

**Jama'ani, Dafi. *Min Al-hizb Ila Al-sijn, 1948-1994: Mudhakkirāt, Beirut : Riyād al-Rayyis lil-Kutub wa-al-Nashr, 2007 (pp. 142-155). Translated by The Palestinian Revolution, 2016.***

*Moving to Al-Jafar Desert Prison*

Nearly one week following the 14 July 1958 revolution in Iraq, and after a sense of security was restored to Jordanian regime figures, they began tidying up the house. Accordingly, instructions were issued for transferring all political prisoners to Al Jafar Prison, so as to find more space for others who were going to be arrested following the collapse of the 'Hashemite Union.'

The Al-Jafar Desert Prison is located in the south of Jordan, 200 km south of Amman and 50 km east of the city of Ma'an. It was established by Glubb Pasha, who had decided on the location when he commanded the Desert Region, prior to taking up his post as the Commander of the Arab Legion. Incidentally, Glubb Pasha was also the founder of the famous Naqrat al-Salman prison, located in southern Iraq near the Iraqi-Kuwaiti-Saudi border.

One evening, around 8pm, the prison administration informed all political prisoners and those serving sentences that they must prepare for departure. Subsequently, a great deal of noise arose in prison; the morale of the incarcerated was at its peak, whereas the confidence of the regime men had hit rock bottom. We began to pack, and after preparing ourselves for leaving, we were confronted with the problem of the radio we had secretly possessed. In the midst of that pivotal period we were passing through, we could not possibly leave that device or be lax in preserving it and bringing it with us to Al-Jafar. In this atmosphere of uncertainty, Abu Saher suggested that we hide it between his shoulders and we objected, as we were certain that we will all be subjected to thorough individual searches. Eventually, we arrived at an appropriate solution: we had a Toffee Box that was 20cm long, and whose base was large enough to fit the radio. So we put the radio at the bottom of the box, and filled the rest of it with sugar. This way, the radio arrived safely to Al-Jafar.

They took out our luggage and loaded it into their vehicles. They then took us out, two by two, and I was with Mahmoud al-Ma'a'ita as usual. When they took us out, they made us stop outside the prison gates, and they began to chain us with Iron fetters, the left hand shackled to the right, and the right foot shackled to the left. They then carefully searched us and completely

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emptied out our pockets (the radio could not have possibly passed through this search). They loaded us next into army transport trucks. After 11pm, the caravan moved, guarded by soldiers from the First Armoured Brigade. We drove for the whole night on an unpaved desert track, and we stopped for fifteen minutes just before dawn to fulfil our natural needs.

We then continued our journey, arriving at Al-Jafar around 8am. After off-loading our luggage, they made us stand in a long line-up next to the prison gate, guarded by an infantry unit. They then ordered us to sit cross-legged and when everyone in front of me sat down, I followed suit. However, my designated partner, Mahmoud, refused to sit. So I held his hand and told him: 'Why won't you sit?' He angrily answered: 'I don't want to sit.' So I held his hand again and told him: 'Sit. These people just lost one throne, and their other throne is under threat. Do you think that they would hesitate to humiliate, or even slaughter, any human being if he were to disobey their orders?'

### *Al-Jafar Desert Prison*

The prison was located in the middle of a desert wasteland owned by the Abu Tayeh section of the Huwaytat tribe... It was built near a desert station that was commanded at that time by Captain Hammad al-Gumayzeh from Bani Sakher tribe. The station was located on a low rising mound that lay 150 m away from the prison. To the southwest, there was an artesian well providing the station and the prison with water. The prison extended for 200m from west to east, and it was divided into two sections, the smallest of which was the western ward. Separating the two sections was a wall as high as the walls surrounding the prison. On each angle of the wall, there was an observation and guard tower.

After searching us, they took us to the areas allocated to each of the political groups to which the prisoners belonged. Our group was put in the eastern side of the prison. This section was comprised of four large barracks and two small ones, a bathing area, and a toilet facility. The barracks were of the kind used by the British army in its impermanent camps. Its appearance was similar to traditional vaults. The larger ones were 7.5 x 4 meters in size, and the area of the smaller ones was 5 x 4 meters. The difference in size was due to the fact that the larger ones contained a washing basin, a bath, and a toilet. Each structure was built of zinc sheets. The roof was covered with tar-soaked felt, and the base was made of cement, ascending half a meter from the surface of the ground. In the summer, the barracks were hot and they were cold in the winter, mirroring the weather conditions of Al-Jafar desert.

We, the nine officers, were housed in a small barracks and they put the other political groups in the larger barracks. Before our arrival, this prison housed a few inmates who were sentenced under the charge of spying for "Israel." After I got to know them, I found that the majority were illiterate simple people that were victims of exploitation and poverty. They were mostly engaged in smuggling between Occupied Palestine and the West Bank. Such people could have easily fallen into the traps of an organisation like the "Israeli" intelligence, and it is certain that their contributions to the loss of Palestine were extremely minimal. The spies that actually lost Palestine held well known positions.

### *Life in Al-Jafar Prison*

The difference between living in Al-Jafar prison and incarceration in al-Mahata prison or any other (excluding, of course, Al-MazzeH prison in Syria), is the difference between living alone in a 2x1.5m solitary cell (and suffering from the difficult and inhuman conditions that result from that), and living in a shared cell amidst twenty of your comrades. Here, there were 2 meter wide corridors running alongside three sides of the walls, and there was a 15x4 m front yard in which you could walk, sit, and play cards, attached to which were modern amenities and a bathing area. These were the specifications of the 'quarters' in which we used to live.

In Al-Jafar, you felt that you had a margin of freedom that was lacking in our societies which were living under the shadow of martial law and emergency regulations. You possessed your freedom within the space of two square kilometres. This small society, like any other, had its own reality and form of living that required organisation. Within it, there were rules regulating being and co-existence. As such, we- those who were living in this small elite society- needed to create regulations and modes of co-existence (but not laws) governing our relationships with each other. This is what we did indeed. Nevertheless, this elite society remained like any other. Transgression upon the rules and customs of co-existence (and even morality) was an objective and natural part of life. The relationship with the prison administration, which represented authority, was minimal, and the prisoners had to run their own affairs by themselves. The most important issues were:

1. Security, be it amongst the prisoners themselves (who had varying political affiliations, morals, and personal mannerisms) or between the prisoners and the prison administration. This was the responsibility of the prison administration.

2. Feeding the prisoners and securing their connections with their families. The authorities gave this task to a steward who conducted these two tasks twice a week. Each of the political groups had a representative that received their allocated provisions, brought the mail for his comrades, and delivered outgoing letters to the steward who posted them in turn from the Post Office in Ma'an.

In this prison, there were two advantages. The first was that you relieved your wife and children from repeating a weekly visit to Al-Mahata prison in Amman. Such visits, besides being exhausting and expensive for your family, forced you (wilfully or not) to declare opinions, to give advice, and to sometimes order your wife and children around. Your own reality does not equip you to do this. For, your distance from them has required them to be responsible for their lives and manner of being. Incarceration in Al-Jafar saved one from having to display to his children an image of himself that is far from being truthful. Distance forced you to contact them by writing. You wrote a letter, and you put in it for each of them a greeting, a piece of advice, or some blame for a shortcoming. And when you write, you are more concise, and you accordingly arrive at a more correct opinion and better advice.

The second advantage is that prison, as Nehru once said, affords you intellectual luxury. This is absolutely true for those concerned with thought, bearing in mind, of course, the difference between Nehru's reality as a political leader imprisoned under the shadow of the British administration and ours as prisoners under the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Nevertheless, Nehru's saying retains its validity for those interested in matters of the mind. Of course, this was the case only in that era. For, knowledge and thought in subsequent periods were subjected to the oversight of the security services, which were implementing a neo-colonial strategy with regards to culture and intellectual affairs. This strategy encompassed all aspects of life. In Jordan, for instance, there were no exclusive prisons for political prisoners and there were no solitary cells before the anti-democratic coup of 1957 and its aftermath. That coup had long term objectives that accorded with the vision of the colonialists and Zionism as to how the political and economic relationship between Jordan and Occupied Palestine should look like in the future. After King Hussein established full control over authority in Jordan and after the intelligence and security services started to follow the intelligence and security services of the 'free world' as King Hussein used to call it (led of course by the American CIA)- the intelligence and security services began to build jails for political prisoners in accordance with CIA specifications. For the most part, these jails were comprised of single cells that vary in size from a room that fits four people to a tiny solitary cell in which

you live standing. The latter would have a small opening in the roof, and you felt deeply constrained in it due to your constant need for breath and light.

Foreign experts were brought in, and their principal task was not only to arrive at full information about the activities of each individual as a member of a political organisation; nor was it solely to learn about the organisation he was in and its leaders or to discover the names of all the people he had political (or even non-political) relations with. Beyond that, these experts were concerned with brainwashing, taming, and domesticating that human being, and to mentally reshape him after emptying him of all manifestations of dignity (and of course patriotism), eventually pushing him off the cliff through entangling him with the intelligence structure. Indeed, the strategy of neo-colonialism is none other than holding authority by means of controlling those that lead it, either as direct collaborators or as fools who are greedy for rule and for its attractions; such people cannot experience feeling unless they live in the trap...

#### *Co-Existence in Al-Jafar Prison*

In Al-Jafar, the space was open for all political groups to encounter, mingle, and even interact with each other. It was the only space in which there existed conditions that allowed for such a meeting of, and co-existence between, the various tendencies. These conditions did not exist in public life outside of the prisons. Alas, the various political forces- that had lived with us through the stages of oppression, subsequent democratic revival, eventual democratic defeat, and posthumous life under martial law and state terror- remained as they were before, negative towards each other, and hostile to the ideological content of other groups. This could only mean that all these political forces did not possess the organic movement and collective will that was independent of their respective external connections.

The most significant two political organisations that were present in Al-Jafar prison at the time were the Jordanian Communist Party (which had the largest number of members in the prison) and the Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party. These were followed in size by the Free Officers Organisation. Amongst the most prominent Ba'athists inmates were Dr Munif al-Razaz, Mr Amin Shuqeir, Dr Hafiz Abdel Hadi, Mr Ali al-Khasawneh, Mr Fayez Mbaydeen, and the lawyer Ismail Mahadeen. As for the communists, their inmates included Fayege Warraad (an MP at the time), Mr Issa Mdanat, Fayege al-Roussan, and other notable figures in the Communist Party, especially from the West Bank. Dr Yaqoub Zayadeen had not yet arrived at Al-Jafar.

Dr. Munif al-Razaz used to convene intellectual sessions that I used to regularly attend, during which dialogues and discussions took place. These sessions were joined by non-Ba'athist prisoners. I remember that one of them was a young committed communist from Nazareth in Occupied Palestine. I do not know how and why he was arrested. At any rate, this young man asked Dr Munif al-Razaz a question whose form and substance I no longer recall. However, I still remember the answer. Abu Mu'nis (Dr Munif) told him that Marx's nirvana was impossible. Arriving to the dissolution of the state and the auto-functioning of society (as in a self-propelling and constant motion) is inconceivable. I did not know the meaning of 'nirvana', so I asked him about it. By constantly attending these sessions, the intellectual foundation that I came to commit to (and continue to hold to this very day) was formed. Dr Munif is a distinguished intellectual, and his thought is close to Fabianism and the ideas of Harold Laski. As for the communists, among their intellectual leaders was Mr Munir Shafiq, the renowned Marxist thinker and writer who had subsequently left the Jordanian Communist Party and joined the ranks of Fateh in the Palestinian revolution. His winding political path eventually led him to become one of the strongest supporters and theoreticians of the Khomeini revolution! ...

The period of 'peaceful coexistence' between these political forces did not last long. This is natural, for the disagreement between the Ba'ath and the Communist Party was of a structural nature, and the gap between them could not be bridged during the Stalinist era prevailing at the time. This latent disagreement was awakened by the position of the communists (which was correct at the time) concerning the amalgamative unity between Egypt and Syria. It was further augmented by the split amongst the ranks of the leadership of the July 1958 revolution in Iraq, and the strong backing that the communists (along with their Jadirjist allies) gave to Abdel Kareem Qassem. This disagreement led to friction, and the matter required the intervention of the authorities, after Mahmoud Rasheed al-Qaryouti assaulted one of the communists. As such, the prison administration moved the members of the Communist Party to the western section of the prison. I believe that the authorities had a hand in fostering this division...

After the direction of the July 1958 revolution in Iraq stabilised and Abdel Kareem Qassem monopolised power with the support of the communists, taking a position against Abdel Nasser, the regime in Jordan became more secure and certain of the fact that events were working to its advantage. Accordingly, it released some politicians who were held without charge, and the majority of the Ba'athist and Arab nationalist leaders were released along with others. Only the communists were excluded. Any person who wanted to

leave jail had to denounce communism and disclose all they knew about the Communist Party down to the minutest detail. Life then flowed normally in accordance with the natural rhythm set by the prison and the prisoners, until it was decided to build new quarters. This required the initiation of a major building enterprise that entailed bringing in workers, digging, and importing building materials for these quarters which became, after the construction was completed, comfortable living areas that featured cold water showers and modern toilets.

### *The Tunnel*

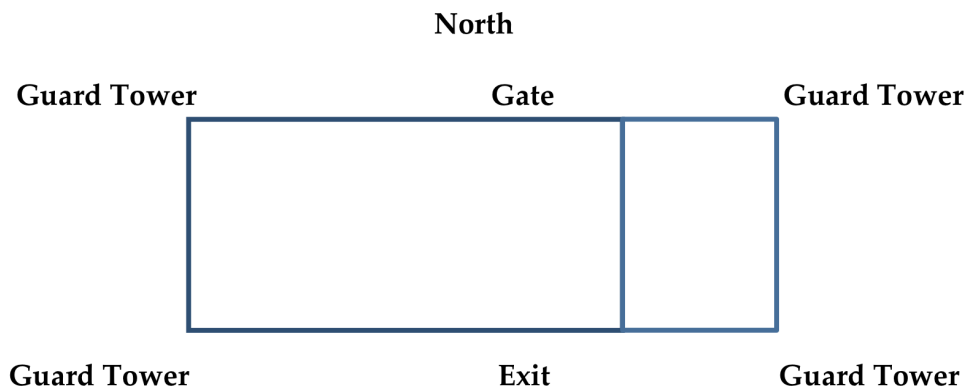
The prison was located east of the construction site. As for the western side, it was an empty yard in which the new quarters were being built. The existence of this large construction site inspired us with the idea of digging a tunnel from the prison to the area beyond its walls, for it offered possibilities that would have otherwise been unavailable. The idea of escape was not new to some of us. It occurred to me personally while we were in Al-Mahata prison in Amman. Back there, the room in which we were incarcerated was next to the street, and creating any opening in the wall (which was easy) would have allowed for reaching the street directly. The reader may wonder about me: why was I suddenly interested in escaping from prison, actively working towards that goal after being vehemently opposed to the principle of escaping the country following the 1957 events and before our subsequent arrest? For me personally, this change of heart had to do with the context of the struggle and the various parties to it. For, when the authorities were actively pushing us to flee the country, they were seeking to ease the accusation process and to relieve themselves from the embarrassments that were bound to be caused by the trial. However, now that you are charged, and your offence is political in nature, the attempt at escape represents a continuation of the political struggle against an absolutist authority. Furthermore, and for those whose consciousness would not ascend to the level of what I have just said, this satisfied an urge for adventure.

### *How the Construction Site Inspired the Idea of Building the Tunnel as a Means of Escape*

Who suggested the idea first? I no longer recall. However, it was inspired by a story we read in Al-Jafar about a British officer that was a prisoner of war in one of the incarceration camps during World War Two. He had managed to escape by digging a tunnel. Since we were army officers who were still youthful, we liked the story, both in relation to the idea and its implementation. Were it not for the construction site, we could not have

possibly applied the idea. Digging a 17-18 m long and 80 cm wide tunnel requires taking out a large amount of sand that could not have been hidden if it was not for the extensive building operation taking place. Indeed, we used to store the sand over the piles that were extracted as part of the digging process required for laying the foundations for the new quarters.

Having found a solution for the sand problem, we were confronted with the challenge of securing the digging kit, lights, and other important equipment. The problem was solved by Dr Wadie Haddad (God bless his soul). He was a handsome and polite young man with impeccably calm mannerisms, possessing a physiognomy that was similar to a bamboo stick: lean but unbreakable. He was characterised by amiability to all those who knew him. The word *yakhouy* (my brother), with which he used to address others, was enough to give him the confidence of all the people he met. Accompanied by a soldier, he used to go out of the prison nearly every day, treating patients in the encampments of the Abu Tayeh tribe that were located near the desert station besides the prison. We asked him if he could supply the following equipment: 1) A small axe; 2) A mattock; 3) A water hose (half inch); 4) Lights and batteries. He duly secured all of these tools. Accordingly, all what was left was for us to choose the digging spot from which we were going to start, the direction, and the end point. The following drawing gives a spatial sense of the prison layout:



As the drawing shows, there were two potential directions in which the trench could have been constructed: the eastern and the northern. The chances of discovering the trench if it was dug towards the east were very high, for there were two guard towers that were separated by only 100 m, and the barracks that were close to the eastern side were inhabited by criminally charged inmates from whom the operation could not be possibly hidden.



The two potential areas for digging had to be scoped out. This task was carried out by Dr Wadie Haddad (God bless his soul). No one knows the excuse he gave to the prison administration to allow him to be accompanied by Abu Sakher (Shawkat al-Shbool) in a tour around the prison. Upon his return, Shawkat informed us of his observations, on the basis of which we decided that the tunnel would be dug towards the north. The information provided by Abu Sakher were as follows: 4 meters outside the prison wall, there was a barbed wire fence surrounding the three sides of the prison: north, east, and west. This fence was approximately 2 meters wide. About 4 meters beyond the barbed wire, there was a natural incline that took the shape of an empty stream, 50-70 cm deep. This incline could hide the tunnel exit as well as those leaving from it. It was roughly located on the edge of the last third of the prison wall, just before it met the wall separating the eastern and western sections of the prison. We found, after some internal reconnaissance, that this incline lies exactly in the direction of the public toilet. The most important advantage to this location was that the two guard towers were two hundred meters apart here, due to the lack of a guard tower at the point where the wall separating the two sections of the prison met the main prison wall.

After we decided on the starting point, we disabled the westernmost toilet so that those utilising it would consider it unfit for use. We then calculated how long the trench would have to be, and arrived at the figure of 17m. The engineers had to answer a technical question concerning the vertical depth that we needed to arrive at before digging horizontally. This was so that the tunnel would not collapse upon us while we were digging. The engineers said that one meter was enough. We accordingly divided ourselves into two shifts; one would dig for a night, and the other would dig the night after, and so on. I was responsible for one of the shifts, which included Abu Saher (Mahmoud al-Ma'aita), Daoud Abdel Hadi, Munther Innab, and Mahmoud al-Qaryouti. We used to dig for about an hour, from 10pm to 11pm. After finishing the work, we used to carry the sand, and put it in the designated areas, restoring the working site to its normal state.

The earth we used to dig was composed of compressed sand; as soon as we hosed it with water, it moved with ease. I could safely say that in the initial stages, the diggers used to be able to dig 1 meter per hour. However, the more the distance increased, the work became harder and slower. That is due to the need for extracting the sand outside and for excessively spraying water. This rendered the ground in the tunnel muddy, and you were forced to spray more water as you went deeper in; the diggers would have choked otherwise as a result of the intensity of the dust. After reaching the first four meters

(which was the distance to the prison wall), we would have been able to complete digging the tunnel in ten days. However, and due to the need to determine the means and destination of escape, we went slower, and we began to dig for less than an hour per night.

### *Exposure of the Tunnel*

After the first week of work, we managed to extend the tunnel beyond the prison wall and we reached the boundaries of the barbed wire fence. All what was left for us was the distance from the boundary of the fence to the incline, which was approximately 6 meters. When the tunnel reached beyond the wall, the digger inside could hear the steps of the night guard, as they came and went. So he would stop and would not return to work until the sound disappeared. On the night when the tunnel was exposed, my shift was in charge and the digger was Daoud Abdel Hadi. When he heard the steps of the guard, he stopped digging until the guard moved away. Daoud went back to work. However, after a short while, he heard numerous quick steps, so he stopped again until he heard the steps leave, their echoes disappearing. So he proceeded again, but after nearly 15 minutes (and in the absence of the sound of any steps), we were surprised to hear a voice on the wall saying: 'Stop! Put your hands up.' We accordingly left everything and ran away. Subsequently, a guard company entered the digging site, finding the tunnel and the digging tools, uncovering the scene of "the crime." So they searched us and they took all the clothing items that had mud and sand on them and left. After their departures, we the 9 officers (leaders of the Free Officers Organisation) decided to assume full responsibility for this work, relieving everyone else from it.

### *How did the Guard Discover the Tunnel?*

When the digger stopped hearing the steps of the guard, he recommenced his work. However, the guard had not moved far away. Instead, he sat down and placed his back against the wall to rest. That was when he heard the noise of the digging. After he became certain that the digging was taking place underneath the ground he was sitting on, he quickly moved and informed the sub-officer on duty about the incident and the two rushed to the spot from which the sound was emanating. Of course, the digger heard them coming and stopped, and when the sub-officer heard nothing, he certainly scolded the guard along the lines of: 'it seems that you are afraid.' Thus, when the steps of the guard and the sub-officer disappeared again, the digger started again. This time, the guard was happy, having eagerly awaited the return of the sound. So he took off his shoes, and walked quietly on his toes and then ran

towards the sub-officer after moving sufficiently far. In turn, the sub-officer took off his shoes and walked quietly with the guard on his toes until they reached the spot and heard the noise. The two then came, this time with the officer in charge, carrying a ladder. They climbed up and saw us, exposing the operation.

### *The Investigation*

An investigative committee was established under the leadership of General Mohammad Hashim, the commander of the Desert Region at the time. They called us, the 9 charged officers, and they put us in different locations and began to interrogate us separately. We had all agreed to admit that we did this work so as to escape from prison. I did not forget this agreement when I was called in, but since I had not seen any of my colleagues entering the interrogation room before me, I became tense. I always hated to be the first to admit, a disposition that was imposed by own human nature. And when your nature imposes something, then you are not an imposter. So when Abu Hashim initiated the questioning and asked me: 'Tell us Dafi about what you know about the tunnel and your contribution to digging it', I instinctively answered: 'What tunnel?' He became furious, for all those who preceded me told him what we had agreed to say, disclosing information that included my contribution to the work. Abu Hashim's voice rose high, and he shouted: 'you think you can come here and act like a top cat? By God I will beat the truth out of you!' So I answered him with equal anger: 'By God, you will not see the truth with beating.' At that point, Colonel Saleem Karadsheh (Abu William), Chief of Prisons and Member of the Investigative Committee, stood up and said: 'Sir, sir, please allow me to have a word with Dafi alone.' Abu William (God bless his soul) took me outside the room and said: 'Son, why are you taking this stance? All those we had questioned, and you are the last amongst them, admitted as to their responsibility for this operation.' So I said to him 'OK' and we went back to the investigative committee and I admitted everything to them. Colonel Salim Karadsheh's son William was my classmate and friend. And I used to visit them regularly at their home, which was close at the time to General Glubb's house in Jabal Amman. In any case, and after the investigation was concluded, General Abu Hashim told us in his characteristically generous nature: 'You have the right to try to escape from prison, and we have a responsibility not to make that easy for you.' They did not impose any punishment upon us, and the tunnel was destroyed and filled with cement.