Abdelrahman Al-Ahmar on Camp Life and Administrative Detention

(*Palestine Speaks: Narratives of Life under Occupation*, compiled and edited by Cate Malek and Mateo Hoke, Haymarket Books, 2021, pages 72-80. Most of the interviews for this book were conducted between 2011 and 2014.)

I'm the same age as the occupation. The war of '67 started in June, and my mother was pregnant with me at the time. She and my father were living in the Deheisheh camp in Bethlehem. They'd been pushed out of their homes in Ramla during the war in '48, and that's when they'd moved to the camp. They lived in tents in camp for over ten years, and then my father was able to build a small house in camp in the fifties. Then during the war in '67, a lot of people fled the camp and ended up living in Jordan, especially in Amman. But my father said, "We're not leaving again." He didn't want to lose his home again. So during the war in '67, my father stayed to protect the house while my mother went up in the woods and hid for a few days. She gave birth to me a few months later in the camp, with the help of a midwife.

I remember the camp of my childhood was a neighborhood of shacks made of cinder blocks and aluminum roofs. Most people in the camp built their own houses, like my father had. We all had leaky ceilings, no plumbing, no bathrooms. There were just a few public restrooms we would all share, and the toilets would flush into the gutters in the streets. We didn't have showers. We'd heat up water in a basin and wash with that. We depended on UNRWA [United Nations Relief and Work Agency] for clothes. I remember getting clothes twice a year, and they were often the wrong size, and sometimes all that was available were girl clothes. We were so cold in the winter. For heat, we had fires in old oil barrels outside our homes, and families would gather around them to warm up. I remember the fires would get so high, we couldn't see the faces of the people on the other side of the barrel. And there was so much disease—cholera, infections of all sorts.

…As children from the camp, we'd feel different from other kids when we went out into Bethlehem, the city. We would see kids who had bicycles, but we didn't have any. They had good clothes, but we didn't have them. They even had Coca Cola! My parents weren't accustomed to the kind of poverty we were living in. They were born in villages with homes on large pieces of land. When I was a kid, my father used to work in Israel. He was a stonecutter. But he wasn't making enough money for the family—he had four boys and two girls to support. There was no one in Deheisheh with money. So everybody was struggling financially, but at least it gave us this feeling of being equal.

I felt pressure from the Israeli army and Israeli settlers at an early age. The most difficult issue that we had to deal with was the settlers. I was only six years old when the settlers started coming through the camp in the early seventies, so I grew up seeing them. The main road from the settlements in the south runs through Bethlehem to Jerusalem, and it goes right through the camp. I think the settlers who passed through saw Deheisheh as something they needed to control.

The settlers were led by a man named Rabbi Moshe Levinger, who saw all the West Bank as part of Israel. They wanted Israel to claim the land around the camp, and they found ways

to make life miserable for us. They would come in buses maybe once a week. They'd get off and start shooting randomly in the refugee camp with live bullets. They'd shout, throw stones, provoke fights. Whenever anyone tried to fight back, the settlers would alert Israeli soldiers who would chase us through the streets and fire teargas canisters. Our windows were always open, so we got used to the smell of teargas.

I remember settlers entering my UNRWA school and smashing desks, doors, windows. The teachers couldn't protect us. There was always a sense of fear and insecurity. When I was younger, these things affected me tremendously. They affected my relationship with my teachers and the way I looked at them. I kind of lost respect for them because I'd seen them degraded. And after some time, other students and I stopped listening to them because we knew they were powerless.

Then in the early eighties, the military built a fence around the camp. It was twenty feet high, and the only way in and out was a gate leading to the Hebron-Jerusalem Road, the one that settlers passed through. I once heard that some tourists who came to Bethlehem saw the fence and wondered if it was the wall of a city zoo! In the camp, we had a curfew—we had to be in by seven p.m., or the soldiers guarding the entryway wouldn't let us back in through the gate. And we couldn't leave after curfew under any circumstances. Some people died because they couldn't go to the hospital after the gate closed at seven.

Around the same time, settlers brought trailers across from the camp and tried to establish an outpost there. I remember being stuck in the camp after curfew and hearing the patriotic music of the settlers blaring through the night.

The soldiers worked closely with the settlers most of the time. When I was fourteen, I got a backpack—the first I ever owned. Before that, I would carry my books in plastic bags, like most kids in the camp. I was so happy I finally had a backpack. It was green. My dad bought it for me. I was going to school one morning, and a group of six soldiers and an armed man in civilian clothes—a settler—called me over. The settler kicked me and slapped me and then took my backpack and threw it into the gutter. I tried to get it out of the gutter, but the soldiers hit me and threw the backpack back in. My books were wet and ruined, and they still didn't allow me to get the pack. I watched them do the same thing to some of my friends—they threw their books in the gutter, too.

At the UNRWA school, they would give us the books for free. I told them what the soldiers had done, and they gave me new books. But I had to put them back in plastic bags again. Of course, the soldiers knew the backpack was important to me because they could see how impoverished we all were and that we were deprived of everything.

Refugees in the camp would retaliate against the settlers by throwing stones. I started throwing stones at age ten. Kids a little older might be a little more organized. Different groups of kids would decide to do something—a group of five over here, a group of six over there. By the time I was thirteen, I was among them. We started to incite other children to put flags up. At that time, it was illegal to hang the Palestinian flag. So, we would tell the

kids to hang the flag and to write slogans on the walls. That was also illegal then. You could be arrested by the Israeli army and go to prison.

When they saw us throwing stones, the soldiers or settlers might shoot. When they shot at us, yes, we were afraid. But with time, with all the injustice and frustration, we were just stuck, and we didn't care if we died. But we thought throwing stones made a difference. We saw the settlers as the occupiers, and they were the source of injustice and deprivation, so we had to fight back. This was before the First Intifada, but for us in the camp it was already Intifada—it was always Intifada.

Eventually, my friends and I graduated from throwing stones to thinking about throwing Molotov cocktails. It wasn't hard to make a weapon out of a bottle of kerosene and a wick. We wanted to throw them at the outpost set up by Moshe Levinger and at the soldiers who were helping the settlers to come and wreck our neighborhood. By this point I was fifteen, almost sixteen. Some in our group were younger—one was fourteen. We made a couple Molotov cocktails and tested them out by smashing them against walls in the camp when we thought nobody was looking.

December 11, 1984, was a cold, snowy night. I was home asleep, and suddenly soldiers swarmed in. I was cuffed and put in a vehicle with some other boys from my group that had already been arrested. That night they picked up me and four of my friends, and we were driven to Al-Muskubiya [a Jerusalem compound that includes Israeli police headquarters, criminal courts, and a prison and interrogation center].

When we got to the interrogation center, it was very chaotic. There were maybe forty guys in all who had been arrested and brought to Al-Muskubiya that night. For the five of us, they took off all our clothes, stripped us naked. Then they tightened our handcuffs, took us outside in an open area, and put bags on our heads. The snow was coming down, and we were naked out there. I couldn't see the others, but I could hear their teeth chattering, and the sound of the handcuffs shaking was so loud. The cold weather still bothers me now—it makes me remember that night. This is where we stayed for forty-five days between interrogations. Our bodies turned blue; we were out in the cold so long.

My interrogation lasted two months. During the interrogations, they beat me, and there was loud music playing the whole time. We were allowed to go to the bathroom just once a day. They would tie our hands to the pipes. It was really painful for me. After some time, I stopped feeling my arms—sometimes I didn't know if I still had them or if they had been amputated. There was constant beating, all over my body, to the point where my skin would be as black as my jacket. If I lost consciousness, they would throw water on me or slap me, so I'd wake up.

This mark on my wrist is actually from the handcuffs during that time in prison. The handcuffs were so tight, they cut to the bone. I still have marks on my legs from the beatings. They wouldn't give us any medical treatment. And the interrogators wouldn't ask you direct, obvious questions. They would just keep saying, "What did you do? What did you do? What did you do?" And that was it. With all the beating, I couldn't focus anymore,

even if I was conscious. I couldn't remember anything that I did from the time before prison, even if I had anything to confess. Most of the other kids told the police what they'd done—they made some Molotov cocktails and tested them out. I didn't tell them anything. Not because I was being secretive, but because I was too confused and disoriented from the beatings. It was a very hostile environment.

Sometimes they would keep me awake for many days straight before they gave me four hours of sleep. And with the pressure of sleep deprivation, I started hallucinating, and I didn't actually know what was happening around me. I would imagine I was in a kindergarten and there were a lot of crying kids causing all this chaos, but I couldn't do anything to calm them down. I stopped knowing if what was happening was real or just a product of my imagination.

Eventually, a lawyer came to visit me. Her name was Lea Tsemel. She was an Israeli lawyer. She came to meet me in the visiting room one day and she gave me cigarettes. She told me she was taking on my case. I was so confused. I just asked her if what was happening to me was real, or was I just trapped in my imagination. So many times I was convinced the prison was full of snakes. I asked her about that, and she told me I was just hallucinating. She told me about my charges and let me know we'd be in court soon.

There was one police officer who was nice. One morning, I asked to go to the bathroom, and the interrogators wouldn't let me go until midnight. When this one police officer saw me in pain because I had to go so badly, he said, "Goddammit! What happened to these people? Why do they torture people? Goddammit!" He was angry, and he let me go to the bathroom. Then he brought me tea and cigarettes and said, "Rest, rest." This was very risky for him, and I really appreciated it.

The whole interrogation was two months. I was afraid that they were going to kill me and my friends, because we had heard all these terrible stories of torture. I had an uncle who had been arrested a while before, and I knew that he'd died in prison. He participated in a hunger strike, and when the prison guards force-fed him, he choked to death.

The main thing that consumed my thinking was that these people were crazy, and they wanted to torture me and mentally destroy me. And they would actually say it right to our faces. They would tell us, "We want to ruin you psychologically." In fact, many prisoners do become mentally ill. Some of them die. I didn't go crazy. I focused on all the other people suffering besides me. And also, I think people who are really religious have a hard time with this kind of abuse sometimes. They pray to God for help, and when none comes, it breaks them mentally. But that wasn't me, and I was able to focus on the future and what I needed to do to get myself out of that situation.

After two months of interrogation, my friends and I were taken to trial and charged with terrorist activities. The judge sentenced us to four to six years each. My mother was in the courtroom, and she fainted when she heard the sentence…