

In an unjust prison system, hunger strikes are a last resort

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Title: *In an unjust prison system, hunger strikes are a last resort*

Cover: *Palestinian youths take part a protest to solidarity with Palestinian prisoners on hunger strike in Israeli jails in Gaza City on May 19, 2014; Photo by Ashraf Amra*

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Mohamed Soltan describes his room in the prison hospital as a glorified cell. By glorified he means that the room has an actual bed for him to sleep on, rather than just the floor. There is machinery in the room to monitor his vitals but whether it is hooked up to him, or whether it is a facade, is unclear. His sister Hanaa says he is bedridden and completely debilitated.

Mohamed has been in Cairo's Tora Prison since August 2013 when he was swept up as part of mass arrests during protests in support of Mohamed Morsi, not long after the Egyptian president's ousting. Mohamed has been accused of colluding with terrorists but as yet no evidence has been brought against him. Out of desperation to challenge the trumped up charges against him, in January of this year he began a hunger strike, which he has sustained to this day.

Photos of Mohamed before his ordeal depict a young man with a healthy body and a big smile. In recent pictures he is gaunt and curled up in an orange hospital bed, a fraction of his body weight. The smile is long gone.

That the hunger strike has taken its toll on his body is clear for everybody to see. More ambiguous, perhaps, is what the Egyptian government have planned for him - are they going to let him die as a warning to everybody who protests against them, or are they scared of the negative backlash his death could inspire?

Authorities have adopted a range of tactics to break Mohamed's hunger strike. They have blackmailed him, lied to his mother and the US embassy when they visit about whether he wants to see them, and threatened to release pictures of him with food.

Mohamed's father, a prominent Muslim Brotherhood member, is in the same prison and the authorities have moved him out of solitary confinement and into his son's cell to convince him to break the strike, a kind of "psychological torture" his sister tells me for a parent to be confronted daily with their child's ill health.

Whilst the family finds the current state of his health hard and constantly fear the news the next phone call will bring, "he's got absolutely no other means or tools to voice his dismay, in protest of his completely unjust detainment," Hanaa says.

Driven to desperate measures, authorities and prison hospital staff force IVs with glucose into Mohamed when he falls unconscious to keep him alive which, as his sister points out, can be extremely dangerous if you don't know what you're doing. Mohamed wakes up when his sugar levels go back to normal.

Refusing to take food as a form of political protest goes back to the suffragette movements of the twentieth century. Ghandi went on hunger strike many times to protest against Britain's Imperial India. Hunger strikes garnered international media attention in the early 80s when IRA leader Bobby Sands became the first of 10 republicans to die in Northern Ireland asking for their right to be treated as special category prisoners, rather than just as criminals.

Since Israel occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Palestinian prisoners have undertaken a number of hunger strikes to protest the conditions of their arrests. They are often launched as collective action, sometimes just amongst men, sometimes just amongst women, and sometimes held in solidarity across every prison. Just yesterday, 70 prisoners held in Israeli jails launched a hunger strike in protest against Israel's policy of solitary confinement.

Most prisoners report a severe deterioration of their living conditions once authorities discover that they are refusing to accept food. Ayman Sharawneh spent 10 years in an Israeli prison before he was released in October 2011 as part of the Gilad Shalit prisoner exchange. But when he was arrested two months later,

without being interrogated or told what his charges were, he felt the only form of protest left was a hunger strike. It would last for 261 days before the Israeli authorities agreed to release him.

Ayman tells MEMO that life inside the prison changed immediately when authorities found out he was on hunger strike. He was confined to a cell with no windows and told by doctors his hair would fall out, he would simply drop dead one day, he would never have sex again and he wouldn't receive medication because he wouldn't be able to digest it on an empty stomach.

"All of this false information was a form of intimidation to stop our hunger strike," says Ayman, "but we continued. Very little of what the doctor said was actually true."

Ayman says that when you haven't eaten for so many days you no longer crave food or miss the smell. But Israeli authorities would bring delicious, strong-smelling food and leave it by his bed to tempt him. In fact, like the Egyptian authorities have done with Mohamed, a whole host of tactics have been used to try and break Ayman's strike.

"When you go on strike the prison authorities consider that you are challenging the prison and the Shin Bet [Israeli secret service]. Every minute, every second of every day you are violated," he explains.

Ayman was moved to a humid cell. His personal possessions and his bed were taken away. The vice-president of the prison would sit with him for up to two days at a time and tell him no one cared whether he died or not. As for the doctors he encountered, they were Israeli; the Arab medics would avoid talking to them completely. Those that did were only allowed to converse in Hebrew.

At the beginning of his strike, Ayman lost a kilo every day. By the end he had no muscle so instead his body started feeding on the liquid between his joints; all the fluid in his spine had gone and he couldn't stand any more.

“I continued because I had a goal and that was freedom. There were no charges against me. For me, backing down was a red line. Either way I had to leave prison, dead or alive. For me, backing down would have been defeat. During the 261 days I would not back down even for a minute. Towards the end it wasn’t about the food, it was about the challenge between the prison, Shin Bet and me. In the end we got what we wanted.”

Ashraf Hussein, director of Public Relations for the Ministry of Detainee Affairs who was on hunger strike for 30 days, says that some Palestinian prisoners do die whilst on hunger strike because they do not get the medical care they need. Some are force-fed through a tube inserted into their nose, which means the food can go into the lungs, rather than their stomach. “The Israeli prison authorities will do anything to stop you going on hunger strike,” he says.

Once the decision is made for a prisoner to begin their hunger strike, Hussein says they are prepared and informed of what to expect. “In the end no one wants to be hungry but we do it in order to defend our rights as humans. International law guarantees that we should lead a dignified life within these four walls. All we’re looking for is a life that meets our basic human rights.”

Hussein confirms that women are not spared from experiencing violations committed against hunger strikers such as strip-searching. One prisoner, Samar Subaih, was handcuffed whilst she was giving birth. Many are threatened with rape and told that pictures of them naked will be posted online.

Such brutal techniques are often carried out in the name of the war on terror, against prisoners loosely labelled a “security threat”. On Tuesday the [Senate Intelligence Committee released a report detailing the CIA’s treatment of around 100 suspects](#) arrested by the US between 2001 and 2009 on terror charges. One prisoner, Abd Al-Rahim Al-Nashiri, embarked on a short-term hunger strike so the CIA force-fed him rectally.

Majid Khan, a detainee at Guantanamo Bay, embarked on a series of hunger strikes so they liquidised the contents of his food tray and, like Al-Nashiri, he was force-fed the contents rectally.

When it comes to Guantanamo Bay it is the practice of force-feeding, and the controversy this practice has stirred up, which is more famous than the hunger strikes themselves.

From his home in France, Hernán Reyes, former International Committee of the Red Cross medical coordinator for health in detention, recounts the story of a nurse in Guantanamo Bay who recently refused to force-feed one of the inmates there. The medic got into serious trouble, was threatened to be sacked and to have his pension withdrawn.

“It’s a shame that none of the physicians have ever taken this position,” says Reyes. “They’ve accepted it [force-feeding] and haven’t said anything. They’ve done something that is ethically wrong.”

“Force-feeding someone for six months is a form of torture,” he later adds.

Reyes believes that medical staff who continue to force-feed the detainees have convinced themselves they are conserving life and that is a doctor’s duty. “It is also sold to them as saving someone who wants to commit suicide,” he says.

The authorities dishing out the punishment are actually removed from the act itself. “A judge that authorises the use of force-feeding doesn’t do it, the nurse does,” he points out.

A few years before the mass arrests of IRA militants the [Tokyo Declaration](#) was issued. It contains a set of international guidelines for physicians relating to imprisonment, which stood against the participation of doctors in any form of torture. It was updated in 2006 to specifically mention force-feeding and states that if the patient is capable of forming an unimpaired or rational decision,

“he or she shall not be fed artificially”.

This essentially means that when it comes to inhumane force-feeding, medics must choose between the law and medical ethics. “The law is stronger, but I don’t care if it’s stronger,” says Reyes. “I would hope doctors would also go to jail if they were forced to do something that is against medical ethics.”

Reyes is also clear that a person has the right to choose if he or she wants to be on hunger strike. “If you accept the idea of informed consent, because of autonomy, you have to accept the position of informed non-consent. If they [the hunger strikers] are adults, they are conscious about what’s going on and they understand the issues and refuse treatment, who are we - as doctors - to impose treatment?”

One of the most common misconceptions circling hunger strikes is that a prisoner is committing suicide and in this respect it is important to clarify that refusing to take food is a form of protest against injustice. If a hunger striker were to receive their concession, they would eat, an important distinction given that many have raised the moral issue of where protest ends and self-harm begins, the latter of which is forbidden in Islam.

As for the case of Mohamed Soltan, Hanaa says that her brother is not giving up on life, but protesting his condition. “He’s not doing it with suicide in mind; he’s not doing it to kill himself. He’s doing it because he loves freedom and he cannot imagine living without his freedom for the rest of his days. He’s doing it to raise awareness and to make it so he has a choice.”

It is Mohamed’s resolve, determination, belief in freedom, justice and human rights, which are the qualities that bind most hunger strikers. Sadly, so is the determination of prison authorities to show that their authority will not be challenged.

“I think they’re using him as an example to others,” says Hanaa. “You cannot oppose. If you oppose then not only will you suffer, but your offspring will also suffer. I believe they’re making him into

an example for generations to come. When you decide to take on any sort of political opposition you will always be risking not just your life and your freedom and all of your rights, you will also be doing so for your children, which is definitely a layered punishment approach.”



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