

Torture, Lice and Gangrene

Four ex-detainees from the Israeli-run jails of Khiam and Ashkelon recount their experiences.

The first three months: The interrogation process can last anywhere from three to four months. During that time, you are held in solitary confinement in a dark cell of roughly 90 square centimeters with a single slot in the wall, allowing you to breathe putrefied air.

The psychological and physical torture work hand in hand. Sometimes, your Israeli jailers will keep you thus confined for weeks at a stretch, leaving you with nothing but your blackest thoughts and a daily bowl of gruel. At other times, they will lead you to the interrogation chamber twice a day to pound information out of you.

They want to know everything - and the sooner you tell them what they want to know, the easier it will be on your miserable body. They grill you for the names of your comrades-in-arms, for information on how you operate and from which base, on future battle plans you may be privy to. But their quizzing does not stop at purely military intelligence.

In those three months, they will want to know everything about you and your environment for their files. They ask you about your family, about the school you attended, about your 10-year-old best friend who used to play marbles with you, about whether you're a virgin and, if not, when and with whom you lost your virginity.

Your captors are guardian non-angels and no form of torture is too base for them. They deprive you of sleep, cover your head with a hood and blast you with loud music. They strike you with nail-studded sticks. And if you still prove less than forthcoming with your replies, they resort to more agonizing techniques.

They drench your naked body in ice-cold water and, as you tremble to recover, they throw buckets of hot water at you. They repeat this process until your bones buckle under the abrupt changes of temperature.

Your torturers are also amateur electricians. Live cables work progressively over your body in a calculated science of increasing pain. They begin at the less sensitive buttocks, moving deliberately up the back and chest, and end at the more sensitive nose and tongue, and then down again to the genitals.

If the short, sharp treatment fails to achieve their desired results, they opt for torture over longer periods: starving you for days on end or hanging you by your wrists so that only your toes touch the ground. Mohammed Yassin's hands and wrists turned black after he was hung in this fashion for 48 hours. Concerned that gangrene had set in, Mohammed's Israeli captors thrashed his hands to get the blood pumping again through the constricted arteries.

By far the worst of interrogation techniques is for them to abduct a member of your family. “If you won’t talk,” your torturers warn you, “we’ll beat and have our way with your mother or your sister or your fiancée.” Afif Hammoud’s mother was held in Khiam for two months. She was physically assaulted, often in front of her son.

Then they lead you back to your pigeonhole of a cell where, in spite of the fetid darkness, you are grateful for the brief respite. And you wait.

The next 10 years: After the violent treatment of the first three months comes the stagnation. In this vegetative stage, every day is exactly like the last which in turn is exactly like the next. You soon forget which month, season or even year it is.

If you are fortunate, after the interrogation, you will be moved to a jail within Israel proper, such as Ashkelon Prison. If you are unfortunate, you will remain in South Lebanon, in Khiam.

The prison cells in Ashkelon and Khiam are roughly the same - 2.5 square meters - but in Khiam you have to share your cell and a bucket for defecation with five others, whereas in Ashkelon, there are fewer prisoners per cell and rudimentary plumbing.

There are more lice in Khiam that eat the skin raw. This is largely due to the unhygienic bucket which, at a guard’s whim, will not be emptied for a couple of days, adding disease to the nauseous stench. You and your cellmates are boxed in like sardines, and you take turns sleeping because there is only enough legroom for three.

The routine is quickly established: sit, stand, squat, lie down. Mealtimes do little to offset the routine. Bread, olives, Israeli halva, and soft cheeses with expired dates on the wrappers are handed out; and you eat sitting, standing, squatting, or lying down.

The only true breaks in the monotony come twice a month. Once to wash, and once to visit the “Sun Room.”

You are led naked to the washroom, and are given two minutes to wash - two minutes to scrub and scrape a month’s grime with cold water. If you take longer than two minutes, the attending guards grow impatient and begin to strike you with their sticks. After your wash, you are returned to your cell, dripping wet and with soapsuds clinging to your skin.

The “Sun Room” is as grandly - if wrongly - named as the prison is bleak. Once a month, you are allowed to stretch your legs for 10 minutes in a courtyard that is essentially nothing more than a larger cell without a roof. You call it the “Sun Room” even though the walls are too high for you to see the sun; but you do catch glimpses of a blue sky, and that reminds you that the sun must still exist.

Back in your cell, you think of ways to occupy your mind. You make worry beads out of accumulated olive pips. And, stripping the plastic off the wire that fastens the bread bags, you use your makeshift needle to mend your clothes, and you take up embroidery, sewing designs such as birds in mid-flight, flags, family trees and romantic hearts.

In the meantime, you wait. You wait until you die or until your release. International pressure from such groups as Amnesty has done little but raise awareness of your plight. And therefore, in the unceasing night, you are left with one dream: you hope above all else that your comrades back home will capture an Israeli soldier to organize a prisoner exchange. And you wait.

NABIH AWADA: "The Israelis turned me into a Hizbullah fighter. I grew up with daily news of Israeli aggression on my people, on my family and friends. I became a fighter because of Israel. They never broke me and I haven't changed. If I'm asked to fight for my land again, I will do so willingly - even at the risk of being captured and spending another 10 years in an Israeli prison."

MOHAMMED YASSIN: "When we were in prison, we believed that the people back home were talking about us, that the Lebanese public cared about the fate of their resistance fighters. We genuinely believed that the Lebanese government was taking steps to ensure our release. When we were finally liberated through our own efforts (the prisoner exchange between Hizbullah and Israel in 1999), we were dismayed by the overall apathy."

AHMAD ISMAIL: "When I was captured in 1988, the country was still in the grip of a civil war. When I was released last year, I was naturally pleased that brother was no longer killing brother. But I have to admit that this came as a shock. The war was all I'd known."

AFIF HAMMOUD: "I can't help it - my body counts the days like a car registers mileage. I wake up every day and think, 'I've survived another 24 hours.' You don't need a watch. Your body knows how long a day is. Even in the darkest cell with no sunlight, your body learns to recognize days from nights. I knew I had spent 3,820 days in Khiam without a calendar or newspaper. But it's become an obsession. I still count the days as if I'm still in my cell. Today, for instance, is 487. That is, I've been free for 487 days."
