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COVER A prison in Lebanon. (Anonymous)
No publication based in Washington should write about prisons without first noting that America leads the world in incarceration. Some 2.3 million people in the United States—more than 7 percent of the population—are in detention. Measured another way, the figures are just as dramatic: Individual states dominate the global list of the top 50 incarcerators per capita, according to data from the Prison Policy Initiative and the International Centre for Prison Studies. Louisiana ranks first in this ignominious competition, with 1,341 people per 100,000 behind bars. As a whole, the US locks up 716 people out of every 100,000, 20 percent of whom are pre-trial detainees. To put this proportion in perspective, the highest-ranking non-US territory on the prisoner-per-capita list is Cuba, which comes in thirty-ninth at a rate of 510. The only country that imprisons anywhere near the sheer number of people as the United States is China, whose relatively low rate of incarceration (121 per 100,000) applies to a population over four times larger. One of every four people doing time the world over is doing it in a US facility.

Prison populations have boomed since the mid-1980s as a result of aggressive policing, mandatory minimum sentences and “three strikes and you're out” laws that impose jail time even for small infractions. Particularly but not exclusively in rural areas, politicians see new prisons as a way to generate steady blue-collar jobs for the locals and reap the rewards of being perceived as “tough on crime.” But the runaway growth of incarceration has actually coincided with decreases in the rates of violent crime. Hundreds of thousands of men and women go to jail for minor drug-related offenses. As Michelle Alexander argues, prison populations are so disproportionately black that mass incarceration constitutes “the new Jim Crow.”

The scale of the US penal system looks even larger when accounting for all those whose lives are in some way supervised by correctional institutions. One in every 35 adults—almost 6.9 million men and women—in the United States is on probation or parole. That figure does not include the juvenile justice system, which holds about 80,000 children in residential facilities, including those held in adult prisons.

According to census data from 2010, there are 4,916 incarceration facilities in the United States, public and private. That number includes federal and state penitentiaries, local jails and immigration detention centers.

Even with this staggering number of facilities, many institutions have stuffed their cells past the limits of regulations. Seventeen states have more prisoners than beds, with Illinois, North Dakota and California near or above 150 percent capacity. The Supreme Court ruled in 2011 that overcrowding in California prisons—at that time, more than 200 percent of intended capacity—violated the Eighth Amendment’s protections against cruel and unusual punishment and ordered the state to discharge 32,000 prisoners within two years. California was able to reach the court-mandated target of 137 percent capacity after four years, though it achieved some of the reductions by transferring 8,500 inmates to privately managed prisons in other states. A failed 2015 bill in the Mississippi legislature proposed to
thin out the crowds and save money by ordering prisoners to erect tent cities. The idea is not unprecedented: Arizona’s Maricopa County has operated a tent city for immigrant detainees since 1993.

Crowding leads to increased rates of violence and communicable disease, and strains the meager prison resources for education, recreation and rehabilitation. Since Congress bars Medicare and Medicaid from covering health care for eligible detainees, state and federal prison medical budgets are the only funds providing care for a population afflicted disproportionately with HIV, hepatitis, tuberculosis, diabetes, asthma, heart problems and mental illness. Not surprisingly, the quality of health care in jails and prisons falls far below that outside the fortified walls. California’s prison medical system was put into receivership by a federal court in 2005 to address deficiencies the judge characterized as “depravity.” In 2014, the Arizona Department of Corrections settled a class-action lawsuit requiring an overhaul of medical policies and practices after its inmate population of 33,000 suffered 37 preventable deaths in two years. The conditions at immigration detention centers are even more horrifying. An investigation by the *New York Times* and the American Civil Liberties Union in 2008 uncovered reams of internal documents from wardens and Immigration and Customs Enforcement staff regarding detainee injuries and deaths, even as the latter agency claimed to have little information about specific cases when asked by reporters. The documents also suggest that ICE tried to decrease the official mortality rate by releasing detainees just before they died.

Though other countries use solitary confinement, the United States stands out for its embrace of the practice. Accurate counts are difficult to come by, but a 2000 census by the US Bureau of Justice Statistics recorded over 81,000 people held in some form of segregation. This number is likely an underestimate, as it relies on self-reporting. Seven percent of federal inmates are housed in isolation units, a number that has risen dramatically since the early 1990s. Social science and medical research, as well as testimony from former prisoners, shows that solitary confinement can cause long-term psychological trauma and even brain damage. Some inmates become catatonic, paranoid or suicidal, as highlighted by the appalling case of Kalief Browder, a Bronx youth held in solitary confinement for about two of his three years on Rikers Island. Browder, who killed himself in June, did not commit the robbery for which he was arrested and was never tried. The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture advocates a global ban on social isolation as a punitive measure, especially before trial.

In the Bureau of Prisons hierarchy, an “administrative maximum-security penitentiary,” or ADX, is the most secure type of facility, relying heavily on housing prisoners in isolation. The federal penitentiary in Florence, Colorado is the only operational ADX, but the Bureau purchased a maximum-security facility in Thomson, Illinois—once on the shortlist of sites to accept Guantánamo detainees and a fiscal sinkhole that has taken fewer than 200 minimum-security prisoners since construction in 2001. ADX Thomson is set to open in the fall of 2016 with 1,600 cells—all for solitary confinement.

Amnesty International’s report about the conditions at ADX Florence describes a human warehouse with limited opportunities for substantive social interaction and few programs “leading to formal qualifications or defined outcomes or goals.” All activities—bathing, eating, praying—are conducted within individual cells, save for up to ten hours per week of exercise. Exercise cages are designed for one occupant and have no equipment. Even some medical and counseling services are conducted by video. All social visits are conducted through plexiglass barriers while inmates remain shackled. In the general population, inmates are allowed six hours per year (30 minutes per month, in 15-minute increments) to speak on the phone outside of legal consultations.

A Government Accountability Office report on segregation within federal prisons found that the Bureau of Prisons has no central system for documenting how segregation is applied across facilities. Neither has the agency assessed whether segregation improves inmate and staff safety or tracked the effects of prolonged isolation on prisoners.

The Bureau of Prisons maintains two communication management units (CMUs), in Terre Haute, Indiana and Marion, Illinois, whose inmates have even more restricted access to phone calls, correspondence, visits and education. A second-wave product of the war on terror—Terre Haute opened in secret in December 2006, Marion in 2008—CMUs are part of the Bureau’s official counterterrorism strategy. Of the 60 to 70 people who live in CMUs, over two thirds are Muslims, not all of whom have been convicted of terrorism-related crimes. Rafil Dhafir, among the first prisoners transferred to Terre Haute, was sentenced to 22 years for operating a religious charity to send humanitarian aid to Iraq in violation of US sanctions. Backlash against such religious and racial profiling precipitated the transfer of a few prisoners convicted of crimes related to environmental and animal rights activism. The Center for Constitutional Rights reports that other inmates in CMUs are noted prisoners’ rights activists, jailhouse religious leaders or vocal critics of Bureau policies.

Like maximum-security prisoners, inmates in CMUs are barred from physical contact with visitors. Unlike other federal prisoners, inmates in CMUs have no private communications, except with their lawyers. All non-legal written correspondence is reviewed thoroughly before delivery. Phone calls (30 minutes per week) and visits (eight hours per month) conducted in languages other than English have to be specially scheduled so that conversations can be simultaneously translated for prison officials. These interactions are also recorded.

For-profit companies manage at least 150 of the 4,916 detention centers in the US. These institutions hold over 130,000 detainees—about 8 percent of the national total—a
number that more than doubled between 2002 and 2010. The industry got its start through contracts with the former Immigration and Naturalization Service, and privately run facilities have now cornered the market for immigrant and youth detention, though some states rely heavily on corporate prisons for convicted criminals. More than half of Louisiana inmates are in private jails. Today, the Corrections Corporation of America and GEO Group, along with the (Orwellian-named) Management and Training Corporation, own 90 percent of private detention facilities in the United States. GEO Group also runs prisons in Britain, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, living up to its tagline, “A World of Opportunities.” Private prisons promise to cut costs for cash-strapped governments, mainly by skimming on staff and services for the incarcerated.

The explosion of imprisonment in the US has reverberated in the Middle East—and the shock waves have traveled in both directions. A few examples: Charles Graner, the Army reservist convicted of torturing Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib, had previously worked as a guard at two Pennsylvania jails, where he had faced several allegations of maltreatment of inmates and racial bigotry. A former prisoner told the Washington Post that Graner had taunted a Muslim in the cellblock by telling him there was pork residue in his food. In the wake of the Abu Ghraib scandal, a raft of stories in the New York Times and elsewhere exposed regular physical and sexual abuse of US prisoners.

The Senate torture report released in December 2014 mentioned a trip by Bureau of Prisons officials to the CIA-run “black site” in Afghanistan known as the Salt Pit, notorious for torture and the death of a detainee from hypothermia. According to CIA documentation of the visit, Bureau staff were “wowed” by the CIA’s approach to managing prisoners, who were kept naked, constantly shackled to the wall or the floor, and virtually entombed by white noise and darkness, save for the jailers’ headlamps. The Bureau delegation judged the facility in compliance with standards of humane treatment because detainees had access to medical care and the building was clean. So-called progress in US incarceration largely follows this line of thinking. Sterility has come to epitomize sound practice, even as the regulation of prisoners’ minds and bodies has become more invasive and the project of rehabilitation largely abandoned.

As in the war on terror abroad, much of the abuse happens to people not formally charged with an offense. In February, the Guardian revealed a secret interrogation center at Homan Square in Chicago, where police detained political activists and others incommunicado for up to 17 hours, sometimes in shackles. Local lawyers said the center is “analogous to the CIA’s black sites,” though they stressed that such violations of civil rights by city cops long predate the September 11, 2001 attacks.

Lastly, as Ian Urbina reported for us in 2003, the Pentagon is a major customer for products manufactured by prison labor. When gearing up for the invasion of Iraq in 2002, the US military procured 194,950 camouflage shirts and 100 percent of its Kevlar helmets from factories run by Federal Prison Industries, also known as UNICOR, at penitentiaries in various states. The captive workers supplied the Pentagon with numerous other items, ranging from chaplain’s vests to communications headgear to high-caliber ammunition. The price was undoubtedly right: Federal Prison Industries was paying subminimum wages and was exempt from payroll taxes and levies for Social Security. The quasi-public company, founded in 1934, is an official subsidiary of the Bureau of Prisons and by law can sell only to the US government. It advertises itself as a “correctional program,” and comes under frequent fire for undercutting competitors in the private sector.

Mass incarceration is becoming a national concern, with bipartisan support for reform in Congress and in state legislatures. Even conservative lobbying groups like the American Legislative Exchange Council—of which the Corrections Corporation of America and GEO Group were long-time members—at least give lip service to the ills of putting so many people behind bars.

As might be gleaned from the conservatives’ interest in prison reform, many actual initiatives spring from the desire to slash public spending. Some of the effects are salutary. Surely, for example, California could have met the 2011 court order by building more prisons. Instead, in 2014, the state’s voters approved a ballot measure to reduce the sentences for property crimes and reclassify personal drug possession as a misdemeanor. The measure also allows current inmates to petition for early release under the same rules.

But another effect of spending cuts is to shift more and more of the costs of incarceration onto prisoners and their families. Detainees—in some states, even pre-trial detainees—are often billed for an account with the prison commissary. Many states have tried to chop prison health budgets by extracting higher co-payments from inmates or requiring an annual fee for medical care. The Federal Communications Commission recently intervened in another fleecing, capping the rate for long-distance phone calls from jails and prisons at 21 cents per minute, down from the unregulated prices that often exceeded a dollar per minute. The new rules also bar telecommunications companies from charging inmates for the commissions they pay to state corrections systems. A trend in prison services favors videoconferencing in place of family visits, a service with no rate cap.

Incarceration is woven into the fabric of the United States, from the legacy of slavery to the political and economic forces that encourage building more jails and seeking profit from the jailed. Prisons, in a final twist, are also part of international aid packages. The State Department is currently funding and directing the construction of two prisons in Haiti to relieve major overcrowding. The penal society is one American export the world can do without.

—Amanda Ufheil-Somers and Chris Toensing
Eritrean Refugees’ Trek Through the Americas

Dan Connell

TAPACHULA, MEXICO—It is not hard to find the Eritreans in this low-key town near the Pacific coast a few miles north of the Guatemalan border. They gather on the front steps of the Palafox Hotel with the only other Africans here—Somalis, Ethiopians, a handful of Ghanaians, all of them migrants—or they crowd into the bustling Internet café across the street.

On a recent afternoon, I met two who had been released from a maximum-security detention center here the night before. They were surprisingly at ease, giddy at the thought that they had passed over the last major hurdle to reaching the United States. All they had to do now was fly to northern Mexico and walk across a bridge. But it had been a long, arduous journey, and I could see they were still jumpy.

Tesfay, a Catholic from the market town of Keren, a crossroads for Eritrea’s diverse cultures and religious faiths, left his country in 2007 at the age of 20 after being caught in a giffa (roundup) and taken to the Sawa military training center for induction into Eritrea’s “national service” together with thousands of other young men and women. Most of his cohort feared they were in for an indefinite term at pay so low their parents would have to subsidize them for the foreseeable future.

But there was nothing they could do, as dissent had been crushed a decade earlier when thousands were jailed, the

Dan Connell, vice chair of MERIP’s board of directors and visiting researcher at Boston University’s African Studies Center, has been writing about Eritrea for nearly 40 years. He is currently researching a book on why and how so many of its citizens have fled.
After a year in Sudan, T esfay became ever more frustrated at MIDDLE EAST REPORT
indefinite national service, but many also mention intolerable abuse, humiliation and punishment for things like raising a question about their status, suspicions they planned to leave or abetted someone else’s flight, or just praying while in the service. Such offenses, real or imagined, are almost never prosecuted at a military hearing; the accused simply vanishes into one of Eritrea’s many secret prisons to languish for years with no one tracking them and no hope of release but by escape.

Hundreds do escape every year, which may seem incongruous for such a tightly controlled state. But those I have spoken with who did so describe a growing breakdown in discipline and security in situations where those guarding them are themselves untrained and poorly motivated conscripts. In some cases, the guards leave with them.

Search for a Safe Haven

The Circuitous Route to America

After a year in Sudan, Tesfay became ever more frustrated at his lack of prospects and fearful of Eritrean security forces who frequently crossed the border in search of escapees. He got on the phone to relatives and raised $3,500 to pay smugglers to take him to the Egyptian Sinai so he could cross into Israel. In September 2008, he reached Tel Aviv, where he joined a growing number of Eritreans who were coming since a clampdown on migration through Libya, the route most Eritrean refugees had taken in years past to get to Europe, where they thought they would be safe.

But after six years of relative quiet, he was swept up in another giffa, this time directed by Israeli authorities, who were corralling Eritreans and sending them to the newly constructed Holot detention center in the Negev desert. By then there were 35,000 in the country, along with 15,000 Sudanese, and anti-African sentiment was reaching a fever pitch, as demagogic politicians stoked the anger among ultranationalists who wanted the Africans out. One member of Knesset from the right-wing Likud Party, Miri Regev, had termed the refugees “a cancer in our body.”

At the end of 2012, the government began to implement measures to reverse the influx. The first step was the completion of a high-security border fence running from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea. The second, a year later, was the Holot detentions. Deportation or “voluntary” departure was to be the final one.

Holot is a desolate place with no facilities for its inmates apart from a cafeteria and beds, though its gates are open during the days and evenings, so residents can go in and out, as long as they get back for roll calls. In this respect, Holot functions as a kind of halfway house, designed to quarter refugees for limited periods while pressuring them to leave—but only under Israeli auspices.

When Tesfay joined a protest in June 2014 and marched to the Egyptian border with hundreds of other detainees to demand they be allowed to leave then and there, he was jailed at the maximum-security Saharonim prison across the road from Holot for three months. When he was released, he decided to go on Israel’s terms.

The choices he and others were offered were: Self-deport directly to Eritrea or accept a deal Israel worked out with Rwanda and Uganda to go to one of those countries. In either case, the refugees got $3,500 in cash and temporary travel documents that would be taken from them upon their arrival.

Tesfay took Rwanda, and the money. As soon as he got to Kigali, however, he arranged to go to Uganda to meet his wife, who had come from Sudan to escape what she had said was harassment and abuse because she was an Eritrean Christian. No place seemed safe, so they agreed that he would try to get to the United States and send for her.

Once he had arranged air tickets and forged travel documents with smugglers in Kampala, he flew to Turkey, then to Brazil and finally to Ecuador, taking this roundabout route because the flights on Turkish Airlines were cheap. From Quito, he went by bus and foot across Colombia and up through Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala to the Mexican border, following a well-trodden path used by hundreds of Eritrean refugees each year, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Tapachula.

His friend Ghebre was from Adi Quala in south-central Eritrea, close to the Ethiopian border. He had been sent to Sawa for military training in 2010, but on his first home leave 12 months later, he refused to go back. Three months later, he was arrested and sent to the notorious Aderser prison near Sawa, where he spent the next two years in what he described as unremittingly harsh conditions. He escaped in 2013 by going to the hospital and slipping out with a guard he had befriended.

Ghebre and the guard went straight to Khartoum, Sudan, where the guard, also a national service conscript, arranged
to be smuggled to Libya. Ghebre, who had fallen ill, stayed behind. He choked up as he told me he learned a few months later that his new friend had died in the Mediterranean trying to get to Italy, the route of choice once again by 2013, despite the dangers, now that Israel’s border was closed and Muammar al-Qaddafi’s regime was gone.

Others he knew had been detained in Sudan and sent back to Eritrea, leaving him scared to stay and scared to go to Libya. He said he had heard about the option of flying to South America to get to the United States and decided to try it. It took him several months to raise the money, but once he had it he flew to Brazil and followed the same
route through Ecuador and Colombia as Tesfay had. They met in Panama and traveled the rest of the way together. By the time I encountered them, they were describing each other as “family.”

“Every Day Scared”

Ghebre and Tesfay moved along this modern-day underground railroad with dozens of refugees and migrants from Somalia, Pakistan and India, as well as Eritrea, traveling in small groups that met up at major transit stops. All the movement was coordinated by a network of smugglers—“agents,” they called them—who got the migrants through checkpoints and led them along little-used footpaths to bypass border posts.

In Colombia the travelers boarded boats for an eight-hour, middle-of-the-night ride on a small fishing boat to reach Panama, where they had plunged into the dense, largely uncharted wilds of the Darien Gap. Some of the time they walked; some they rode in long wooden canoes paddled by indigenous Panamanians whom the smugglers hired.

For two days, they were awakened before dawn to slog through undergrowth so tangled with vines and brambles they often could not see where they were putting their feet. The thick canopy overhead blocked the sun, but punishing temperatures and suffocating humidity left them drenched in sweat. Brief but intense bursts of rain offered some letup, but left them dripping even more. No one wore long pants or long-sleeved shirts, the two men said, because it was too hard to move in wet clothing. Hence they were vulnerable to a hundred cuts and bruises from the spiky vegetation and razor-sharp grasses.

Some threw away clothes, food and even water when these items became too much to carry, forcing the migrants to drink from rivers the color of cappuccino. But if they did so, they paid the price with crippling bouts of diarrhea. At least one in Ghebre’s group gave up, he said.

Throughout the trek, the migrants kept as quiet as they could to avoid attracting the attention of Colombian drug runners who use the trails or the heavily armed border police who hunt them. When they emerged from the jungle, though, they stumbled on a military camp and were immediately detained. They were also fed. It was a relief, Ghebre said.

After four days he was loaded onto an army truck and taken to another camp, the second of four en route to Panama City. Each time he moved, he was asked for a bribe. At the fourth camp, he met Tesfay.

In Panama City the migrants were questioned and photographed, and then issued ten-day passes to get to Costa Rica. It took six days to get the money from relatives to pay for the trip. On day seven, a local “agent” put them on a bus.

For the next two weeks, they worried about being detained in one of the other countries they had to pass through or, worse, taken off a bus by one of the many drug-smuggling gangs that operate there. “I’m every day scared,” said Ghebre. “I’m not ever relaxed.”

None of this ordeal was made easier by their lack of Spanish. “We had very little contact with the people,” he said.

As it happened, the journey was uneventful—harrowing midnight hikes along barely marked mountain tracks, a pickup truck jammed with migrants careening along back roads in Nicaragua, hour after hour on rickety hand-me-down school buses in Honduras and Guatemala, but no hostile confrontations.

Jail Was a Relief

Detention finally came in Tapachula, just as they had expected. Nearly all of the migrants are aware of what awaits them at the Mexican border. Many Central Americans, fearing they will be turned back at Tapachula, slip into Mexico to the north near T enosique so as to catch a freight train known as “the Beast” to the US border. Most African and Asian migrants, coached by the smugglers, go to the authorities instead.

Mexico gives them two choices: Petition for asylum, which is not difficult to get if you have a good case for it and can wait two to three months, or plead your case, ask for a travel permit and promise not to remain in Mexico. Take the second option and you are granted safe passage, with 30 days to get out of the country.

Mexico detains more refugees and migrants than nearly any country in the world—90,000 (not all at once) in 2012. In the first 11 months of 2014, the number jumped to 117,000, most from violence-plagued Honduras, El Salvador or Guatemala. By way of contrast, Britain detained 25,000 over a similar period.

The Estación Migratoria Siglo XXI in Tapachula is the largest detention site in Mexico, with a capacity of 960, but many people are held a week or less, giving the place a revolving-door feel. Most Eritreans view this delay as a minor irritant, after all they have been through.

The UNHCR also has an office here, but staff there can only guess at the number of Eritreans who come through based on detention statistics from the federal government, as almost none register as refugees. “They don’t approach the UN,” said Ana Silva Alfonso. “They know the way, and they are very well organized.”

I met Tesfay and Ghebre after they had been inside for seven days. Neither was fazed. All they were talking about was where to go next, California or Texas. They appeared to have no plan and no relatives to call upon in either state, but they had been reading posts on Facebook. They inclined toward the Hidalgo Bridge at McAllen, Texas, as their crossing into the United States.

Asked why the US, Tesfay merely shrugged and said, “I like freedom.”
“A Beast That Took a Break and Came Back”
Prison Torture in Egypt

Aida Seif al-Dawla is a psychiatrist whose fight for citizens’ rights and dignity in Egypt has taken many forms since her days as a student activist in the 1970s. In 1993, she founded the Nadeem Center for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture, of which she remains executive director. Lina Attalah, editor-in-chief of the independent newspaper Mada Masr, spoke with Seif al-Dawla in early April 2015 about the prevalence of torture in Egypt and the latest state attempts to restrict the activities of non-governmental organizations. In the summer of 2014, state newspapers published a warning from the Ministry of Social Solidarity that NGOs operating outside the scope of the law organizing their work would be subject to legal action and possible dissolution. In parallel, media outlets leaked names of prominent human rights advocates and organizations as potential defendants in a lawsuit accusing them of receiving foreign funds to destabilize the country. The news circulated against the backdrop of a systematic crackdown on freedoms, manifested in the imprisonment of activists and journalists and the general suppression of dissent.

You were telling me about the different manifestations of torture that made you want to focus on the issue in the early 1990s. How has torture developed as a practice in the last 20 years? To what extent has it been normalized to target all citizens and not just deter political activity?

It’s a difficult question because we are only able to describe what we see, and what we see is the tip of the iceberg. In general, torture is associated with moments of political awakening. So we started receiving people who underwent torture around the 2000 protests in solidarity with the Palestinian intifada. Then, in 2003, around the protests against the US invasion of Iraq, we also received torture survivors. The same happened around the Kifaya protests against the regime in 2005, as well as the calls for the independence of the judiciary, up until the revolution. But I haven’t seen anything more violent than what we are witnessing today.

I thought what happened during the revolution was the most violent form of oppression. I won’t ever forget the first case of torture I saw after the revolution broke out. A young man came to us at 6 am on February 10, 2011, and recounted the details of his arrest and detention at a military prison. He claimed to have seen a man dying from the effects of torture, and later we managed to verify his account. He showed us traces of torture on his back—something I hadn’t seen before. Since then, the cases have not stopped.

According to what I see and hear, there is a desire to break people and humiliate them. This is an analysis based not on presumptions but on survivors’ accounts of what they are told as they are tortured. There is also a significant increase in sexual assaults on men and women. In general, I feel there is a beast that took a break and came back in full force to take revenge.

After the June 30, 2013 protests calling for an end to the Muslim Brothers’ rule, torture increased. But the public stopped wanting to see it, and started to label accounts of torture as lies. Some opted instead to acknowledge that torture is happening—and to endorse it. This is the major difference from before. The state will always oppress, but it is no longer so important for the state to hide its crimes of torture as it was in the past.

The usual story is that lesser-known people are the ones who are tortured. But people spoke out fiercely against torture in the wake of the death of Khalid Sa’id, the young Alexandrian with traits of the middle class.

Violence and torture are inversely proportional to the expected reaction when the case is publicized. If a poor man, unknown to anyone, enters a police station and the cops torture him, no reaction is expected. There are many examples of such people—Islamists and others—whose torture stirred up no reaction. If the man is well known, the opposite is true. Today, however, the Ministry of Interior allows itself a higher ceiling with regard to torture. The way in which the well-known activist Alaa Abd El Fattah was arrested and beaten [in November 2013] is a sign of this escalation, but also of the police settling scores, as we see in other assaults on prominent dissidents. No one is safe anymore.
Do you think it’s true that middle-class people were moved by Khalid Sa’id’s torture because he resembled them and that therefore his story went viral? Does this narrative bother you?

Of course it bothers me. But there is some truth there. The picture of Khalid Sa’id was undeniably influential. It was horrible. When I saw it the first time, I thought it was a mummy in the picture. His case got a lot of attention.

But in the same week that Khalid Sa’id was killed, an old man was beaten and tortured to death in a Nasr City police station and it went largely unnoticed. A group tried to set up a campaign for him, but it failed. In the same month, another man was arrested, and tortured—his hair was ripped from his head—because he was drinking beer with a woman in Muqattam. People asked what he was doing with a woman in Muqattam! It was an indicator that the opposition to Khalid Sa’id’s death was not unconditional rejection of torture. Sympathy with torture survivors is conditional.

Is torture just a habit acquired over the years by the security apparatus or is it a state policy?

Torture is part of state policy. The state is not content to refrain from stopping torture. There are laws in place to limit a tortured citizen’s ability to get justice. Citizens can get monetary compensation, but it’s very hard to get a criminal case filed. That has to go through the public prosecutor, who is a political figure and has the right to accept or refuse the case. If he refuses the case, the prosecutor is not required to explain why, and his decision cannot be appealed unless new evidence emerges.

Policemen don’t pay for torture tools and torture rooms out of their salaries. These things are paid for out of the Ministry of Interior’s budget, which we fund with our taxes. In other words, we are paying the state to torture us.

We have a culture of violence at home, in school and elsewhere, but it’s different when torture is directed by the state at society and then society copies the practice. Today, violence in society is taking the shape of torture. We recently saw people tie a man to a tree and torture him because he was suspected of having done a crime. There is also a media discourse that condones violence. So we have seen reports of a mother turning in her son, and a woman on the Metro denouncing a girl to a policeman for reading books on atheism because the girl was reading the novel *Children of Gebelawi*. [This Naguib Mahfouz novel was banned in Egypt in 1959 as it was said to have alienated authorities at al-Azhar. The book was eventually published outside of Egypt and distributed in Cairo, and later, in the mid-2000s, was reprinted by an Egyptian publisher. —LA]

Shireen El Kady, 25, an accountant from Cairo, was abducted in Tahrir Square by the army and subjected to sexual assault and beating.

BRIAN DRISCOLL/REDUX
Do you find that torture inside police stations is a version of something that happens every day in the streets, where citizens feel they aren’t in full control of their own bodies?

Of course, the state doesn’t function as a servant of society, but as a proprietor of it. Any plainclothes policeman can stop you at any point and ask for your identification card. Anywhere else in the world, if a plainclothes policeman accosts you in that manner, you have the right to ask him who he is and why he is stopping you. The state here has the right to tell a woman what to wear on the street or at work. When people cross what the state deems to be red lines, the state is entitled to punish them physically by incarcerating them and oppressing them.

You started at the Nadeem Center by offering confidential medical care to survivors, but over time you started to take an open political stand and to publicize cases. Did you feel that the need for advocacy trumped the patient’s privacy? How do you balance the personal and public dimensions of these cases?

The balance is worked out in agreement with the patient—all the details, including whether to publicize the case and what the consequences of doing that might be. Publicity can both be a means of protecting the survivor and a way to put them back in confrontation with the police. We cannot guarantee that a confrontation won’t happen, but we can guarantee that we will be there to support the survivor in either case.

Some survivors ask that we publicize their cases from the beginning, when we do not see that as the right decision, because, for example, the survivor hasn’t seen a forensic examiner yet. In such cases, publicity can lead to restrictions on the freedoms of the survivor and attempts at barring him from seeing a doctor. In many cases, the therapist also has an opinion about publicity and he or she will determine whether we are ready to make a move.

The therapist is present with the survivor at all times when a decision to publicize has been taken. The therapist is there when testimony is collected, whether in a private setting for the writing of a report or press release, or at a public conference.

Do you choose certain cases for extensive documentation and publicity in order to make torture a matter of general concern?

We intensify the publicity with certain cases in order to create some dialectics over the phenomenon and to avoid merely reporting a number of separate incidents. This is what we are trying to do now with the death penalty, for example. But, of course, the campaigns around torture have different players now, with the advent of groups of young activists who are not affiliated with NGOs and who volunteer to move around,

Mohamed Abdalla, 24, a sound engineer from Cairo, was arrested for protesting and tortured in prison. BRIAN DRISCOLL/REDUX
meet violence and torture survivors, gather their testimonials and put them out there for the public to see.

**Do you think the public has been desensitized to state violence, in view of the increase, and the fact that many people condone it?**

It is a fine balance, but to refrain from documenting and publicizing the details of torture cases is not the solution. I think it has to do with how we present each case. Personally, I prefer not to use shocking images of blood and gore. Instead, we want to highlight the life of the survivor, and the extent to which the survivor looks like us, so as to convey that we are all facing the same danger. We try to talk to people who want to listen; for those people, seeing is not a precondition of believing. In any case, there is no alternative but to keep talking about the issue.

**Is there a strong gender dimension to torture practices, with men attacked on the basis of their masculinity and women are attacked on the basis of their womanhood, as social norms define those categories?**

Of course. Nothing is said during torture parties that is not said on the street. It is just multiplied. So we find in torture of women the same verbal assaults and sexual threats that male-dominated society uses against women. At the same time, as they are being tortured, men are likened to women and to LGBT people. In general, torture is a mechanism for breaking and humiliating a person. The infamous story of ‘Imad al-Kabir is an example: A policeman ordered his subordinate to sexually assault Kabir while taking photographs, which he threatened to distribute among Kabir’s family members. We encounter everything, including rape and sexual assault.

**Is it inevitable that torture survivors will be broken by these experiences?**

Yes, it is inevitable. But recovery is possible, despite persistent after-effects. The strength of the person in question makes a difference. And the less the individual is aware of the reason for his torture, the less he can explain it, the more difficult his condition can be. Those who work in politics, especially Islamists, believe that this suffering has a meaning, and they are able to decide after the experience whether to continue with their work or to stop. But those who are not directly politicized or who are caught off guard by their torture do not recover easily. They tend to isolate themselves from society and face a certain emotional loss.

**What are the cumulative psychological effects of torture and other violence during the clashes between state agents and protesters in the aftermath of the revolution?**

Bitterness and anger. No one has been spared. My own son, his friends and his circles, are examples. They went through a lot, from visits to police stations to trips to the morgue. They saw friends die or go to prison and it has all been a cruel experience. My son, for example, has been pouring out his anger at any policeman he meets in the street. Bitterness aside, there is a sense of defeat and a loss of meaning in life, as well as a mix of love and hate for the country and attempts to flee, which fail most of the time.

**Have you nonetheless encountered some success in your work?**

Of course, there is tangible success. We have become a well-known and respected center, and we are working on important cases. But the more evident success is to be found with patients whose condition is improving and who are returning to normal life, as well as the good state of doctors, and their ability to carry on the hard work, despite the huge pressure they face.

**I want to ask you about the Nadeem Center’s role in confronting the state’s crackdown on human rights organizations in the last year. You were an important figure in the stand against the 1999 NGO law, which also limited the freedom of association for the civil society movement.**

We had the experience of rejecting the law in 1999, and so we knew how it would end. Nobody believed us when we said we should resist the law because it gave the state the upper hand. That’s why we had to negotiate and, inevitably, a law we opposed passed anyway.

When the law passed, we applied to register the Egyptian Association to Combat Torture alongside other organizations that were also applying to register. The applications were all refused. When we went to court to appeal the decision, the registrations were all accepted, with the exception of the Egyptian Association to Combat Torture. Believe it or not, the last round of arbitration in the Association’s case, which started in 2001, was adjourned again in May without resolution.

Of course, this latest crackdown concerns us. The state can shut us down any time, despite the facts that our accounts are public and that we pay our taxes every year. I am ready to be audited by the authorities, so long as Naguib Sawiris gets audited, too, along with the other big businessmen. If they want to shut down the clinic, they are welcome to do so, but not with the excuse of us using foreign funding. If the state is against foreign funding, let them ban it.

I am one of the people who used to ask diplomats from the European Union in meetings at the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies to stop funding programs in Egypt. It is European taxpayers’ money. If the Egyptian government issues a law that gives it control over this money, we cannot really ask the EU to oppose this decision and risk its relations with the Egyptian government. So let them stop the funding and we will manage. We won’t stop working on fighting torture, even if they shut down the clinic.
Gaza as an Open-Air Prison

Ilana Feldman

In February, the well-known British street artist Banksy went to the Gaza Strip to draw attention to the plight of Palestinians in the aftermath of the devastating Israeli assault the previous summer. With regard to the murals he painted around the Strip, he wrote: “Gaza is often described as ‘the world’s largest open-air prison’ because no one is allowed to enter or leave. But that seems a bit unfair to prisons—they don’t have their electricity and drinking water cut off randomly almost every day.” This comment, a new iteration in a long history of describing Gaza as a place of confinement, is meant to point out the continuous degradation of living conditions in this sliver of land cut off from the rest of Palestine and the world.

Plans for rebuilding Gaza in the wake of the latest Israeli onslaught also prompted a suggestion for revision of terminology. In response to the Cairo donor conference held in late October 2014, commentators argued that proposals for reconstruction would deepen the systems of control over Palestinians and place humanitarian actors in the position of implementing the blockade Israel has tightened since Hamas was elected to lead the Palestinian Legislative Council in 2006. According to journalist Jonathan Cook, “One Israeli analyst has compared the proposed solution to transforming a Third World prison into a modern US super-max incarceration facility. The more civilized exterior will simply obscure its real purpose: not to make life better for the Palestinian inmates, but to offer greater security to the Israeli guards.”

Observers have been regularly describing Gaza as an open-air prison at least since the late 1990s. The term has been used by activists in the Palestinians’ corner (such as Noam Chomsky and Ralph Nader), by not-so-sympathetic officials (such as former World Bank head James Wolfensohn), by humanitarian and human rights organizations (such as Médecins Sans Frontières and B’Tselem), by reporters writing for a range of outlets and, perhaps most importantly, by Palestinians.
themselves. The twists offered by Banksy and the unnamed Israeli analyst suggest that conditions have become so dire that this language may now be inadequate to describe the state of affairs.

What does the term “open-air prison” connote? Perhaps the first referent for the term is the control over Palestinian movement that has been a central part of Israeli occupation practice. These restrictions are what Sinn Fein’s Gerry Adams pointed to when he said in 2009 that “this is a total denial of the rights of the people of Palestine. This is an open-air prison…. People can’t travel out of here; they can’t travel in.” And it is not only advocates for Palestinian rights who have noted this control.

In the midst of the 2014 attack, the New York Times reported that “the vast majority of Gazans cannot leave Gaza…. Prime Minister David Cameron of Britain in 2010 called Gaza ‘an open-air prison,’ drawing criticism from Israel. But in reality, the vast majority of Gazans are effectively trapped.” Gazans suffer from their inability to move in and out of the Strip. Even Israeli officials might concede this point, though they would disagree about who is responsible.

And responsibility is a second referent in the term “open-air prison.” It is meant to indicate not only that Palestinians in Gaza cannot move, but also that Gaza is not independent. Israel, the occupying power, is the warden of the jail. In 2007, following the Hamas takeover of the Strip from security forces loyal to the Fatah-dominated branch of the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, the Guardian remarked: “The Palestinians can be blamed for weak leadership…. But the impoverishment and fragmentation of Gaza is a result not just of tribal Palestinian politics, but of the cumulative despair generated by living in an open-air prison. As Israel is the jailer it bears responsibility too for the conditions inside.” As a letter to the editors of the Washington Post put it: “Gaza has been turned into an open-air prison, with all its borders—land, sea and air—controlled by Israel.”

The insistence on Israeli responsibility has only become more urgent in the years since the 2005 pullout of Jewish settlers and pullback of soldiers to the Green Line, the 1949 armistice line that is the closest thing to an internationally recognized border around the Strip. Israeli officials have since argued that they no longer occupy Gaza; the UN and experts in international law disagree. The 2014 attacks prompted some of the strongest statements about responsibility, as when Médecins Sans Frontières official Jonathan Whittall decried the circumstance of working “in an open-air prison to patch up prisoners in between their torture sessions…. Some of the prisoners have organized into armed groups and resist their indefinite detention by firing rockets over the prison wall. However, the prison guards are the ones who have the capacity to launch large-scale and highly destructive attacks on the open-air prison.” He went on to ask: “Would [we] accept to work in a prison where the guards had thrown away

A rainy day in the Shati refugee camp west of Gaza City.
the key and threw explosive devices over the wall into the overcrowded den of human suffering.” That Médecins Sans Frontières felt compelled to move beyond its usual stance of being a witness to suffering, but not judging causes, indicates both the extremity of suffering and the immensity of the imbalance in responsibility for it.

Prison life is about confinement and loss of control. It is also experienced as a narrowing of life possibilities and future horizons. A February 14, 2015 report in the Washington Post put it starkly: “In almost every way, the Gaza Strip is much worse off now than before last summer’s war between Israel and Hamas. Scenes of misery are one of the few things in abundance in the battered coastal enclave…. Palestinians in Gaza say they are trapped more than ever in what they call an open-air prison.” With the dramatic destruction of 2014 fresh in the collective mind, it is easy to forget just how bad things already were beforehand. In the summer of 2002, at the height of the second intifada and Israeli armed incursions into Palestinian cities, Vincent O’Reilly, the head of Refugee Trust International wrote that Palestinians were imperiled by “malnutrition, ill health, psychosocial trauma, depression and psychosis. Agriculture is on the verge of collapse, livelihoods are threatened and for many people destitution is close.” He continued: “Indeed the fact that on any one day over 1 million people are denied free movement by armed soldiers means that citizens of the West Bank and Gaza are being held in the largest open-air prison in the world today.”

As O’Reilly’s comments show, in early appearances the term “open-air prison” was frequently applied to both parts of the Occupied Territories. In 1988 an article in the Toronto Star described the intifada youth in Gaza as “the first generation to have lost their fear because they have nothing to lose: Jail sentences merely change the architecture of their prison.” And the earliest LexisNexis result for the full term “open-air prison” is about a village in the West Bank. Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s the term was applied equally to both places: “Now they live under occupation in what are essentially two open-air prisons, one in the West Bank and the other in Gaza.”

Mirroring conditions on the ground, usage began to diverge in the later years of the second intifada, as Israel increasingly shut down access to Gaza and began to build a wall through the West Bank. In the face of this construction, a report in Ireland’s Sunday Tribune commented that the wall was poised to “effectively mak[e] the West Bank a huge open-air prison, like the Gaza Strip.” By 2007 the linguistic separation seems complete, along with the political separation of the territories between Hamas and Fatah. Commenting on the Hamas seizure of control in Gaza, Gwynne Dyer wrote: “In a sense this confrontation has been coming for years because the Gaza Strip is an overcrowded open-air prison where living conditions are vastly worse than in the West Bank.” Increasingly, the suffering of the West Bank and Gaza were perceived as different. And Gaza was viewed as a harbinger of the worst possible fates for the West Bank.

There have also been shifting temporalities in the term’s deployment. It is sometimes offered as a description of what is and sometimes as a warning of what may come to be. As noted, the building of the West Bank wall was one occasion when “open-air prison” has been used to admonish. The Irish Times related a UN Security Council debate in 2003, in which the wall was described as “a land grab that would create ‘open-air prisons’ on Palestinian territories.” Another was the removal of Jewish settlers and soldiers from Gaza in 2005. An editorial in the San Jose Mercury News reported on Palestinian fears that “the pullout set to begin next week will simply turn the narrow, overcrowded strip of land into an open-air prison whose borders and destiny will remain under Israeli supervision.” These concerns were echoed by international activists, such as the Canadians reported on by the Montreal Gazette: “A Gaza Strip without Jewish settlements will be little more than an open-air prison for Palestinians unless the international community puts pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to also relinquish control over land, sea and air access to the territory, say Montreal advocates for Palestinian rights.”

What does it mean that there are warnings of a possible future that is also the present condition? For one thing it highlights the ongoing and steady deterioration of Gaza’s situation: As bad as the present may be, there always seems to be a worse future yet to come. For another, it points to the inadequacy of existing vocabulary to properly name this condition. As much as the term “open-air prison” properly calls attention to confinement and control, it might also suggest a process of ordered judgment that may unwittingly accept that Palestinians in Gaza deserve their punishment. As much as it underscores the downside of daily life, it might also suggest a degree of routine and regularity that belies the constant threat faced by those who live in Gaza. As a resident of Rafah put it: “This is worse than prison…. In prison, you can be safe. Here you are in danger all the time.” And he said that in 2001.

Endnotes

1 Independent, February 27, 2015.
2 The National (Abu Dhabi), October 27, 2014.
3 Guardian, April 9, 2009.
10 Philadelphia Inquirer, May 1, 1997.
15 San Jose Mercury News, August 12, 2005.
16 Montreal Gazette, August 16, 2005.
Writing Palestinian Politics in Israel’s Prisons Before Oslo

Rebecca Granato
Since Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, around three quarters of a million Palestinians have been arrested, sometimes for actions taken against Israeli soldiers or civilians, but at other times for association with others or for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. In the early days of the occupation, thousands of Palestinians were rounded up, many serving sentences of ten years or more.

Many of these thousands were already aligned with a political movement before entering prison, and all but a handful without any such ties ended up joining a faction within weeks of arrival. More than half identified with the Fatah movement, which at the time controlled the Palestine Liberation Organization and now dominates the Palestinian Authority formed in 1994 after the Oslo agreements with Israel. The emphasis on political affiliation made the Israeli prison of the 1970s a notable site of Palestinian institution building, a place to work together within the factions to develop the capability to govern outside the prison walls.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, and through the early 1980s, prisoners put pen to paper and carefully inscribed their activities into notebooks provided to them by the Israeli prison authorities. The notes include entire books studied by prisoners at self-organized educational sessions and hand-copied verbatim, as well as responses to political events and documentation of each faction's structures, rules and regulations. The circulation of these writings had profound implications, transforming thousands of men into politicized beings, a kind of citizenry. Through the documents the prisoners learned the craft of politics and helped to fashion factions inside the jails into well-oiled machines. These places intended as sites of punishment thus allowed Palestinian movements to become more efficient. More significantly, the introduction of accessible study and discussion materials meant that incarcerated persons could develop political careers—and via an educational system rather than just personal connections. Inside Israeli prisons arose the basis for a post-Oslo state-in-waiting.

From Individuals to Institutions

Two Fatah-affiliated ex-prisoners who helped to build the political structures described in the surviving documents are Radi Jara’i and Ibrahim Khrishi. Jara’i was arrested in 1976, having joined Fatah just two years earlier and received arms training in Beirut. A high-school teacher from Jerusalem, he and two of his students were captured in Netanya with an explosive device he says they intended to use against civilians. Thereafter Jara’i spent 15 years in prison, during which time he took a leading role in transcribing the internal political conversations into notebooks. Khrishi presents a different, but equally interesting, picture. Prior to his first arrest in 1982, Khrishi insists he was not formally involved in Fatah or any political group. He was enrolled at Birzeit University, and focused on his studies, when the soldiers came in search of him at his family home. But upon his release from jail he returned to Birzeit as a leader of Shabiba, the student arm of Fatah. Today, 30 years later, Khrishi remains an active member of the faction, holding the position of secretary-general in the Palestinian Legislative Council.

Interviews with Jara’i, Khrishi and other ex-prisoners reveal a major shift over time in how Palestinians organized themselves in Israeli jails. During the first years of the occupation, when the political prisons started to fill up, leaders were informally appointed—without any rules or regulations—to organize the lives of the prisoners and maintain a certain calm. The early leaders, such as Abu ‘Ali Shahin, who had been an officer in the PLO army, were always well connected. Social life inside the prisons closely resembled the outside, replete with neighborhood or family disputes and alliances. One gained the trust of others through social networks rather than accomplishments.

But this “individual leader” system, as many ex-prisoners call it, was not practicable for overseeing a rapidly expanding prison population under great stress. Conditions, many interviewees say, were “atrocious,” with severe overcrowding. One recalled that prisoners had to sleep like sardines in a can, with one man’s feet next to his neighbor’s head and brushing up against the head of the person on his other side. In such uncomfortably close quarters, it is not surprising that physical violence sometimes erupted. These tensions, too, frequently corresponded to factional divides. An oft-recounted clash broke out in the early 1970s between members of Fatah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), leading a member of the latter to slash at a Fatah man’s face with a razor. Abu ‘Ali Shahin, the informal “boss” of Fatah in the prison, not only demanded an apology from the PFLP, but also organized an attack against the assumed leaders of that faction. According to Jara’i, this confrontation led the informal leadership to realize that their differences would be better resolved by talking. The Palestinians understood that the jail administrators could exploit inter-factional divisions to the disadvantage of all the prisoners. They agreed that some written rules were needed.

The result of these conversations was a gradual move away from the “individual leader” period toward a more institutionalized and—notably—documented approach to political organizing in prison. The prisons at Beersheva and Ashkelon, both with relatively stable populations of hundreds of Fatah inmates serving substantial sentences of more than five years, were the places where most of the foundational political documents were written. With very little to do in the way of work for the prison administration, the prisoners themselves largely set the rhythm of...
daily life. The initial organizational efforts were not driven by a clearly centralized leadership; rather, they happened organically, coming out of the regular meetings between individual leaders.

Starting around 1973 or 1974, the conversations focused on how to develop a clear administrative structure in the interest of improving inmate safety. At first, before hunger strikes won inmates access to writing implements, they wrote with smuggled pens on cardboard from packets of cigarettes or margarine. The extant documentation of the agreed-upon rules and regulations consists of tidy penmanship on the pages of small notebooks intended for examining Israeli schoolchildren. It cannot have been lost on the prisoners that they were drawing up their guidelines in booklets adorned with Hebrew letters, which somehow marked them as permissible by the Israelis.

The creation of written records was not premeditated, but its value was quickly embraced as a way to inspire participation, unity and support for the Fatah movement. Indeed, recording in writing how a system should work and how participants therein should behave is a process newly emerging or changing states undergo. Texts outlining rules and regulations serve as a kind of contract between leaders and participants, as well as a standard by which to judge success and failure. So, too, documentation gave the prisoners a basis from which to work, a starting point from which they could pursue political development. Most significantly, however, documentation enabled the establishment of a prisoner’s movement. Inscribing beliefs, practices and codes in ink ensured that the system would survive beyond a particular leader’s release.

Jara’i and others say that the written records of organizational principles were first “published” in the late 1970s. One must look to oral sources for confirmation since the notebooks are hardly ever dated or credited to an author. The lack of dates suggests timelessness—that the documents are intended to transcend the historical moment and to govern prison organization until amended. The obvious reason for the anonymity was to escape detection by Israel, since many jailhouse leaders remained connected to Fatah after their release, some for decades. Khrishi, for example, became head of Shabiba within a month of his release in 1991 and would not have wanted such writings traced back to him. During the 1970s and 1980s, not unlike today, it was difficult to avoid rearrest. Almost every person I interviewed went to prison at least twice. Unassigned authorship can be read another way as well: The documents were the instructional record for leadership and political engagement, and
a clear reflection of the democratic, participatory intentions of the prisoners. This newly designed structure was a far cry from the top-down, static leadership of Fatah in the diaspora. Because every single Fatah member within a given prison had a voice when it came to deciding on representatives and approving the governing rules of the space, the anonymity of the documents reflects a community spirit and collective responsibility for the circulated written material.

Equal participation, however, did not mean there was a complete lack of centralization. On the contrary, the most important thing accomplished during this period was the codification of a strong, elected leadership. The prisoners’ starting point for designing an internal political system was to look to Fatah in the diaspora, which had created something of a state-in-waiting, as a model. The hierarchy inside at first glance resembles that of the outside, including a Central Committee and a Revolutionary Council. But additions were made to accommodate the realities of incarceration, including an education committee to oversee the book lists and promotion of prisoners from one “grade” to the next, and a security committee to monitor the Israeli authorities, as well as to watch out for and punish spies or informers. This structure assigned specific tasks to each position. Thus, centralization did not mean concentration of power in a few hands.

From 1977 onward, the process by which the committee-based leadership was chosen was also agreed upon and enshrined in the prisoners’ notebooks. Even in the largest prisons, with hundreds of Fatah members, completely democratic elections became the norm. Everyone was a candidate. If Fatah had 250 prisoners at a given location, all 250 names would appear on the election roster. One copy of each roster would
Resistance Museum in Abu Dis

Alex Lubin

In the shadow of the Israeli separation wall, and on the bucolic campus of al-Quds University in Abu Dis, a suburb of East Jerusalem, sits a museum dedicated to Palestinian prisoners of Israel. The Abu Jihad Museum for the Prisoners’ Movement is named after the Palestinian political prisoner and martyr, Khalil al-Wazir or Abu Jihad, who gained notoriety as a leader of the first intifada and an advocate for prisoners’ rights. Al-Wazir was assassinated by Israel in Tunisia in 1988.

It is estimated that there are currently 5,300 Palestinians in Israeli jails. Hundreds of them are children who, under Israeli military law, can be tried as adults at age 10. Since 1967, there have been approximately 750,000 Palestinian prisoners, and about 25 percent of the Palestinian population has been incarcerated at some point in life. The museum’s director, Fahd Abu al-Hajj, was himself a political prisoner, having spent ten years in an Israeli jail.

National museums are frequently places where states relate their foundational narratives that locate the state in a past and project the state into the future. Similarly, museums are places where states display art and material culture of other places and cultures in order to position themselves as modern or cultured. The Palestinian prisoners’ museum works in a different curatorial register because it represents a people who are stateless, while collecting material culture about the ongoing struggle for national liberation. In this way, the Abu Jihad Museum operates self-consciously as resistance, while also curating the Israeli occupation in subversive ways. The space might be compared to the Hizballah-run landmark in Mleeta, south Lebanon, which also engages in the genre of “resistance museums.”

The design of the building reproduces the experience of being taken to jail. Cement pillars shield the entrance, evoking the separation wall that stands in stark relief behind the museum. The visitor then walks across a paved bridge over a stand of cacti, the historical marker of Palestinian villages. Once over the bridge, the visitor must pass through a turnstile crowned with barbed wire in order to enter the museum. It is akin to both incarceration and movement through a checkpoint, thus providing commentary on the walls of the prison and that prison-like barrier just a few hundred yards away.

Once inside, the visitor encounters a history of Palestine’s prisons beginning with those built during the British Mandate. The displays tell the stories of political prisoners killed in Israeli jails since 1967 and focus on various forms of torture employed. Here the museum relies on abstract representations, for example artists’ depictions of sensory deprivation and stress positions, rather than the physical tools of the torturer’s trade. The interior design corresponds to the exhibits on the walls; bars and walls disrupt the movement of visitors through the hallways. There is a display of political posters of the prisoners’ movement (much of the poster collection has been published in book form).

Although the great majority of the Palestinian prisoners are men, the Abu Jihad Museum features information about women prisoners, too. The text accompanying photos of female prisoners indicates that children born to imprisoned women must be incarcerated with their mothers for two years, after which time the children must leave the prison, often entering homes without parents.

The second floor of the museum showcases prisoners’ artwork and letters. Like political prisoners in the US, many Palestinian prisoners learned to write while in prison and chose to document their internment. The museum also shares many of the tactics employed by prisoners to communicate with each other without the guards’ knowledge.

The prisoners’ writings make up the archival material housed in the library on the third floor. The archives house hundreds of thousands of testimonials, which are intended to assist in the work of historical preservation as well as legal advocacy in the present.

The Abu Jihad Museum for the prisoners’ movement suggests the political possibilities of a resistance museum. Its curatorial politics as well as its interior and exterior design mirror the passage from freedom to unfreedom. At the same time, the separation wall standing just outside of the museum suggests another kind of prison.

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be sent to each room and the prisoners would vote secretly, with the election committee counting the votes at the end.

Common Political Language

The repeated written emphasis on cooperation and democratic decision-making practices extended outward to other factions as well. The prisoners’ texts concerning other factions emphasized unity rather than competition as a guiding principle. One notebook full of writing, which, according to interview subjects, was circulated from one prison to another, set out to answer the question, “What is Fatah and what are its features?” In so doing, it served as a kind of set of bylaws for interactions with other groups. From the very first sentence, the language of inter-factional cohesion is employed. The phrase “national unity” is repeated throughout, and is said to be “the common denominator” of all public interests and of Palestinian nationalism itself.

To that end, prisoners established general detainee institutions, committees that cut across party lines. One example is the “struggler committee,” responsible for a kind of public relations and issues such as hunger strikes that required inter-prison communication and mass participation. Another is the “reception committee,” which welcomed each prisoner to his new home, oriented him to the prison and invited him to choose a political faction with which to align.

The documents suggest at least a desire to cooperate on issues related to the general prison experience, rather than focusing on ideological differences between factions. This inclination toward unity is confirmed in the rhetoric of ex-prisoners. Both Jara’i and Khrishi emphasized the cooperative spirit that developed alongside the political structures. In describing interactions with, say, PFLP members, they spoke in glowing terms about the warmth that developed across factional lines, often noting that prison was the only place they experienced such frictionless politics. Likewise, both men stressed that factions strove not to undermine one other by poaching members or hatching other deviant schemes.

The notebooks were widely shared among prisoners in the late 1970s and into the 1980s, allowing for a common political language to evolve. By the end of the 1970s, even the smaller facilities housing only 50–100 prisoners mimicked the leadership structure and spirit established in places like Ashkelon and Beersheva. Information was trafficked via kabsula, a tiny piece of paper wrapped in plastic, swallowed and later passed around in a new location. The most common site of exchange was the Ramla hospital, where prisoners from all over were transferred for treatment. The relocation of prisoners further supported consistency in Fatah politics. In times of turbulence, such as large hunger strikes, the Israelis would move the suspected ringleaders elsewhere, sometime hundreds of miles away. The idea was to weaken the faction, but the effect was usually that the relocated leader was elected to another top position in his next prison residence.

Prior to the late 1970s, the prison experience was contained only in oral stories. The transition to written records and the resulting replication of structures and systems across prisons created a common sense of belonging to something larger; the circulation of written and reproducible rules, regulations and ideology bound together seemingly disparate and discrete spaces. Out of this circulation and widespread adoption came the birth of a formal political organization inside the prisons. It was at this point that one could truly talk about “the prison experience” and “the prisoners’ movement.”

Moving Up

The biggest impact of the documentation in the prisons is that it led to more diversity in political participation inside, and eventually outside. Khrishi is an excellent illustration of someone who had next to no political interest, and certainly no experience prior to prison, but who now plays a significant role in the Palestinian Authority. Transitions like Khrishi’s were made possible by written materials, which served as tools for obtaining a political education. Upon his arrival at Junayd jail in Nablus, he was welcomed by the ‘reception committee’ and joined Fatah. This decision came not out of any particular urge to be part of a faction, but was the norm. As Khrishi pointed out, “Less than one in 100”—usually only the very religious—“remained unaffiliated.” Having joined Fatah, he was immediately included in its educational programming, much of which dealt with the question of Palestine.

Khrishi was not an individual who could have risen to the top in the late 1960s or early 1970s. In prison, as he tells it, he fell in love with the written word and vowed to read everything available to him, from social and cultural works to novels and poems. It was through text that Khrishi was drawn into the history, politics and, most importantly, policies of Fatah. Then, it was via the study of Fatah’s new documentation that he ascended the political chain of command, serving as head of the Central Committee by the time of his release. Through his encounter with the texts codifying Fatah, Khrishi was able to develop a political understanding and ignite the flames of a political career.

By the mid-1980s, these documents were well established as signposts for the Fatah movement’s political structure inside the prisons. Today, looking back, many of the prisoners who experienced the production of the notebooks, as well as those who entered prison in the 1970s, remember that period as the “golden years,” a time when a spirit of democracy and cooperation prevailed in the written word and beyond.
In 2001, following a general amnesty for several hundred political prisoners, the Syrian government reportedly closed its most infamous detention center—the Tadmor military prison. Human rights organizations, both local and international, had made Tadmor the subject of intense scrutiny from the 1980s onward. Amnesty International described the prison as “synonymous with suffering,” citing inmates’ daily exposure to torture, deliberate humiliation and degradation, and dangerous physical conditions, as well as the risk of summary execution.¹ In 1980, Tadmor was the site of a massacre, when the regime ordered the execution of 600 to 1,000 alleged members of the Society of Muslim Brothers in reprisal for an assassination attempt against President Hafiz al-Asad.

Called the “kingdom of death and madness” by poet Faraj Bayraqdar, Tadmor occupies a special place in contemporary Syrian and Arabic prison literature. Several former prisoners of conscience have written harrowing memoirs of their detention. More recently, writers and other cultural producers have focused on the military prison in novels, poetry and documentary film,

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such as Hala Muhammad’s Riḥla ila al-Dhakira (Return to Memory), which was aired as part of Al Jazeera’s series on prison literature. These accounts provide a stark contrast to the Syrian government’s steadfast denial of human rights violations in the prison. Breaking the silence imposed by the Asad regime over more than four decades, such works reconstruct the trauma of detention in Tadmor and challenge the limits imposed by the state on Syrian collective memory.

“Absolute Prison”

The dissident Yasin al-Hajj Salih spent 16 years in detention at various facilities. In his writing and interviews on prison life, he asserts the importance of a political detainee reconciling himself to incarceration and learning how to be productive and thus “tame” time. Not in Tadmor, however, which he calls the “absolute prison”:

Let us imagine a prison without visits, without books and pens, without means of entertainment and without “tools of production” of any sort, without domestic facilities—kitchen fixtures, stoves—without hot water...just a closed place that doesn’t open up except [for one] to receive food...and punishment. That is Tadmor prison: the Syrian shame that is indelible. In this prison, time does not pass. It accumulates over the prisoners and suffocates them.

For al-Hajj Salih, Tadmor represents not just the disgrace of the Syrian regime, but an exception to the rules of how to survive detention and even adapt to it for personal benefit.

Tadmor is situated in the Homs desert near the ancient site of Palmyra. French Mandate authorities ordered the construction of the complex as a military outpost. After Syrian independence, it functioned as a prison for members of the military who had committed ordinary crimes, but according to some reports, as early as 1966, the state began using Tadmor to incarcerate a number of political detainees, particularly those accused of association with the Muslim Brothers. In the 1970s, under the rule of Hafiz al-Asad, the state expanded the prison with the addition of new buildings. According to a 2001 Amnesty International report, the military prison was “designed to inflict the maximum suffering, fear and humiliation on prisoners and to keep them under the strictest control by breaking their spirit.” Prisoners were isolated from the outside world and forbidden to communicate with each other; death could come at any time.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, much of the prison’s population consisted of those charged with political crimes. Between 1980 and 1990, again according to Amnesty International, the regime imprisoned an estimated 20,000 people in Tadmor. The state’s crackdown on opposition movements during that period resulted in severe overcrowding in the communal or dormitory cells of the prison; at times, the cells were so jammed that prisoners had to take turns standing while others slept. The vast majority of these detainees were Muslim Brothers, but there were also members of the Communist Action Party and Communist Party Political Bureau, the pro-Iraq faction of the Baath Party, and other outlawed leftist parties. Because Tadmor was the most punitive site in the archipelago of Syrian prisons, the security apparatus often sent detainees there as a form of additional retribution if they refused to confess or sign loyalty oaths. In some cases, such as that of al-Hajj Salih, prisoners were transferred to Tadmor after their original sentences had expired.

Several Muslim Brothers and others erroneously accused of affiliation with the Islamist group were the first to author memoirs of the hardships of Tadmor. Many of these testimonials were published informally. They are now available on the Internet and so easily circumvent the censorship of the Syrian state. These accounts include Khalid Fadil’s 1985 Fi al-Qa’: Sanatayn fi Sijn Tadmur al-Sahrawi (In the Abyss: Two Years in the Tadmor Desert Prison), Muhammad Salim Hammad’s Tadmur: Shahid wa Mashhud (Tadmor: Witness and Witnessed) and al-Bara’ al-Sarraj’s Min Tadmur ila Harvard (From Tadmor to Harvard), which the author also
began publishing via Twitter in 2011. Lebanese detainees such as 'Ali Abu Dahn, who were among the forcibly disappeared during the Syrian military occupation of Lebanon, have also written about their experiences in Tadmor. In chronological narrative and excruciating detail, the authors present their experiences of arrest, torture and detention at Tadmor and other interrogation centers. These memoirs not only document the authors’ personal suffering at the hands of the state, but they also bear witness for those who were killed in the prison and thus cannot speak for themselves. In addition to a number of Facebook accounts, a website, Tadmor8k.com, provides eyewitness reports of the 1980 massacre and other human rights violations committed by prison authorities. There is no information about who created Tadmor8k or who maintains it, but the website serves as a platform for dissemination of lengthier testimonials about the prison, including Hammad’s.

Words Sometimes Fail

Former detainees who have described their time at Tadmor in memoirs, poetry, fiction or other media must confront the silencing methods of the Syrian regime. And they must contend as well with the incapacity of language to capture the full extent of the cruelty and absurdity of detention. According to al-Bara’ al-Sarraj, Tadmor is a “symphony of fear” that simply cannot be described in words. The combination of abject fear and concern to communicate the lived experience of imprisonment faithfully poses a challenge to many detainees who feel an ethical and political imperative to speak out about their time in prison.

The title of Faraj Bayraqdar’s prison memoir *Khiyanat al-Lugha wa al-Samt* (The Betrayals of Language and Silence), published in 2006, poignantly reflects the conflict between the obligation to combat regime censorship and the bleak recognition that words sometimes fail. Based on writings Bayraqdar smuggled out of prison and edited upon release, *Betrayals* offers a fragmented account of the poet’s detention in a number of prisons and interrogation centers in Syria over the course of 14 years. These places include Palestine Division, an interrogation headquarters of the Syrian military intelligence service where prisoners are routinely tortured, Saydnaya prison and Tadmor.

Bayraqdar recounts some of his and his fellow inmates’ experiences at the military prison in a number of chapters. In a departure from earlier Tadmor memoirs, the poet does not attempt to provide a chronological, fully detailed account of his detention. Instead, he relates his initial transfer to and arrival at the prison and then presents a series of disjointed scenes and brief anecdotes. Beginning with a chapter entitled, “To the East,” Bayraqdar recalls the prisoners’ hopes that they would not be transferred to Tadmor, their despair when they discover that they are being sent there for additional “punishment,” and the torture they suffer upon arrival. Using euphemisms particular to Tadmor and other Syrian jails, he tells of his brutal “reception” and the “hospitality” of the prison guards.

In the following chapter, entitled “Circles of Continuous Inhalation,” Bayraqdar relates the horror of witnessing prisoners killed outside the dormitory cell during what is supposed to be a “breather” in the courtyard. As described in several accounts of Tadmor, when prisoners were permitted to leave the barracks for a break, it was common for guards to torture and kill prisoners arbitrarily, sometimes by inventing new means of torment and sometimes simply by beating them to death. For Bayraqdar, this knowledge means that “the breather in the courtyard is a true cutting off of breath, and sometimes a final cutting off of breath.” A knock on the cell door means another prisoner has died or will die. The chapter closes with the gruesome story of a prisoner forced by a guard to swallow a dead mouse whole. This prisoner, the author tells us, did not die after the incident; he merely lost his sanity.

In a third chapter on Tadmor, entitled “Tadmoriyat: Beyond Surrealism,” Bayraqdar presents his reader with a series of seven numbered “portraits” of the prison using both poetry and prose. In the first vignette, he writes:
High walls of stubborn cold cement…
Observation towers…
Minefields…
Barriers and checkpoints…
Fortifications and highly trained military units…
And finally…surrounded by lessons of pure, national fear
Oh, names of God!
Even if all of Syria fell,
Surely, it would be impossible for this prison to fall.

Here the poet explicitly evokes the connection between fear and physical attributes of the prison and its environs. In the subsequent vignettes, however, he presents scenes of soldiers severely abusing prisoners, featuring forms of cruelty that appear beyond his descriptive abilities. In these passages, marked by a staccato cadence, Bayraqdar tells of a jailer who orders an elderly detainee to lick his boots and then beats him. He conjures the shadows of lashes used to whip inmates, and speaks of prisoners forced into unimaginable stress positions until they collapse. In the final portrait, a guard uses a prisoner as a human trampoline, jumping up and down on the man’s neck and kills him.

At the end of the chapter, Bayraqdar asks his readers: “Do you really want the truth?” He reminds his audience that, surreal as it may seem, what he is attempting to describe really did happen. The atrocities that readers might think impossible were in fact regular occurrences. Here, as elsewhere in the book, the poet raises the question of truth and reliability in his recollection and depiction of his experiences. This interrogation of the capacity of language to portray the worst moments of suffering of political detainees in Tadmor ultimately does not detract from the impact of his account, even while the reader recognizes that it can only be partial and piecemeal. When Bayraqdar uses the term betrayal in his title, it is not just an allusion to his own betrayal as a political detainee at the hands of the Syrian state, but to the treachery of both language and oppressive silence.

“I Do Not Want to Look Outside”

Two years after Bayraqdar’s memoir appeared, Mustafa Khalifa published his landmark novel al-Qawqa’a (The Shell), one of the first about a detainee’s imprisonment in Tadmor. A political prisoner from 1982 to 1994, the author presents the semi-autobiographical story of a seemingly apolitical protagonist named Musa who returns to his homeland after studying film in Paris. Musa is arbitrarily arrested at the airport, brutally tortured at an interrogation center by military intelligence agents, mistakenly identified as a member of the Muslim Brothers, and then sent to the “desert prison.” He does not learn of his alleged crime until the time of his release.

Like many detainees, Musa masters the skill of oral composition—an art that allows prisoners to resist the silence imposed within the prison walls, where they are deprived of basic writing tools and barred from speaking to each other. Musa retains each diary entry in his memory. Eventually, once he is released, he is able to record them on paper. Except for the initial section, the novel is composed of these dated entries—some just a day or two apart and some separated by several months, as if the protagonist was temporarily silenced or had no desire to speak. Each entry contains parenthetical observations—editorial comments seemingly made at a later time, as if the narrator has returned to the composition again and again.

Musa never receives a trial and is detained for 12 years, mostly in the desert prison. He is, however, sentenced to silence by his fellow detainees, when he is overheard telling his torturers that he is, first, a Christian and, then, an atheist. Ostracized by the other inmates in his communal cell, Musa describes himself as withdrawing into his “shell.” The subtitle of the novel is “diary of a voyeur,” but he is not a voyeur in the traditional sexualized sense of the term. Having very little interaction with other inmates, the protagonist constantly peers out of his shell and watches those around him. Censored by the disciplinary mechanisms of prison and by other detainees, he listens attentively to everything and everyone around him, meticulously observing as both insider and outsider, and diligently recording all that he witnesses.
From the beginning of his detention, Musa’s life is threatened not only by the prison guards, who inflict torture, humiliation and degradation, but also by the Islamist extremists in his cell who believe that he should be executed as an unbeliever. For ten years, no one will speak to him because he is considered impure—mimicking the muting of thousands of political prisoners who passed through Tadmor and other sites and who are unable to tell their own stories. Nonetheless, Musa speaks through his diary in the horrifying lexicon familiar to readers of Syrian prison literature. Like Bayraqdar and al-Sarraj, he tells of the “reception” given to prisoners as soon as they arrive at the prison; each is forced to drink filthy water from a sewage drain. Those who refuse are beaten to death. Those who drink are treated to more torture or “hospitality” as the guards call it. There is no respite, and everyday activities bring arbitrary death. Musa recounts how prisoners are routinely whipped, lashed and beaten during breaks in the yard; how prisoners are not allowed to raise their eyes toward their jailers; and how the warden randomly executes 14 of his cellmates. He also methodically describes daily aspects of prison life—the baths, illicit prayers, the confining, airless dimensions of the communal cell, the secret communication between cells, the innovative treatments prisoners devise for wounded deprived of medical care, and the numerous modes of prisoner resistance.

Abruptly, in the twelfth year of his detention, Musa is transferred from the prison back to the military interrogation center. Through the influence of a relative he is finally freed. Musa returns to his family home, but it is no celebratory liberation. Instead, noting that he has never truly been released from prison, he describes himself as having lost the ability to communicate and carrying a grave within himself. Rather than creep out of his shell to record what is happening around him, he remarks: “I do not want to look outside. I close its holes in order to turn my gaze entirely to the inside, to me, to my self.”

Throughout the novel, Musa is cast as “secretly observing” life in the desert prison. His candidly subjective account speaks for him, but also for other inmates. In stark, accessible language, The Shell depicts the experience of Tadmor while raising the question of whether or not a larger Syrian audience is already familiar with Musa’s story. The structure of the novel, with the time lapses between diary entries, also suggests, like Bayraqdar’s memoir, that offering a complete history of the horrors of Tadmor may never be possible.

Never Forget

The conclusion of The Shell is far from optimistic. The exact destiny of Mustafa Khalifa’s protagonist remains unclear, much like the fate of many of the current political detainees and forcibly disappeared in Syria, as well as the outcome of the Syrian revolution. In June 2011, just a few months after the onset of the uprising, the Asad government, according to local and international human rights groups, reopened Tadmor for the purpose of punishing defectors from the military and anti-regime activists. While a recent Human Rights Watch report casts doubt on whether the prison was ever actually closed in 2001, the now well-documented return of political detainees to Tadmor marked one tragic turning point in the events that have unfolded in Syria since March 2011.

Four years into the uprising and conflict, on May 21, 2015, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) took control of the city of Tadmor and the military prison there. While international media outlets and UNESCO focused on the possible destruction of the ruins at the ancient site of Palmyra, social media circulated unconfirmed reports that ISIS members had freed the detainees, including Lebanese prisoners held by the Syrian state for more than 35 years. The rumors of the prisoners’ release caused turmoil for their families and loved ones in Syria, Lebanon and elsewhere, but some former detainees speculated that the Asad regime had transferred the prisoners prior to the ISIS takeover. At the time of writing, the fate of those detained in Tadmor military prison since 2011 remains unknown.

Nine days after the conquest, ISIS destroyed most of Tadmor military prison with improvised explosives and issued a propaganda video of the rubble. The remnants of the structure can no longer be used as a prison. Yet the demolition caused much debate among former detainees, including those who lamented the fact that it was ISIS that blew up the prison, rather than other opposition groups, and those who accused ISIS of destroying evidence of the Asad regime’s human rights violations and crimes against humanity. Still others who had survived the notorious prison expressed regret that they would not be able to revisit the place in the future.

Perhaps, even with the somber and haunting recognition of the hundreds of thousands of Syrians who have lost their lives and the millions who have been displaced or forced into exile in the past four years, there will be an end to the extremely repressive measures and human rights abuses of the Syrian government, its allies and some of the groups now opposing that regime. One can hope that those who were more recently detained in the desert prison have survived and, like their predecessors, will continue the struggle to break the silence. One can still hope that another Tadmor military prison will never be built, and that the stories of those who were imprisoned and died there, the stories of all of those who endured the worst forms of human suffering and the worst types of human cruelty, will never be forgotten.

Endnotes

The Moroccan Prison in Literature and Architecture

Susan Slyomovics

In seventeenth-century Morocco, the scholar Abu ‘Ali al-Hasan Ibn Mas’ud al-Yusi admonished the reigning Sultan Mawlay Isma’il in writing. His much quoted letter, the “short epistle” or al-risala al-sughra, instructed the ruler to avoid injustice and oppression. Mawlay Isma’il was second in line as sultan following the establishment in 1664 of the ‘Alawi dynasty, whose descendants Hassan II (1961–1999) and his son Mohammed VI (1999-) have ruled as kings of Morocco.

Al-Yusi’s letter to Mawlay Isma’il begins by acknowledging limits to the epistolary form in which the genre of advising the ruler (nasiha) is couched: “We have written this letter for at the moment it is all we can do.”

Letters speaking truth to the ruler have a long and influential history in Arabic, and the impact of al-Yusi’s letter on Moroccans through the centuries to the present is immense. Anthropologist Henry Munson traces the myriad ways Moroccan historians and intellectuals perceive al-Yusi as a scholar and exemplar “distinguished from his
contemporaries by daring to speak the truth to the caliph of the time” and by his “frankness” in providing royal counsel; he concludes that “to praise al-Yusi is, in effect, to endorse [al-Yusi’s] view that a ruler’s legitimacy is contingent on his being just. Saying such things in Morocco has often been dangerous.”

Twentieth-century Moroccan prison literature owes much to the letter, the actual and symbolic exchange among groups inside and outside Morocco. There are the letters smuggled from prison, the open letters addressed to the Moroccan government and the conscience of the outside world, the letter-writing campaigns to amass support, and the massive correspondence between external support groups and Moroccan prisoners of conscience. Human voices seemingly silenced behind bars narrate in personal writings key notions about human rights, the public sphere and prison reform. A letter may both channel the experience of an individual prisoner and capture the processes of resistance in its content, form and means of delivery.

Letters, communiqués, narratives, memoirs and even graphic novels about and from prison recounting forcible disappearance, imprisonment and torture have proliferated in the Arabic-speaking world especially in tandem with the rise of the novel in the early twentieth century. In Morocco, French colonial rule (1912–1956) was followed by homegrown tyranny in which various instruments of repression were “Moroccanized.” The legal system, the bureaucracy, the police, the prison system and, in fact, the entire apparatus built by the French protectorate to oppress Moroccans was carried over intact after independence. A first set of French-mandated decrees of 1915, 1927 and 1930 produced legislation to create the administration and construction of a penal system. A second set of decrees would create the category of political prisoner with which to populate a dark, painful category consisting of those forcibly disappeared whose fate was unknown. It is noteworthy that most of all, [prison] construction was such that any ray of sunlight was prevented from penetrating the walls. [The prison] was built directly on the earth, separated from it by only a thin layer of cement. The humidity was extreme. They gave me four used blankets, and presented me, as a favor, with a bolster and a mat that I had to get rid of urgently because it had become a compost heap of bedbugs. I had the right to promenade a half-hour in the morning, and a half-hour in the evening, but because this was a regime of isolation, I was only permitted in the courtyard very early in the morning and at the end of the day, when the sun had passed beyond the high walls. Isolation is the most refined form of torture.

What allowed the French to control, dispossess and oppress Moroccans would permit Moroccans to do the same to Moroccans.

“Years of Lead”

King Hassan II’s reign of close to four decades overlapped with most of the period that has been characterized as the “years of lead” because of repression, thwarted uprisings, human rights abuses, a network of secret prisons and a vast population of known political prisoners. This era also produced a dark, painful category consisting of those forcibly disappeared whose fate was unknown. It is noteworthy that the metaphor of writing about the past of incarceration and the emphasis on the material qualities of the physical page in some vast book about Moroccan prison literature—one visible and legible to an entire nation—was highlighted by the foremost perpetrator of Moroccan carceral conditions. The king said in a famous 1994 speech:

We have therefore decided to turn definitively the page on what is called “political prisoners” .... I intend that this situation will be definitively clarified in order to put an end, on the one hand, to a situation of embarrassment and doubt inside the country and to tendentious criticisms by ill-willed people or enemies abroad. In this way Moroccans will be sincere and credible when they affirm that Morocco has the rule of law, that their words are corroborated by acts.

Since the secret detention centers throughout Morocco is a Moroccan story of disappearance and torture, how does writing work when the subject is the memory of torture? How may the writer translate past experience of torture into a present experience for listeners and readers? Writers,
especially former political prisoners, confront the lack of official documents to provide facts about the principal torture factories. Consequently, literary critic and former political prisoner Abdelali El Yazami asks readers to distinguish between literature produced while the authors were incarcerated and writings that emerged or were published after a prison release or when censorship was reduced since memory, time and exile are added literary features.

In the 1970s and 1980s, many political prisoners belonged to the Moroccan left. A striking example of raw, emotional material was by Abdelaziz Mouride, a Marxist political detainee in 1974–1984, who laboriously smuggled out of prison his graphic novel page by page to expose horrific conditions under Morocco’s repressive carceral regime. Originally written with Arabic titles and speech balloons, it was published pseudonymously in France in 1982 as *Fi Ahsha’ Baladi* (In the Bowels of My Country) and subtitled “On Political Prison in Morocco” while its author was in Kenitra prison. A French translation by noted poet, translator and writer Abdellatif Laabi, Mouride’s fellow inmate, appeared simultaneously with the equivalent French title, *Dans les entrailles de mon pays*. Its publication impossible to imagine under Hassan II, Mouride’s greatly revised work was finally published in French almost 20 years later in March 2000 as *On affame bien les rats* (They Starve Rats, Don’t They?) by a transnational Paris-Casablanca publishing house. Laabi’s own searing novel of his arrest, torture and imprisonment, published in Paris in 1982, was made available in Morocco only in 2000, thanks to Casablanca’s Editions Eddif and financial support from the French embassy in Morocco. Laabi’s 1982 title, *Les chemins des ordalies*, literally, “The Ways of Ordeal,” and more approximately, perhaps, “Trial by Fire,” would become its Moroccan subtitle, superseded by *Le fou d’espoir* (A Fool for Hope). Laabi’s book is a rare example translated into English, published in 1989 by Readers International under the unfortunately unmarketable, all too foreign (at least to Americans) title *Rue de Retour* (Street of Return). Beginning in 1992, an exposé of Tazmamart, the notorious secret prison in the hinterlands of southeastern Morocco, first appeared in French, authored by Christine Daure-Serfaty, the French wife of Abraham Serfaty. But this work was only translated and published during the post-Hassan II era, beginning in December 1999, in serial excerpts by *al-Munazzama*, the Arabic-language newspaper of the Organization of Democratic and Popular Action, then an official political party. In many instances, the choice to publish in any of Morocco’s languages was governed by histories of repression at home, thereby forcing publication abroad, which led to publication in translation.

Moroccan prison writings know no ideological boundaries and the flow of works by a variety of overlapping categories of Islamists, Marxists, feminists, Amazigh/Berber nationalists, union activists and the regime’s own parliamentarians do not cease to emerge. For example, self-described Islamist detainees also chronicled their prison experiences in literary and artistic productions such as artwork, unpublished and published letters, and diaries. Both Mohamed Hakiki and Ahmed Haou chronicled prison experiences in various newspapers. Examples are Hakiki’s “A Prisoner’s Diary” describing his arrest, disappearance, trial and prison life, which appeared in the newspaper *al-Jisr* in 30 bimonthly installments (1995–2000) starting a year after the author’s amnesty in contrast to Haou’s prison memoirs, which were published while he was still incarcerated.

Prior to the death of Hassan II in 1999 and underscored by a path-breaking series of Moroccan government initiatives of reparations and a truth commission, the burdens of expressing the pain of Moroccan prisons and enforced disappearance have long fallen to textual and visual representations. Nonetheless, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, a harbinger of the changing political and cultural climate was *al-’Aris* (The Bridegroom) published in 1998 to great acclaim and sales. Composed as a series of clandestine letters smuggled from prison by the poet Salah El-Ouadie to his mother, his book was based on memories of torture some 20 years earlier but with a pen dripping with sardonic humor:

Dear Mother: I am writing you a letter you will never receive. I will write it in my memory because I lack pen and paper—how wretched
a privation. I have many reasons to convince you that writing you now would be a grave imprudence even had I the means. I do not want—were I discovered, God forbid—to spend the night under a rain of abuse, of curses and gross insults, of beatings and random blows to my neck as if planned among them. I have already received today my share of offerings by the faithful who watch over our repose in this unique refuge. We eat, sleep, drink, keep silent, scream, bide our time, we cradle our hopes, praise God that we are still alive breathing the air of our country, and that our swollen bodies occupy space therein. When a well-trained prison guard arrives to call one of us ceremoniously for a high-level encounter with the agents that watch over our repose and those of our peers, he jumps for joy from his bed, leaves smartly in order not to miss the opportunity. Between you and me, how much time does it take an ordinary citizen to meet an official? Generally one year or two but here—long life to them—never is anyone left to wait.  

While key chronologies necessary to the production of Moroccan prison literature are French colonialism and post-independence decades of repression, the establishment of the Moroccan Equity and Reconciliation commission in 2004 unleashed public testimonies, official reports, memoirs, fictionalized accounts, graphic novels, truth commission websites and films about prison experiences. One of the political compromises of the commission was to grant a blanket amnesty to perpetrators with the result that they remain unnamed in public testimony although internal commission interviews and archives recorded who they are. Even before but certainly after Morocco's 2004 truth commission, the acts of naming perpetrators and torturers in articles, novels, films and memoirs, whether abroad or in Morocco, was and continues to be a familiar literary and political tactic; victims remain free to speak and write outside the confines of the commission rules. As a result, during and after the commission the numbers of such works increased exponentially. Indeed, the commission made available through its website as well as sponsored or secured wide dissemination for the large numbers of films, bibliographies, reports and scholarly studies about repression during the years from 1956 to 1999. For example, their 2015 bilingual French and Arabic publication entitled *al-I’tiqal, al-Taqasum, al-Fada’at wa al-Dhakira* (Imprisonment, Sharing: Places and Memory) available online chronicles the turn from memory to history to architecture.

**Prisons Into Museums?**

Transforming prisons into museums, burying and marking the dead and the disappeared, indeed the entirety of documenting the painful past participate in a growing body of research emerging around notions that state-instigated, communal reparations in the form of traditional or modern human-rights-based site memorializations currently trace an alternate, sometimes parallel path. Acknowledging and

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The Journey to Tahrir
Revolution, Protest, and Social Change in Egypt
Edited by Jeannie Sowers and Chris Toensing

This collection includes essays by Mona El-Ghobashy, Asef Bayat, Timothy Mitchell, Elliott Colla, Ursula Lindsey, Joel Beinin, and more.

“Long before the battle for Qasr al-Nil bridge erupted, MERIP understood and analyzed the forces that would start a revolution.”

—Anthony Shadid
demarcating the architectural imprint of the carceral autocratic past is an ongoing process in Morocco. Moroccan human rights activists who were political prisoners have made it a priority to restore secret detention centers, citing for example Casablanca’s preeminent torture facility Derb Moulay Cherif, and in southeastern Morocco, additional sites at Agdez, Kalaat MGouna and Tazmamart. Their intention is to create spaces that preserve historical memory through architectural restoration and to renovate detention centers as multi-purpose places (some but not all as museums as well as cultural centers, social complexes, documentation and citizenship centers). Until the projects to create material representations of suffering that were proposed from 2007 onward, it seemed as though architectural space had been made to speak through the primary interpreter of the entire Moroccan truth commission process, namely the victim or the relatives of the disappeared, those tortured and humiliated who were represented by means of a vast outpouring of prison literature and writings as well as oral testimonies by thousands of claimants (often videotaped, filmed, audiotaped).

In contrast to witness testimonies and prison literature, the application of architectural analysis to international law through the examination of areas of violence and locations of human rights violations is defined as “forensic architecture.” According to Eyal Weizman, one of its foremost theoreticians, the concept of forensic architecture “allows politics to be read by studying form”; by looking at ruins, for example, forensic architecture as an analytical method reconstructs scenes of violence as they are inscribed within spatial artifacts and environments. According to Weizman, forensic architecture represents a shift from victim testimony in the form of oral and written witnessing to a consideration of space and place:

There is a marked contrast here with the traditional culture of human rights, which has always relied to a great extent upon the posture of the witness, whose contribution is distinct in opening up the historical record to include those voices previously excluded. The era of the witness did not only treat the witness as a bearer of information, but also as an ethical opportunity (deserving of empathy and compassion). It was the fragility of the voice that mattered most. Testimony
was important for being delivered…. The speech of witnesses that human rights has always been identified with was the essence—the anti-totalitarian origin—of the human rights discourse itself: the idea of speaking truth to power, the individual against the state. It had an ethical and political place. The question is: What are the ethical and political meanings of the shift towards the object?11

Morocco’s Equity and Reconciliation Commission attempted to provide concrete materialization of absence and forced disappearance through a communal reparation program launched in 2007 that would “enable citizens to appropriate their history and preserve a positive memory in order to ensure three parallel and complementary types of reconciliations: reconciliation of local people with the state, reconciliation of local people with place as secret detention centers, and reconciliation of the state with its painful and repressed histories.” With some funding from the European Union distributed to NGOs throughout the country, plans were formulated to formalize commemoration sites. The first phase of the project consisted of headstones and cemeteries, a commemorative practice that follows globally recognized, perhaps standardized memorial scripts, to include proposals for mass graves as part of memorial gardens, an eternal flame, a wall or monument of victims’ names, museum-quality exhibitions with glossy panels providing brief historical synopses, photos of victims, audiovisual testimony of survivors, and the importance of stating and visually highlighting the credo of “never again.”12 Local activists working in NGO associations in southeastern Morocco where so many secret prisons are located, for example in Agdez, Ouarzazate, Kalaat M’Gouna, Skoura and Tagounit, strongly recommend rehabilitating and preserving these structures in their Draa and Dades valleys. They plan to insert these imposing edifices into the existing, well-developed international circuits of oases and desert tourism, but they claim that the work of conservation is also disciplinary and its objects.

Endnotes
12 See the website for the NGO Sites of Conscience at: http://www.sitesofconscience.org/
Send My Regards to Your Mother

Zein El-Amine

I.
I sometimes refer to my college years in Saudi Arabia as “doing time.” But early in those years I did some time that almost did me in—and my mother, too.

I had spent high school in Bahrain as a boarder. My father pressured me to attend university near our house in Dhahran, where he worked as a contractor on the US military base.

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I kept in touch with a few high school friends that first semester. Every Wednesday evening (our Saturday night), I would come home, shower, shave, put on dress clothes and walk over to the international call center. There I would make two calls, one to Diana and one to Karen. These conversations felt like conjugal visits although they were not of a sexual or romantic nature. They were the highlight of my week in a country where dating is illegal and alcohol is prohibited, at an all-men’s university with nothing to do on weekends but dial up these friends a mere 15-minute flight away. It was the 1980s, before the causeway was built between the two countries,
allowing people to drive across the Gulf and indulge in all things forbidden in Saudi Arabia.

I decided to visit my high school friends during my first college break. So I got a visa and hopped on a plane to Bahrain. The next morning at my friend Wael’s house, I had a great breakfast of omelets, labna, olives and tea, not knowing at the time how precious the meal would be. I dressed in jeans and a T-shirt reading, “That’s right, we baaaad!” I grabbed my baby blue OP shorts and headed off to meet Diana for a tennis match.

Zigzagging to my destination, I came across a housing compound much like the gated communities that dot the island. This one looked new, with a red-and-white striped guard shack at the entrance. The shack was unmanned, though, and the gates were wide open. I could see clear across the property to my path to the tennis courts. I decided to take a shortcut.

II.

As I exited the back gate, a military-uniformed guard came running through the compound to catch up with me. When I turned around, he shouted, “Waggif!” and then, unsure of my native tongue, “Stop!” He caught his breath, pausing at the sight of the bundled OP shorts. He asked me a question in what I gathered to be Arabic and switched to a broken English. I remembered that Bahrain contracted Pakistanis to serve in its military, and made a mental note to joke with my friend Diana about how Bahrain gives guns to people who speak neither the language of the natives nor that of most of the expatriates. I gathered that I was trespassing somewhere I should not have. The guard was sweating up a storm in his dark wool uniform and cap. Trying to end his misery, I put on my best authoritative voice: “I am a student…. American embassy…. Play tennis…. Manama American school.” I waved my blue OP shorts like a bull-fighter’s cloth. Then suddenly he said: “OK. Go.”

A few minutes later, a military jeep skidded in front of me, blocking my path to the school. As the dust settled, I moved my arm away from my face to see a Bahraini soldier in a gray uniform glaring at me. “Inside!” he repeated. I slid into the back seat and found the jeep full. I was sandwiched tightly between two soldiers, their woolen dress chafing my arms and the scent of sweat and excrement filling my nostrils. The driver sped away like an ambulance.

When he finally slowed down, I caught a glimpse of a high, whitewashed, fortified wall. The jeep moved through a metal gate with a concrete archway and passed a tower-like structure sitting on a concrete slab. It looked like a decapitated lighthouse, with no windows and no sign of a door.

I was escorted into a building so drab it looked abandoned. We walked up to an office with a male secretary wearing a thobe and headdress, a cheerful fellow with tanned skin and a bright white smile, one too fixed to be trusted. I got the impression he was expecting me. “What is your full name?” “Zein Mohammad El-Amine,” I answered, adding my father’s name. “Stand there,” he said, pointing me toward uniformed minders.

An Indian “tea boy” went into the office behind the smiling man. Inside I could see someone sitting behind a glossy dark mahogany desk dressed in a traditional headdress and white thobe. The thobe was draped with a dark brown wool abaya with gold thread trim. From his graying goatee and gaunt, shriveled cheeks, I guessed the man to be in his sixties. The desk seemed a bit too large for him. He signaled the guards to bring me in, each one holding an elbow as if I needed assistance. The official continued to sign papers. I noticed a name plaque—Al Khalifa, meaning he was a member of the ruling family. I was anxious to speak with someone who spoke a language I could understand. I was anxious to return to Diana and go out on the town, have a laugh about the whole thing over a pint of Double Diamond beer and a double scotch.

“What is your name?” he finally asked. “Zein El-Amene.” “What is your full name?” “Zein Mohammad El-Amene.” “What is your father’s full name?” “Mohammad Bakir El-Amene.”

He looked up at me for the first time since I walked into the office. “What were you doing at that house?” “I was taking a shortcut to the tennis courts.”

I was about to explain further when I noticed that his attention had turned to the graphic on my T-shirt. He narrowed his eyes and moved his lips slowly: “Daat isss… rrright. Weee baaaad!” On the shirt was a cartoon of two intoxicated cats laying about trash cans in an alleyway, one holding a bottle marked with a double X, the other with a limp cigarette or a joint drooping from his upheld paw. The word “bad” was indeed spelled with a half dozen vowels. The man did not seem pleased with this declaration. Still squinting with distrust, he looked up at my face. I hastened to say that I was visiting from Saudi Arabia and started to reach for the military base ID in my front pocket. As I stepped forward, Mr. Khalifa pushed himself away from the desk and the two guards jerked me back by the elbows. “Stay where you are,” snapped the one on my left. The official turned the card over in his hand, in a way that told me that he either did not understand its significance or did not care. He set the card down on the desk and mumbled something. I decided to visit my high school friends during my first college break. So I got a visa and hopped on a plane to Bahrain. The next morning at my friend Wael’s house, I had a great breakfast of omelets, labna, olives and tea, not knowing at the time how precious the meal would be. I dressed in jeans and a T-shirt reading, “That’s right, we baaaad!” I grabbed my baby blue OP shorts and headed off to meet Diana for a tennis match.

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I hesitated. Having watched way too many American cop shows, my first response was to request a phone call. I actually said, “I am entitled to a phone call.” Smiley beamed: “Oh yes, you will get your call. You can call whoever you
like.” My joints were turning to jello from elbows to knees. I did not have much on me—a few Bahraini dinars for lunch, my trusted military base ID, which I felt was my only ticket out of there, compacted remains of a Kleenex. He checked the pockets of the shorts and pushed them back toward me. “You can keep these.” The guards were at my elbows again, leading me to another part of the building. We went down to a basement with unpainted, roughly finished concrete walls and dim fluorescent lighting, and then into a room smudged with soot. There was a man sitting with a cigarette and a pile of papers and an ink blotter. Without inquiry he asked me to come around. I stood shoulder to shoulder with him and he grabbed my hand to fingerprint me. He asked me to hold up a placard with a number and some scratches in Arabic on it. I did not read the scribble until they took the picture. “Suspected terrorist,” it read.

At that moment, I stopped taking those mental notes for my storytelling session with Diana. I was marched past the truncated “lighthouse” to a long, rectangular one-story building. There was a small room at the entrance with a motel-style reception counter. The man who had fingerprinted me had come along and had a little whispering session with the man behind the counter. The guards stood by as the “receptionist” took me through the entrance with a motel-style reception counter. The man who had fingerprinted me had come along and had a little whispering session with the man behind the counter. The guards stood by as the “receptionist” took me through the door, into an unfinished concrete hallway lined with metal doors, each with a square barred opening. There were 14 cells in all, seven on each side. He opened the second door on the right and immediately closed it behind me.

III.

The cell was arms’ span in width and exactly twice the length. There were two bunk beds but there were two other men. One, in his teens, looked like an Arab and the other like a South Asian. The Arab teenager was leaning on the wall in the far corner, hands behind his back. He examined me, trying to judge whether he should speak to me, and in what language. I looked Middle Eastern but my T-shirt threw a bit guarded—despite his pleasant demeanor—because I did not interrogate you there.”

“Then they did interrogate me in the office,” I replied. “No, they did not interrogate you,” he searched my face, as if he could open it, and then the door swung in with a metal

“From your father’s name.” “Really? Not from the family name? Our family is a well-known Shi’i family from south Lebanon.”

“There are El-Amines all over. I am Ali.” He turned and offered his cuffed hands for me to shake. “Have a seat,” Ali said as if I had come over for tea. “Welcome.”

I sat on the lower bunk, its sponge mattress barely covered with a gray sheet. Ali sat a comfortable distance away, resting his back against the wall. He asked me why I was arrested and I answered that I was not sure. I told him my story and he told me his. He had been picked up in front of his neighborhood mosque for distributing “political” fliers after Friday prayers. He reflected on my story and said: “Something is happening out there.” He mentioned that there had been an influx of new prisoners in the past two days. The government was nervous about something. I told him I didn’t expect to be there long, though I did not reveal my father’s association with the US military. He smiled and said that he had also thought he would be out in a day or two.

“And how long have you been here?” I asked. Six months, he said. My face flushed, and I felt sweat bead around my temples and the tip of my nose. “Like this?” I pointed to his handcuffs. “Yes, like this.” He noticed the sudden change in my disposition and hurried to add that some people leave much sooner. He knew someone who left yesterday and had been there for less than a month. That did not help.

“The fact that they didn’t take you to the tower first means that they are not sure about you.”

“The tower?”

“Yes, that little building outside in the clearing. That’s where they initiate the prisoners. They obviously did not interrogate you there.”

“But they did interrogate me in the office,” I replied. “No, they did not interrogate you,” he searched my face, as if making sure he had not missed anything, and said it again.

I sat on the ground, away from the grimy bed, and kneaded my OP shorts with sweaty palms.

Time slowed down; the sun took forever to set. A red haze hung in the cell for the longest hour. Then in a moment it diminished, leaving us in the dreariness of a bare light bulb and bare concrete. Despair set it in.

There was a long silence interrupted by prisoners mumbling their evening prayers. I heard the main door open. Ali had just finished his prayers, which he performed on the floor, hands behind his back. He told me that they were about to serve dinner and that I would not be able to eat it. But not to worry, he assured me, he would scrounge up something for me this first night. I felt a bit insulted, thinking of the worm-infested olives that were the centerpiece of every meal at my old school. Ali smiled kindly, saying nothing.

There was a loud knock on the metal door, as if we could open it, and then the door swung in with a metal
whine. A cauldron was wheeled into view. A man in a dark green jumpsuit, looking more like a mechanic than a cook, accompanied another in a white thobe and headdress. Ali gave them his back. The man with the thobe unlocked his handcuffs and handed each of us a wooden bowl. Ali and the South Asian stood in the doorway, holding out bowls like Dickensian characters, and I followed suit. The foam-ringed cauldron was topped with a greasy orange film. The server began to stir the swill underneath until it turned a light brown. He ladled the blend into our bowls. We were handed two pieces of pita bread hard as Frisbees; then the door slammed shut. Ali slid down against the wall and sat on the ground. He set his bowl down, rubbed his wrists, and proceeded to swirl the alleged soup around, slurping it up before it separated again, taking bites from the hard bread in between. I remained standing, looking down at my bowl, watching the grease separate and float on the surface. The liquid was lukewarm and gave off the scent of something inorganic, something petroleum-based. Ali advised me to drink it, knowing well that I was not going to. He tilted his bowl to down the last bits, a sight that turned my stomach. He took the bowl out of my hands and gave it to our cellmate, who dipped the petrified bread into the broth and gulped down the mush.

The guard opened our cell again to put the cuffs on Ali. Ali waited a few minutes, then put his ear to the bars and listened until he heard the hallway door close. He asked me to stand with my back against the door. He approached me until we were nose to nose and asked me to cup my hands so that he could step up to the vent above the door. Ali was light and I lifted him easily to the vent. He managed to balance himself, despite the handcuffs, and set his chin down on the bottom of the opening to keep steady.

“Brothers!” he yelled into the void. “Brothers, we have a new prisoner. His name is Zein Mohammad Bakir El-Amine, a Shi‘i!”

What came back was a discord of shouts that turned into a harmonized chant. I could not tell if it was a show of solidarity or indignation. As the noise died down, Ali spoke into the makeshift intercom: “Samir, can you send something for our brother to eat?”

There was a faint response from a cell on the other end of the hall. Ali jumped down and asked me to watch the barred window in the cell door. I stood there for about ten minutes and then I heard names being called out, Muhammad, Abdallah, Yusuf and so on, each time from a different cell, by a different person. Six names were called in all, each sounding closer and closer. Then I heard, “Zein, Zein El-Amine,” from the adjacent cell, and a string swung across my vision, a small shiny object attached to it. “Grab it!” Ali repeated as I jumped back, startled. I managed to hook the item with my index finger and reel it in. It was a wedge of cheese, in the familiar aluminum foil wrapping with the iconic picture of the laughing cow indented at the center from the string. I was about to step back when I heard the names being called again and saw another piece of string swing across the opening, this time with a piece of bread attached. Then again, the names called again, ending with mine and followed by the appearance of another string, this one carrying a small egg. I was overwhelmed—seven hungry men had passed the food, one to another, all the way to me. I sat on the bed, gathered all the goodies in my palms, smothered the piece of soft pita bread with the cheese and wolfed it down. Then I grasped the egg. It looked too small to be a chicken egg but no matter. The South Asian man, probably a Pakistani, was peering at me from the top bunk. I was about to crack the egg against the bedpost but Ali yelled at me to stop. The egg was raw, he said, for nourishment and not for taste. I had to puncture the top and suck out the yolk. I said I would gag. So he told me to set it aside for later.

IV.

After dinner Ali and I sat across from each other talking. He was leaning back on the bed, trying to get as comfortable as possible with bound hands. I was leaning against the wall, feeling sluggish and nauseated. Someone was singing across the way. A couple of hours passed, and then I heard the hallway door open. I was sure they had found out who I was and were coming to get me. Our cell door opened and my heart leaped in anticipation. A man with a white thobe and headdress followed by a uniformed soldier walked between Ali and me and started shouting at the other prisoner. “Why are you looking out of the window?” He pointed at the window to the outside, located above his bed. The Pakistani cringed against the wall on the upper bunk, as if anticipating a beating. The official told him that next time they would take him to the tower: “Al-burj! Al-burj!” I saw tear-rimmed fear in the prisoner’s eyes. He must not have understood it was a warning. He must have thought they were taking him to the tower then.

The official charged out and the Pakistani fell back in tears. Ali tried to explain to him with hand gestures that he was not going to the tower. The Pakistani nodded. Ali patted him on the shoulder with his forehead, the closest thing to a comforting touch he could offer, then listened at the other door again. We heard a metal door shut, then another. Ali sat in front of me. He turned his back to me and asked me to hold the cuffs down on the ground. I did. He moved his ass above the cuffs and wriggled his way out. He was still handcuffed but at least his hands were now in front of him.

I asked what had just happened. “They thought he was looking out of the window and they were about to beat him up. But I think they realized that they got the wrong cell.” “So what if he looks out of the window?”

“There must have been a dignitary visiting. There is definitely something going on. High officials do not visit during the night. Somebody is nervous.”
Ali took advantage of his semi-liberated hands to perform the night prayer. I was at a moment in my life where I was becoming jaded about religion, for my fellow Lebanese had been killing each other in its name. But seeing a chained man pray allowed no room for cynicism. I watched him as he inadvertently muzzled himself every time he brought up his hands to his temples. Prayer had never seemed more meditative, more purposeful.

“Are you getting sleepy?” he asked. I answered no. I was holding out hope that I would be released before dawn. Surely my father would soon get a call in Dhahran and he would call the American general, and the general in turn would call the American ambassador in Manama, and then some apologetic Bahraini official would arrive to reprimand the people who put me here. I imagined sleeping until noon, another nice breakfast and a tennis match in the baby blue shorts. Later Diana and I would go to the Anchor Inn, and she would order her pint of Double Diamond and I would order a double scotch with Coke, and we would get sloshed by the pool and laugh about this whole episode. I was still delusional at this point.

“You should sleep,” said Ali. “They’ll wake us up at dawn for tea and bread. You should eat in the morning. It is the only thing you’re going to be able to eat because it is just tea and bread.” I told him that I was going to stay up but did not betray my optimism.

“You should sleep on the bed and I will sleep on the ground here.”

“What? No, no, that is not possible.”

“I don’t sleep much. I have to get my hands back behind my back now. I am just as uncomfortable on the floor as I am on the bed.” He set his fists on the floor. “Here, help me get back in position. I can’t be caught like this.”

I held down the cuffs and he moved himself back into his original position. He moved to the corner and rested his head against the wall. “Don’t worry. This is normal for me. Believe me, it makes no difference.”

I was very hesitant about lying down on the bed. There was no pillowcase or top sheet, and I worried about bugs. Most important, it would be surrender to the knowledge that no one was coming for me that night. I slowly examined the bed in the snatches of moonlight, looking for telltale scurrying. I brushed off the pillow and laid my OP shorts on top of it. The Asian man was already in deep sleep and Ali was watching me intermittently between moments of rest. My ankles began to itch, as did my head. I spent the night popping up in bed and swatting at the invisible.

I finally snatched a half hour of sleep before there was a clanking at the door. Someone was banging a tin cup and yelling. As long as I had lived on the Arabian Peninsula, I still could not understand the Gulf dialect when it was spoken at a quick pace. Ali told me to wake up. “Be ready or they will pass you by.”

Ali stood in front of the door. When they flung it open, he turned his back to them and a man in a sort of gray jumpsuit, pant legs rolled up as if he had just done his ablutions, pulled a steaming pot into view while a Bahraini man in civilian clothes moved in, jangling his keys, and unlocked the handcuffs. It was Smiley from the processing office. As Smiley moved out, the man in the jumpsuit moved in with enamel-covered tin cups, chipped and rusted on the rims. The Asian eagerly extended his arm. The three of us stood side by side, cups held out, as the man scooped the hot liquid from the big pot. Then another man, who had been clanking on the metal doors of the cells, came in with a stack of flat bread. The bread was again Frisbee-like in rigidity but my cellmates grabbed it and were munching on it even before they settled in their little corners. From the smell coming off the light brown brew I guessed it was tea and it must have had some milk in it. I later learned it was the best meal of the day. When we finished eating, Ali rushed to do the dawn prayer, again taking advantage of his free hands.

I asked Ali about the daily schedule. There was none—no exercise, no walks in the yard.

I asked about the bathroom. “They let us out in the morning. It should be soon, so be ready because you have five minutes to do your business. Then there is another time in the afternoon. And then there is this.” He pointed to a pot that I had somehow missed in the corner next to the door. Ali said, “Don’t look in it. I will empty it at the bathroom break.” The Asian man laughed.

“Does he understand Arabic?” I asked.

“A little. He’s Pakistani. He was in the country with a counterfeit passport. Or he was making counterfeit passports. I don’t know. He is not a political prisoner, and they did not take him through the tower.”

“What is the tower?”

Ali regarded me warily, weighing what he should say. Then he averted his eyes and explained: “The tower is where they take you if you are arrested for political reasons. It is a narrow, round structure with a sand pit for a floor. They seat you in a chair, blindfold you and tie your hands behind your back, and then they start with the questions and the beatings. There are usually two of them, and they take turns punching you in the face. They do this for hours, and then they leave you bleeding and tied to the chair for days, without food, without water, without allowing you to go to the bathroom. You bleed, piss and shit yourself for days. Then they take you to the showers and bring you to your cell.”

There came a knock for the bathroom break. There was shouting, a clanking of doors and a slapping of flip-flops. When they opened our door, the Pakistani man ran past me. Ali, released from his handcuffs, also took off. So I raced after them. I heard a smattering of greetings as other prisoners passed me. One patted me on the shoulder and was reproached by the guard. I walked into a stall and
took a piss, and rushed to the sink to wash my hands, only to realize that the powder I had spilled on my hands was laundry detergent. I stood there confused, as Ali tugged at my elbow. We ran out as the guards herded others in to take our place. Back in the cell I sought out my OP shorts to wipe my hands.

V.

Day 2: My daydreams of being set free were already spent. I started to remember things that had happened while I was in high school, signs that this happy island was troubled but that we were too engrossed in our navel or too stoned to notice. The morning rattle woke me from a dream about a neighborhood covered in long black banners and doppel-gangers of Ali, in black shirts and pants, walking around passing out leaflets.

As I drank my tea and crunched my dry bread, I traced the dream back to an incident one sunny day when we were en route to school. We were on a bus proceeding along the tree-lined boulevard. The palms were swaying in the wind. The bus was abuzz, as it was on this day every week, about the previous night’s “Muppet Show” episode. The traffic was unusually heavy. As was my habit, I was sitting next to Mahdi, the driver, a Bahraini Shi’i barely 18. He cursed the previous night’s “Muppet Show” episode. The traffic was not my carefree days and disco nights: A close friend and I eating lunch when we heard chants from an unseen approaching crowd. A policeman knocking with a stick on the storefronts. Merchants rolling down their metal doors with a loud rattle. Muffled shouts rising, falling, then dissolving into scattered wails. Half an hour later, the merchants opening back up. We drove through this procession in total silence, the banners snapping at us. Then, just like that, we were back on the boulevard again, in the full sunlight and the jovial chatter of the daily commute.

Day 3: I was learning more about Bahrain than I had in the three years I spent in the country previously. A rebellion had been brewing and it was being snuffed out before it spilled out of the restive suburbs into the squares of the capital. More answers about mysterious happenings that had punctuated my carefree days and disco nights: A close friend and I eating lunch when we heard chants from an unseen approaching crowd. A policeman knocking with a stick on the storefronts. Merchants rolling down their metal doors with a loud rattle. Muffled shouts rising, falling, then dissolving into scattered wails. Half an hour later, the merchants opening back up. We walked out of the café to a scene of scattered flip-flops and the sting of smoke that hadn’t settled. It was as if a crowd had been sucked up into a hovercraft that jetted off in silence, leaving nothing but their shoes. The incident had not troubled me until now, as I sat on my OP shorts, hair like a Brillo pad, stubble on my chin.

Day 4: More silence, less talk. More listening to other prisoners. It seemed like every prisoner on the block was a Bahraini Shi’i except the guy at the far end. Ali had told me he was Syrian. That man oozed resilience. He sang every morning and every evening. The morning songs were light-hearted, full of false hope, a sugar high that left you sick in its wake, and made the silence all the more dreadful. The evening songs were mournful, the saddest of Umm Kulthoum and Farid al-Atrash, songs that stuck in the throat.

I told Ali about his family. His father worked a menial job and was always away. His tales of his mother reminded me of my aunts back in south Lebanon. I imagined her voice like my aunt’s, full of sad tenderness. But Ali talked about his family in the past tense, never in the present, and certainly not in the future. It was a survival mechanism, I understood later. You could not hope. It was a surefire route to greater despair. You had to be immersed in the moment. Span the hours of the early morning, long for the tea and bread as if something to be savored. Then pass the hours between tea and lunch. Watch the light. Venture out in your mind, but not too far, maybe across the street from the fort. Walk back and forth in the cell. Set a goal, a number of “laps.” Go beyond it to create a stimulus in a stagnant environment. Exhaust yourself before lunch so that you can nap. Look forward to respite from the oppressive heat. Then dinner, then a couple of stories as if hanging out with friends. All the while, do not let the idea of escape or reunions come to you. Keep hope at bay.

On the fourth or the fifth day the guards showed up at an unusual time. There were two of them and they came to our cell first. For a second I dared to hope again, but then I saw them release Ali’s cuffs, and I saw that there were other guards opening other cells. I realized it was something else, perhaps another bathroom break. I grabbed my OP shorts, which had
become my towel, handkerchief, pillowcase and floor mat. Ali had his usual look of resignation. We were herded out to a courtyard. There was a structure in the center that gave the impression of being a fountain. Orders were given that I could not hear but I saw that the prisoners had started to converge around the fountain. It was drab unfinished concrete and there was a stub of a tiled column in the center with two faucets. Men started washing up and filling their cups with water. I walked slowly because I felt something that I had not felt for days—sunshine. I subconsciously closed my eyes and opened them to see other prisoners looking at me. It was the first time that I had a chance to really see my fellow inmates. They all looked Bahraini to me except one tall man with a pale complexion and light brown hair, who I took to be the Syrian singer who had sent me the food. They all looked so voluble than usual. Our Pakistani cellmate—for the first time—was trying to figure out what we were talking about. Ali’s hands were in front of his body; I had helped him do his miraculous maneuver earlier when the guards cleared out. He was no longer talking to me as a cellmate but as a friend, one who would be there with him for a long time. I was too much in the moment to be depressed about that prospect. We heard a rattle at the main door and I scrambled to help Ali slip his cuffs behind his back. The guards were moving so fast that Ali had barely got into position on when the door opened.

“Zein El-Amine,” said a man in civilian clothes flanked by two men in military garb. I couldn’t speak so I raised my hand. “Gather your things,” he said. My things? I picked up my OP shorts and turned to Ali to get a hint of what was happening. He quickly approached and I moved to hug him, his chest bumping mine. “You’re going home,” he said. And then louder as I moved away: “Send my regards to your mother.”

When the outside door opened, the sun hit me with the force of an explosion. I winced, put up a hand up to my forehead and kept trotting. Everything was in pieces: One second I was in the cell, the next I was in the sunshine, and then I was in a car speeding down a highway, flanked by two guards. I am not sure how fast they were driving but it felt like hyperspace.

Back home that same day, amidst family and visiting friends, I heard one woman tell another: “Thank God. They almost killed her.” My father confirmed it. “Yes, they almost did kill your mother with all the bad news. They told me you were involved in the coup and that they were taking prisoners to the desert, executing them and claiming no knowledge of their existence. “That news knocked your mom flat. She has been bedridden for days.”

I am tempted to say that I did not sleep that night; that I kept on waking up swatting imaginary cockroaches and scratching non-existent fleas; that I had dreams of the tower, of being bound and blindfolded, my head a bloody pulp. But no, I went to the small bedroom of my childhood, I laid in one of the two twin beds and fell into deep sleep, a sleep free of fear, free of trauma, with dreams of ordinary things. I would like to pretend that I woke up snatching at air, not knowing where I was, thinking I was back in the cell, looking around to see Ali on the floor, his back against the wall so as not to strain his shoulders. But no, I woke up knowing exactly where I was.

I can’t remember where my mom was that morning, though. I assume she stayed in bed another day. She is missing from my recollection of that first day back—completely. Maybe she is missing because I erased her. Maybe she is missing because she fell ill months later and died within a year of that day, from lung cancer, at the age of 53. Maybe that day was what connected her death with my imprisonment. Maybe I want to sever that connection. Maybe I do not want that child with his OP shorts, ignorant of the consequences of his actions and sleepwalking through his youth, to take any responsibility for the disintegration that ended the life of the person he loved the most and who loved him the most. Maybe the anger that simmers under my surface today, that constant roil, started on the day when I tied the deeds of that murderous government with my personal tragedy. They whittled away at her until she was gone. Maybe that day is the day I lost any measure of healthy fear.

I got some more clarifications from US officers who knew my father: The housing complex that I cut across belonged to the Bahraini minister of interior. The timing of my accidental trespass was very bad, a day after an alleged coup attempt against the ruling family. The accused in the attempt were Shi’a. Some of the people from Saudi Arabia accused of helping them had indeed traveled to Bahrain on my flight. The day before my arrival, the Bahraini government claimed that they had discovered a warehouse full of new Bahraini military uniforms, accurate to the T with the exception to the buttons, which were marked “Made in Iran.” But even if I had picked up a paper or listened to the news upon my arrival, I would not have known, for there was a total media blackout. The military and secret police were arresting any Shi’i man who was not where he was supposed to be. A young man trespassing on the property of the minister of interior was easily thought to be a “suspected terrorist.”

I would like to conclude that I was still fuming after my debriefing, but no. I walked out into that December Arabian sun, and felt my blood ululate in its nourishment. I went to the base exchange, its shelves fully stocked and bathed in artificial light. I picked out some soap. As the other customers eyed my scruffy appearance, I enjoyed their discomfort.
Status-less in Cyber City
Maisam Al-Ahmed

When refugees from the Syrian war first began to stream into Jordan, the Jordanian Ministry of Interior registered the newcomers and placed them in the care of families, under the kafala system, mainly in the capital of Amman. The kafala or guardianship system has roots in Bedouin customs, but in modern times the term refers to how many Arab states handle migrant workers. A citizen or a company, known as a kafil, sponsors the migrant for a work visa and residency permit. At first this system accepted everyone, regardless of nationality or legal status—including 55 Palestinian families coming from Syria. The Palestinians in Syria, like those in Jordan who compose nearly half of the country’s population, are refugees from the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1967. Those who have fled to Jordan now are twice displaced—and the Jordanian government appears determined not to allow them to settle in the kingdom.

The Palestinians in Syria, like those in Jordan who compose nearly half of the country’s population, are refugees from the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1967. Those who have fled to Jordan now are twice displaced—and the Jordanian government appears determined not to allow them to settle in the kingdom.

Prior to the conflict in Syria, Palestinians had some freedom of movement between there and Jordan. Many who left Jordan during the 1970s for Syria lost their legal status in Jordan, but retained the option of returning to the kingdom to live or to visit family. After the war erupted, many of these Palestinians requested their Jordanian documents back so they could resettle. The government refused to issue the papers, instead holding the Palestinians at the border for days, or even months. To deflect international condemnation, Jordan permitted Palestinian children under the age of 6 to enter for emergency medical treatment, knowing that many families would not accept separation, or would have their child returned to Syria after recovery. As for the few who managed to get in, the government prohibited them from staying with their Jordanian relatives or kafils, and forced many to return to Syria, in violation of the international legal principle of non-refoulement. Others the government sent to Cyber City, a complex in northern Jordan that now serves as a camp especially for Palestinians coming from Syria.

As the Syrian war intensified in 2012, Jordan worked rapidly to construct the huge Zaatari camp, in addition to a few others, to accommodate the influx of refugees. The Syrian nationals resident at Zaartari can still be bailed out of the camp by a Jordanian kafil. At the same time, Jordan stopped accepting any Palestinians from Syria under the kafala system, instead sending those refugees to Cyber City. In mid-2012, sometime in July or August, the government declared that Palestinians from Syria could no longer cross the border at all. In addition, the government asked all families who hosted Palestinians under the kafala system at the beginning of the war in 2011 to present their guests for relocation to Cyber City. Subsequently, Palestinians entering Jordan from Syria have done so either with forged or insufficient Syrian documents or illegally at unofficial crossings. Some of these people wind up at Cyber City and others are deported. Neither the UN High

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Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) nor the UN Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA) is able to supply the exact number of Palestinians who have fled from Syria into Jordan, only an estimate of more than 20,000 as of March 2014.

Cyber City was originally part of a free economic zone launched by King ‘Abdallah II. Now rented by the government, the six-story building can hold up to 480 people, and consists of two units per floor, each with 12 rooms and a communal kitchen. Some 14 relief organizations, including UNRWA, UNHCR, Save the Children, International Relief and Development, and the Noor Al-Hussein Foundation, maintain caravan offices in the environs, where there are also a mosque, two supermarkets, a playground and an activity center. The entire area is under the management of the Ministry of Interior. As of June 2014, the number of refugees in Cyber City was 397, around 90 families—all Palestinians from Syria or Syrians married into Palestinian families.

UNHCR is responsible for the Syrians in the camp, and UNRWA for the Palestinians. The two agencies collaborate to assist refugee families. The Jordanian government has set up a clinic where refugees can get basic medical care, or be transported to a nearby hospital if need be. The government also busses camp children to the closest schools in Ramtha. Save the Children provides various services, such as help with preparation for exams.

Life as a Palestinian refugee in Cyber City is tough. The Palestinians, unlike Syrian nationals, are given no formal identification card that defines their status as refugees. These cards allow refugees some mobility within Jordan as well as access to aid from NGOs and UN organizations. Palestinians are not allowed work permits, either, and therefore cannot get a job, except in extremely rare cases inside the camp as a part of a cash-for-work program. The only income the Palestinians have at this point is food vouchers distributed by UNHCR every two weeks, equivalent to 2.4 Jordanian dinars (about $5), which the Palestinians cannot cash and can use only at the supermarkets at Cyber City for certain food products. Refugees and a number of organization representatives say that the vouchers almost never cover the needs of families, especially with continuously rising prices.

At the beginning, Palestinian refugees from Syria were able to leave Cyber City and go elsewhere in Jordan. Every month, they were granted two days of “vacation time” to go to the souq (market) or to visit extended family. On special occasions, such as weddings, refugees could ask for a longer period of “vacation time.” All that was required was a form indicating their purpose and destination, and the approval of camp management. The camp was then receiving generous donations, some of which were given to refugees to supplement the vouchers or supply pocket money for “vacation time.” The donations gradually dropped off, however, and so did the number of refugees requesting to leave the camp. Some feel that the outside environment, whether family or the host country itself, is not welcoming.

But the biggest obstacle to freedom of movement is the lack of an official ID card. Checkpoints have multiplied near the borders and between cities in Jordan to apprehend people entering the country illegally. Because Palestinian refugees from Syria have no document identifying them as refugees in Jordan, they face the threat of detention or deportation. In several cases, authorities were presented with the proper vacation form but did not accept it as proof that the refugee was “registered” in Cyber City. These refugees were detained, and when the camp’s directors realized they had not returned from “vacation time,” UNRWA had to intervene, sometimes with the help of camp management, to secure the refugees’ release. These incidents have discouraged Palestinians from requesting “vacation time.” Many fear that one day UNRWA may not be able to protect them from forcible return to Syria.

Another problem facing many Palestinians in Cyber City is the difficulty of obtaining birth and marriage certificates. Early on, Syrian nationals were able to get either document in one or two days, but Palestinians had to wait a minimum of ten days, again because they lacked the requisite ID cards. As the government became stricter, however, sometimes the process now takes months. In addition, UNRWA is no longer allowed to contact the Ministry of Interior directly, but has to use the Foreign Ministry as an intermediary. The reasons for that change are not completely clear, but the most common explanation is that the government considers UNRWA a foreign body within Jordanian borders, similar to embassies and consulates. In June 2014, there were at least five cases of newborns and newlyweds in Cyber City waiting for their certificates. One of the children was already one and a half years old. For registration purposes, UNRWA is able to count her as a Palestinian refugee as long as she is settled in the camp with her family, but if she were ever to move, she would have no legal papers attesting to her nationality. She would be considered stateless under international law.

Getting a marriage or birth certificate requires the husband or father to leave Cyber City for more than two days and head to government offices in Amman. But, again, the lack of an ID card makes it risky to leave.

Sadly, many of the people living in Cyber City have been separated from their families. One Palestinian man, for instance, must remain there though his Syrian wife and children live in a Jordanian town. The wife could move into Cyber City, but no one wants to raise children in a refugee camp if they do not have to.

Denied employment and income, Palestinian refugees in Cyber City are bored with life in the camp, and the younger generations are driven into depression, refugee women say. It has become very hard to maintain a family, let alone to start one. The UNHCR vouchers are insufficient and there is no access to higher education. Many refugees say they are living in an open-air prison, and that they would rather return to Syria than stay in Cyber City. The unbearable situation has led a number of youths to attempt suicide or to escape. As of June 2014, the total number of runaways was 45, 30 of whom were found and returned to the camp. Many were able to abscond through the empty construction zones. Others requested their “vacation time” and did not return.

The number one concern for the majority of the refugees is what the future holds for them and their children. It is a question with no answer at present.
Migrant Workers and the US Military in the Middle East

Darryl Li

To sustain the massive overseas deployments of the twenty-first century, the US military has hired private contractors to supply everything from convoy security to the daily fare in the canteen. The likes of Blackwater get most of the press, but most contractors are neither ex-soldiers nor US citizens. The Pentagon does not want to hire locals, however. The thousands of Asians, Africans and other “third-country nationals” who work at US bases in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere have precious little protection from abuse.
ver the past 15 years, the United States has waged two major land wars in the greater Middle East with hundreds of thousands of ground troops. Shadowing these armies and rivaling them in size has been a labor force of private contractors. The security company once called Blackwater has played an outsize role in the wide-ranging debate about the privatization of war and attendant concerns of corruption, waste and human rights abuses. But this debate has also largely overlooked a crucial fact: While Blackwater was founded and largely staffed by retired US military personnel, the vast majority of the overseas contractor work force is not American.

The so-called privatization revolution has also been an offshoring revolution, with US contractors frequently overseeing an even larger set of foreign subcontractors and workers. Accompanying US forces are both local workers and migrants imported from outside, dubbed “third-country nationals” (TCNs) by the Pentagon.

Over the past decade, hundreds of thousands of TCNs have worked in support of the US military’s Central Command or CENTCOM in an arc of countries stretching from east Africa to central Asia. Migrant labor has become indispensable to Washington’s war machine, with TCNs often outnumbering American and local contractors and even most allied contingents.

For much of 2010 and 2011, there were more TCNs supporting the US military in Iraq than American and local contractors combined. According to the latest figures, from April 2015, only 39 percent of the over 54,000 contractors in the CENTCOM area of responsibility are American, the rest being roughly equally divided between locals and TCNs.

TCN workers are involved in nearly all aspects of base life, including construction, food preparation, entertainment, firefighting and even armed guard duty. They have come from dozens of countries, including Bosnia-Herzegovina, Chile, Colombia, Fiji, India, Nepal, Peru, the Philippines, South Africa and Uganda. In Iraq, TCNs continued to play a major role in supporting US government operations after the formal end of combat operations and will likely do the same in Afghanistan as well in the event of a troop withdrawal. Post-sequestration downsizing of the US military is likely to further strengthen pressures to employ migrant workers.

On US bases abroad, foreign workers are usually paid a fraction of what US citizen contractors and soldiers make; they are not included in the politically sensitive figures of “boots on the ground”; and their deaths and injuries are not officially tallied and rarely register in debates in Washington. TCNs present additional benefits from the Pentagon’s perspective: They are deemed less likely to make common cause with insurgents than local workers and they are readily deportable if non-compliant. Many TCNs are forced to pay recruiting firms exorbitant fees to secure their jobs, leaving them highly indebted and effectively indentured. Not surprisingly, stories of horrific abuse and mistreatment of TCNs have received considerable media coverage in recent years and sparked reform efforts back in Washington.

**Military Privatization and the Shift to the Gulf**

The US military has a long history of employing local citizens on its overseas military bases. Indeed, the use of private actors in military affairs is historically the norm rather than the exception, with the high point of US centralization of the instruments of force likely taking place in the twentieth century under the Cold War national security state. The few precedents from this period stand out precisely because of this backdrop: After the 1959 revolution, the naval station at Guantánamo Bay largely switched over from a Cuban work force to Filipinos and Jamaicans, who today comprise some 40 percent of the base’s population.3

The restructuring of the US military at the end of the Cold War helped drive the shift to a migrant labor work force. While the military was affected by the broader push to privatize government functions that had started decades earlier, how and where privatization occurred also mattered. By shifting to a new center of gravity in the Persian Gulf, the US military restructured in ways that meshed with that region’s political economy.

Over the past two decades, the US military has privatized many of its functions, especially those related to logistics and base support services. A major development was the rise of the Army’s Logistics Civil Augmentation Program (LOGCAP), which enabled the military to delegate wide-ranging authority for logistics to private contractors. Instead of hiring private companies to provide specific goods or services, the Pentagon awards LOGCAP contracts to large companies ("prime contractors") to supply logistical needs for entire missions on an open-ended basis. In order to accomplish specific goals, prime contractors then issue task orders to subcontractors, which may be US or non-US companies.

Contracts have been widely criticized for reimbursement structures that guarantee a fixed percentage of profit, thus encouraging cost inflation, fraud and waste by prime contractors and subcontractors alike. The 2003–2011 war in Iraq was mostly supported through the LOGCAP III contract, managed by KBR. The current LOGCAP IV contract relies on a handful of prime contractors rather than a single one: Operations in Afghanistan are divided between Fluor (northern and eastern regions) and DynCorp (west and south).

The first significant military operation to run on a LOGCAP contract was in Somalia in 1992, where prime contractor Brown and Root (now KBR) arrived less than 24 hours after US forces. Privatization created a stronger incentive to reduce labor costs, providing an economic rationale for relying on non-US workers, although not necessarily for importing migrant workers from third countries. In Kosovo, 90 percent

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of Brown and Root’s workers were local, making it the biggest employer in the area.4

Military privatization, however, is not simply an abstract process that unfolds in the same way across space and time. Crucial to understanding the rise of TCN labor in particular was the post-Cold War military’s shift to a new center of gravity—the Persian Gulf. The 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait cemented a major shift in the global US military posture that began after the Iranian revolution, with the deployment of large ground forces to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait as a counterbalance to both Iraq and Iran. The military that fought the 1991 Gulf war was still largely a Cold War-era one, with relatively limited contractor use. But since then, US bases in the Gulf have been key staging areas for operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, engendering a broader shift in labor procurement patterns.

In comparison to the major overseas hubs of the Cold War military in Western Europe and East Asia, the Gulf economies make overwhelming use of foreign migrant labor. The Gulf states’ migrant-driven economies converged with changes in US military logistics. As early as the 1960s, the US Army Corps of Engineers in Saudi Arabia, which built some of the country’s early television network infrastructure as well as many of its major military installations, employed migrants for much of its construction and maintenance work, and only a few locals.5 In the decades that followed, the use of migrant labor grew even more dramatically. Gulf regimes crushed budding labor movements that emerged around the petrochemical industry and replaced them with large numbers of migrants, all while extending state largesse to pacify and coopt the citizenry. In contrast, contractors at the major US airbase at Incirlik, Turkey, were forced into arbitration with local unions after major strikes in the late 1980s and early 1990s. One US military contractor complained of the Turkish workers having a “home-field advantage.”6 In countries like Kuwait, such issues were no longer a major concern.

By the late 1990s, companies specializing in recruiting migrant labor for construction, logistics and security in the petroleum and related industries were poised to lend their services to the US military. As a result, large US military contractors such as KBR, DynCorp and Fluor can draw from a variety of smaller multinational companies to recruit and transfer workers through the Gulf. One Dubai-based company operating on bases in Afghanistan, Ecolog, was founded by an ethnic Albanian entrepreneur who started out providing services to NATO peacekeepers in Kosovo. One of the leading recruiters of Ugandan security guards for the US military, Dreshak Group, is also based in Dubai but was founded in Pakistan.

The Shape of the Force in Iraq

In order to grasp a sense of the magnitude of the US military’s reliance on foreign contract labor, it is necessary to compare official troop levels—the numbers that are often the fixation of policy debates in Washington—with the size and composition of the contract work force. The following figures are a preliminary attempt at such an analysis in the CENTCOM area of responsibility.7 Unfortunately, there are no readily available statistics for use of TCNs by the US military worldwide, nor is there publicly available data on the breakdown of nationalities among TCNs. Nevertheless, even this limited data makes apparent the major role of TCN workers, including in armed security work.

The Iraq war presents perhaps the starkest example of the contemporary, multinational, public/private nature of the US military. Figure 1 compiles data on uniformed personnel and contractors in Iraq (unfortunately, this graph does not include recent deployments in the campaign against the self-declared Islamic State or ISIS).8 This graph illustrates the privatization revolution in action, with total contractor figures rivaling those of uniformed personnel and even exceeding them on average in 2008, 2010 and 2011. In terms of raw numbers, the total contractor work force peaked at 163,591 in December 2007, just shy of the 165,700 uniformed personnel in the country at that time; by 2011, contractors outnumbered service members by a ratio of 1.7 to 1. This trend is consistent with increased reliance on contractors during the withdrawal phase: Contractors allowed the US to maintain operations while reducing the politically sensitive number of uniformed personnel. Indeed, thousands of contractors continued to work for the Pentagon even after the end of US combat operations in December 2011.

This graph also makes clear that the privatization revolution has been an outsourcing revolution as well, with US citizens constituting a minority of the contractor work force. Indeed,
from 2009 onward, TCNs were the single largest category; in 2010 and 2011, TCNs outnumbered US and Iraqi contractors combined. They also outnumbered the total British military contingent. Notably, the increased reliance on TCNs has come largely at the expense of Iraqi workers, whose share of the contractor population fell dramatically from 2007 to 2011. The percentage of US workers also increased, albeit more modestly. This confluence strongly suggests that TCNs are especially important to cover the withdrawal of US forces.

While contractors are normally thought of as performing support work for the military, it is striking that many TCNs in Iraq were armed guards. Contractors are officially prohibited from engaging in offensive combat operations, but frequently work in personal security details and also guard bases and convoys. In August 2008, employees of private security companies constituted 7.15 percent of the TCN population in Iraq, a figure that steadily climbed over the next three years. By January 2012, shortly after the withdrawal, 85.6 percent of the nearly 9,500 TCNs were employed in the security sector. Needless to say, these numbers translated into an overwhelming dominance of TCNs in the private security sector of the military work force overall. TCNs comprised between 70 and 88 percent of total private security personnel in the military labor force after 2008, dwarfing the combined numbers of US citizens and Iraqis. The number of armed TCN security contractors appears to have peaked at 11,580—the equivalent of 11 percent of US troops in the country around that time.

Ugandans in particular have been prominent in maintaining perimeter security on US bases in Iraq and Afghanistan. At one point there were nearly 10,000 Ugandans in Iraq. Indeed, while armed US security contractors such as those fighting for the company then known as Blackwater have attracted the lion's share of attention, US citizens have never exceeded 11 percent of the total security contractor force in this period. Figure 2 illustrates the breakdown.

This pattern appears to hold for non-military US government operations in Iraq as well. According to the latest available data, from fiscal year 2010, TCNs comprised 49 percent of the about 11,000 contractors supporting the State Department in the country—and nearly 66 percent of private security personnel.9

The Shape of the Force in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, there are striking similarities and differences in the use of contractors compared to Iraq. Figure 3 compiles data on both service members and contractors deployed to that country. In Afghanistan, the overall extent of contractor reliance has been even greater than in Iraq. Contractors have consistently outnumbered service members in Afghanistan, except at the peak of the troop surge in 2011. In January 2015, the total ratio of contractors to service members reached nearly 4 to 1.

The composition of the contractor work force, however, differs significantly from that in Iraq. In Afghanistan, the US has relied far more on local workers, who made up the overwhelming majority of the labor pool until 2011. Since then, the US has recalibrated, moving to a rough balance between Afghans, Americans and TCNs. As in Iraq, promises of eventual withdrawal have justified shifting to a more internationalized and “flexible” work force.

The contrast between the US military labor force in Iraq and Afghanistan is even more apparent in the security sector. Unlike in Iraq, security firms in Afghanistan have mostly employed...
locals. Over time, there has nevertheless been a steady increase in the use of TCN contractors by private security companies, and by 2015 TCNs comprised around half of the Pentagon’s total private security contractor force there.

The greater emphasis on TCN use in Iraq compared to Afghanistan can be explained by several factors: First, US forces disbanded the Iraqi army and faced an aggressive insurgency from the first year of the occupation, which strongly discouraged employment of Iraqis. In Afghanistan, US forces had a much lower profile and began their mission with strong local militia partners. Yet as the Afghan mission has expanded along with the scale of the insurgency, US forces have increasingly turned to TCNs. Second, Afghanistan’s relative distance from the Gulf and its land-locked location likely made the importation of TCNs more expensive and difficult than in Iraq. But in both instances, TCNs have played a major role, especially during periods of rapid increase or decrease in the number of troops.

The Shape of the Force in the Gulf

Finally, figures for contractors in the CENTCOM area of responsibility outside Iraq and Afghanistan confirm that extensive use of TCNs is not limited to combat areas. The US military presence in the region includes major bases in Kuwait, Bahrain (home of the US Fifth Fleet) and Qatar (which hosts a forward headquarters for CENTCOM at Al Udeid Air Base). These facilities are crucial staging areas for US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as in the projection of US military power throughout the greater Indian Ocean.

Although there are no publicly available overall figures for service member deployments in the CENTCOM area to enable comparison with contract worker statistics, the raw numbers themselves are impressive, as depicted in Figure 4. TCNs reached a peak of 35,000 in 2009 and outnumbered local and US contractors combined in 2008, 2010, 2011, 2014 and into 2015. Locals were the least numerous category; in January 2015, their share dipped to less than 1 percent of the contractor work force. This figure is especially striking in light of the long-standing US military presence in many of these countries, but is consistent given the composition of local labor markets.

Workers’ Rights

The legal status of private military contractors has sparked considerable discussion, albeit with a misleading emphasis on the US citizens: Typically, American war workers do not receive the same political validation that soldiers do, but are paid much higher salaries. Foreign contract workers, however, are treated neither as soldiers to be honored nor as mercenaries who may charge a premium for specialized military skills. They are covered by World War II-era workers’ compensation laws, but numerous practical obstacles prevent them from effectively pursuing claims. The Department of Labor, for example, will not even send mail to Iraq for processing compensation claims.¹⁰

In recent years, media exposés of the plight of foreign contract workers have highlighted the risks they face. Local workers are tarred with the accusation of collaborating with foreign occupiers and vulnerable to reprisals from local insurgents. As a result, some can apply for special visas to the United States. TCNs, on other hand, are vulnerable by virtue of being in a war zone far from home, often saddled with crushing debts accrued in order to pay recruitment fees to obtain jobs in the first place. This vulnerability has contributed to substandard or unsafe working conditions, housing, summary reductions in pay, and sexual and other forms of harassment.

The US government has enacted some reforms, but their effect appears to be limited and they do not address core labor rights concerns. Most measures have framed the issue as one of “human trafficking,” which revolves around a narrower—and more difficult to prove in court—set of egregious abuses that require government intervention. Instead of empowering workers to organize on their own behalf, trafficking measures tend to posit the US government as savior by rescuing victims and prosecuting wrongdoers. This model, widely assailed within the United States, is even more flawed in overseas war zones where Washington relies on the very corporations that are driving the trafficking. There have been no criminal prosecutions for trafficking on

Continued on page 48.

Mohamedou Ould Slahi’s *Guantánamo Diary* is at least the fifth autobiography by a Guantánamo prisoner. But because Slahi remains in US custody, unlike the others, his is the only first-person account that the government had the power to redact. Indeed, *Guantánamo Diary* can be read as two intersecting narratives. One story is Slahi’s own—the recollections and reflections on his experiences as a wanted, captured, disappeared, tortured, broken, yet unwaveringly devout and highly intelligent man. The other story, conveyed through heavy redactions that block words and passages throughout the book—including the entirety of one of Slahi’s poems and female gender pronouns when he describes his interrogators—is a grim and embarrassing account of the state of US intelligence work in the “war on terror.” The book’s editor, Larry Siems, uses footnotes to fill in some of the information blocked out by redactions but available in the public domain, including several official investigations into the Bush administration’s regime of torture.

Slahi’s journey to the dark side begins in his native Mauritania, where his government, for no reason other than to curry favor with the United States, takes him into custody in November 2001 and agrees to his rendition to Jordan, where he is imprisoned for seven and a half months. Between 2001 and 2004, Slahi was one of at least 13 people sent to Jordan for interrogation and torture at the behest of the Americans. The Canadian government is also implicated because Slahi lived in Canada for a brief while, and the Canadians provide threads from some of Slahi’s innocuous phone conversations, for example the mention of “tea and sugar” that American intelligence agents begin to spin, like delusional Rumpelstiltskins, into the whole cloth of a terrorist plot. In July 2002, the CIA renders Slahi from Jordan to the Bagram prison in Afghanistan, and then on August 4, transports him to Guantánamo.

Slahi was ranked the top terrorist at Guantánamo, not on the basis of any evidence of wrongdoing but rather because his life raised questions that lacked answers—at least one the government was willing to believe. Initially, he was questioned about and then deemed presumptively guilty of involvement in the so-called Millennium Plot to bomb the Los Angeles airport. Why? Somewhere along the line he and Ahmed Ressam, who was convicted for the plot, crossed paths. Ressam never implicated Slahi, however. The Millennium Plot was small potatoes. Slahi would soon rise up the “mosaic theory” path to the pinnacle of official suspicion as the person who recruited Ramzi bin al-Shibh for the September 11 attacks. This suspicion can be gleaned, despite all the redactions, through Slahi’s account of the trajectory of his questioning and treatment.

Slahi was subjected to some of the worst torture on offer at Guantánamo with the full knowledge and facilitation of the US government. The paper trail includes a memo signed by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld on December 22, 2002, authorizing a menu of harsh techniques; a memo signed by John Yoo in the Office of Legal Counsel, dated March 13, 2003, to squelch opposition by top military lawyers and which reprised the reasoning in Yoo’s August 1, 2002 memo to the CIA; and a policy directive signed by Rumsfeld on April 16, 2003, which was the prelude to the “special interrogation plan” for Slahi. Thus, with chain-of-command authorization and a legal “golden shield,” the torment intensified.

Slahi’s autobiography fills in the well-known story about how military interrogators sought and received permission to torture prisoners at Guantánamo. Two of Slahi’s personal “vulnerabilities” that were exploited by his interrogators were his love for his family and his religious devotion, which includes modesty. He was stripped and sexually molested by female interrogators. His interrogators threatened rape against his wife, his mother and him, and not just any rape but “American rape,” which has come to occupy a hyper-scary place in the pantheon of rape cultures. He recounts the words of one interrogator: “In American jails, terrorists like you get raped by multiple men at the same time…. [B]eing raped is inevitable.”

Around June 18, 2003, Slahi was moved to the India Block in Camp Echo where he was held in absolute isolation. He was barred from praying and punished if he was caught doing so, and he was denied all “comfort items” including toilet paper and soap. He writes: “I was living literally in terror. For the next seventy days, I wouldn’t know the sweetness of sleeping: interrogations 24 hours a day, three and sometimes four shifts a day.” His breaking point was the infamous “boat ride,” which started with a vicious beating and involved several hours of being sailed about with the intention of making him think he was being taken to a far more horrible place. Two men posing as foreign interrogators, one Egyptian and one Jordanian, were part of the violent charade.

Slahi describes this traumatic seaborne episode as “a milestone in my interrogation history…. A thick line was drawn between my past and my future with the first hit [REDACTED] delivered to me.” His words and sentiments echo those of Jean Amery, a Belgian Jew who was tortured by the Nazis before being sent to a concentration camp: “The first blow brings home to the prisoner that he is helpless” and he loses “trust in the world.” And “[w]hoever was tortured, stays tortured.” Slahi, resigned finally to his helplessness, decided to tell the interrogators what they wanted to hear to make the torment stop. He produced a string of wild stories that drew on the lines of his years-long questioning, including a plot to blow up the CN tower in Toronto (a structure he had never heard of before being imprisoned), and that he was a top al-Qaeda recruiter. Then he signed the statement, and that made it
“true.” Since then, Slahi has been imprisoned in a special facility within the prison where he is treated like someone in a witness protection program.

In 2010, the judge who heard Slahi’s habeas corpus petition ordered his release. But the Obama administration appealed, and the DC Circuit Court of Appeals sent his case back to the district court for a rehearing, where it is still pending. The unredacted manuscript remains classified.

—Lisa Hajjar


Somewhat contrary to its title, this book tells the story of the Iran-Iraq war from a particular Iraqi perspective—that of the presidential office. The authors frame their “military and strategic history” in the old, simplistic argument that Iraq was dominated by a totalitarian state with Saddam Hussein at the top of the pyramid. The front cover, a picture of Saddam in uniform addressing the troops, is more accurate than the title in depicting the content of the book.

The main body of the text is an account of key battles in each year of the war. The authors rely extensively on excerpts of records of meetings of the political leadership in Baghdad, most of them attended by Saddam. Iraqi army intelligence reports, training memoranda and internal assessments of battlefield performance are also referenced heavily. We learn about the Iranian side of the war primarily through Iraqi intelligence briefings.

The book is the third and last installment of the Iraqi Perspectives Project, a series on the former regime’s view of its wars. It relies on Iraqi state archives captured and transported to the United States after the 2003 invasion. These documents have become publicly available through the Conflict Records Research Center of the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University. In addition to these main sources, the narrative draws on interviews conducted after the invasion with Iraqi army officers outside of Iraq as part of the Project. A long list of secondary sources also informs many of the book’s claims.

It is worth noting that neither author has sufficient Arabic to conduct interviews or read the primary sources. They depended on translations by the US government and contractors. Working with translated primary sources raises an inevitable problem of interpretation: The documents have already undergone interpretation by the translator before the authors see them (thanks to Ann Thomson for helping me with these issues). Also, which documents were chosen for translation and on what basis? The authors say that they relied on the counsel of Laila Sabara, a native Arabic speaker, in handling the translated documents. Sabara, according to her public profile, is a freelancer who studied French literature and translation and has offered translations to US government bodies and private firms since 1999. In the absence of an explanation to suggest otherwise, it seems to compromise the integrity of the research that the document selection, interpretation and translation were left mostly to someone untrained in methods of social science or history and without Iraq expertise.

Despite the new sources, the book portrays the Iranian and Iraqi regimes in moralizing clichés—“fanatic” and “totalitarian,” respectively. Saddam Hussein is frequently referred to simply as “the dictator.” The characterization of Iraq under the Baath as “totalitarian,” famously promoted in the 1990s by Kanan Makiya, is questionable both historically and theoretically. The regime, authoritarian as it was, never had the capabilities of a totalitarian state. In its own propaganda, the Baathist state projected an image of strength and ideological consistency, but it is a (very common) mistake to reproduce this image uncritically. The book contradicts itself somewhat on this point. On the one hand, it details a complex internal and international scene that is far from being under anyone’s tight control. But once it moves to general frameworks it accepts the regime’s self-image as omnipotent, as well as the normative tone of writings on Iraq in the 1980s and 1990s.

The failure to escape moralizing creates a number of analytical and historical blind spots. Some are obvious and some may only be discovered by another study using the same archives. Most striking is the US role in the war: Iraqi and Iranian suspicions that the United States was acting to undermine both combatants are portrayed as functions of the regimes’ paranoid nature. But, as the book illustrates in its discussion of the Iran-contra affair, for example, Iraq was not wrong to believe that the US and Israel were supplying Iran with weapons. What prompted this deal, according to the authors, was not a policy to prolong the war, as the Iraqis thought, but chaos at the top of the Reagan administration. Political complexity and contradictory motives, it seems, are characteristic only of Western liberal democracies, while Iraq and Iran have cultural propensities for dictatorship and fanaticism. Another blind spot is the complete distortion of the role of both the US and the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) in the years leading to the Baathist coup. There is no mention of the ICP’s strong presence during the monarchy or the republican era, or the critical assistance given by the US to the Baath, a marginal party at the time compared to the ICP, in the coup and subsequent elimination of the Communists from the Iraqi army and political life. This book is well written and sourced with interesting new material, but its analytical claims should be taken with a grain of salt.

—Nida Alahmad
Povey, Tara. *Social Movements in Egypt and Iran* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Continued from page 45.

US bases overseas. No contracts have been terminated for abuses against TCNs, although the Pentagon has in a few instances punished corporations for failing to pay local Afghan workers. Recently enacted federal regulations ban the charging of recruitment fees, but an investigation by *Middle East Report* editor Anjali Katam for Al Jazeera found that many TCNs falsely tell the US government that they did not pay such fees in order to avoid losing their jobs. It is unclear how this policy can be implemented given strong incentives to pass responsibility (and plausible deniability) down the contracting chain from the larger corporations to the smaller recruitment agencies.

To the extent the US government has moved to recognize labor rights for foreign contract workers, serious questions remain. The Pentagon has enacted a “bill of rights” of sorts for contractor employees that specifies important basic standards such as receiving agreed-upon wages on time, taking appropriate breaks and possessing written employment contracts in languages workers understand. The rule, however, pegs wages and housing and safety standards to the laws of the host country. These protections mean little in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan, where the minimum wage is below $1 per hour. And Bahrain, Djibouti and Qatar, for example, all host no private-sector minimum wage laws. Moreover, even this bill of rights lacks any clear enforcement mechanism: The rules are imposed by the Pentagon on contractors, but provide no clear basis for workers themselves to assert those rights in any court.

Author’s Note: Thanks to the Social Science Research Council’s InteAsia Program, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, for helping to support the research upon which this article is based.

Endnotes

2 The website icasualties.org has compiled a list of 259 TCN contractors killed in Iraq, based on media reports. See “Iraq Coalition Casualties: Contractors—A Partial List,” http://icasualties.org/IraqContractors.aspx.
7 For more on the methodology of calculating these figures, see Darryl Li, “Offshoring the Army: Migrant Workers and the US Military,” *UCLA Law Review* 62:1 (January 2015), pp. 112–171. Updated troop levels in Afghanistan for 2014 and 2015 are based on media reports.
8 As of the second quarter of fiscal year 2015, the Pentagon employed some 600 contractors in Iraq, but their nationalities have not been publicly disclosed. See footnote 1.
11 Federal Acquisition Regulation 22.1703(a)(6). The relevant federal legislation, however, only bans “unreason- able” recruitment fees, meaning this prohibition can be changed without Congressional action. See 22 U.S.C. § 7040(g)(iv)(IV).
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