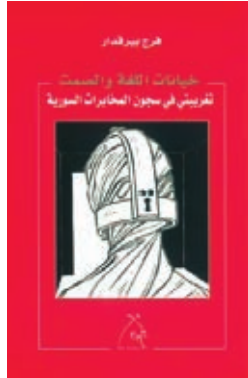

BOOK EXCERPT

KHIYANAT AL-LUJHA WAS SAMT

BY FARAJ BAYRAKDAR

Khiyanat al-lujha was samt (*The treasors of the language and silence*) is the prison testimony of poet Faraj Bayrakdar, one of the longest serving political prisoners from Syria. The Syrian military intelligence arrested Bayrakdar, in 1987, as a suspected member of a communist party.

Following his arrest, Bayrakdar was held incommunicado for seven years. In 1993, he was brought before a court that sentenced him to fifteen years in prison. As political prisoner under the regime of Hafez al-Assad, he served his prison sentence in two of the most notorious prisons in Syria: Saydnaya and Tadmur.



Bayrakdar's long imprisonment prompted international human rights groups to rigorously campaign for his freedom. In 2000, fourteen months before the end of his fifteen-year sentence, Bayrakdar was released from the prison, through an amnesty granted by Bashar al-Assad. Since 2005, he is in exile in Sweden.

Khiyanat al-lujha was samt is a chilling testimony of the Kafkaesque repression, torture and abuse inflicted by the Syrian regime on Bayrakdar and other political prisoners. This excerpt is the thirteenth chapter of the book, that Bayrakdar describes as the tragicomedy chapter.

SKETCHES WITH SECRET INK

Translated from Arabic

BY GHIAS ALJUNDI

1

When the size of the prison cell became smaller than the number of the prisoners, the prison administration chose to call it *al-Nafaq* (a tunnel). However, we the prisoners called it *al-Mahshar*. Then, the prison administration came up with an insane but ingenious solution to the problem: the shift system.

Prisoners in *al-Nafaq* were divided into four groups. One group would stand for six hours while two groups squated. Amid all the staggering frustration and humiliation, the fourth group would sleep upside down. After six hours, the fourth group would be standing and the first group would be squating. And now that I have sketched the picture, let me add the colour, image and voice to it.

A standing prisoner started an argument with one of his standing neighbours as he could not put his other foot on the floor due to lack of space. Dissatisfaction was clear in his voice as he talked about selfishness and lack of empathy among prisoners. As he continued to rant about peoples' corrupted morals and values, I was aimlessly watching the whole incident. Finally he had the verdict out in the air that those chaotic, ignorant, unwise people who were his fellow prisoners did not deserve to live, rather they deserved to be in much worse situation than they were already suffering.

I was still aimlessly watching the episode until one of my comrades nudged me with his elbow and whispered, "Look at this crazy philosopher! Just to get some space for his foot he

is cursing everyone. But whose fault is this, really? This circus goes on as the government fails to secure basic needs in the prison while it is busy boasting its great achievements to the whole world."

2

When a new group of prisoners arrived at the Saydnaya prison from the interrogation branch, the prison administration met them with tempting offers. The newcomers were to be classified and allotted to different wings. A comfortable wing – better than a five star hotel: with radio, newspaper, gym and lots of untold facilities – would be allotted to those who would agree to be cooperative, flexible and may even compromise on their political views.

However, the administration noticed a remarkable lack of response from the prisoners to its generous offer and found them to be stubborn and hardheaded. This was how the classification process began. Some officers were entrusted to classify the real stubborns among the prisoners. The criteria for classification, which actually showed the depth of intelligence and analytical power of those officers, were primarily the screening of thick eyeglasses, then neatness in appearance and finally the size of the body.

Then, there was another round of screening based on some vague standards. Those who matched that profile were taken the *Black Gate*. Do I know what the *Black Gate* is? Do not ask me. Think of a name if you want.

***“You politicians are strange people! Why do you insist on reading newspapers?
I swear to you on my military honour,
I myself don’t read newspapers.”***

As for me, what do I want from this story? May be the real criteria for the classification of political prisoners rather than the control and adversity they are exposed to.

3

They moved Abu Mutawe to a solitary cell. Shortly after the transfer, the sergeant returned and said, “Tell Mahdi Amel to pack his belongings and go to that solitary cell as well.”

“There is no one with that name,” answered the wing leader. After quite a long discussion the sergeant revealed to the wing leader that a letter that Abu Mutawe tried to smuggle out to his family had been confiscated. In the letter, he asked his family to bring some books for him and one particular book of Mahdi Amel. Now the sergeant was wondering how would Abu Mutawe give that book to Mahdi if they were not in the same wing.

Apparently, the sergeant thought he had hard evidence of unauthorised communication between different wings. Mahdi Amel was a Lebanese writer and philosopher, assassinated a long time back. However, the sergeant was not convinced with that fact as the prisoners were trying hard to convince him. Suddenly, the anxious sergeant came up with a solution and told the wing leader, “Well, I will inform the administration about this. But, anything to do with Mahdi Amel will still be your responsibility since you are the wing leader here.”

4

The sergeant instructed Abu Iyad, “Leave all your belongings behind and come with me.” Abu Iyad’s mind started swirling at full speed, analysing a wide spectrum of incidents that could happen, extending from the possibility of release to fresh rounds of interrogation. He could not fathom the vacuum under his feet while stepping down the stairs.

The way those jailers received him at the ground floor of the prison, put Abu Iyad into a semiconscious state. Greeting him with a shower of abusive words, they beat him while he was made to sit on the floor. Then, all he could hear was the buzzing sound of that hair cutting machine as they shaved his head.

He suddenly shook out of his trance as the sergeant was calling out to someone to bring a torture tyre. Like a spring, he jumped to the sergeant, “Tell me, why did you shave my head?” The sergeant answered, “That’s none of your business.” “Bring me the torture tyre!” he shouted again. Abu Iyad was still searching for an answer when the sergeant said, “You know your sins and offences.”

Terrified, Abu Iyad pledged repeatedly that he did not commit any sin. At one point, the sergeant reluctantly said, “The person in question might be someone else, but, we have to look into this. You can now go back to your wing. I will discuss this with my chief. If we find that you are not guilty of anything, then, you will be exempted from further torture

– otherwise, we will meet soon with the amount of torture doubled for you.”

He returned to the wing like a broken palm tree after a storm. He sat down. All the prisoners gathered around him, asking details about what happened, grilling their brains with chilling analysis. The palpating tension was unbearable, as if someone was pressing broken glasses through our skin, draining out the blood. But, just after an hour or so, everything was clear. How?

A sparrow came and told us, “That’s simple. There was a misunderstanding due to poor translation. The discrepancy between the real and metaphorical use of the word hammam (bath) was the real culprit. In prison, hammam means giving someone a falaka accompanied with other abuses and harassments. So, when the prison director granted Abu Iyad access to the bathroom for taking a shower, the sergeant interpreted the order in the language of the prison.

The sparrow also narrated how the sergeant was reprimanded by the director. The director said, “O son of X and X! I asked you to cut the prisoner’s hair and give him access to the hammam, because his family has managed to reach a high-ranking official who promised the family a special visit with Abu Iyad.”

5

After much protest and many failed attempts from our side to establish our right to newspapers, the prison administration sent an officer to investigate our hidden agendas. The investigating sergeant came with his baton, turning it left to right. He threw some random questions in the air. And after testing our patience for a long period of time, he came to the point, “You politicians are strange people! Why do you insist on reading newspapers? I swear to you on my military honour, I myself don’t read newspapers.”

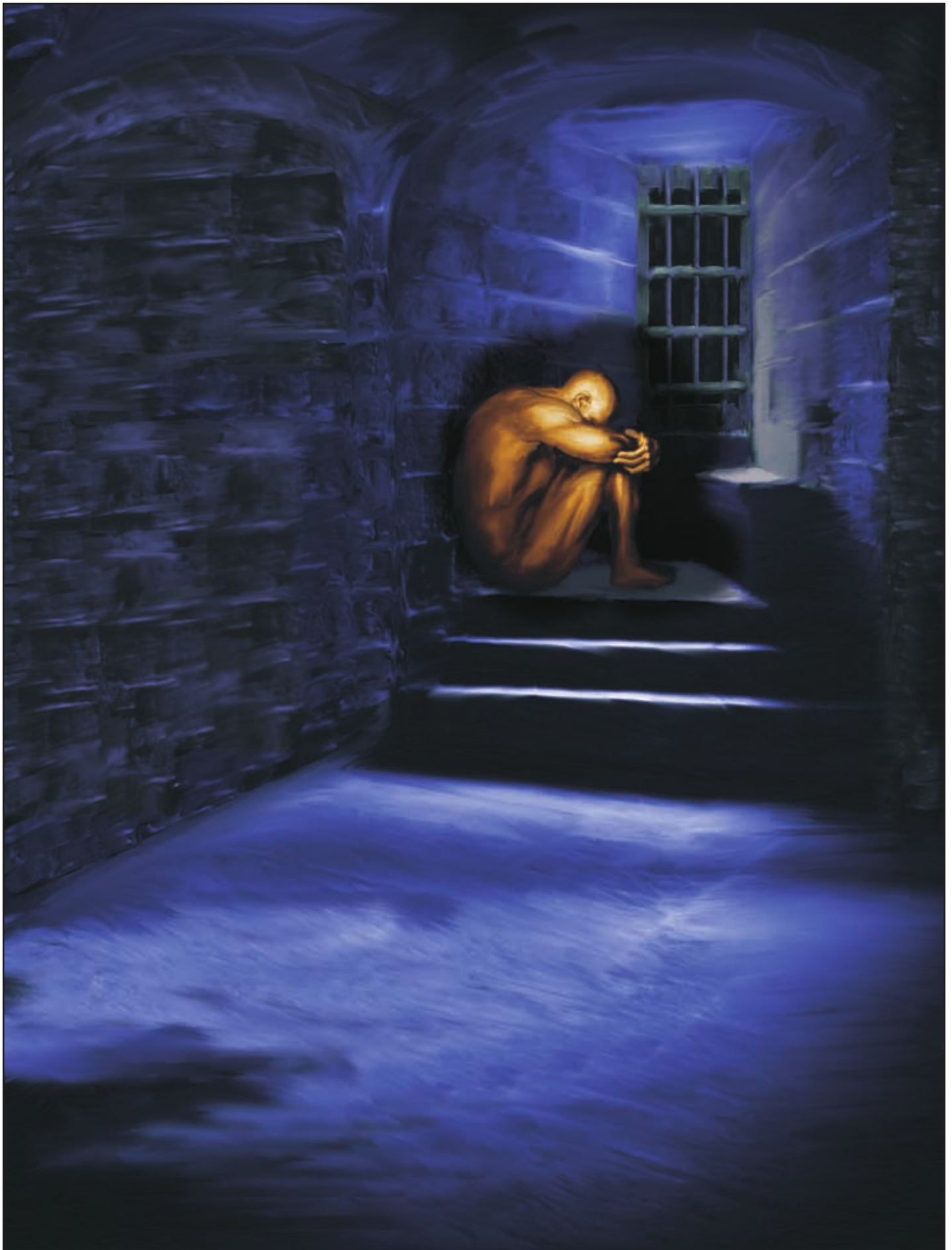
He went on lecturing, “Why do you need newspapers? Do you want to know the latest news? Believe me, there is nothing new, nothing new under the sun. And, if there is any new or important news, it will be published in the Bulletin of Moral Guidance of the army. It is delivered to us and will be delivered to you as well.”

We told him we did not need that bulletin since we wanted newspapers that are read by the masses. As prisoners, we wanted to ensure our right to newspapers.

Now, the sergeant started to chew his words like gum and spat them on our faces, “I see! The bulletin that offers you the cream, is considered shit?” He moved his neck as if he was trying to reposition his head above it and said, “Yes! Absolutely. It is the cream.”

At this point, one of us became terribly impatient and said, “Brother, for God’s sake! Would you take the cream and give us what is left?” This impromptu display of impatience from our side angered the sergeant and led to piles of threats from his side about what would or could happen to us. Next day, the disciplinary officer came and varnished us with insults and threats because we dared to refuse the bulletin, the cream.

Needless to say, a long time passed before the bulletin or the newspapers were delivered to us. However, the daily dose of misery was in endless supply.



Artwork by GreyType Creative.

“You don’t know how bad my mother is at mathematics. I am sure, I will be released before she sorts out that puzzle.”

6

In one of the wings, the prison director was having a meeting with the prisoners. Before ending the event, he asked if anyone had any question or complain. One prisoner shouted, “Sir, I have! Nine years ago, I was cleared by the court, but, I was not released. Two years ago, I was re-tried and cleared again. As you can see, I am still here.”

The director posed for a speech, “O my sons! Be fully assured that every innocent prisoner I have here will eventually get out of this prison, no matter how long it takes. Yes! They will get out even if it takes hundred years.” He took a pause, as if he wanted to give the prisoners a chance to digest his words. And, then, he spoke to the assistant officer, “Move this prisoner to the innocent prisoners wing.”

The assistant officer was totally baffled, “But, Sir! That wing is already full.” The director interrupted him with a decisive military tone, “No. That wing still has some room.”

He addressed the prisoners again, “My sons, anything else?” Five prisoners raised their hands and started to explain their cases that were similar to the case of the prisoner who was granted the innocent wing. “Enough! Enough!” said the director wryly. “They should also be moved to the innocent prisoners wing,” he instructed the assistant officer. However, the prisoners told him that they preferred to be in the wing they were in.

“OK! As you wish. You know that your comfort is our concern as long as it doesn’t break any rules,” the director left with his entourage of guards and officers.

7

Prison food, how do I describe? Faced with bouts of protests by the prisoners about the food, the prison administration was pretending to be deaf. Finally, prisoners declared a hunger strike. Some of the prisoners decided to add a moral and historical weight to the strike by naming it yoghurt intifada. The intifada only led to a fresh round of classification of the prisoners. Following all these protests from our side and a big bulk of threats and intimidation from their side, the food improved a little by quantity and quality.

All that happened a few years back. Now things were no longer the same. Not a gift from God or not because of a surplus or credit to the history. Three melons for the entire wing that had more than a hundred prisoners. To be accurate, we are often given three and a half.

Talking about chickens. As if they were subjected to an unpleasant government. The outer-wing, that had eight people, was given less than one chicken every week, sometimes, in every two weeks. That meant the daily portion of food, for a single person, was one hundred and twentieth portion of the chicken.

But, do you lift a finger? We do not. Please do not be

overwhelmed, you are out and need not lift a finger.

8

Everything in the prison was controlled except theft. In that prison world, it had had a free rein and played a prominent role despite being a secret. To cut it short, almost nothing was far from being available to be stolen: meat, cooking oil, sugar, dessert, bills, amounts, weights of materials.

During the day, teachers made strenuous efforts in arranging things properly, by nightfall traders sneaked into the wings to sell their goods, as skilfully as the market traders of Hamidiya souk in Damascus. Once, our listening ears captured a nice haggle between a guard and a prisoner. It is difficult to draw the right picture of the actual context of the bargain, I will try to focus on the main issue here.

Prisoner: “No! A tank full of cooking butter is less than 800 lira, outside the prison.”

Guard: “Well, take it for 700.”

Prisoner: “No! Not a single lira more than 300.”

Guard: “Make it 650, you will not regret the deal.”

Prisoner: “I am not going to pay more than 300.”

Guard: “I swear by God! I bought it paying more than 300.”

Prisoner: “I know! I know exactly how much it is outside.”

Guard: “Well, 600 and that is the last price.”

Prisoner: “Oh! Don’t argue with me any more. Take 400 and give me a break! Let’s just divide the price between us.”

Guard: “My God! Give me 500 lira and that’s all. Do you want chicken?”

Prisoner: “No. It doesn’t sell much these days. Some prisoners are against buying chicken.”

While locking the gate of the cell with a chain, the guard said, “OK! It’s up to you... do whatever you want. You are a free man!”

9

No story about Tadmur or Saydnaya is complete without Abu al-Kheir. Given his ever-puzzling gestures that suggested his young age, his stock of rather old stories about these two prisons was confusing. So, I asked him how old he was.

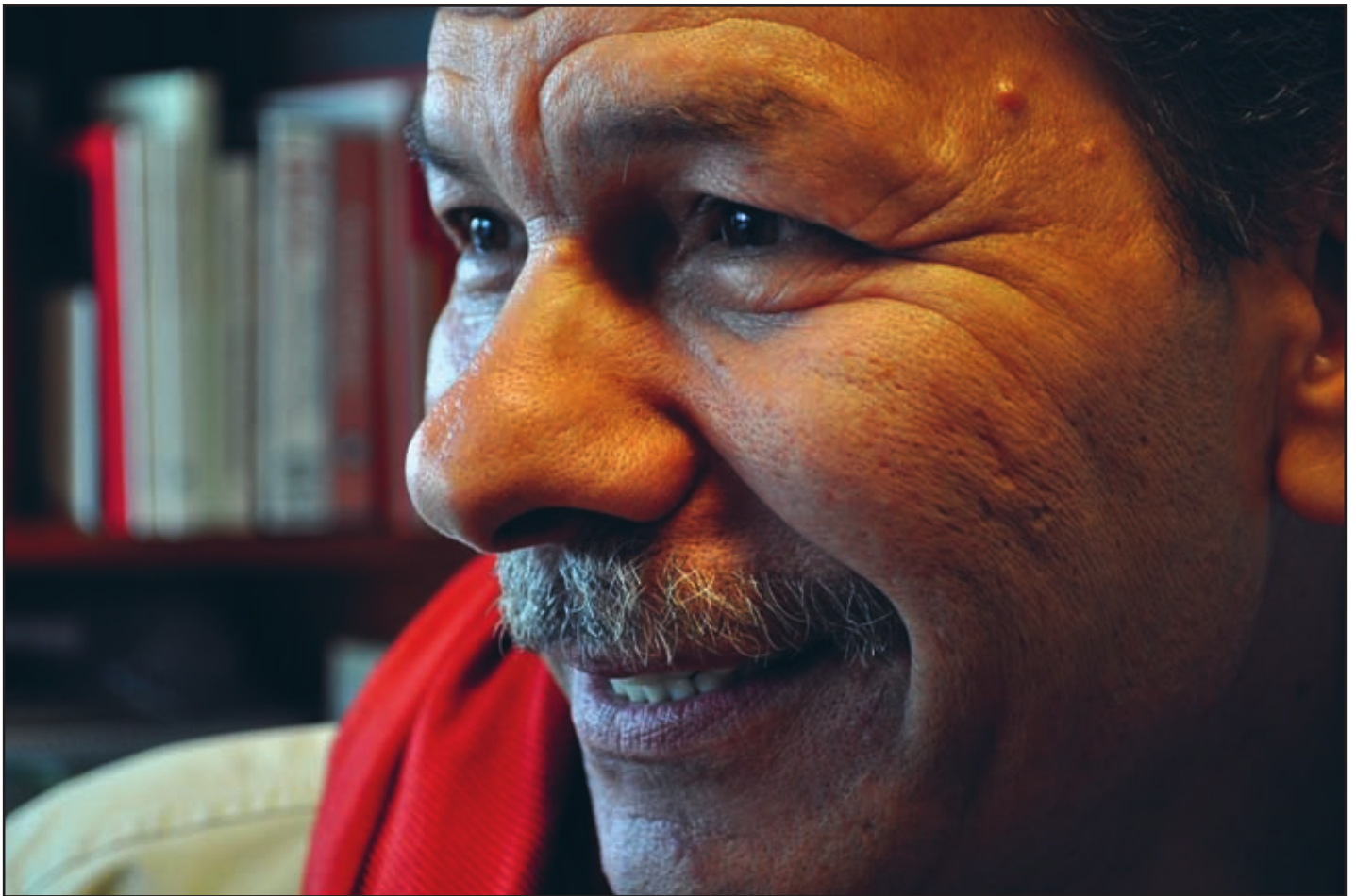
He smiled and said, “Fourteen years.” He paused to relish my predictable reaction and continued, “I am not lying to you. I was arrested when I was fourteen. I feel my time, my age... everything was put to a halt from that point.”

Baffled, I asked, “But, how did that happen? You were under-age!”

He laughed full of his youth or childhood, “You are new in our wing. Tomorrow, I will introduce you to more than ninety prisoners in this wing who were arrested when they were under the legal age of arrest, all of them.”

Abu al-Kheir spent seven years in Tadmur and five years in Saydnaya. After twelve years, when finally he was allowed to meet his family, he was in tears, dancing on his toes and laughing his heart out.

After the family visit, he told us, “At first, I couldn’t recognise my family and they couldn’t recognise me either. Few minutes later, I recognised my father and he recognised me too. Then, I asked about my mother. My father pointed to the old woman standing next to him. I was embarrassed



Faraj Bayrakdar: Photo, private.

beyond limit. I didn't recognise my mother! Then and there I wished, if only the ground would open into a big hold where I could vanish. But, in the end, I successfully managed to show them, everything was OK."

After a brief silence, he said, "I lied to my mother too. Poor mother, she asked me when I would come back. What could I say? I assured her that when my years inside the prison will be equal to the years I spent outside, she will find me next to her."

Suddenly, Abu al-Kheir was back to his self and burst into laughter, "You don't know how bad my mother is at mathematics. I am sure, I will be released before she sorts out that puzzle."

10

"There is a general amnesty, guys! The Council of People has approved the decree of a general amnesty," Abu Basla Mahrouka (a term used for an impatient person) shouted cheerfully, entering the wing. Bewildered, we started looking at each other while Abu Basla kept on repeating his words, as if he was trying to keep up with the drum beating inside him. I do not remember who among us asked him about the source of the news, anyway, he replied, "The second floor! A while ago, we had a contact from the second floor."

With this answer, the sudden surge of hope and chaos subsided a little bit. Then came the apprehension of yet another disappointment dug by Abu Basla, who never ceased to disappoint us again and again. It was like his second nature.

We contacted the second floor. They replied that the Council of People did not approve the decree yet, but, it was being discussed. We asked them about the source of the news and it was Abu Elhinn. Abdu Elhinn said he was informed by the prisoners from the first floor, but, there was no mention of the Council of People discussing over general amnesty.

Upon contacting the first floor, we came to know that the news came from the al-Asmar family when they visited him. The news was that the authorities were collecting names and preparing a list for release of prisoners to mark Eid-al-Adha. Naturally, such a list would have to be approved as a decree by the Council of People. So, we requested Ibn al-Asmar to tell us exactly how he got the news. What he told us was that his family told him about big rumours outside. Apparently, everyone was predicting that a general amnesty was imminent.

Later, we followed this up during other family visits. Some of our families contacted Bait al-Asmar to clarify the news they shared with their son. After two weeks, much to our dismay, we could finally gather that the news we heard was purely a personal analysis based on an earlier analysis that somehow originated from one of the previous visits of the al-Asmar family.

11

After a tormenting four years of imprisonment at the Tadmur prison, one day, one of the interrogation officers called me for a meeting. He was from the Palestine branch and had a bad reputation among those he interrogated, specially women. My

***“But, socialism has been defeated, my brother!
Nothing called socialism is left on the face of the
earth. So what’s the point of your meaningless
sacrifice?”***

relationship with him had always been hostile not only because of his behaviour or infamy, but also because we were from the same region and I knew a lot about him since high school.

At the meeting, he asked me to sit down and said this was not an official meeting concerning any intelligence or politics related issues, rather, he just wanted to check how was I doing.

He asked, “OK! Tell me, how do you see things these days?”

I replied, “What things?”

He said, “The world. The fall of the Berlin wall and the breakdown of the socialist bloc and other things, which you must be reading about after you were allowed newspapers.”

I said, “Well, I will now forget what you said about this meeting not concerning intelligence or politics. As for your question, regretfully, I don’t have an answer.”

Deceitfully smiling, he cleared his throat, “Why not? Everything in the world has changed. Are you telling me that all these events had no impact on your political position and views?”

I retorted, “Only the dead do not change. For any change to take place, the ability to think is the prerequisite. Freedom is mother to thoughts. Given the lack of information, if not the absolute absence of it in this prison, I am not free to think, thus, I am not free to change as well. And, you know fully well that this conversation is between a jailer and a prisoner...”

He interrupted, “Wrong... trust me... wrong! You need not see me as a jailer in this conversation. I told you everything has changed. We have changed and we are changing things outside. As I mentioned already, this is not an interrogation. Now, tell me, don’t you read newspapers?”

I answered, “I read that I am still a prisoner, and that is enough for me to deny what you are saying, unless you mean that you have changed for worse.”

He asked, “Do you still consider us a dictatorship?”

I asked, “Do you now have any other label or name that can describe you better?”

He declared, “But, socialism has been defeated, my brother! Nothing called socialism is left on the face of the earth. So what’s the point of your meaningless sacrifice?”

I said, “Yet, we have not defeated the dictatorship here and that alone is worth the sacrifice.”

He said, “Freedom is now much more different than what you saw in your days under the sun. Just look at the widespread criticism of the government in all the newspapers. But, you must know, there is no such thing as absolute freedom in a backward society like ours.”

I said, “Don’t you think it’s funny, that you are trying to convince a political prisoner, so eagerly? Are you saying that freedom has a foothold in Syria? Are you telling me that it’s an illusion that I am in a prison? Or, you want me get this piece of information from Al-Baath newspaper, that is your mouthpiece.”

He said, “What’s wrong with Al-Baath? Believe me, it is one of the best in the Arab press, even the world press.” I do not think he noticed my smile as he continued, “I mean this newspaper should be given credit for its accuracy, honesty and credibility... OK! Forget the newspapers and listen to me. I can assure you and I don’t think you can deny that we have more freedom here in Syria than the whole region, if you draw comparison with Iraq, Jordan or Turkey.”

I said, “I don’t think your superiors will appreciate your effort in praising them through comparison with the Iraqi regime. This might anger them. So let’s leave Iraq out of this, for now. When it comes to other governments in the region, at present, they are less repressive than the one you are representing, the one whose victim I am.”

Agitated and embarrassed, he stammered, “That’s not true... no... never! Name a single country in the region that is more democratic than Syria.”

I replied, “Jordan. They have recently passed a press freedom law. Now, they are considering legal procedures for allowing the formation of political parties.”

He could not contain his frustration any more and reacted sharply, “Who told you that Jordan is like that?”

I threw my last card on the table, “Al-Baath newspaper says so.”

He smashed his hand on the table, “O... talk... mere newspaper talk. Forget newspapers, they just print anything. Let me tell you what the truth is...”

12

We arrived at the Tadmur (Palmira) prison without any clothes except what we were wearing. As those did not last for more than a year, we tried to figure out a way to patch them, cut them or somehow reuse them. In the end, we held a meeting to discuss over our last strategic reserve: the bedsheets. This sheet belonged to one of our comrades from the Saydnaya prison who later joined us in Tadmur.

At the meeting, more than four hours passed as we were discussing various suggestions on the optimal use for the sheet. Some suggested that we use a part of it to patch the torn clothes and save the rest for the future. Others wanted to use the whole sheet for making a few pairs of shorts. Well, some also suggested that we keep two pieces aside to make a chessboard and a backgammon board.

Finally, a committee of people qualified with scientific expertise in tailoring was elected and assigned to patch our clothes. The committee completed its duty after a week of finger bending hard work, but, no one seemed to be satisfied with the results. The committee was either biased in assessing who needed most, or, the sheet was misused. Or, the committee was tyrannical and did not care to listen to anyone.

It is not a surprise that, like richness, poverty has its morals. And, it was a blessing as it did not take long for our wild arguments about clothes and patchwork to stop. Because, some days later, the state graciously offered us military suits and underwear. However, we kept our old clothes as there was no guarantee that the future did not have worse days hidden in it. ■