

I Was Saddams Prisoner

Author(s):

Abu Jameel [3]

Brother Abu Jameel's account of being detained in the prisons of Saddam's Ba'thist Regime.

Category:

General [4]

Topic Tags:

Prisoner [5]

Regime [6]

Person Tags:

Saddam [7]

Abu Jameel [3]

Foreword

In the name of Allah, the Most High. Salawat upon Muhammad, the last of the Prophets, and his immaculate progeny.

Six months after my release from the fateful detention in Iraq under Saddam's Ba'thist regime, I sat down to write my experience. When the essay, divided in twenty small chapters was ready, I gave it to my

chosen friends and relatives to read.

They advised me against printing it. Several reasons were advanced. Meshed in the web of these disincentives, I kept the essay hidden away.

And then one morning, I woke up with an inexplicable urge to join hands with the oppressed Muslims throughout the World. I decided to publish my essay, and join the chorus of agony and anguish while the whack of the tyrants' whips continues unabated.

There in the distant countries, I can see an old mother, expectantly peeping out of a small window, waiting for her son to return. I can see a bride who wakes up every morning to find that her husband is not by her side. I can see the small innocent faces of children questioningly looking at their mothers, to find out when father would return home, bearing with a loving smile, his hands full of small gifts.

And on the other side of the corridor, I see the blindfolds, the shackles, the whips and the blood streaming from the bare backs of the young and old Muslims. I can hear them moan and whine. With them, I join to raise a feeble cry.

May Allah, in His Mercy, help Islam, as ever.

1984

ABU JAMEEL

Chapter One

It was past midnight. The inmates in the cell were all half asleep, after a day, which had ended with a lot of anxiety and fear. Fear reigned everywhere; the fear of being summoned by the "Muhaqqiq" for an investigation that never seemed to end, of being beaten till you bled profusely¹ of being tortured till your nerves were wrecked. And then the massive metal door creaked, with a squeak harsh enough to send your blood tingling.

Every time the guard, the Haras, turned the keys in the hole, the door unlocked in stages, with a sharp metal voice. The leaning, reclining and sleeping inmates sat erect, with all alertness, like a flock of frightened sheep, expecting the slaughterer to enter the pen and make his pick.

But this time it seemed odd. Odd because the activities normally ended before midnight. So everyone looked questioningly at each other, shuffling his blanket full of lice, ready to meet the fate. A Haras entered. "*Inhadh*", he shouted, and commanded us to vacate the front part of the cell and push ourselves to the rear. In a cell which could hardly occupy three scores, we were three hundred.

Behind him entered a young man, stark naked except for a brief loincloth. He seemed to be in his early twenties. His head was shaved except for the two gleaming black locks, which gave an impression of two eyes grown on the head. His eyebrows totally shaved, his moustache half-shaven. Blood streamed from his chest, back, arms, thighs and legs. He had been chastised with the lashes, which turned his skin violet, and showed the marks clearly. His ghost-like appearance scared everybody, most of us unable to meet his glance, which showed utter helplessness and distress. And then we saw Abu Mahmood, dressed as usual in his black double-breasted suit, with a wry smile hanging on his thick lips.

"Tell them!" he shouted at the tortured young man. "Tell them of your sins, and why have we treated you thus". And the young ghost muttered in Arabic. "I had been here few months ago, and then I was released. As I went home, I informed some of my relatives and family friends about the whereabouts of their missing members. They had disappeared, and the families were worried. I told them, they were all detained by the Mukhaberat, and that I had met them. I am now arrested again and convicted of having disclosed the secret".

"Did you hear him"? Abu Mahmood blurted. And every one of us answered in a chorus: "*Na'am Sayyidi*". The message was conveyed. The young man, hardly able to walk was then pushed out of the door, taken away to where nobody knew.

Chapter Two

Our cell was on the fourth floor. This was No: 58. We were told to remember the number, and every time one of us came back from the Muhaqqiq, the Haras would ask him the Raqam of his Ghurfa. If he failed to speak out the number, or was unable to convey because he was a foreigner, just as I was, then he must suffer the slaps and blows falling upon his jaws, cheeks, head and everywhere. The Haras enjoyed this tremendously, and invariably performed his duties to please his masters. And when his hands tired, there were the kicks. "Cursed are your father and your mother, you rogue, why can't you remember your cell number?" He would shout.

The newcomer today was a young, handsome boy. He was pushed in, his blindfold removed, his handcuffs undone. For a few seconds he surveyed the room, looked at the strange, depressed faces and broke down. Sitting near the door he bitterly wept.

In spite of all the clashes, fights and quarrels that were commonplace within our cell, a strange bond of sympathy had grown among us. We heard each other's plight patiently and attentively, consoled and tended wounds. And when a newcomer appeared, we played host. So when this boy, Hasan, wept, the senior members rushed towards him, held him by the hand, and bade him to act honourably like a man. "*Ayb-Ayb La Tabchi-Anta Rajul*" – shame, shame, do not cry, you are a man, they said.

A glass of lukewarm water was given to him to drink, for there was no cold water available. And a cluster of men sat around him to hear his story. But Hasan was primarily interested to know how long he would be here. "They told me to accompany them for ten minutes. Ten minutes, yes, ten minutes only. I have an old mother, and I am her only son. My father is dead. She had just gone out to buy some food for the house, and they came in. My mother does not know that I have been picked. O Allah, she would die ... die ... die ... not knowing where I have gone." And he cried again.

This time they let him cry. As he lifted his head from his knees, tears rolling by his fair cheeks, for he was half Iraqi half Turkoman, he asked one of us. "How long have you been here?" "Two hundred and eight days", the answer; he glanced at another questioningly and the reply was – "*Arb'ata Ash-Hur*" – four months. He now wept with a loud wail and said: "But they told me ten minutes. I am asthmatic, and my widowed mother is old."

I was there to witness the pathetic scene. A young friend of mine resting his palm against his cheeks was lying next to me. With a nervous twitch he looked at me and then at the newcomer and said "Allah Karim", and then with a sarcasm that seemed so out of place in the gory environment he added "*Inna Anzalnahu Fi Thamani Khamseen*" – Verily we have sent him down to No: 58.....

Chapter Three

A young man sat at a far corner in the cell, looking down through his parted knees, dejected and detached. And then he lifted his head looking straight, with a blank gaze. He was hardly twenty-two; his body slim, weak and full of marks left behind by the chains and the lashes. These never seemed to heal.

Mates next to him teased him, gently stabbed and prodded his body with their fingers, and cracked jokes at his expense. His response would be varied. At times he was irritated and enraged. He would stand up protesting, brandishing a warning finger at them. And sometimes he would make a rejoinder and add to the general joviality. It was evident that this terrible experience in Mukhaberat had had a telling effect upon his mind.

His name was Waseem, and he hailed from a known family of Iraq, the Kashiful Ghitas. He had lived in Switzerland for four years, pursuing a course in Engineering, and spoke English and German with considerable ease. On his way back on vacation, he came to Beirut to meet his brother who was actively engaged in religious publication work, and was known for his affiliation with Amal. As he crossed the border to Iraq, the devils of Mukhaberat apprehended him, promising a very brief and informal interview. He was now here for the past five months! Accused of anti-Ba'thist activities, of course.

A small window carved within the massive metal door opened one day, and Haras shouted Waseem's name. The senior most among us had assumed headship in the cell, and acted as a transmitter. He looked at Waseem and said, "Harval" – Run. And Waseem lept from his nook, answering "Na 'am, Sayyidi". A sharp merciless gaze from the guard shook him to his core, and then from through the window he was given a blindfold to wear. This was made of a black leather cover with a rubber strap. It covered your eyes and hung down crisply to your nostrils, and had the nauseating stench of human sweat. Then the door unlocked, two arms pulling him out like a doomed animal, and the handcuffs were fitted to his wrists. The door was locked again, and we were now to wait for his return to know about his fateful encounter with the Muhaqqiq.

A day in the cell is measured by events. There are no clocks, and no watch is allowed. It was appreciably long before the unlocking of the door silenced us all, our eyes frightfully riveted to it. Waseem reappeared, crestfallen and bent from his waist, plodding heavily forward. The shirt he wore stuck to his back, showing clear bloodstains. It had been the most terrible day of his stay. The interrogators first served him with the blows, and then whipped him with "Sonda" till his flesh showed, and blood trickled all over his back. Later they tied him firmly with chains around his wrists and ankles and onto an iron frame. The hands were then pulled on either side till he felt that they were coming out of the shoulders, and so were the legs till they seemed to dislocate from the hips. And then the frame was hung and turned so that he lay upside down. "Speak the truth else you will die!" The words which were meant to elicit from him a confession. Waseem threw himself to the ground, unable to walk or talk for three days. In his half wakeful state, droplets of tears rolled down his cheek, with a weak voice "What have I done, mother-what have I done?"

He woke up after three days, this time surprisingly alert and sane. "You belong to Kashiful Ghitas?" I asked. "Yes", he said, I was surprised, for I knew that one Ali Kashiful Ghita was acting for the Ba'thist under the guise of an Aalim-a Mujtahid. In fact, Ali Kashiful Ghita brought disgrace upon his revered

family by joining hands with the infidels against Syed Muhsin El-Hakim. Waseem understood this implication. "Please do not mention my uncle Ali. He is a traitor".

For two more months, Waseem was in the cell, each day waiting for his fate. His mind was now split between hope and despair. He sometimes anticipated his release—talked about his marriage and settling in life. And then suddenly turned round to ask: "But I am useless; look at my features—I am so ugly. Who will give me her hand in marriage?" Waseem felt so concerned about his lower jawbones, which jutted out conspicuously. He would show me his teeth, and observe that the upper row stood behind the lower ones when he shut the mouth. And when hope welled up, he would say: "Never mind, I 'will visit my dentist first and tell him to mend my jaw"! A ripple of laughter followed. My Iranian friend Jabbar asked: "What did he say? –a dentist? Why a dentist? Tell him to knock this door and ask for Muhaqqiq. He will mend his jaws in the Ghurfa Amaliyyat" Laughter again. One day Waseem signed before Qadhi, and was consigned to Abu Ghuraib for sentence. God only knows what befell him.

Chapter Four

The guard shouted from the window: "*Jasim Hammud, Khuz Aghrnzak!*" – Jasim Hammud, pick up your belongings, "*Wa Hidhaak....*" – and your shoes.... "*Wa Raqamak....*" – and your number "*Watla'a*" – and come out. This typical announcement meant the release, at least from the dreary cell. No one could predict whether the fellow was going home or to the gallows or before a firing squad. The victim himself felt so uncertain that he would not be able to decide whether to celebrate or to mourn the departure. And what is the number?

Every unfortunate one who enters the Mukhaberat is given a small wooden or plastic tablet bearing a number. "You are no more a human being; you are a number", he is told. The psychological impact of this must be experienced to be fully understood. One, for the first time perhaps, realises that he has ceased to be a human person—nor is he a commodity. No—he is merely a number—as abstract as a number. And then he is frightened at the prospects. So, he has ceased to exist in reality. He is nobody.

During my stay of four months and two days in detention, we were at times called by our names, and at times by the numbers. This meant that we had to remember our numbers at all times if we wished to avoid the calamity. A feeling of reassurance surged forth when I was called by name. At least, I existed. But this was depressed when I was cited as a number. We had a Korean who did not know Arabic at all. He was taught to memorize the number, which he did after great effort. He failed, however, to show up

when his number was called, and the Haras shouted: "*Ayn Huwa-Ma Aku?*" – Where is he, is he not there? Unfortunately, nobody else recalled that it was the Korean's number, so the head shouted repeating it. After a pause, the Korean responded.

"*Shi Bek?*" – What is the matter with you? The Haras demanded. Someone had to explain him that the poor man did not know Arabic, but the guard was not interested. He was roughly manhandled to the Muhaqqiq.

Blindfolded and handcuffed, every detainee was pushed down the corridors, sometimes by the winding staircases, and alternatively by the lifts. The Haras caught him by the arm and pulled him till he was brought to the door of the room where his Muhaqqiq waited. On some occasions there would be a panel of investigators, four or five or six of them, all lined up on a sofa. The blind-fold never allowed you to see their faces; you could only count the pairs of shoes visible from beneath the fold—or hear the footsteps. The Haras would stand by you, or, when directed, leave the room. And then the volley of questions would begin, questions being shot from here, there and everywhere.

There were several Muhaqqiqs, each assigned to a room, and each room had a number. So apart from remembering our own numbers, we were required to remember the number of our Muhaqqiq's room. It was common to say, for example, that "I belong to No.9, or 14, or 21". Each Muhaqqiq was known for his notoriety and cruelty, and if one was in the hands of a Muhaqqiq known to be the least humane and merciful, one earned our special sympathies. "So you belong to No. 14 eh? That Muhaqqiq is the most notorious one. He never lets his victims out"—one would be told.

The questioners were specially trained to cause maximum damage, physically and mentally. The most commonly adopted tactic was to ask several question consecutively, and then pause. This pause, which at times extended to several minutes, left the detainee uneasy, unsure and staggered. What next? The pause seemed eternal. Are they looking at you, or are they no more interested in you? You never could tell. It shattered the nerves, and cold sweat would begin to settle on the forehead. And then it began all over.

"Tell the truth", meant admit your guilt. Contrary to all measures and standards of justice, you were guilty from the minute you were accused. My Somali cellmate, Abdul Qadir, tried to defend himself. A burning matchstick introduced to his beard burnt the hair and the chin. He came back to the cell with a peculiar smell of the scorched hair emanating from him. This was the beginning, he was told. "Go and think over it—and tell the truth when we call you again".

Chapter Five

Once in a fortnight, the inmates were all hurled out to what was known as “*Shams*”. One by one we were rushed to this room, which did not have a ceiling. Here we were able to breathe fresh air and enjoy some sunlight. As we passed through the corridor which led to “*Shams*”, we saw the ladies with their children seated in captivity. The guard instructed the ladies to cover their faces, while small babies fearfully clung to their mothers. The slightly grown up children played in the corridor, kicking the football, which was not there. They perhaps remembered their days of freedom and imagined things, which would help them, forget the plight of their mothers, or the torture of a passing-by male detainee.

We knew that there were some ladies in the corridor, for while we remained incarcerated in the cell, we distinctly heard hysteric screams of the ladies in the middle of the nights. Was it a nightmare? Or did she dream of her husband, her son or her youthful daughter who had either been captured or had disappeared never to be seen again? Or was it the pain in her ribs after having been mercilessly tortured in Ghufa Amaliyyat down below? One thing is certain. Whenever these shrieks pierced through the dark of the night, a blanket of silence fell upon us all. The Iraqis wondered what had befallen their nation. Could there be any justifiable malice against an innocent woman who has apprehended because her male relative had either defected or committed an offence? There were hundreds of them. Some were in the cells for over a year. How did I know? My wife was there!

While in *Shams* we were asked to remove our shirts and do some exercise. The guard stood there with a rubber hosepipe in his hands, and asked us to run round and round till we were breathless. And this followed by a vigorous exercise, which rendered everyone thoroughly exhausted. There were some who tried to avoid this gruesome drill under health pretexts. Some were spared, but not all. My Sudanese friend, Qasam, once sat down refusing to participate. He had been suffering from a nasty cough and a high temperature for sometime, and had not at all recovered. Right then Abu Mahmood, dressed in his black attire, appeared. His appearance always heralded a misfortune, for his unseemly features were enough to frighten anyone who chanced to see him in an unlit alley. He looked around and found Qasam and his likes retired in a corner. “*Shi Bek?*” “What is the matter with you?” No reason would convince him. He then delivered a talk to us all in which he emphasized upon the need to exercise which, he said, was meant to keep us fit. “*An-tum Mawqufin*” – You are detainees, “*Ihtarirnu Anfusakurn*” – maintain your self-respect. And with that he ordered all the invalids to jump and run. Qasam ran till he panted and suffered from short breath. Later he was admitted to the ‘hospital’ down below, chained to his bed. Diagnosis? Tuberculosis.”

God knows which medicine was administered to him, but he was sent back to our cell for convalescence. He was still coughing, and ran high temperature. Something within him seemed to eat

him up. The Muhaqqiq recognized no infirmities. In that state of health, he was taken by the Haras blindfolded and handcuffed for interrogation. He was asked there by the Muhaqqiq to sing a Sudanese song, and then dance. Despite his frailty, he summoned all his strength to oblige. And then the mercurial mood of the Muhaqqiq became evident. "Tell the truth—Why did you go to Libya? Did you read the Green Book? What are your relations with Gaddafi and Khomeini?" To all this, his answer was simple. He had left Sudan as a political dissident, and came to Iraq to find a job. "Well, well—you do not want to tell the truth. Enough time has been given to you till now—but you refuse to realize. We have decided to... execute you." With this fateful verdict, he returned to the cell. It is indeed difficult to assess whether he was being steadily devoured by his ailment or by the bare sword that hung over his head.

A visit to Shams was meant to give us opportunity of breathing fresh air and enjoying the sunlight. Here we would see the azure sky, the chirping birds flying, and at times hear the hoot or a siren. Once we heard Adhan also from a nearby mosque. Airport seemed to be not far away; because we could hear the planes take off and land. It is said that divine gifts and blessings are valued high when they are lost.

The sagacity of this maxim was best realized in the Shams, for we were only yards away from freedom. Freedom, which is taken for granted by all of us, and is rightly, considered as our basic right, can only be evaluated when it is denied. Here, while a group of our friends enjoyed the sunshine and fresh air, another group waited for the guard to go, so that they could sit in respite and brood over their fate. As the Haras left us for a few minutes, these friends would sit and cry. The sweet memory of the free past and the prospects of an uncertain future engendered a feeling of depression, which could not be easily overcome. And when we returned to the gloomy cell, the depression continued for hours on end.

And at that moment, the window in the metal door clicked open and the Haras appeared. He asked our chief to come and then spoke something, which was not audible. Abruptly the window was shut, in a manner to convey total indifference and an insult. And then the head said: "Brothers, Seyyid al-Haras (the guard) is totally displeased with the stench and filth in this cell. While we were in Shams, he visited this cell and was horrified to see the shamble. He now commands us to clean the floor, the toilet and the Hammam." All of us were soon mobilized to scrub the floor, and wash the closets. We sprinkled the 'Tide' washing powder originally rationed out to us for washing out torn clothes, and poured water to spread the layers of dirt evenly in the cell!

Chapter Six

Georges and Oscar were Christians. Georges was an Iraqi from Kirkuk, while Oscar was a Catholic from Philippines. Just as December set in, they remembered the festival of Christmas, and hoped that they would be released to reunite with their families. And then Christmas passed uneventfully, so they expected the release on the New Year eve. Nothing happened. Georges was spending his second month in the cell, but Oscar had been there for six months. Both spoke fluent and flawless English.

Everyone in the cell likes to know the other man's story and the reason for his apprehension. Then one would compare its seriousness with ones own case, and reckon if he himself stood any chance of reprieve. "Georges, what have you done?" I asked. "Nothing serious. I am accused of having shown disrespect to Seyyid al-Rais (the President). In a fit of anger, I wrinkled a newspaper, and it happened to contain his photograph." He was reported, and subsequently accused of, or rather convicted of, being anti-Ba'thist. I did not realize how difficult life must be for the Iraqis. Later on, I found that there hardly was any printed material, a daily, a weekly or a monthly, which did not carry the President's portrait. Any use of these papers, other than reading, could render the Iraqis vulnerable.

And then suddenly I sensed that the friends in my cell were buoyant with some expectations. It was January, and an army anniversary was approaching. Hawwaz and Burhan confided that there would be a general "*Afw*", a pardon for all of us. Qathan said that the Haras had told him, that Seyyid al-Rais did this every year, and there was no reason why he should not do it this year.

Qahtan was from Tikrit, and enjoyed special liberties with some of the guards who knew him personally. They allowed him to come out in the corridor and smoke one or two cigarettes. There they talked to him, and parted with the outside news. But Qahtan had to pay a price for the favours. He passed the information about the conduct, and the talk of every cellmate to Haras, who in turn transmitted it to the Muhaqqiqs. So our attitude towards Qahtan was that of fear and respect.

As the date of the anniversary drew near, the feelings in the cell ran high. Strange enough, but nobody in the cell forgets the dates. The duration of one's confinement and detention is measured by the number of days. Abu Ali says: "I am completing my hundred and fourth day today", and Faisal says that he is doing his hundred and seventy eighth, out of which he spent exactly sixty three days alone in a single cell on the first floor and further fourteen in the red cell – Ghurfatul Hamraa.

Qahtan was now surrounded by all of us, eager to get a final confirmation from him about *Afw*. He took out a rosary—a *tasbeeh* or *sabha*, made of strings pulled from *Bataniya* (the blankets) and then plaited and knotted to resemble the beads. Placing his hand upon a distant knot and with eyes closed, he started from the first knot chanting: "Allah, Muhammad, Allah, Muhammad...." the final knot ended with Allah, and I could see how elated he was. "*Hatman, Aku Afw*", he said. "Definitely, there is a pardon."

The date passed and there was no sign of any reprieve, not for Qahtan either!

Chapter Seven

The modes of chastisement varied. At times it depended upon the Muhaqqiq. There seemed to be a long list of punishments, and he would prescribe any for the detainee. From Mosul, there was Husain, an old man who was a farmer. For six days on end no morsel of food or sip of water was allowed to him. He had a bulky, beefy frame, and perhaps this helped him survive. When he was finally allowed the first meal, he could hardly open his eyes to see what went into his mouth. He had been denied sleep as well. When sleep stealthily took the better of him, he was slapped and kicked by the ever attending Haras. His speech became incoherent, his eyes blank. Sitting next to me, he showed some sign of recovery after weeks. What was his offence? "I used to go to the mosque fairly regularly. They thought I was religious, and therefore affiliated to Hizbud-Da'wah." Then, with an admonition he said "Do not mention Da'wah here. They will strangle you."

The detainees came and went. From the first three hundred, our number fell to around one hundred and eighty. And it dwindled still further to eighty-six. What a relief! We were now able to stretch our legs and sleep. It was not so before. Our chief had contrived an ingenious method for our sleeping cycles. Everyone was a Badeel to his mate. While my friend slept, I stood upon his body for six hours or so. No movement was possible because of congestion, nor could I sit because of the feet interlocking each other's. And then he woke up to allow me to sleep. He stood over my body as if to prevent me from escaping.

But our room soon became crowded as scores of Egyptian and Jordanian young men were brought in. We were nearing the three hundred mark again. The cell now rang with Arabic dialects, punctuated with hilarity so characteristic of the Egyptians. There were other companions who stuck to us so faithfully. They were the overgrown black lice, which skipped from one person to another, causing intolerable rash, irritation and pain. These parasites never left us alone. They were to be seen everywhere on our bodies, on our torn and slit shirts, in the buttonholes, and hundreds of them crawling in the plaited curly hair of the Sudanese, the Somalis and other Arab friends. Killing them became a good pastime, and we soon obliged each other by picking up a stray louse crawling on the ground, or on the other fellow's clothes. Sores appeared everywhere, and scratching became an obsession.

A 'Doctor' came to the metal door thrice a day. The window would open and a trimly young man accompanied by Haras would appear. "*Man Indahu Ilaj?*" he would shout. Those who needed treatment

flocked to the door. The common complaints were *'ishal'* (diarrhoea), *'Qabdh'* (constipation), *'Ghudoon'* (tonsils), sores on the tongue and upon the palates and the nostrils. The medicine man had a list, which he consulted. If one said *'ishal'*, one was given the red tablets to swallow in his presence, and if it was *'Qabdh'*, then the tablet was invariably pink; and so on. Minor ailments like sores were never treated; they were all classified as "Hassasiyyah", allergic. Some killer cream finally treated the scourge and havoc played by the lice, and we felt greatly relieved. The lice were there, but their number had considerably reduced.

It takes all sorts of men to make a society in the cell. There were political refugees, dissidents, defectors, smugglers, thieves, foreign exchange dealers, pimps and sexually perverted. And along with them were men like me who were accused of espionage. Jawad, aged 19 years, was there because he tried to trace the President's portrait and inadvertently drew his nose crooked; Muhsin was there because he visited mosques and the Holy Shrines of Najaf and Kerbala quite frequently; Abdul-Rab was apprehended because he was found with a note-book in which he had written quotations from Nahjul Balagha; Mustafa, a Turk, was brought in because they mistook him for another Mustafa, also a Turk, who was wanted; Jasim was there because he dealt with ammunition and firearms; Ibrahim came because he believed that Iraq-Iran war must stop and strongly expressed his opinions before the informers; Abu Mansoor was here for no reason known to him, and a half-mad Muhammad was with us because he visited the Shrine of Najaf, and banged his slippers upon the sacred Zareeh. An Indian, Kehar Kaushal, entered the cell because he joined a strike, which was illegal in Iraq. They had struck together since they had not been paid for six months. Two Pakistanis came to Iraq without visa, another one without a passport. One Indian tampered with his own Passport, trying to erase an old, expired visa so that a new one could be stamped. Such was the colourful, motley crowd, each with a peculiar story.

Chapter Eight

In a well-lit room, a Muhaqqiq sat on an elevated platform, with a writing pad before him. In my first encounter with him, the blindfold was slightly raised by the Haras –enabling me to see the interrogator and survey the room. There were several other tables around, and a portrait of Saddam neatly placed on a plank. And there was a sofa set arranged on one side. I was given a chair, which I thought must have come there by mistake from a kindergarten. It was small, very low and apparently fragile.

Initial questions dealt with my identity, my family history and my immediate relatives. In between these were simple enquiries, he asked:

"Do you pray"?

"Yes". I said. The question seemed strange and totally irrelevant. But then I thought that perhaps they wanted to establish if I was truly a Muslim; a quality, which I guessed, might earn me some favour. As days passed by, I understood the implications.

Detainees charged with criminal offences or accused of immoral practices stood a better chance of early release. Pimps, drug peddlers, smugglers, playboys and gays were released within two to three weeks, because they helped the process of de-Islamization. Sameer, an Egyptian young man, looked quiet and well behaved in the cell, but his story was astounding. He travelled with strangers in the buses, and on the way would politely offer tea from his thermos. The traveller soon went into a deep slumber, and Sameer helped himself with all the contents of the stranger's wallet. The drugs and sedatives thus used in the blend made tea all the more palatable—for both, Sameer and his victim. Here, I reckoned, was a boy who would be severely punished and detained for many years. But he was released from the cell within a month and was seen in Baghdad by some of my friends who were brought back from freedom again, this time accused of being deserters.

The Ba'thist regime does not tolerate religious leanings. Just as we sat one evening to eat the upper crust of the half-baked bread called *Sammoon* with tasteless curry, which had more water in it than any of its usual ingredients, young Muhsin entered. Most of the inmates seemed to know the newcomer. He had been here six months ago, and had stayed for four months. He was then sent to Abu Ghuraib jail. They greeted him and welcomed him to the meal. He was a resident of Samarra. I found him reticent but cordial. He prayed regularly and sat for Dhikr, Taqeebat and other voluntary acts of worship for quite long. As our acquaintance became intimate, I once asked him about his case. He was reluctant to disclose anything in presence of the others. Early one morning, we chanced to be alone near the Hammam for Wudhu, and he explained his plight in detail. "I was arrested because I was a regular goer to the mosques and the Shrines of Askariyyain, and accused of being associated with Da'wah. They kept me here for four months, and did not call me for *Tahqeeq* even once. Then I was suddenly transferred to Abu Ghuraib, where I stayed for six months. I became acquainted with the cruel Haras of Abu Ghuraib, and being a senior inmate, was usually spared their whips and slaps. Then I wrote a note to the Head of Mukhaberat complaining that I was not being interviewed and I wondered how long would I remain incarcerated without knowing the charges preferred against me. I was transferred again to this place. They have called me downstairs once, but could not trace my file. And when they found it after a long search, there was nothing against me except that my inclinations towards the Ba'thist policy were unknown. So I must be religious, fanatic, orthodox, reactionary and follower of Hizbud Da'wah." Muhsin stayed for ten months and many more weeks, totally neglected. Iraq's present Ba'thist regime consigns religious youths to the dungeons of oblivion.

Religious performances in the cell were looked down upon by the Haras and other officers who made unannounced, short visits. To be seen with a rosary – a *sabha* was the most intolerable offence. Rosaries made from the strings of motley *Bataniyya*, plaited and knotted with great care and dexterity, were perhaps the only attractive items in this dreary cell. We said our Tasbeeh with these rosaries hidden under the blankets covering our knees. A Haras, Raed, saw one of us with this beautiful brown rosary in his hand, and was red with anger. The massive door opened, and a search began. Some twenty-five rosaries were found on the inmates, and they were all pushed out to the corridor for punishment. The cracking wire whips and the wails of "*Sayyidi-Sayyidi-Afw-Afw*" could be faintly heard from outside. Quran was not allowed into the cell. Daily prayers were ridiculed, though tolerated. Muhammad Ali of Samawa once stood up for Tahajjud in the small hours of the night. In the packed cell, he managed to find a place near the door. During the final Witr, he had just raised his palms for Qunoot, when most unexpectedly Abu Mahmood appeared at the infamous window. "*Shunu Salat Hazeh*" what sort of prayer is this? There was nobody there to answer, for Muhammad Ali was steadfast in his supplications, and those half awake like myself pretended to be in deep sleep. Abu Mahmood stood riveted to the ground till Tahajjud was over and with a contemptuous grin said: "You would not be here if God ever heard!"

My interrogation continued on the same note.

"Do you speak Arabic or Persian?"

"Do you read Quran?"

"Yes".

"How can you read Quran if you did not know Arabic?"

"This is common in the non-Arab Muslim world. We are taught to recognize the Alphabets, and trained in recitation without understanding the language", I explained.

"Why did you visit Iraq?"

"For Ziyarat of Arba'een."

"And who sent you here?"

"Nobody. I came of my own accord, and at my own expense.

"You are lying. You must know that we are kind and considerate to those who are truthful. And when you

start telling the lies, we treat you like animals—worse than that. Do you understand?"

"Yes, but I am telling no lies."

The interrogator left his seat and came closer to where I sat. This menacing approach sent a chilling sensation down my spine, but nothing happened. He asked:

"Are you Ayatollah?"

I was taken aback. Was I? This seemed to be quite far-fetched, and I could not guess why they thought I was Ayatollah. I had no beard—it had been perforce shaved in the cell. And then I remembered. In my briefcase, they had found an *Amaliyya* of Ayatollah El-Khui, and some of his letters and receipts for *Khums*.

"No, I am not Ayatollah", I said.

"What are your relations with El-Khui?"

"He is my Mujtahid. I follow his rulings in Islamic jurisprudence and regulations".

"And with Khomeini?"

"No relations with Khomeini".

"Do you believe he is a crazy Mulla, responsible for the slaughter of thousands of innocent Muslims?"

I hesitated. This was a tragic pause. The Muhaqqiq hit me on my jaws with his fist and I was on the floor as the chair tilted." You are Khomeini's spy—and with that label I was sent back to the cell.

Chapter Nine

"*Dawaam*" started in the early hours of the day, and halted temporarily in the afternoon. It resumed in the evening and continued till midnight. These were the hours of *Tahqeeq*, when detainees were called in for questioning. Weekend began from Thursday afternoon, and ended till Saturday morning. Things were usually quiet during the weekend. Friday was a good day, because each of us was given 'Baidh', a

boiled egg in the breakfast.

Usual breakfast consisted of *Shorba*, a thick paste with an offensive smell, and two half-baked *Sammoon* which was definitely unfit for human consumption. The crust seemed to be brown and baked enough for eating. The inside of the bread was a sticky blend of flour and yeast, which choked as we tried to swallow. A boiled egg on Fridays was an invaluable gift of God, treasured and valued. I remember when on a particular Friday, we were only eighty-six in the cell, and the Haras opened the window and asked:

"Kam Wahid" – How many of you?

And our headman, gathering all the courage retorted:

"Mitayn Wa Thdashar-Wallah". Two hundred and eleven. By God.

The Haras gave two pales full of eggs—and we had enough each to last us for three days.

Our ears now turned to the outside noises. When the trolley carrying lunch approached, someone would announce—"Ghaza, Ghaza" – and ask us to arrange ourselves in the Majmooa of tens. Plastic bowls were then distributed to each Majmooa. It was the same diet everyday. Oily, half-cooked rice in big plastic containers which resembled bath-tubs for babies, and a slimy pungent curry which sometimes contained large square bits of tough meat. The headman and his aids then filled our bowls. Bones in the meat, quite rare though, was an essential raw material. We washed it and then set down for hours and sometimes days rubbing it against the hard floor till it assumed the shape of a glossed round pin. Then we flattened one tip, and with a nail from the shoes on the rack, we bore a hole in it. This was the needle. It was prohibited item just like the rosary, but it could be conveniently concealed. And then we pulled out threads from our tattered shirts and threaded the needle to stitch our torn shirts and pyjamas. It seemed Time had travelled backwards, for we were using implements of the 'Bone-Age'. It was beautiful, this needle. Abu Fahd, a Druze from Syria treasured one dearly, and said, "I will carry it with me when I am released, and place it in a Mathaf (Museum)."

"Dolkatukum Ya Ikhwan-Dolkat" – the headman always announced when he knew tea would be served in the evening. A Dolka was a plastic jug, which was filled with black tea having strong aroma of camphor. It was very sweet. A jug for ten. And the same curry which was left over from lunch. If there were some crumbs, we dipped them in the offensive liquid and ate.

The Dolka had another use also. Water from the taps was always sizzling hot. "No cold water, Sir, you are Mawqfin. You are not in your houses." This was the water for drinking, wudhu, washing our clothes and ourselves and for the toilets. Water was kept in the Dolka for hours to cool down. In Hammam, it

was collected in the trough till it became usable for bath. And when a particular Dolka was ready, scores of inmates quenched their thirst with small sips, which would at times only wet their lips. During my four months and two days, cold water was available for ten days when some anniversary was being celebrated in Iraq. Mukhaberat seemed to be in a condescending mood. Wudhu meant a quick jerk of your palm below the water flowing from the taps—if you were not careful, blisters formed on the palms. We could not wash our torn pyjama suits – because there was no spare suit. So we washed our shirt first, shook it till it dried, wore it around the loins and then washed the pyjama. And if the Muhaqqiq decided to call one right then, one rushed downstairs with the dripping suit. *'Harval Ya Maloon, La Umma Lak'* – the Haras would roar.

Chapter Ten

A young Egyptian entered our cell with a wobble that betrayed his poor state. Our headman squeezed him between the rows where he calmly settled, talking to no one. As was customary, a group of friends surrounded him with the intention to know his case, but he did not respond. Right then the window flicked open and the Haras said: *"Wayn Huwa? Haza Masriy?"* – Where is he, this Egyptian? The head answered that he was sitting comfortably with his Egyptian fellow men. "No one should talk to him—No one—do you understand?", he commanded, shut the window and disappeared.

Two hours later, Majid, a young officer from the Amanaat, walked in followed by the ever-present Haras. The Egyptian young man was summoned, and a volley of questions started. Majid lit his cigarette, and demanded: "Where did you get the dollars from?" *"Wallah, Ma Adree,"* By God. I do not know, came the reply. "So you do not know eh?" Majid was furious. He slapped him and then hit him hard blows. *"Wallah, Seyyidi – Ma Adree,"* – By God Sir, I do not know. This time the boy was kicked on his ribs, and as he tried to control himself from falling, blows and slaps followed. The boy cried helplessly. "Stretch your palm", Majid said. The boy extended his palm, and the burning butt was extinguished against his palm. He gave out a cry of pain and bitterly wept. Caught by the neck, Haras pushed him out of the cell and the door shut. I thought the boy was in for trouble and that he would be half dead if at all brought back. Instead he returned hail and happy. He told us that he had confessed, and supplied further names of those involved with him in the illegal transaction.

Amanaat is the entry point and also the exit. My wife and I were driven from Baghdad Airport (Saddam Airport) under escort. I was given a small white handkerchief to tie around my wife's eyes, and then they blinded me with my own muffler. As the car sped along the main roads of the city, my wife clasped my hand and asked, "Where are they taking us? Are we going to be killed?" My heart throbbed with fear; nervously I replied, "I do not know. But we are the guests of Imam Hussein. Allah is with us—do not

panic." We felt that the car was speeding down a ramp, and then, a sudden halt. We came out of the vehicle without the slightest idea of what destiny held in store for us. And we entered a place, which looked like a warehouse. For when the cloth was removed, we saw the place full of various articles. There were clothes, shoes, trunks, arms and ammunitions, knives, motorbikes, and heaven knows what all spread around, with a lot of dust gathered over them. "*Uq-oud*", a Haras shouted, but I did not "know". "Sit Down", and both of us complied. We saw Majid in a corner, seated on a wooden chair, writing. And then he approached us." Remove your clothes and all your belongings. Tell your wife to go in the adjoining room and change. Come on, quickly", he ordered. I was given the dirty torn pyjama suit; and my wife an old dress. We were then beckoned to the table where we signed the list of our belongings. Just as we finished signing, Majid looked at me snarling: "Jasoos Khomeini? Khomeini's spy?" I made no reply for I did not "understand". "You will see the fire, soon, very soon", he warned. Earth seemed to slip from under my feet. For the first time I realized that I was held under serious suspicion. My lips went dry with fear and my wife silently wept. But worse was to come.

The Haras put the shackles around my wrists, and blindfolded my wife and me. Then he pulled us in a zigzag manner giving the impression that the alley was not straight. We came to an elevator. On the second floor, I was ordered out. My wife screamed: "Where am I going? I shall die.... They will kill me.... please do not go...." and the screams died down as the elevator shot upwards. I saw my wife again after four months.

Chapter Eleven

Intellectuals in Iraq are damned. Most of the youths condemned to indefinite stay in *Tawqif* were highly educated, intelligent and politically aware members of the society. Their crime was that they were vocal and articulate. Not all of them were votaries of Islamic state; but they were all unanimous in their condemnation of unjust, authoritarian rules in most of the Arab states.

There was a young man who seemed to live on the wings of fancy. Alone in a corner, he spoke to himself, chuckled with a smile gradually developing into a broad grin. Young in age, he had a face demure and sage. We thought he was mad, till one day I found out that he was a poet. He quoted several pre-Islamic literary giants, and recited their lines with pride and admiration. At times, he read his own poetry to us. The *Muhaqqiq* somehow knew that the fellow was well versed in metre and rhyme. Naturally, he provided us a good diversion in a dungeon where there was nothing else to do but to kill the parasites, stitch the torn clothes, wash ourselves, pray, brood over our weird fate, quarrel over trivialities, remember our family and helplessly weep.

The poet once came back from the Muhqqiq badly shaken. His face red from the slaps and blows, his front tooth broken. The pyjama showed blood, for he had been mercilessly kicked in his testicles. In an hour and a half of incessant questioning, no respite was given to him as various modes of punishment were meted out one after the other. He was given a shock treatment, which sent him flying from the chair like fish out of water, tottering to the floor semi-conscious. All this because he was asked to recite few verses of his own to amuse the Muhqqiq. Call it an audacity or foolhardiness, he chose some of the most provoking lines from his notes, the pointed spikes against the inhuman Ba'thist regime, and recited them with candour that was least expected. The Muhqqiq flew with rage and then hell broke loose.

Faisal, who had been there for nine months, was a lecturer in Mathematics. He was from Jordan, teaching in a University in Baghdad. He left Jordan as a political dissident, unable to reconcile with the despotic rule, and came to Iraq to find a living. Here he married. A year after his marriage, when his first-born was only a month old, he was apprehended. I remember how one morning he woke up with tears rolling down his cheeks. He had dreamt of his young wife and the newborn child. He saw that the child was grown up—and in the arms of its mother, it gave a toothless smile, spreading its arms towards him as if to say: "Take me father, hug me, fondle me, kiss me, please." Faisal cried for one hour. He was a Mathematician, and a human being. During my stay of four months and two days, I never saw him go to Muhqqiq. His ordeal seemed to be over; but the protracted confinement tortured him further. What had he done? While lecturing on Mathematics, he at times digressed to touch the burning political issues of the Middle East, and frankly castigated the monarchy and the despotic rules of Jordan and other Arab states.

He never realised that the government's secret agents and informers were everywhere. His own students reported him, and one day, the icy hand of Mukhabirat descended upon him. "You cannot imagine how much they beat me," he once told me. "They seem to have softened down now, for the beating I see these days is not at all comparable to what I have undergone. The rain of *Sonda* falling upon my body turned my skin violet, then black and then violet again. I had a bloodbath" – he said.

The young generation of Iraq and many other Arab states is condemned to decadence. Only those who choose to live aimlessly, whiling away their precious time in frivolity and gain less pursuits, ostensibly inclined to the prevailing rule, can survive. A young man who thinks, has an ideology and original persuasions, is religious and a true Muslim, gives vent to his feelings and opinions, for him all roads point to the gallows. With every young intelligent Muslim Iraqi who is systematically brainwashed, wrecked, finally executed or banished, Islam incurs an irreparable loss of genius.

Yahya, a student of psychology, came from Kuwait. Common to many psychologists, he had his own psychological problems. His wife had deserted him accusing him of impotence, and it became impossible to live in Kuwait. So he came to Iraq where a job awaited him. Human behaviour was his subject, and as he discussed human traits, he cited examples from history. The Ba'thist regime found

him a suspect, and pre-empted his arrest before he could discuss the present insane rulers psychologically. He was rounded up in Kerbala, and was immediately consigned to a dark vault, which had a revolting stench of urine and human excrements. Thereafter in a police cell, before his final transfer to our cell, the Haras sexually assaulted him. Needless to say that Yahya recalled his experience with profound bitterness. "They are beasts, these Haras", he would say.

Chapter Twelve

Kamal, the poet had now recovered from shock, though marks were still there to be seen. The speed with which he recovered was amazing, for now as he recalled the intermittent blows and slaps, he giggled and laughed. "I told them; yes, I told them what I thought of them and of their jungle rule." He was pleased with himself because he succeeded in disturbing the Muhaqqiq. Faisal asked him to relate the incident in detail and to recite the verses, which had proved offensive.

Kamal was ready. The poem he recited was too long for me to retain. Yet I managed to commit a few lines to memory. As a student of Islamic history, I had always wondered how the companions of our Prophet and our Aimma, peace be upon them, were able to remember lengthy traditions, sermons and supplications and to faithfully transmit them to posterity. Now I realized how when one is deprived of the tools, not able to jot down anything, then one relies upon ones memory, and memory suddenly becomes more retentive. While in the cell, I remembered many more lines; but just as I try to put them to paper after a lapse of months, I can recall only some.

"I was asked to stand on a chair and recite. Right then, I could only recall a poem by my Syrian friend who had written about Ba'thist regime in Syria, and I thought it applied to Iraq as well. So, forgetting that I was but a detainee, I began." – Kamal began.

Faisal, Fathi and I eagerly waited for him to commence. This would give a mental transportation from the gloomy, dreary surrounding which beset us and an escape from a depressing attitude we had developed towards Time, which ever seemed to stand still. Kamal was also pleased to find that he had listeners, so he threw his Bataniya aside and squatted, assuming a posture of a guru before the pupils.

"History has never witnessed worse tyrants than them,

Not even in the injustice of Pharaoh nor of Haman.

Their era is ruled by the laws of jungle;

Where might is right, honoured by the rulers.

They have filled their cities with evil and sin,

And have rendered every place fraught with vices.

They destroyed the religious schools,

And smeared the purity of hearts and the dignity of youths.

The young and old among them have turned into pimps,

And their women, into whores, like mischievous monkeys.

And the modes of chastisement and torture

Have no precedence in the history of mankind.

Did you ever see a whip, which eats and drinks?

By licking the sacred stream of innocent blood?

Did you hear of a man whose skin is peeled of?

Or did you see the inner ear being pierced?

Did you hear of a man, whose bone is crushed?

And his teeth broken to pieces?

Did you hear of one whose flesh is broiled?

In a furnace, or in a hot steam or roasted in flames?

Did you hear of one, whose urge for passing urine is constrained?

And all his body apertures plugged?”

Qasam who had by now joined us was emotionally affected. He hid his face with his palms and listened. We saw clear droplets trickled down his cheeks on to the floor, and as was customary, we shook his arms bidding him not to cry. He lifted his face, looking intently to Kamal, pleading for more. Kamal was least moved. He perhaps expected this response.

He continued:

“And what could be expected of the mean, faithless people,

Those wretched, basemen of lower birth?

Noble and brave are never born of whores—who

Bring forth only riffraff of society.”

And then Kamal sat erect, proudly looked around as if addressing the whole cell, and raising his voice, said: –

“I am a Muslim, and my bosom is full of pride.

I am a believer, and light fills my soul;

I rise high in glory among mankind.

I shall continue to announce my call with a challenge.

I carry the banner of faith and invite people to join.”

The massive door clicked again, and we realized that lunch was being served. This indicated that it was noon, so some of us hurried to the Hammam for Wudhu and then stood to pray. This was a meatless day, and the rice, soaked in oil, was half cooked. Kamal's poetry had somehow elevated our spirits, and we ate food with relish and Thanksgiving to Allah for His ways, designs and wisdom.

Chapter Thirteen

The corridor to which I was brought the first day was dimly lit. As I sat on the floor, I remembered that it was Friday night: "Laylatul Jumu'ah".... and then my eyes fell on the handcuffs. I could not believe my eyes. Was this actually happening? Or was it a bad dream? Raising my head towards heaven, I sighed, and in a bid to control my emotions, I said: "Alhamdulillah – all praise be to Allah".

Unaccustomed to the ways, I pushed the irksome blindfold upwards and managed to survey the surroundings. The corridor was occupied by scores of people, all handcuffed and blindfolded. A cry of agony, now and then, pierced through the pervasive silence. I was terribly upset. My lips were dry, my throat parched.

Looking towards the Haras, I raised my finger and asked for water. He exchanged a glance of surprise with his colleague, and said: "Hear that? He is asking for water!" They both giggled. I had made an outrageously unusual request! But his colleague said: "Huwa Ghareeb", he is a stranger, give him some." A small glass filled with cold water was given to me, with an admonition: "Next time you are thirsty, seek my permission and go to the washroom. You will find water there." He was referring to the boiling water from the taps; but then I did not know.

As dawn broke, men around me shuffled and woke up from their sleep. And then one after another hesitantly sought permission from Haras. "Sayyidi" no reply. "Sayyidi?" no attention. He now dares raise his voice pleading: "Sayyidi?".... The Haras turns his face towards him with total indifference and shouts back "She Bek?" "May I go to the toilets?" "Go", the Haras shouts. This continues the whole day. No one is allowed to talk, and the blindfold must not be raised. Ah, the new Haras who had come to relieve his colleague saw that my bandage was a little higher. He came near and blurted: "Get it lower, and do not try to look around."

It is indeed difficult to describe the uneasiness and distress a person experiences when deprived of vision, knowing full well that God has endowed him with the normal sense of sight. Blindness is different. The latter is a state of resignation to fate, while the former always feels threatened and subdued. O God! What a horrendous experience it is! Unable to sustain the perpetual darkness caused by the leather cover before my eyes, I kept on pushing it upwards, and then finding that the Haras was not attentive, surveyed the corridors and its inhabitants. Carefully, I placed the cover back to its position before he noticed.

"*Ya Allah Raham Kar.... Ya Allah....*", I heard. It was in my own language, the dialect seemed familiar. As he found his place in the corridor I managed to steal a view. He was middle-aged, with a luxurious growth of beard. I drew closer and asked: "Are you from Pakistan?" He was taken aback, for he least

expected anyone who could speak Urdu. With a sigh of relief, he said: "No, I am from India." "Your name?" "Ali Husain." "Why are you here?" "I came for Ziyarat of Arbaeen." "So you are Shia?" "Yes I am." And then we had a brief exchange of information, all conducted in soft whispers.

Rooms lining the corridors were either single cells for solitary confinement, or 'Red Cell', "Ghurfatul Hamraa", where more than twenty would be squeezed in at a time. Murmur of Tasbeeh, Dua-e-Kumail, and Adhan could be heard from these rooms.

For six days, I was in this corridor, every hour expecting a release, which I hoped, was imminent. With the passage of time, hope denuded. The uncertainty was now indeed frightening. The only solace was the company of fellow humans who had shared my plight. It was common suffering. Then one day, my name was announced along with many others. Six of us stood up. We were asked to line up, holding the shirt of one in front, so that "blind would lead blind." Ali Hussein was not to come, so he felt miserable. "Where are you going?", he demanded. Not knowing what destiny held in store for me, I conjectured "I am being released—hopefully. *Khuda Hafiz.*" Ali Hussein raised his shackled hands and prayed: "O Allah, send me where this man goes!"

We were taken to a cell, which was on the fourth floor. As the door opened, our blindfolds and handcuffs were removed, and the Haras pushed us all in. In spite of the cold outside, the cell was warm, and heat inside was stifling. There were more than three hundred unfortunate detainees swarming in this place, where hardly seventy or eighty could be accommodated. Two days later, Ali Hussein appeared. He suffered from myopia, with a limited visual acuity. I advanced to greet him. "Salaamun Alaikum, Bhai Ali Hussein," I said.

Recognizing my voice, he looked up and then after a pause, said: "So my prayer was answered! I asked God to send me where you were going, little knowing where it would be—and here I am, landed in this dungeon *Ya Allah Raham Kar.*"

Chapter Fourteen

Wudhu was one of the most difficult chores. Water from the tap sizzled our fingers, and it was impossible to collect handfuls for washing the face and arms. But we liked assembling near the basins because it provided an opportunity for private conversations.

Here, I met Yusuf, a Syrian Christian who had come to wash his wounds. His chastisement had been the most severe, his wounds most unsightly. Afraid of making any expression by words, lest an eavesdropper overheard me, I made a sympathetic gesture with my eyes to show my feelings. Making a similar gesture, he said: "They say I am a spy, while in fact I am not. I am simple truck driver, regularly plying between Kuwait and Iraq borders. They insist that I must confess. How can I, if I am innocent? I would not, even if they gored my eyes, removing them out of the sockets."

This was the only punishment he could now envisage, because he had undergone every other kind. In Ghurfa Amaliyyat, Yusuf had been lashed all over the body till he bled profusely and then given a respite for two days. A doctor usually stood by with a card in his hand. When he mutely showed the red ace, it meant danger. It was a signal conveying to the tormentor that the victim had had enough, and would die if punished further. Yusuf could not sleep on Bataniya, because the roughly woven blankets stuck to the raw flesh, and pricked him like needles. When he sat, the loose wool shreds would pull the wounds. If he slept on the bare floor, the cold surface rendered him uncomfortable.

After two restless days, Yusuf went to Muhaqqiq again, this time to be treated with electric shocks. With wire ends tied to his fingertips, toes, ear lobes, tongue-tip and glens, enough voltage was generated to send him flying, and down with a thud. Semi-conscious, he was led back to our cell. And exactly after two days, he went downstairs again. His clothes removed, a flame was introduced across his bare chest, down to his stomach and then to the sides of his legs. He came back to the cell in a state, which defies all description. In the following week of respite, his skin peeled off, water, blood and pus oozed out with a revolting stench.

For ten days, he went without any food or water. Rawi, an Egyptian Christian, sat next to him consoling and tending his wounds. An informer within the cell once managed to convey this to Muhaqqiq and Rawi was summoned and warned. Yusuf must be left alone.

A frequent visitor to Iraq is regarded with suspicion. Fear reins everywhere in the minds of the ruled as well as the rulers. The outcome is general distrust among the Iraqis for each other. No wonder that Sabah, a journalist, was interned with me because his estranged wife had reported against him to Mukhabirat. He was so terrified in the Muhaqqiq's chamber that he relieved himself standing there. Pushing him back into our cell, with his soiled and stinking pyjama, the Haras jeered at him "La 'ana Llahu Abaaka Wa Unimak-Ya Qadhir" – God curse your father and mother-you dirt!

Chapter Fifteen

The Iranians in the cell were a strange lot. These young men, all aged between twenty and twenty-five, were allured into Iraq by radio propaganda. Disenchanted by the strict Islamic discipline gaining ground in Iran, they chose to believe in the Iraqi promise that they would be transported safely to any point in Europe, where the streets, they thought, were paved with gold. Stealthily, they crossed the border, telling their parents that they were out on a short holiday within the country. Some of them travelled without a passport, while others had Shanas Nameh, the identity card only. These defectors gave themselves up as Laje'en Siyasi, political refugees, expecting a privileged treatment from the Ba'thist regime. They were all consigned to the hospitality of Mukhaberat.

These young men suffered from highly individualistic tendencies. Each thought that he suffered the most, and that his own plight was the gravest. Those who came in company of two or more blamed each other. Jabbar used to say: "Had it not been for that cursed Feeruz, I would not have been here!" However, due to their common ethnic origin, ignorance of Arabic language, affiliation with Mujahedeen and other dissident political parties in Iran, they were able to create a fragile fraternity within our cell. Khomeini, whom they mentioned as *Aqa Jan* only, was good and pious before he assumed power, they said.

Waheedi, the most educated among them explained his views by parables. He said, "Once an Iranian from a remote village came to Tehran. Strolling in the fruit market, he bought one small, yellow peach. He found it extraordinarily sweet. When he returned to his village he related this to his friends with great relish. During his second visit, which fell in another season, peaches were not to be found. He looked for it everywhere, and finally laid hands on overgrown yellow lemons, thinking that they were peaches. As he took the first bite, the bitter, sour lemon sent him reeling. With an understandable disgust, he said: 'Buzurg Shud, Kharab Shud.... It became big, and it became spoilt.' You know, power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolute."

The Iranians in my cell were neither subjected to any questioning nor any torture. This total indifference to their state was enough to torment them. Sitting next to the unhinged door of washrooms, they would be weeping silently, remembering their families and their beautiful, beloved country. They were here for six months now, and none knew the fate awaiting them. Once they tried to contact a Muhaqqiq through the Haras, but the trained guard simply said: – "Antum Dhuyuf...." – You are guests.... do not worry.

Waheedi, Ali Reza, Feeruz, Jabbar, Darwesh and others sometimes sat in a group, engaged in small talks, ridiculing the Arabs and their ways, cracking jokes at each other's expense—all in an effort to forget their worries. Man's ability to contrive ways of forgetting the nagging worries is a providential gift. He does this sometimes by diverting his mind to other subjects; but strangely, he succeeds in forgetting also

by simply willing to forget. Difficult though it is to explain in words, the fact is I persuaded myself that I had no past, no future. Voluntarily I believed that I was alone, had no parents, no children, and no wife. Oddly enough, this greatly relieved me of the worries. When a faint voice within me emerged to remind me of the disillusion, I suppressed it.

They would recite verses from Hafiz, Sa'di, Qa'ani, Khusrow, Khayyam and other classical, ancient and modern, and thus while away their time. They were highly critical of the Arabs whom they considered inferior, inhuman and dirty. Jabbar had a very subtle sense of humour. Looking at an Arab inmate who had just been to Hammam for a bath, and then had sat in toilet to relieve himself, he said: – "Do you know a camel once dipped itself in a river and walking back on the muddy ground, proudly announced to its companions: 'I have had a bath.' The companion looked at it amused, and then one said: 'yes we can see it from your feet!'" We both laughed. "You are in a good mood today, Jabbar", I said. "Mood? *Dile Man Danad, Wa Man Danam, Wa Danad Dile Man....* my heart knows, and I know and so knows my heart."

Chapter Sixteen

For eighty-four days, my wife sat on the floor on the corridor blindfolded and isolated from other ladies who were there. Disabled by the language barrier, she would communicate with Haras by sign, pointing her finger towards the direction of closets, and go when allowed. As is known, women nurse their tastes jealously, so to partake of the filthy food, which was daily, being served was unthinkable. She went without food for days till the Haras observed this, and reported to Muhaqqiq and the "Doctor". Fearing that she might die of starvation, they forced her to eat. Some women, who actually were informers but were there ostensibly as detainees, cajoled her, coerced her, and ultimately managed to feed her with milk, crumbs and butter brought as a special diet.

Sitting alone and unable to communicate with anyone, as this was not allowed in the corridors, she wondered what had befallen us. Not knowing where I was, she felt insecure, and as she remembered our children, she wept for days on end till at last tears dried up. No one was there to pity her or say a word of consolation. One morning she was taken to room No.73 along with Iraqi ladies, where she spent the rest of her days. Soon her companions found out that she was a total stranger, and pitied her plight.... "Allah Karim.... " – God is great, benevolent, they would tell her.

Here in my cell, thoughts about my wife tormented me most. Where was she? How would she put up with the situation so shockingly cruel? Unable to control my emotion, I burst into tears and my friends surrounded me pleading, "Do not cry; please do not cry." They did not know that my wife was also

apprehended till I broke the news. They shook their heads in disbelief, and I remember one Jordanian who walked away with moist eyes. "Why? –Why your wife? Why are these innocent women being tortured?" Abu Ali asked.

The Muhaqqiq sent for me for the third time. Today his voice was sharp and accusing.

"Say, who sent you here?"

"Nobody, I came on my own, for pilgrimage to the Holy Shrines."

"Have you been to Iran?"

"Yes

"Why?"

"For Ziyarat."

"Which Ziyarat?"

"To the Shrine of Imam Reza in Mashad."

And then the Muhaqqiq stood up, drawing nearer to me, and with every step, which he measurably took, he asked:

"You are President of your community Federation in your country?"

"I was. I have since retired."

"Our investigations reveal that you are a founder of a World Shiite organization in London and also its President."

"I am one of its founders. I am no more its President."

"Why did you not reveal this before?"

"Because you never asked about my social or religious activities. I am supposed to answer your questions only."

Four hard blows descended upon my lower lips, sending me tottering to the floor. As I gathered myself, the Muhaqqiq continued:

"Do you love your wife?"

The mention of my helpless wife sent my heart bleeding. Controlling myself, I managed to say:

"Naturally so."

"Well, you will never see her again. We know we have caught a big fish. You will be executed."

The Haras was summoned to escort me back to the cell. I did not know where my feet fell, as I walked with him in the alleys.

Chapter Seventeen

Days rolled into weeks and weeks into months; my hopes for release and freedom were diminished and denuded. Every time I returned from the Muhaqqiq, my companions would ask: "*Waqq'at?*" – Did you sign? I had not been asked to sign anything till when I was summoned for the sixth time. Eight pages written in Arabic were spread before me to sign, with blindfold pushed upwards to allow me to see the words at the end, "*Al-Muttaham*" – the Accused. No one was supposed to read the contents, even if it meant signing ones own death warrant.

In the cell, I broke the news to my friends, and they were jubilant. Extending their hands to congratulate me, they explained: "You have signed. Your investigation is now over. "*Inshallah Takhruj....* " – God willing you will soon leave. Two more months elapsed, and I was still there. A delay after having signed portended serious consequences, and my friends began to doubt my innocence. Abu Mansoor whispered to his friend: "This man must have committed a big offence, else he would not be here for so long after '*Tawqi*'. He might go to Abu Ghuraib for a couple of years."

Early one morning, Muhammad who worked in Amanaat downstairs, lingered into our cell and called my name. As I entered the Amanaat, I remembered my first day, and strange feeling overwhelmed me. There, seated on a small chair, I saw my wife after four months, but we were not allowed to converse. Both of us were asked to put on our clothes and check our belongings. Muhammad said: "You are going

home today. Be happy and smile." We managed a nervous smile, for here you do whatever you are told to do. And then within minutes, an officer announced: "Sorry, but the releasing officer will be late by two hours. So change your clothes and go back to your cell."

This tormenting exercise was repeated on us thrice. Every time we were brought to Amanaat, given back our clothes and suitcases, and then under one pretext or the other, were again thrown into our cells. The officers seemed to enjoy this game of cat and mouse; though we could no more tolerate the cruel joke. On the last occasion, the officer in charge made us sign several papers, amid unprintable abuses, and allowed us out in their car. We were taken to another cell situated in the heart of Baghdad. A room was given to us, where we sat to recall our experiences from the first day, shed tears over each other's miseries so as to mitigate the overwhelming grief.

A day later when our photographs and fingerprints had been taken, we were transferred to a third place where old hoary, half-naked inmates, most of them totally deranged mentally, accepted us without any curiosity. One of them beckoned us to an adjacent room, which we entered. My wife was taken to another room reserved for Iranian ladies while I stayed behind with some hard-core criminals who had been there for as long as nine months. An Egyptian, Majid by name, politely welcomed me and said, "Welcome to Sheraton. Feel at home, please. And what did they tell you?" Nervously I answered: "They have asked me to remain here for a night." Giving a mischievous smile, he said: "Yes, they told me so when they brought me here seven months ago." My heart sank.

Chapter Eighteen

Misfortune seems to have descended like a whirlwind upon Najaf, Kerbala and other Holy cities. Where are those glorious days when the sacred Shrines teemed with visiting pilgrims, and the small winding streets leading to numerous Mosques and Madressas were full of religious students and Ulema? These Holy places are now deserted, and the Madressas have been reduced to destitution and rubble. Most of the foreign students have been expelled, and the Ulema have either been banished or eliminated.

Many would testify that these religious cities and their Holy Shrines provided an atmosphere so peaceful and pure, unsullied by the taint of materialism and undue anxiety. I was here for Arbaeen, an event that normally attracted nearly a million Zuwwar every year. I was surprised to see very few Zuwwar this year. Instead of peace and tranquillity, there was fear and uncertainty everywhere. No young faces in Haram, except of those who were appointed by the authorities as spies and informers.

Just as I entered the Shrine of Imam Hussein A.S., and stood near Habib b. Mazahir's Zareeh, a young man leapt from the left and demanded:

"Who took the photographs?"

"Photographs? Which photographs?" I expressed my total surprise and ignorance. He regarded me threateningly and said:

"I saw a flash."

"I do not know. I do not have any camera on me," I said. He turned and disappeared into the Haram. This unexpected encounter was enough to unsettle me. In the evening, I was entering the courtyard of Hazrat Abbas A.S. when I was suddenly stopped by a soldier:

"Where do you come from?"

I told him. With evident suspicion, he asked:

"Do you have Muslims in your country?"

"Yes, many of them," I replied.

Within the Haram very few Ulema could be seen. How could places, which were virtually ruled by the clergy; where piety was the norm of life, and the streets bustled with religious activities, fall victim to the foul leprosy of nationalism, communism and other infamous ideologies? The institutions and parties, which spawned them, were there since long; probably the elements of complacency, decadence and tragic weakness among those at the helm rendered the region unprepared for the onslaught subsequently unleashed upon them.

The Holy Shrines are controlled by the Mukhaberat. Young security officers, dressed in plain clothes, stand near the main entrance, near the shoe keepers, at the gates, surrounding the Zareeh, under the arches of the courtyard, near the Imam who is leading the prayers and at times, next to you like an inseparable shadow.

In this third place of confinement a young Kurdish listened intently as I conversed with Majid. Then warily he came near and whispered: "I have a gift for you. Take this." He gave me two small green pieces of cloth and said: "I am from Samarra, these are from Askariyyan." A God-sent gift from an unknown quarter! But no sooner he did this, then the Haras apprehended him. Reprimanding the young man, the

Haras said: "You still stick to these outmoded, obsolete baubles—you ignorant brute! Forget these. Remember: *'Ar-Risalatul Khalidah'*, the everlasting message of Arabism: wake up from your sleep!"

Chapter Nineteen

Raising my palms towards heaven, I prayed vehemently: "O God, the ordeal seems to have no end. We are being transferred from one cell to another, each worse than the other. Have mercy upon your servants, O Allah!" This was Monday, two days after my arrival here. They had promised my release the next day, but freedom was not in sight. Majid's words rang in my ears: "Yes, they told me so seven months ago"; and the prospect of being incarcerated indefinitely in this gloomy environment frightened me out of my wits.

I recalled how earnestly I had prayed in the preceding days. Once as I prostrated before my Creator, beseeching for mercy, I fell into a momentary trance. How distinct were the words, which were heard from nowhere: 'Verily, Allah is ever vigilant over His servants.'

I raised my head not believing that I heard the words. Alas! My prayers were answered. The horrors of detention in the Mukhaberat nightmarishly haunt my mind even today, but I feel profoundly soothed and placid when I recall how my communion with the Almighty was lovingly answered. A call of distress it was, which cannot be re-enacted in days of ease and plenty.

I had not finished my prayers when a car was seen at the door. It was from Mukhaberat. I heard the frightened friends warning each other: "It is from the Devils – It is from Mukhaberat. Heaven knows who is the victim." Right then my name was announced. I stood up to prepare myself for the departure, but I could not guess where I was transported. Was it another cell? Am I going back to the cell No.58? My legs shook as I put on my shoes. It was all the more difficult to handle my luggage. Majid helped.

I saw my wife already seated in the car, and I arranged myself next to her. The officer politely informed that I was booked for London next morning, showed me the tickets and then said: "You will be our guest for tonight—in the cell of course. Keep ready tomorrow at six." As the car sped through the streets of Baghdad, members of the public regarded it apprehensively; for the infamous car was well known.

Back to the cell, we waited for the dreary night to pass, a night which seemed long and endless.

Chapter Twenty

"Fi Amanillah", the men from Mukhaberat blurted, and turned their backs. We were brought by them to Saddam Airport under guarded escort and handed over to Immigration. Moments later, we were in the departure lounge waiting for the announcement telling us to proceed to the aircraft. We were asked to wait as other passengers proceeded, and when none but my wife and I were left, my wife asked: "Are we really going, or is it just another joke played on us?" "God forbid," I said.

Finally, the ground hostess led us to the aircraft. Our Passports were given to the steward with an instruction to part with them after the take-off. On our way to London, my wife kept on warning: "Do not talk to anyone, please. He could be a devil from Mukhaberat. They are capable of recalling us from the air. This is their national airline".

As we landed in London, the reactions to the torment I had undergone began to surface. My right foot refused to move; a severe backache and high temperature further disabled me. Surprisingly, my wife, who was equally weakened, kept her calm and composure. She helped me through the formalities, and we came out of the Airport.

No one on earth knew that we had been at last released. Emotion within me welled up, and oddly enough, I decided to keep my arrival a secret for further few hours. My wife insisted that I ring our daughter and request her to come to the Airport. I dialed the number.

Our daughter picked up the phone.

"Hello", she said.

I could not respond. Words choked up my throat, and my tongue wagged nervously.

"Hello"? She repeated.

"We have come.... dear.... we have come." I managed to say.

"But who are you?" she queried.

"Your father and mum – we have come." She wept.

The sincere and earnest prayers by Momineen all the world over were heard. How the menacing threat

of execution was averted, and which factors contributed to our release, is a matter of anybody's conjecture. One thing is sure.

"Who answers the oppressed when they cry out to Him and relieves affliction, and makes you inheritors of the earth. Another God besides Allah? How little you reflect."

Source URL: <https://www.al-islam.org/i-was-saddams-prisoner-abu-jameel>

Links

- [1] <https://www.al-islam.org/user/login?destination=node/16195%23comment-form>
- [2] <https://www.al-islam.org/user/register?destination=node/16195%23comment-form>
- [3] <https://www.al-islam.org/person/abu-jameel>
- [4] <https://www.al-islam.org/library/general-history-politics>
- [5] <https://www.al-islam.org/tags/prisoner>
- [6] <https://www.al-islam.org/tags/regime>
- [7] <https://www.al-islam.org/person/saddam>