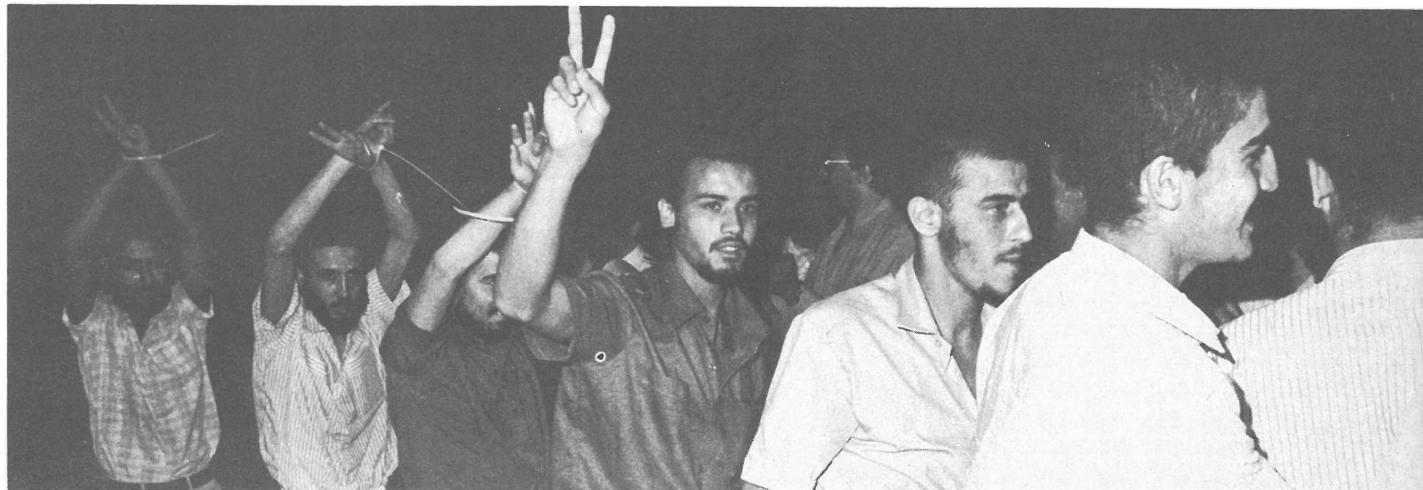


At first people thought most of arranging their everyday life and relations with others; how to react to the prison service policy and improve their living conditions. Gradually, with increased political knowledge and experience, the prisoners began to feel the need for solid organization among themselves. All the resistance organizations engaged in this process, but the PFLP was most advanced in this field due to our larger proportion of prisoners with extensive political and organizational background. In 1968, our comrades had a clandestine newsletter in the prison, though we suffered from lack of paper and pencils, the problems of smuggling it from cell to cell, section to section, etc.



Prisoners liberated at Quneitra, Syria - Operation Galilee

The concept developed of electing committees for certain duties, and to represent the prisoners before the prison authorities. In the years 1971-73, Kfar Youna prison (near Tulkarm) was a vanguard experience in this respect. There were meetings, elected leadership, organizational discipline, criticism and self-criticism, political study and organized contact to the outside, plus well-organized actions against the prison authorities. This encompassed prisoners from all the resistance organizations. In 1973, during a disobedience strike, all the Kfar Youna prisoners were transferred to the prison at Bir Sheeba, along with some prisoners from Askelon. Thus Bir Sheeba became a melting pot for experience from different prisons.

In these years the political prisoners came to really feel and act as such: having representatives to speak collectively, not individually, courageous struggles, and struggles with a clear political content, such as refusing to work. All this countered the Israeli practice of treating us as individuals and common prisoners, for the status of a political prisoner is different in terms of rights and duties.

The Israelis made new efforts to break the political prisoners via worsening living conditions and implanting agents in the prisons, to provoke quarrels and break solidarity. As a result, the prisoners acquired a greater sense of security matters; we developed our own 'security network' and were able to isolate suspects and sometimes even liquidate persons involved in serious collaboration.

The concept of Nafha

In the context of the prison authorities' failure to break the political prisoners, the concept of Nafha was born. The prison service wanted a jail with the hardest possible conditions and maltreatment for the most active militants.

From our first days at Nafha (1980), we prepared for a hunger strike, because we felt that if the prison continued in this way, it would become a model for other prisons. Treatment and living conditions were back to the severe level of 1967. All our acquired rights, the concessions extracted by struggle, were denied. If the Israelis had succeeded at Nafha, they could build several prisons on this model, transferring successive groups of prisoners to be 'softened', then returned to the larger prisons. So, 75 days after Nafha opened, we initiated a hunger strike with daring demands for total change in the living conditions, including changing the physical structure, enlarging the small windows and courtyard, having a dining room, beds,

decent sanitary facilities, the same food and treatment as Israeli prisoners. We demanded bimonthly not monthly family visits, radios, newspapers and magazines; many of the things we demanded were lacking in other prisons as well.

Would you evaluate the hunger strike as a weapon?

An open-ended hunger strike, win or die, is the prisoners' best weapon, but it must be used carefully to keep it sharp. If an open-ended hunger strike is unsuccessful, it will take a long time to rally fellow prisoners to such a struggle again. The hunger strike is a strategic weapon and should be used in a situation where it can be maximally effective. The hunger strike waged this year in Askelon and other prisons was partial, taking only bread and tea. This had the purpose of prolonging and spreading the strike as much as possible.

Would you describe the relation between the struggle in the prison and the overall struggle of the Palestinian people?

Political prisoners are part of the resistance movement, having their own battle inside the jails according to the concrete conditions. In fact, the Israeli prisons where Palestinians are held have become higher institutes of political and organizational learning; they are a place for measuring the potential energies of the person. Now, a large number of the most active militants in the resistance, especially in the occupied territories, are prison graduates. Inside, resistance is the only way to keep hold of oneself; otherwise you will break, even physically. One can see how morale, political motivation and integrity affect the health of the prisoner.