



A Day in the Life of a Palestinian in an Israeli Prison

by Walid Al-Hodali



The day of the Palestinian prisoner starts with the worst word known to their ears: “count.” The wardens stream into view, heavy with all kind of weapons and devices, screaming the word “count” over and over again through speakers, waking the prisoners from shallow sleep to hideous images. Sometimes a prisoner wakes up with these sounds and images prior to them happening because they are permanent nightmares in his mind.

An hour later, prisoners assemble to do a sports activity, then stand in line for the bathroom facilities. Sometimes prisoners stand in line multiple times a day, especially in a prison like Ashkelon, where there are 20 people to a cell.

A sports activity in a small space is called *al fora*, where prisoners roam in a circle due to lack of space, and they stand in a queue that makes going faster or slower nearly impossible, since they’re practically attached to each other. Afterwards, they go back to their bathroom queue, where hot water is released for 30 minutes, not enough for all those who did a sports activity.

Then comes breakfast, which alternates every other day: One day is beans, the other day is one egg. The prisoners eat breakfast in front of their beds, which are in front of the bathroom. That small space is a hallway, a dining area, and a walkway for prisoners.

Prisoners then have an hour of reading, where the space suddenly grows silent. Usually, the prisoner is given a book by the prison’s librarian, who registers the requests and the borrowed books in a list. Sometimes they have cultural events, when organizers in the prison arrange readings, discussions, and competitions.



Inside an Israeli prison.

After their afternoon nap, prisoners go outside again, in the only space where they can interact with each other, political discussions and a dialogue of any sort. Dialogue is an essential part of the prisoner’s life, and it doesn’t ever stop to keep their minds and hearts alive in the midst of all that loneliness.

Every so often, the wardens conduct a search of the premises. The prisoners are removed from their cells, while the guards pull everything apart in the most violent of ways, strip all the belongings, then depart with the same suddenness with which they arrived, leaving heaps of chaos for the prisoners to organize while rage brews in their hearts.

Sometimes, a prisoner’s lawyer might visit, which seems like a much-needed break from the routine, and a chance to meet someone from the outside world and get news about what is happening beyond the prison walls. Families are allowed to visit only once a month, and prisoners begin preparing for those visits days in advance, calculating what they will say to their families in the small amount of time they are allowed to spend together. These visits are always bittersweet because the prisoners are delighted to hear about their families, but they are burdened with memories,

longing, and sadness about being away from home.

The rest of the day passes with the echo of the TV and radio. Prisoners first watch the news, then the Arabic and English programming that they’ve agreed on.

The word “count” percolates again in the evening for certain, even though the wardens often conduct sudden counts during the day at any random time. After the dreaded count, the cells are closed for the evening, and life takes on a new turn, when prisoners watch TV, talk about issues from political to social to cultural, and the space becomes a room for discussion open to everybody, interrupted by the call for prayer from the resident imam, and prisoners select one area where they pray together.

Most prisoners usually go to sleep at 11:00pm and some will wake up at the break of dawn for the *Fajr* prayer. Each night they all put their heads on their pillows, dreading the morning yet to come.

Walid Al-Hodali is a resident of Ramallah who has spent years in Israeli prisons, sometimes under sentence, and other times under administrative detention. He is also the author of the play, Sata’er Al-Atma (“Curtains of Darkness”).