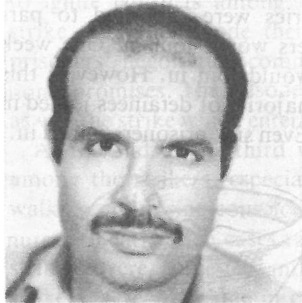


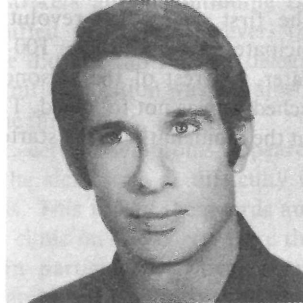
Highlights of Palestinian Struggle

1976 Hunger Strike in Ashkelon Jail

The United Nations has declared 1987 to be the Year of Palestine, and April 17th is the Day of Solidarity with Palestinian Prisoners. We mark these two occasions with an article on the 1976 hunger strike in Ashkelon jail in occupied Palestine.



Abdel Aziz Minawi



Zakaria Tatari

It is of great importance to remember the past struggles of the Palestinian people - their consistent, ongoing fight for establishing a popular, democratic state in Palestine. Palestinian revolutionaries imprisoned in Zionist jails have constituted a primary force in our masses' struggle at all stages. They have accumulated a rich militant experience and set a shining example for our masses of the possibilities for steadfastness and resistance, even under the worst of conditions. The following account of the Ashkelon strike was contributed to *Democratic Palestine* by two former political prisoners, comrades Zakaria Tatari and Abdel Aziz Minawi, who were among the 1,150 Palestinian revolutionaries liberated from the Zionist jails in 1985, in exchange for two Israeli soldiers captured by PFLP-General Command.

PRELUDE TO THE STRIKE

Before talking about the historical strike in Ashkelon, it is essential to review the development and conditions of the prisoners' movement in the Zionist jails at its different stages. Both objective and subjective factors determined the development of the prisoners' movement.

The objective factors can be divided into two: First was the physical and psychological oppression enacted against the prisoners' movement and organizations inside the Zionist jails, in order to eliminate the Palestinian national identity and armed struggle. Second was depriving the Palestinian prisoners of the least humanitarian rights to which political prisoners all over the world are entitled, and which are clearly outlined in UN documents. Among the subjective factors were the level of coordination between the various resistance organizations inside the prison, and the consolidation of the alliance among these organizations in the prisons and among the Palestinian masses at large.

On this background, we can understand that there were many reasons which led the imprisoned militants to think of conducting such a strike as occurred in Ashkelon, raising the slogan of «Yes to hunger, no to subjugation.» The strike was an effort to counteract a number of negative factors and tendencies among the prisoners themselves, while at the same

time pressuring the Zionist prison authorities for improvement in the conditions of detention. Among the factors which the strike aimed to correct were: First, the deterioration of the conditions of the prisoners' movement and its organizational dispersion and division. Second were the attempts of the prison administration to spread despair among the prisoners and erode their morale. Third was the emergence of opportunist trends, rightist and leftist, among the prisoners, along with the religious trend (the Muslim Brotherhood) and the so-called democratic trend which presented itself as a substitute for all the Palestinian resistance organizations. Fourth was the spread of 'tribalism' whereby people were classified by their origins (Gaza, West Bank, etc.), and prisoners banded together on the basis of their place of origin, acting according to the idea of 'the survival of the fittest'. Fifth was the bad living conditions suffered by the Palestinian prisoners, which impacted on their morale, leading prisoners to think about their own situation and sentence, while neglecting their people's cause.

A sixth factor was the prison administration's policy of discriminating between the prisoners, showing preference for those who worked in the prison (almost 2/3 of the inmates) in such jobs as tailoring, building, etc. Those who worked were granted a number of privileges: an extra 30 minutes of lighting in their cells, an extra half hour break, and a 10-15 minute extension of the monthly family visit. They were allowed to meet their families in a room, rather than separated from them by a screen.

A seventh factor was the spread of disease among the prisoners, heart, skin, stomach and other diseases which demanded immediate medical treatment or surgery which was denied. This had resulted in the death of several militants: Abdel Qader Abu Al Faham, Omar Awad Allah Yousef, Yousef Karim and Fuad Salamah.

Eighth was that books, newspapers and studies were prohibited. Ninth was the distinction made between Jewish criminal prisoners and security (i.e. Palestinian) prisoners, whereby the former gained more rights than the latter, if the latter had any rights at all. Tenth was that the cells were grossly overcrowded with more than 40 people squeezed into a room suitable for less than 10.

All these factors and problems accumulated, motivating some of the organizations' leaders inside the prison to think about conducting a strike that would be much more effective than previous forms of protest. The hunger strike is considered the highest form of prison struggle to be used especially when all other methods are exhausted in the struggle against the oppressive conditions. Previous forms of protest had included meeting with the prison administration to convey the prisoners' demands, refusing a meal, refusing to go out of the cells during the daily break and refusing to meet with visiting families. The prison administration had responded to all such actions by ig- ►