, my friend, that you know now that Palestine costs dear."

Like Fadi Yunis, a member of Fatah within the PLO arrested in 1970 for carrying out operations inside Israel and sentenced to 20 years imprisonment spent in various Israeli prisons, Jibril Rajoub came to know in the Naffa and Jnuid prisons the diverse features of the Israeli prison regime. Rajoub's prison memoir Zizana raqam 704 (Call Number 704) recounts too a narrative of struggle and collective organization. Although the political and cultural conclusions remain much the same in Call Number 7 and Call Number 704, Rajoub's narrative, which relates events a decade later, comes to a different ending from that of Zizana raqam 7. According to Samih Kan'an, another inhabitant of cell number 704 who wrote the preface to Rajoub's account, "Jnuid" and its struggle formed a turning point, a very specific leap forward in all the preceding tactics of the struggle. Zizana raqam 704 tells the story of the "battle of Jnuid" in 1983 and the 34-day hunger strike in Naffa prison begun on 14 July 1980 that provided important lessons and precedents for the prisoners' organization in Jnuid. The chronology of hunger strikes (idrāb al-ta‘āmin) has acquired a conscious historical significance in the Palestinian narrative of Israeli prisons. Their succession and development articulates the progressive evolution of the resistance being formed inside the prison. For Rajoub, furthermore, A Ketzicot detainees in the Negev desert
ing the Nafha strike and, in the end, twenty-six prisoners were transferred. Meanwhile Nafha had become known as the "address of the prisoners' movement," the "academy for revolutionaries." Jzaid, to which the detainees were later transferred, gave "new meaning to the words "modern deca." Jzaid prison, opened on 8 June 1986, is overcrowding due to the overcrowding in other prisons, was designed to house up to as many as 1,000 political and common law detainees. Most of its prisoners at the time were under 40 and serving sentences of more than ten years. The hunger strike, began on 23 September 1989, was a protest against the "modern deca." conditions provided to the prisoners by the new facility. Overcrowding, deprivation of exercise, lack of medical services, poor food, use of gas to control the cells, physical punishment, lack of religious worship, and isolation from the outside and social contact. The organization of the hunger strike involved the organization of the prisoners and the prison itself. A central committee was formed and a working paper issued. The strike committee inside the prison further reflected the dynamics of the resistance organization outside and consisted of three members from al-Askal, one from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and one from the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). Saws, however, refused to participate. Indeed, the internal structure and workings of the prisoners' movement, while it maintains its organizational connections with the confederations of the different factions of the PLO outside, is importantly conditioned by the fact of the prison regime and the need to confront its authority collectively. As Fadil Yarur had already described his own experience with a fellow prisoner from a different faction: "He was from Popular Front General Command and I was from Fatah, but we were members of one revolution." The Fatah strike that ensued was to be, according to Rajoub, a "battle of the power of the will against the will of power." The isolation that a decade earlier had confined the resistance activity of Fadil Yarur and his comrades in cell number 7 in Gaza prison was transferred to Jzaid in 1984 into an extensive and effective network, drawing on the now developed history of hunger strikes by Palestinian prisoners and penetrating both inside the prison and across prison walls. Participating in the strike were 678 prisoners who succeeded in mobilizing support through letters, lawyers and news agencies, not only in the town of Nafha, but throughout the Occupied Territories, in Israel and abroad, and enjoining solidarity strikes in Hebron, Nafha, Asqalan and Ramla prisons.

As Mario Hector wrote from death row in a Jamaican prison, "the free flow of letters is crucial to the intelligent and calculated struggle for life on the Row." For Hector, however, a "criminal prisoner" imprisoned for a murder that he did not commit, the emergence from a private grievance to a politicalized resistance came gradually, until "daily discussions through the ventilators with these brothers, the need for an organized struggle group in the prison to keep the struggle alive and unify the prisoners' common objectives under an organized system of struggle arose." The prisoners' struggle, is necessarily a collective one and as such transcended the barriers and definitions described by the state and its social orders. The political threat posed by that struggle to the state is the success of an alternative social organization and popular communications systems that would challenge the dominant historical narrative.

Jabril Rajoub's narrative is structured then by the three consequential stages to the Jzaid hunger strike: first, preparation for the strike; second, the strike itself; and third, consolidation of the organization. The Jzaid hunger strike, began on 23 September 1989, ended twelve years later, on 4 October, with the capitulation of the prison authorities to some of the prisoners' demands. And although the system later refused to follow through on many of the promises and agreements made to the hunger strikers, the prisoners' movement had emerged decisively as a formidable counter-organization to the prison system itself. Rajoub was released from prison in the May 1985 prisoner exchange, only to be re-detained without charge in November 1985, the first of the many of the exchanged prisoners. He was one of those who remained behind as the Intifada continued.

**The prisoner exchanges in 1983 and 1985 between the state of Israel and "intermediaries" for the PLO released several thousand Palestinian political detainees from Israeli prisons and detention centres. The prisoners, many of whom were permitted to return to their homes and those who remained in the Occupied Territories (although subjected to persistent harassment, rearrest and even assassination), brought with them their "prison culture": strategies of resistance elaborated, not only organizationally, but culturally as well, in memoirs, poetry, drawings and stories of organized cultural opposition against a state system of political detention. Political literature flourished again, now "beyond the walls." A new corpus, a genre defined less by formal criteria than by historical circumstances and political exigencies, was constituting itself. The prisoner exchanges, however, had the further effect of decapitating the leadership and dismantling the resistance inside the prison— consequences that may help to explain why the prisoners' exchanges were managed in the first place. Palestinian political detainees inside Israeli prisons had been remaking the resistance within the walls, a resistance that was in turn mobilizing the popula-
tion outside in support of its hunger strikes, work stoppages and protest actions demanding improved conditions, if not release. But as Eshel Yariv points out, it is as far as we can go to argue in the article, "Israel's Prison Academies," "The uprising's Unified National Command [known to Palestinians as the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU)], which has received the intifada by means of periodic handbills, is constructed along the same lines as the special committees formed by the Palestinian security [sic] prisoners." Palestinian universities and schools in the Occupied Territories have, since December 1987, been militarily closed more often than they have been open. Indeed, in order to accommodate the massive numbers of detained protesters since the beginning of the intifada, the education authorities have for certain periods used the closed schools as makeshift prison centers. The threat that these school and universities pose to the state if not properly policed or effectively disciplined is told, for example, in a short story, published in May 1988, by the Israeli Matt Nesvigij. "The Game's Up" relates a Navy frogman attack on a boat moored in international waters off the coast of Israel. None of the commandos involved in the operation know what they will find there. "Military intelligence haven't determined if it's drug-smuggling, gun-running, white-slavery or terrorism. But we do know, gambling is a front for something big and our job is to find out. Any more questions? Okay, men, after me — and good luck." The attack is carried through successfully and the ship's gamblers are "herded into the central lounge." But there is still the locked door below deck. This is then opened with plastic explosives and the Israeli frogmen confront there 40 West Bank pupils and their teachers. "I suspect as much!" Bar-Barian snarled. "A clandestine matriculation call! In the name of the Civil Administration, I hereby arrest you for illegal education."

With the Palestinian schools and universities militarily closed, despite international accords recognizing education as a basic human right, and with many of the students transformed into prisoners, the task of the education of Palestinian youth was assumed, in significant part, by the popular committees. This "popular education," or 'al-sa'il al-wul al-sha'abi, which included not only the basic skills necessary to pass the ta'asajah, or Jordanian secondary school leaving examination, but a Palestinian nationalist content as well, was itself declared by the Israeli government to be "illegal education" and the teachers and students who were discovered and caught promulgating and practicing it were in their turn arrested and detained. The educators were seen to constitute a serious danger to the sway of Israeli dominion. In Ramallah, for example, a report published in the "irregular" journal Fawz in July 1989, there were over 600 students enrolled in these popular education schools, and in the nearby village of Bireiieh, 150 students and pupils had completed eight months of schooling. "A clear indication of the intifada determination to continue and to realize the potentials of the intifada to transform the very life of and the organizations in the international community. Among these the most distinguished is perhaps that of the 'awadunay, or communiqués in leaflet form disseminated regularly, every ten days to two weeks, by the UNLU. These contain reports on general developments in the different aspects of the intifada, political analyses, solidarity messages, and specific instructions for general strike days, planned actions, etc. As a critical archive in their own right, these 'awadunay represent the political and strategic intersection, as a communica-

ations weapon, of "form" and "content." Even as they issue, and are reproduced...
“No taxation without representation.”

Taxes,” and other demanded goals, that call in “Close the Prisons” or that are connected to the educational institutions and the holy sites, etc. This is what brings people to mobilize around these slogans and to struggle, even in the face of death, for their realization. The concerns of all the factions are clearly articulated in these slogans without ever forgetting the general goal. That general goal, however, was not altogether clear or pronounced in the first days of the intifada, but varied according to the point of view on the correctness of what was proposed by the general slogan. The slogans articulating demands, however, are the goals around which the different points of view encounter the national forces and all the factions of the Palestinian people.

Murtadi's reading of selected *hajanat* begins from the early days of the intifada and examines the evolving critical relationship formulated in these texts between the levels of the general and the specific production and distribution of counterfeit leaflets that, even while initiating, at times anticipating by having intercepted preliminary transmissions of the proposed communiques between the Occupied Territories and the PLO in Tunis, the style and form of the UNL's authentic *hajanat*, seek to counteract and absorb the directives and goals of the intifada and instigate factional dissection and sectarian contradictions into the organized objectives of the popular mass uprising.

This effort on the part of the Israeli state both to penetrate and to capture the uprising's popular communication system, appropriating thereby its networks and deforming its political discourse and its operational messages, also functions through the military occupation's creation of extended multitudes of collaborators. These collaborators, as many as 5000 according to The New York Times, are drafted, armed and paid by the Israeli Skin-Net, and have in recent months become the target of organized reprisals from the Palestinian population, some spontaneous but most coordinated by the uprising's leadership. The collaborators are used by the secret police to gain substantial information about the plans and projects of the uprising as well as to identify members of its leadership. According to a report in *New York Times*, published by the Alternative Information Center, “Without the collaborators, the ‘wanted lists’ of leaders would have existed and there have been no meaning to the army’s ‘initiated actions.’” While the many reprisals, including assassination, against the collaborators have been much publicized and self-righteously condemned by the US media and administration spokespeople in particular as evidence of the internal disintegration of the uprising, *New York Times* goes on to argue the contrary, that “killing is the last step in a long line of efforts to convince the collaborators to sever their connections. The aim is to bring the collaborators back from their dark ways. First, the suspect is warned. Then they are beaten or their property is damaged. Sometimes the family is approached with the suggestion that one of its heads take the responsibility of improving the collaborator’s behavior. Only when there is no other choice do they kill.” And according to an Israeli journalist from *Haaretz*, Ron Klein, “With our assassination, the flow of information that streams to our security forces dwindles” (13 September 1989).

Especially significant in Israel’s formation of these marauding bands of collaborators is the conscription, through threats, bribes, physical coercion and promises of early release, of informers (or *magen*, as they are called) from amongst the Palestinian detainees inside the prisons. Such conscription ultimately designates two levels of operation: first, to intercept the organized clandestine dissemination of political education within the prisons, and second, to create a fractionally “ally” within the ranks of the uprising “outside.”

We will teach them a lesson. We will break Beit Sahour, even if we have to impose a curfew for two months.

Yitzhak Shamir, Israeli Defense Minister

No taxation without representation.

Beit Sahour residents

Beit Sahour is a small town in the outskirts of Jerusalem and with a population of approximately 12,000, mostly Christian inhabitants, that was besieged by the Israeli army for six weeks, ostensibly to enforce the collection of unpaid taxes, recapitulates in large the lesson of “prison culture” as a strategy of countering the occupation. According to Don Pinnock, writing about the 1980s South African context, “Popular communications systems - those means by which information and social symbols are communica-

In East Jerusalem, in a hot summer afternoon on the afternoon, not the summer, we flew Kheis...
interrupt those "popular communication systems" and the "social patterns" and "social relationships" that they transmit, both internally and in connection to an outside world. The statement distributed by the IDF to the inhabitants of Beit Sahour following one month of military siege and unlimited popular resistance was this intent. On the one hand, the military sought to interrupt the collective program of the town.

There are quite a number of residents who are worried about the future, and they want to stop this kind of confrontation that brings them nothing but harm. However, a group of irresponsible individuals incite the inhabitants to break the law, in addition to certain elements from outside Beit Sahour who wish to gain opportunities for political profit from what is happening in the town.

By restricting access to the area, on the other hand, the authorities attempted to cut off not only food but external communications as well. The statement went on:

The attention given by the mass media to what is going on in the town will soon disappear and the town itself will no longer have its name in the news headlines, just as the attention to events in the territories has decreased and no longer excites the world media.

Indeed, when one elderly woman whose house was being ransacked by soldiers suffered what was later diagnosed as "stress-related heart blockage," a soldier ripped a telephone wire from the wall in order to prevent the woman's daughter-in-law from calling a doctor.

For over a month, Israeli soldiers accompanied tax collectors through the town of Beit Sahour, confiscating the personal property of its residents to be sold as tax payment at auction in Tel Aviv. An estimated three million dollars worth of property was pillaged from the town by the military, in excess of the taxes owed. A report by al-Haq, a legal aid service in Ramallah, to the state signatories of the Fourth Geneva Convention expressed grave concerns at the human and civil rights violations being perpetrated in Beit Sahour. The report emphasized especially: arbitrary assessments, the militarization of tax collection, confiscation of third party assets, confiscation of identity cards, and the isolation of the area. The tactic of the "confiscation of third party assets" was, it would seem, designed in particular to disrupt the internal social organization and property relations of the town. According to testimony by the victims collected by the Arab Studies Society in East Jerusalem, when there was nothing in a house deemed valuable enough to confiscate, the soldiers insisted that it was not the "right house." According to the witness report of Habib Hanna Habib Kheir, for example:

INTIFADA INDEX

Number of Palestinians detained during the first six months of the uprising: 8,362
Number of Palestinians imprisoned in Ketziot tent-prison in the Negev desert: 2,722
Prison sentence imposed on Israeli soldier for killing a Palestinian resident of Gaza by firing nearly a dozen bullets into his stomach at point-blank range: 1 year
Prison sentence imposed on Palestinian youth for throwing stones at passing cars: 2 years
Sentences imposed on four Palestinians for throwing stones at passing cars: 8-10 years

From Middle East Report, September-October 1988

WORKS CITED


Barbara Harlow is Associate Professor of English at the University of Texas, Austin, and author of Resistance Literature (1980) and Bared Woman: Writing and Political Detention (forthcoming). She translated Yoacqim Davida's Surs (1979) and is editing a collection of the University of Minnesota series "Emergent Literature."


