

Talking To: Ali Abu al-Dehn



Lebanese detainees released from Syrian prisons leave Lebanon's Justice Palace prison in Beirut on December 15, 2000. They entered Lebanon on December 11, 2000. (AFP/Joseph BARRAK)

Not every Lebanese released from a foreign prison is greeted with the pomp and celebration seen yesterday. In 1987, Ali Abu al-Dehn went to Syria to obtain an immigration visa to Australia. The Syrian Intelligence Services invited him over for a cup of coffee, arrested him and detained him for 13 years on charges of opposition to the Syrian presence in Lebanon. His release in December 2000 stands in stark contrast to yesterday's fanfare. In an exclusive interview, he tells NOW Lebanon about his experience.

Dreaming of release

Throughout the 13 years I spent in the Syrian prisons of Saydnaya and Tadmur (Palmyra), it never occurred to me that I could be released. I had received a life sentence that had not been delivered by any court. Even though I had lost all hope of being released, I used to see myself walking down a street with people looking at me and saying, "This man was a political prisoner in Syria." I also used to imagine people coming in scores to welcome me, congratulate me on my release, express pride in my experience and say that I was jailed instead of them in order to spare them the same fate. In my imagination, they were whispering, "We could have been in his shoes." I used to be proud of these images racing through my imagination, and in some cases, I almost believed what I was really seeing it, thus mixing fiction and reality.

Disappointment and the people's pity

When I was released [in December of 2000], I was bitterly disappointed. Indeed, when I and 44 Lebanese detainees were released from Syrian prisons, Lebanese security forces did not free us from our shackles. They prevented us from living the moment we had long waited for, the moment when we would kiss the nation's soil. We were not released but rather transferred to the Ministry of Defense, where we remained for one night.

I walked down the street, but people did not approach me to greet me with pride. It seemed that those talking to me felt compassion for my suffering as they asked me whether I had been beaten and abused. But no one mentioned the reason behind my arrest, i.e. my opposition to the Syrian "presence" in Lebanon. People used to feel pity for my weakness or mock my "idiotic blank stares."

On the fourth day following my release, my wife and three daughters invited me to go out for a walk. I declined, and as my eyes were brimming with years, I told my family, "I don't want people to whisper words of pity when they see me or mock the fact that I cannot walk alone without a family member supporting me." Throughout the years I spent in prison, I never thought I would feel such a disappointment upon

ment throughout the years I spent in prison. I never thought I would feel such a disappointment upon returning to my country and my family.

Searching for employment

After two to three months, I grew used to being free and started looking for a job. I met with two different companies, and it seemed one of them was pleased with my qualifications and ready to hire me. However, when asked where I had worked during the past few years, I had to tell them I had been a political prisoner in Syria because I did not want to hide it from anyone. The human resources officer then gave me a \$ 100 bill, saying, "Yes, that's right, we saw you on television." He didn't hire me under the pretext that my age was not fitting for the job. I refused his money and deplored his offending offer. [This experience was not unique. Another time I asked an acquaintance to find me a job.] He apologized and said he could not offer me a job as long as the Syrians are still in Lebanon. He offered me money instead. I refused, saying he only likes those who need help.

Catching a break

For months I lived in abject poverty, surviving on vegetables I'd find in a landfill by the Jisr al-Wati vegetable market. Finally, I found a job as a driver with a taxi company. My employers asked me not to tell my customers about being a former political prisoner in Syria. This job helped me end my isolation and reinsert myself into society. I asked the manager to commission me with long-distance driving and volunteered to accompany foreigners on their trips in Lebanon as I spoke fluent English. I also offered to take foreign customers to Lebanese tourist spots I wished to visit myself. I used to drive the solid, tidy company car and be neatly clad in a shirt and a tie. I felt a great deal of confidence.

My son, who had left the country to Australia, graduated from college and sent us some money. I used it to buy a car and a red license plate [an official plate]. I started working as a self-employed taxi driver. During this time, I also worked with several human rights groups. Poverty and the hardships of life did not prevent me from following up on my fellow detainees and seeking to liberate them. I was asked to recount my experience on MTV, CNN, MBC and Fox News. Furthermore, I met with 12 European ambassadors and explained to them my case and those of other political detainees in Syrian prisons. They all uttered the same sentence, "We help states, not individuals."

Consequences of speaking out

In 2004, I received threats following a televised appearance in which I called on the Syrian president to take what had happened in Iraq into consideration and realize that the game was over. I told someone working with the Army Intelligence of the threat, and he advised me to stop working as a taxi driver. He argued a killer could pose as a customer wanting to go to a remote area and then shoot me and steal whatever I had in my pockets. The police would conclude I was killed in a robbery and that my murder was not a felony and had no political implications, he said. I took his advice and stopped working.

My wife and daughters did not approve of me appearing on TV to speak about the issue of detainees in Syria. They voiced their disapproval and their fear of losing me yet again, saying, "We can barely believe you are back, and we do not want to lose you." Yet some inner force drives me to seek to help my fellow detainees in Syria.

A simple request

I asked the politicians I met with to treat the detainees released from Syrian prisons and those released from Israeli prisons on an equal footing. Indeed, upon being released, the latter received a hero's welcome and were granted financial indemnities and hospitalization aids for them and their families. Nevertheless, all I got were shallow promises.

This interview was originally published on the NOW Lebanon Arabic site and was translated to appear here.

Ali Abu al-Dehn's website is available by following this link: <http://flpdinsyria.com/index.php>

