

**Al-Noubani, Abdel Rahim. "The Facts of the Legendary Hunger Strike in Nafha al-Sahrawi Prison, 1980". Jerusalem: Palestine News Network, 2012. . Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*, 2016.**

*What follows is a discussion of the hunger strike that took place at the Nafha al-Sahrawi prison in 1980, where both Ali al-Jaafari and Rasem Halawa became martyrs, as told by former prisoner Abdel Rahim al-Noubani.*

*Preparations for the strike:*

From the moment of their detention in the Nafha facility, the prisoners knew that it was an attempt by the prison service to break the core of the detainee front. If they managed this, it would undoubtedly be a disaster for the detainee movement and would bring it right back to its first stage of oppression and misery. It was understood, therefore, that in order to triumph in the upcoming confrontation, a choice had to be made – a choice that was individual yet collective, both necessary and lonely – for the alternative was death, and a slow and humiliating destruction. The detainees' command resumed sending messages to international, Arab and local forums and organizations, this time declaring the exact date of the hunger strike, 14/07/1980. Two days before the strike began, the prison authorities transferred comrades Abu Ali Shahin, Jaber Ammar, Mohammad al-Qaq and Abdallah al-Ajrami to Shatta prison, reducing the total number in Nafha taking part in the strike to 71. But these four, who were leading members of the front, joined the strike on the appointed day all the same, from their new location.

On the evening of 13/07/1980, the prisoners detailed their demands in a letter addressed to the prison service, delivered to the night shift unit that day. The letter read as follows:

1. The prisoners demand the installation of beds
2. The prisoners demand access to a radio and television
3. The prisoners demand the improvement of the quality and quantity of food
4. The prisoners demand access to Arabic and Hebrew books and newspapers
5. The prisoners demand the expansion of windows, allowing more sun and air into the cell

---

<sup>1</sup> This work is made available under a Creative Commons 4.0 International Licence, and must be used accordingly. Please see citation guidelines on the About Us page.

6. The prisoners demand an end to the policy of collective and individual punishment, solitary confinement, depriving them food during their isolation, and only providing them with bread and water.
7. The prisoners demand the visiting allowance to be prolonged to one hour every two weeks
8. The prisoners demand access to winter and summer clothes, as well as blankets
9. The prisoners demand permission to buy food and vitamins from the prison canteen, which has been hitherto denied
10. The prisoners demand their walk allowance extend from 15 minutes to an hour

## *Legacies*

The ranked officer was informed that the prisoners had declared a hunger strike beginning the next morning, 14/07/1980. Some prisoners, including myself, shaved their heads, partly because our hair would start to fall out during the hunger strike, and partly in anticipation of the prison service's attempt to use pulling hair as a method of torture in isolation and investigation cells. Other inmates, meanwhile, began writing their wills, convinced that they would die during the strike, and others began writing their memoirs, among whom were Rasem Halawa and Ali Jaafari, who died on the tenth day of the strike. All the prisoners, meanwhile, vowed to show patience and resilience, and not to bow to the authorities' attempts to break their will and their strike.

Prior to the start of the strike, the prisoners managed to smuggle a small radio from a Jewish civilian prisoner in exchange for money, and hid it in a secret location. One prisoner was entrusted the task of listening to the radio and taking notes of what he heard, to be written and passed on to the other captives, including news about their hunger strike. On the second day of the strike, a group of Palestinian mayors, Bassam al-Shakaa, Ibrahim al-Tawil, Fahed al-Qawasmi, Mohammad Melhem, Karim Khalaf and Wahid al-Hamdallah, attempted to visit the prisoners, only to get stopped a few hundred meters from the jail and denied entry. A day after this incident, we heard news of a collective assassination attempt on the mayors, in which comrade Bassam al-Shakaa lost both legs, after an explosive device planted by Israeli intelligence went off in his car, triggering mass demonstrations across all Palestinian cities. The Saudi Arabian UN delegate, Ahmed Khalil Abdul Jabbar, submitted a request to the Secretary General of the United Nations, Kurt Waldheim, to send a UN committee on a fact-finding mission inside Nafha and examine the conditions in the prison.

It should be noted here that the prison director, Amiram, a Yemeni Jew, was a former officer in Bir al-Sabaa prison, and was badly beaten by its prisoners in 1976. This was during the period in Bir al-Sabaa known for disciplining police and prison officers, as a response to the brutality wrought on the prisoners by the authorities at the time. And it was for this reason that this director was particularly ruthless and aggressive in his dealings with the prisoners of Nafha.

It is also important to mention the statement of the Popular Front official spokesperson Bassam Abu Sharif, broadcast by Arab and Western news agencies and radio stations three days prior to the beginning of the strike. The statement read, 'The Nafha prison authorities have killed 26 prisoners on hunger strike.' This was completely untrue, and triggered anxiety and fear among the detainees, who felt that – if this news had spread – Israel would exploit the statement and launch a genuine attack against them.

#### *Attempt to break the strike*

Around midday on 21/07/1980, day nine of the strike, an announcement was made by the prison management through the speakers installed in the cells, stating only that the prisoners should 'prepare themselves'. About an hour later, an officer from the prison administration and an intelligence officer visited the cells and told twenty six prisoners – the same number of prisoners cited by Bassam Abu Cherif as having died prior to the start of the strike – to pack their bags. These prisoners, myself included, were taken out into the yard where a truck, special investigation units and Israeli soldiers stood waiting for us. The prisoners were asked to strip and get ready for inspection in an empty room. It was in this room that I saw comrade Rasem Halawa for the last time. During our wait for the inspection, he said to me 'Brother Abu al-Noub, come closer and let's talk for a bit, for God only knows if I will see you again!' When all 26 of us were present, we were taken into the prison yard, chained together in twos. We were then subjected to another round of beating and humiliation by the police and soldiers who were accompanying the truck, and it was under the force of this abuse that we were told to get in the prison's 'Bosta' truck. We had no idea where it was heading. They continued to insult and swear at us throughout the journey, and at one point one of the soldiers said that 'Israel could have bought new weaponry with the price of the food that you refrained from eating.' One of the prisoners, Ali al-Jaafari, gave a severe and appropriate response.

#### *Death awaits us in Ramle prison*

Three hours after our departure from Nafha, the truck came to a gradual stop in front of gates that were opening and closing. Several voices rang out around us. One of the prisoners stood up to take a look out of the top window of the truck, and saw that we were in Ramle prison. As we got out of the truck in the prison yard, we saw two groups of officers and soldiers waiting for us, among them the director of public prisons at the time Haiim Levi; they began to beat us badly. We later found out that this prison's warden was Roni Nitsan, one of the prominent criminals known by the detainee movement. He later died at the hands of one of the Jewish prisoners, as a result of his tyranny and brutality. After the standard health checks – weighing, blood pressure, and so on – in the prison clinic (which would, incidentally, later become a public stage for abuse and murder), we were divided up into 26 rooms in one of the sections of Ramle prison, one prisoner to each cell. There were no mattresses in the cells, just a thin piece of sponge called 'Joma' the size of a mat. We were told to sit on the mat and not to stand or approach the door.

Less than an hour after I had been put in my cell, I heard distant loud screams. I didn't know whom the voice belonged to, but I knew it was someone from our Nafha group. As the shouts persisted, getting louder and louder, I felt more and more helpless, more scared for the person screaming, and more afraid of the unknown future that lay ahead. But this time I heard a group of soldiers, sounding as if they were dragging a corpse or a beaten body over the ground. Meanwhile, moans and cries of a number of prisoners in the next room, neighbouring mine, got louder. I realized that severe torture was carried out in this section, against the prisoners on hunger strike brought from Nafha. At last, a police officer opened the door of my room and told me to get out. I found myself standing in the prison clinic, in front of the clinic director, Ravi Rumieh, another jailer, Nawaf Musalaha, and a group of heavily built police officers. I was sat down on a chair and presented with a plate of food; twice, the director asked me to eat and both times I refused. 'Suit yourself', he said. I had immediately noticed a large saucepan on a gas stove, which I later found out was filled with water and dissolved salt. The clinic's director had a device similar to an endoscope, which was made up of a container and a long tube which is designed to extend from the nose or mouth down to the stomach. This device was called the *zonda*. But the clinic had prepared no food to be entered into the hunger strikers' stomachs – all they had prepared was salt and boiling water. They tied and bound me to the chair with ropes, and began to force the tube in through my nose. They were rough and aggressive, and it caused blood to pour from my nose into my mouth, spilling onto my chest and staining my shirt. I could feel that loathsome tube reach the bottom of my empty stomach, before they began to

pour the pot of salt and water into the container directly. At that moment, I remembered something important that a colleague of mine, Hani al-Issawi, who was also transferred from Nafha to Ramle, had said to me: 'Abu al-Noub, I heard Lafinat, an officer major in Nafha prison, warn the soldiers from the bus about you, so be careful.' I was further convinced that the Ramle prison authorities intended to end my life, after the jailor Nawaf Musalaha said during my torture, 'Noubani, you'd better stop your strike because Ravi wants to kill you.'

### *The Martyrdom of Ali al-Jaafari, Rasem Halawa and Ishaq Maragha*

All 26 of us were subjected to the same ill-treatment. However, in the cases of Rasem Halawa, Ali Jaafari and Ishaq Maragha, the tube got stuck in their lung instead of going down to the stomach, and boiling water and salt was poured in, instantly burning and destroying the lung. The next morning, on 22/07/1980, someone from a different section to us – I think one of the Arab criminal prisoners, and an employee in the foreign prison service administration – announced with a sad and resounding voice 'Good morning, prisoners of Nafha, I inform you that Ali al-Jaafari has been martyred.' That evening, the same voice announced, 'Good evening, prisoners of Nafha, I inform you that Rasem Halawa has been martyred.' Thus our first day at Ramle prison was marked by two deaths, and one serious lung injury to comrade Ishaq Maragha, who was subjected to the same cruelty and torture as both Ali and Rasem in the prison clinic, but whose body initially withstood the injury. It was not until 1983 that this injury finally led to his death.

After the force feeding, the prison authorities brought Ali, Rasem and Ishaq to a room next to the prison clinic – 'the waiting room'. After Ali and Rasem died, I was reunited with comrade Ishaq, who told me what happened: 'When we were put in the waiting room, the three of us collapsed onto a wooden bench, overcome with extreme exhaustion and fatigue. The pain was ripping our chest and gut apart. But it seemed that Ali Jaafari was the suffering the most; he grabbed the bars of the iron door, his drained voice shouting out to the section's jailer and clinic doctor alternately, asking them to provide us with emergency assistance and treatment. He then turned to me suddenly and said, "Abu Jamal, I'm dying, I'm dying!" I tried to calm him and raise his spirits, and boost his strength – for I had noticed something in him that I myself did not feel, despite the fact that we had both gone through the same torment.

Ali al-Jaafari started shouting again, "Abu Jamal, my legs have died, I can no longer feel them, they're as cold as ice." I was helpless, and could do nothing

but say to him, "Don't be afraid, Ali, here comes the doctor, don't worry." He suddenly shouted again, for the third and last time: "My arms have died, Abu Jamal." I was as drained as he was, and as he said this to me, my eyes filled with tears; I saw his last gasp escape from his deteriorated lung to his broken nose by the *zonda* hose; canals filled with blood and pain opened up inside him. His head was slightly bent over to his right shoulder and his cold hands were still holding onto the bar of that damned iron door. His gracious self slid away, and his pure soul left his body, and all the while he stood there, like a palm tree that had lasted a hundred years drying out. We rested the body of our martyr on the ground, shaking with sobs. In that moment, Rasem and I forgot we shared the same fate as he.

The torturers then came straight into the room and brought us along to the clinic with Ali's body. It was only a few hours before Rasem Halawa, too, passed away. So he and Ali al-Jaafari became martyrs on the same day, 22/07/1980. Ali al-Jaafari fell the hero of Nafha, the champion of the legendary Mount al-Qarntal operation, leaving behind an honourable history of generosity and sacrifice. Accompanied on his trip to eternity was his comrade and his friend, martyr Rasem Halawa. My brother and friend Abu Ali Shaheen told me something very special about Ali Jaafari. He said, "I can still remember Ali Jaafari, who used to plead for the tube not to be used on him, and who believed that drinking milk, if allowed, should be drunk directly without the tube. It was as if he was certain that he would be victim of that dreaded implement. This time they used it repugnantly; they placed it in his lung and poured in water and salt. He died the very same day, as did Rasem Halawa, who was extremely strong and could carry one of us like he could a bird in his hands. And the great fighter Isahaq, who experienced acute internal bleeding from the tube, was also later killed by it.

### *Solidarity and anger*

News of the martyrdoms spread throughout Palestine. Angry street demonstrations were held everywhere, and human rights organizations both across the world and within Israel itself took great interest in the case and circulated information about what had happened. The prison administration faced ultimate embarrassment. A group of lawyers came to the prison, including the well-known, progressive Israeli advocate Leah Tsimel. She met the injured captive, Ishaq Maragha, and provided a powerful description of the prisoners' conditions in Ramle to the Israeli public and the world. Tsimel shamed Menachim Begin's government, his interior minister, Yosef Burg, and the director of public prisons, Haiim Levy for being directly involved in the

killings at Ramle prison. Her actions, alongside an international outcry, provided solidarity with those at Nafha and put pressure on Israel.

Most importantly, in the Nafha case, the leadership of the Palestinian revolution completely supported the strike, even though it had no political aim. Its sole aim was to improve the quality of life of the detainees who had been denied their human rights, and in that sense the Nafha strike succeeded. It produced tangible results, and most importantly it overthrew the school of oppression and terrorism and broke its might. It and proved that the slogan raised at Nafha prison 'yes to hunger, no to surrender' as the slogan of the detainees' struggle; the battle of the guts demonstrated the will and resilience of the Palestinian detainees, without weaknesses and without internal disputes.

#### *The ongoing strike*

On the 23/07/1980, the morning after the loss of Ali and Rasem, the hunger striking prisoners were taken aback by a cart containing a pot of milk intended for them. Prior to that, the prison administration had ended our isolation and taken the hunger strikers back to the cells, redistributing them in rooms of an average of six prisoners. We had previously adopted a position towards milk consumption during the strike, as had a senior Israeli judge: that a glass of milk did not taint or end the strike. The judge of the Israeli Supreme Court had already supported this position based on a petition filed by comrade Abu Ali Shaheen in 1979. The prison administration offered us milk in an attempt to stifle the resentment of the prisoners and anger of the Palestinian streets.

It is important to mention that the Nafha hunger strike started at the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan, and although the prison administration allowed us milk, some prisoners insisted on fasting during the hunger strike – in other words, they only had a cup of milk *after* the prayer at sunset. Fourteen days later, we went back to Nafha prison, where the strike was still ongoing, 27 days in. We continued to strike when Ramadan ended, continuing to refuse food during Eid.

#### *Suspension of the strike*

On the third day of Eid Al-Fitr, the 33rd day of the strike, on the 16/08/1980, the prison administration summoned the detainees to a dialogue committee, which was headed by our rebel comrade Khalil Abu Ziad. A committee sat waiting in the authorities' offices, made up of representatives from the

commission of Arab lawyers, representatives of the Red Cross and representatives of the directorate of public prisons. Throughout the day, an extensive discussion took place between representatives of the prisoners and the aforementioned parties. It is worth mentioning here that the leaders of the prisoners in Nafha had previously refused a private committee meeting with the directorate of public prisons to discuss the demands of the captives.

The detainee dialogue committee agreed to suspend the strike after the approval of more than 95 percent of the prisoners' demands. So the detainee committee returned to prison, and comrade Khalil Abu Ziad stood at the centre of the jail and addressed the prisoners. He said:

'Dear brothers, dear comrades, congratulations on your victory, the Directorate of Public Prisons agreed to meet our demands, and accordingly the General Committee of the Struggle has decided to suspend the strike to give the prison authorities a chance to implement what it promised.' Among the most prominent of what was agreed upon, I remember the following:

1. Agreeing to install beds in the cells
2. Agreeing to install a television
3. Agreeing to install a radio
4. Agreeing to expand the window on the cells' iron doors to reach to half almost the frame
5. Agreeing to allow more Arabic and Hebrew books and newspapers
6. Agreeing to lengthen the time allocated for walking to an hour each time, thus an average of two hours per day
7. Agreeing to allocate a room for visits, and increasing visiting time to 45 minutes every two weeks
8. Agreeing to provide necessary medical treatment to all prisoners as required
9. Allowing prisoners to work in the kitchen and ---
10. Allowing underwear and blankets to be brought in during family visits
11. Allowing prisoners to walk freely and visit each other

*An inspiration to all, an extraordinary feat*

After this announcement, the prison's director ordered his assistants to return the confiscated sugar, tea, coffee and cigarettes to the prison. And in the prison's kitchen a meal of milk and butter was prepared, which all the prisoners ate for dinner. The next morning the prison's management brought us a meal consisting of the milk and butter mixture, toasted bread and beans. The prisoners returned the beans as it did not suit the physical state of recent hunger strikers, and comrade Khalil Abu Ziad asked the jail administration to

allow all the prisoners to go out to the prison yard together to eat lunch together and greet one another, which was granted. As the lunch hour approached and the prisoners went into the yard, they were surprised by the presence of large numbers of visitors, made up of Israeli civilians, military personnel and journalists. Some of them were climbing the roof of the jail and others were wandering between rooms and departments. They had come to Nafha to see the prisoners who had managed to survive without food for 33 days, and perhaps some, or all, expected that the prisoners would attack dinner like wolves due to the intensity of their hunger and thirst. But what the prisoners actually did moved and impressed the watching crowd. The prisoners sat on the ground, spread out in a circle, except for three of them, who handed and distributed the food to the prisoners in order.

The meal, as I remember it, was composed of boiled and mashed potatoes, toasted bread and soup. No prisoner took a bite until Khalil Abu Ziad gave the order. Each visitor who left Nafha jail on that day, went with an impression of the utmost importance of the Palestinian prisoners, an impression which would stay with them until their dying day. Some later documented what they saw in books and studies, but that day itself we heard them make comments first hand, such as, 'what soldiers they are to have acted with such immense discipline' and 'these prisoners will become pillars of Palestinian state'.

### *The Martyrs' Cemetery*

So this is how the legendary Nafha hunger strike ended, with the participation of all Palestinian prisoners, most notably in the Asqalan prison, where captive Anis Dawla was martyred a few days after the strike ended. He died on the 26/08/1980, from pain, fatigue and suffering caused by carrying on with his strike in solidarity with the prisoners of Nafha. Following this strike, another partial strike took place for seventeen days, due to the prison authorities' delay in executing the promised demands. But it was all finally carried out, except the installation of a radio, which was achieved during the strike of Junaid Prison in 1984. As for the bodies of the martyrs of Ali al-Jaafari, Rasem Halawa, Anis Dawlah and Ishaq Al Maragha, they were buried in numbered graves to be later on handed over to their relatives in the 2011, 31 years after their martyrdom.