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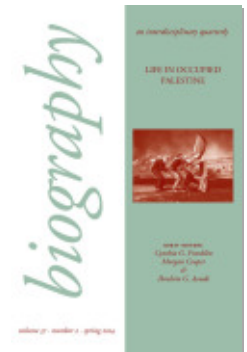
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“FOOD IS NOT OUR ISSUE”: REFLECTIONS ON HUNGER STRIKING

SA'ED OMAR

Sa'ed Omar was a student at AnNajah University in Nablus before joining the armed resistance. He enlisted in the Communist Party and worked with them for one year before his arrest, when the Israeli military incarcerated him for nine years in an Israeli prison. On release, he tried to cope with life after prison, enrolling in Birzeit University to study political science and journalism. He continues to be an activist, believing that nine years in prison didn't rob him of his vision. In this reflection, Omar discusses his reasons for going on hunger strikes, attempts by Israel and the Palestinian Authority to break his spirit, and his refusal to renounce his vision for a free Palestine.

I went on hunger strike two times. The first time was for twenty-one days and the second for twenty-eight days. It was because the Prison Administration put our friends in solitary confinement for years, preventing them from seeing anybody. We were trying to get them released to the public area of the prison, with us. The Administration refused our demands to release them because they were leaders of the movement inside the prison. We decided to start a hunger strike without a limit. We gave the Administration our demands to release those in solitary confinement and to allow families of prisoners from Gaza access to visit their children and parents. Gaza families were prevented from visiting for five or six years because Israel declared Gaza an enemy state. The Palestinian Authority (PA) doesn't control Gaza, which was considered the center of resistance in this period. The West Bank was under the military fist of the PA security forces, which prevented resistance against occupation here. And so Gaza families were punished by not being allowed to see their loved ones. For six years they didn't see their children or fathers.

For a very long time, a hunger strike has been an instrument to achieve goals. We don't want to die. Hunger striking is very hard—you will die if your body can't take the pressure and if circumstances work against you. We chose April because the weather was warmer; the body can't take the cold when you have nothing to eat. The Prison Administration used every force they had to end our hunger strike. The first time we went on strike for twenty-one days, and ended the strike because there was a deal between Israel and Hamas, the resistance, to exchange prisoners. Gilat Shalit was released in exchange for one thousand resistance prisoners.

We put our strike on hold, but after several months we returned to the strike. Nothing had changed. Everyone was still in solitary confinement, and more of us were taken into isolation. The Administration did everything it could to stop our efforts to get them released. Even the PA sent people to negotiate, arguing that the PA would be hurt by such a strike, that the political environment couldn't handle a strike at that time. They argued that people in the streets would move against the occupation and the PA. Both sides considered a hunger strike as harmful to their interests, politically and economically. We know that the PA and occupation share projects—members of the PA have many projects with the Occupation and they don't want the public to move against the Occupation because it harms those projects. This is their perspective. They don't think, "These are our people, held in solitary confinement being humiliated for years, forbidden from family visits or a normal life in prison." We aren't asking to be released from prison. We ask only that our friends be released from isolation, to share our life in the public section of prison. But the PA looks at it only from an economic and political point of view.

We refused to listen to them.

A doctor asked me, "Why would you sacrifice your life for people you hardly know?" I told him that they would do the same for me if I were put in solitary confinement. If I leave another behind, he will think he can leave me behind too. But we have a rule inside: we never leave anyone behind, even if it costs us our lives.

We signed an agreement between all the organizations in prison to begin the hunger strike again. We shared the demands with the media and with the Prison Administration. The strike lasted twenty-eight days, at which point Israel accepted that we would not stop our strike without our demands being met—return our friends to us and allow Gaza families to visit their beloved.

My weight was down to thirty-four kilos and my kidneys and lungs are damaged permanently. Hunger strike is a dangerous choice, but in time everything heals.

It is the last tool for negotiation. In the end, what solves the problem is hunger striking. It's the last instrument you wield to achieve your goals.

Now the movement is quiet. Up till now, nobody is responding to the hunger strikers and supporting them. We're trying to mobilize people, in the streets, refugee camps, and universities to support the hunger strikers. We're trying to help them.

I know what hunger striking is. Time gets in the body like poison. They keep moving you from section to section, taking your clothes, hitting you—everything to break you. But they cannot break you. If you have to die for your freedom, you will die.

When I was hunger striking, I was moved from one prison to another. Seeing the sea on that day, on the road between Haifa and Carmel (it's inside the Palestinian territories that were renounced as Israel) . . . seeing the sea that day made me wake up. I was exhausted, I was very sick, nearly on the edge of breaking. It was day twenty-four of the strike and seeing the sea helped me last to the end. I had problems and was in the hospital too many times. The doctors tried to break me. They told me I was dying and my life was endangered. They tried to give me food; they put it in front of you to tempt you. They even barbeque meat so the smell breaks you. They eat in front of you. But we try to ignore them because we know their tactics.

It's impossible to ignore the smell of meat when you are dying from hunger.

But food is not our issue. We don't live to eat. We eat to live. If your life is without dignity, you don't need life. That's how we look at things in prison.

Even in prison, you are home. Being restricted from entering Palestine is our greatest fear, to be deported or prevented from going home. The Prison Administration offered to deport us, to Jordan, to Syria, anywhere we wanted. They offered us freedom if we would leave Palestine. But we preferred jail to freedom outside of Palestine.

This is the life we live here. We have a government that doesn't support its own people. It just chases its political and economic projects.

And a few people who fight every day for their freedom.

And over our heads, Occupation.

* * * * *

Everybody who is sentenced for a long period goes through an interview before being released. The intelligence officer asked me what I wanted to do when released. I told him I want to go to the sea.

He told me, "You can't go to Gaza."

He's talking about Gaza and the West Bank. I told him, "I'm not talking about Gaza. I'm talking about our sea."

He said, "The Dead Sea is not a sea."

"I'm not talking about the Dead Sea."

"What are you talking about?"

"Haifa, Akka, Yaffa."

He told me, "You can't go there because this is Israel."

I told him, "You're mistaken. I didn't sit in prison for nine years to be told this is Israel. This is not Israel. This is our land. Our grandfathers lived there and you kicked them out. And we will return. I'll take pictures at the sea and send them to you."

"I will be waiting for you after the wall. If you try to jump over it I'll catch you and take you back to prison."

I promised to send him pictures. He responded that he will arrest me when he sees my pictures at the sea. I told him he's welcome to.

But I will go to the sea in the end and I will take photos.