

10-01-2018

“May there be relief”: On food in Adra Women’s Prison

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A former inmate at Syria’s Adra Women’s Prison recounts the struggles, deprivations, and occasional pleasures of food in the notorious jail.

[Editor’s note: The below article was produced as part of Al-

Jumhuriya's 2017 Fellowship for Young Writers. It was originally published in [Arabic](#) on 11 January, 2018.]

It's two o'clock in the morning, the lights are turned off, and I've been in a deep sleep for two hours now. Although nighttime in prison is not much different from daytime, even if it could be said to be more spiritually intense, I was still determined to describe myself as a "daytime creature," one who goes to sleep early and wakes up when the gates open at 9:00 a.m.

Suddenly the sound of the main gate being opened was heard. The whole wing woke up. Because we didn't hear a distress call, the first thing we thought was that the sound was probably related to a raid, one that would turn the wing inside out in search of anything or nothing. We were all on edge. The wing supervisor went out quickly and came back moments later screaming, "Veggie leftovers! Come on girls, wake up!"

This time, it was a different kind of raid. As I tried to shake myself out of sleep and witness the moment, I said, "What a treat! On the outside we couldn't shop for vegetables at two in the morning."

The "slave girls" rushed to open the doors of the remaining dormitories, turned the lights on, and collected the bills for the "leftovers" from the "lodgers," as we were called. "Lodgers," as if we had chosen to move away from our families, homes, the smell of fresh herbs, and the taste of fresh vegetables and fruits in order to be "lodgers" in the Adra women's prison.

Fruits and vegetables are delivered in the morning to the Prisoners Welfare Association's conference room and

distributed to the various prison wings according to the previously gathered orders. The distribution begins on the top floor, in the wings next to the conference room, which are reserved for civil crimes. In the evening, the rounds eventually reach the two wings in the basement, which were created after 2011 and are reserved for terrorism. After finishing the distribution, any excess items that remain are sold to the wings in the same order.

Vegetables and fruits arrived every couple of weeks. Sometimes the distributor would be a month or more late, with the excuse that it's dangerous to get to a women's prison. This danger, however, didn't stop the soldiers bringing in the items we requested from the outside market and selling them to us at prices several times their original cost.

The process of registering a bill usually begins with the following question: "Which season is it, ladies?" This magic sentence opens the door for sharing memories, experiences, smells, and even colors. Normally the bill consisted of everything that could be bought and which could tie the prisoner to her former life, enabling her to cook something that would bring that life back, something with a smell she knew would be wafting through her house at this time of year. Umm Muhammad used to force us, the girls in her group, to taste her husband and children's favorite foods, dishes made with "her own two hands," even if "our mothers" had never heard of them before.

As for me, although I was an "anti-fruit person" in my normal life, I always asked for more fruit while I was on the inside, simply because it reminded me of my grandmother.

Most of the time, the bill for the vegetables that was brought to us included only one or two items because of our difficult financial situation.

Bushra adored tomatoes. Because she was one of the “has-no-one” girls (i.e., someone who has no funds whatsoever reaching them through visits), she got approval from the Prison Administration to make and sell beaded accessories. Once she had collected enough money, she got another permit to buy a blow dryer that she used to do our hair on special occasions (a visit or a court appointment), charging 100 Syrian pounds (\$0.19) each time. For her meals, she relied on the food provided by the prison, setting all her earnings aside to buy tomatoes, and joking that her “blood type is tomato positive.”

In prison, one’s relationship with food goes beyond hunger or the desire to survive. There, food is the only pleasure of the senses that is available. It is a cure for nostalgia, and one of the few links left to the outside world and one’s former life. Sometimes its pleasure is limited to smell only. On my first day, after leaving the security branch and arriving at the Adra paradise, my most dearly held dream was to sleep while hugging a bouquet of parsley. Food preparation is an opportunity to prove one’s uniqueness. Nothing makes a prisoner happier than praise of her cooking and her skill at using the few available ingredients to make a delightful dish that sends a mouth-watering smell throughout the wing.

The food aid provided by organizations is distributed irregularly. Every few months, each group of ten prisoners receives a food basket that is approximately enough for a family of five to eat for a month. In addition to aid being

scarce, the Administration provides food twice-daily, but in insufficient quantities. If a prisoner lacks purchasing power to supplement their meals, they can't get enough food, especially since visitors are not allowed to bring food into the prison.

Breakfast rations for each prisoner consisted either of a spoonful of oil and a little thyme, or a spoonful of apricot jam, or two pieces of cheese, or a spoon of strained yogurt. On Fridays, breakfast was a cup of beans or boiled chickpeas that the women creatively seasoned with the ingredients at hand. Lunch rations amounted to a cup of food that that came in four different varieties: bean stew with rice, lentil puree, rice with peas, and bulgur wheat with tomato on Fridays. Sometimes this was accompanied by a cup of lentil soup, or a single potato or eggplant for each group of prisoners.

Apart from the visits that were restricted to Sundays and Wednesdays, and the weekly day off taken by the head of the security branch on Fridays, these meals were one of the few things that created a sense of weeks passing in what was otherwise an endless repetition of identical prison days.

Almost all the meals were repeated over and over again. We used to add spices, onions, garlic and other available or borrowed ingredients in an effort to transform the meal into a completely different dish, or at least to make it edible. The food was never as bad as the food in the security branches, but due to the lack of diversity we had to be crafty to keep eating the same thing day after day.

Sometimes eggs would be given out; one for each "lodger" and child (in our wing alone there were six children living

with their mothers). At one point we had an idea that seemed brilliant at the time: “If we sit on the eggs and brood them, after a while we ought to have a poultry farm!”

The prison’s conference room provided additional basic materials such as spices, pasta, rice, vegetable oil, coffee, tea, some legumes and canned foods for sale at steep prices. Eggs, yogurt, and chicken were also sporadically available. It was sometimes possible to get certain items not included on our normal bill through the soldiers of the market patrol. These came at double the cost, of course, but were necessary to satisfy our cravings.

One winter day, my friends and I decided to invite our cellmates from the dormitory to an outdoor lunch. We all wanted the same thing: shawarma!

We were able to procure it by the afternoon. As we waited for the doors to be opened so we could heat the shawarma in the electric oven that Umm Hamza kept in the outdoor dining hall, each one of us stayed in our corner, enjoying a cozy nap while stowing the bag under my bed (five of the six dormitory rooms were closed from 9:00 p.m. – 9:00 a.m., and from 3:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m., for what are called the “lock-down” periods, but the sixth dormitory, where I was, was kept open because it was the supervision dormitory; that is, the one for the prisoner who held the post of wing supervisor).

Minutes later I heard a rustling sound from the fruit and vegetable bags that hung under the bed. This meant that the mouse had returned to visit us once again. We put the shawarma bag up on top of one of the cupboards and searched for the mouse among the bags. (“We” here refers

to my friends, because I merely climbed onto the top bunk and did no more than cheer them on). But she, the mouse, escaped before she could be apprehended in the act.

We went back to our naps, and Samia ascended to the top bunk with a book in hand. Only moments later she heard the sound of rustling again, this time from above the cupboard. Chaos broke out in the dormitory, and my friends no longer cared about the lock-down. They opened the cell's door and took the shawarma bag out to the courtyard, despite the fact this act would subject us to collective punishment. Once in the courtyard they opened the bag and the mouse jumped out, disappearing into a drain.

When they returned to the dormitory after explaining to the duty officer what had happened, the atmosphere was tense and everyone was on the edge of tears. Some of the prisoners did in fact cry that day—myself included.

“Now what do we do? The mouse ruined our lunch.” One of us resolved the issue: “We’ll remove the top layer. Mice don’t eat the meat, it was just hiding in the bag. The heat of the oven will sterilize it!”

And when the lock-down ended, we finally enjoyed the collective meal to which the mouse had beaten us.

Fresh or dried coriander? Such a dispute may seem normal, something we see every day on social media in the local cooking groups that have become widespread with the dispersal of Syrians all over the world. In prison, however, it goes beyond a difference in point of view. Here, the defense at all costs of the ingredients in our dishes takes on the form of a creed; of one of the few certitudes left. It is the defense of a cause with a clear slogan: “This is how my

family cooks it!”

In Damascus and Daraa, fresh coriander is used, while in other provinces only dried coriander is used. In Damascus, whole grains of cumin are used for cooking stuffed vegetables, but in Aleppo this is considered a cardinal sin.

It’s with the same certainty that the preparation of traditional dishes becomes an occasion for celebration. One can’t imagine the joy a prisoner experiences when she prepares a famous dish from her city or village. She always makes as much as possible so that everyone can taste it; “Perhaps the taste will carry us there!”

From Daraa we tasted the local specialty, mleechi, as well as their muqatta’a. From Homs we ate lentils with lemon, and from Lattakia we tried mselouqat and karabeej.

Each dormitory had one common freezer which was used solely for chicken and leafy vegetables that are quick to spoil. As for the fridge, it was used only for water, and occasionally to cool juices during the summer.

The only way to preserve our stored foods was to dry them. And because the wings were so crowded, finding suitable space to expose them to the air wasn’t easy. We would take jute mallow (mloukhiyeh) leaves to the laundry courtyard before the doors were closed in the evening in order for them to be exposed to the morning sun that would fill the aired rectangular space. After the doors were opened again in the morning, we would take them back to the rooms so the women could hang up their clothes, and so that the mloukhiyeh could be kept away from the prying hands of curious “lodgers.”

During the mloukhiyeh season, its smell would fill the dormitories. Whether it was cooked with or without coriander, dry or with broth, with garlic or with onion, its delicious aroma would always remain the distinctive scent of summer.

The women can prepare any dish, no matter how difficult it is to come by the necessary ingredients and cooking tools. For instance, al-harraq b'isba'u is a lentils- and dough-based Damascene recipe traditionally made with a special type of dough, but in prison it was made with pasta.

Likewise, shakriya (meat in yogurt sauce) was cooked using potato instead of meat, as the latter was deemed a luxury, not only because of its price, but also because the Association rarely made it available at the conference room.

In the absence of cooking tools and the inability to operate the hotplate for a long time, the "lazy" methods would be used for preparing several recipes. This is despite the suffering that these methods might cause for the prisoner herself, who may wish to flaunt her ability to hollow out zucchinis and eggplants, or to roll up vine and cabbage leaves and stuff them with food. But at least they provided the possibility of enjoying the food, as the zucchini would be cut and cooked with rice and tomatoes, and cabbage would also be cut instead of rolled. If electricity was available to use the hotplate for an extended period of time, or if the tools for hollowing out vegetables could be found, then food preparation would transform into a collective festive ritual.

Some prisoners seek a source of income in order to meet their basic needs. Some receive a small amount of money

in exchange for work assigned to them by the Prisoners' Management Association. They call these prisoners "workers" or "slave girls." They clean the wings, distribute the food, transfer materials to the Association's warehouse, and perform other tasks that require significant physical labor. Other prisoners are assigned the task of supervising the wings, rooms, and money boxes, while still others work in the conference room.

Prisoners might also propose their own projects to the Administration. After being proposed, some of the projects are approved, provided that the prisoner applying (who is not necessarily the entrepreneur in charge of the project) is a "has-no-one" girl. The soldiers receive a percentage of the proceeds in return for procuring the necessary raw materials that are brought from outside the prison, and the Prisoners' Welfare Association does not provide any significant support for these projects.

Among the projects related to food, some prisoners make sweets and sell them to the rest of the prisoners in exchange for a small sum of money. Of course, the Administration also gets its daily share of the the sweets!

With the help of lawyers, one of the lodgers got help from an outside party. One of their colleagues suggested she teach her how to make awwameh (dumplings), and that she begin making and selling them as a small project that would protect her from destitution. The dumplings she made were among the best that can be found.

One time the officer on duty ordered additional dumplings, on the basis that he'd pay for them. During the "lock-down" that evening, however, he told the prisoner to come out of

the dorm and objected to the price. “Take them for free, then, sir!” she replied—and he did.

During the month of Ramadan, what little furniture there was would be redistributed throughout the dormitories so there would be enough room for each group to sit and eat together. (“Group” referring here to a number of women prisoners who would share food and expenses, each one often including “has-no-one” prisoners.)

Ramadan was one of the few customs we were able to practice in almost all its details. We would eat together at the time of suhoor (before dawn) and again at iftar (after sunset). Even the women who don’t fast would eat with the group after the sunset call to prayer. Groups would also exchange sikbe (a food portion offered by a neighbor) as part of the Ramadan rituals.

The main issue that came up during Ramadan was regulating the use of the two electric heaters we had in each dormitory. Whenever the electricity was cut off it was a disaster, because only one heater could function at a time using the generator’s electricity. Since everyone wanted to heat food at the same time, the supervisors would try to organize the women into taking turns. One group would begin heating its food one hour before iftar time. In this way everyone could get relatively hot food.

The second problem was procuring cold water, which was especially important considering that Ramadan has been coming during the summertime in recent years. Supervisors monitor the water cooler in the courtyard all day, trying to prevent the inmates from drinking it all to ensure there would be some left for iftar. They would also organize turns

so each room could get a share of the cold water.

The women would also hold collective celebrations on special occasions, such as New Year's Eve and the birthdays of the ward's children or of the prisoners who know their dates of birth, or who invented one. On such occasions the dormitory would be busy all day with preparations for the evening meal.

During the summer, a fierce battle rages over the refrigerator. The battle flares up when one of the prisoners dares to drink from the nearest bottle of cold water, despite the precautions taken by bottle's owner to mark it as their own, or to tie up its lid with plastic bags in order to make it difficult to open, or even to threaten to spit in her own bottle!

The thing most connected with food in my memory is acts of theft. Hunger, and often the lust of the senses, would drive the prisoners to take a few bites from a plate left in the fridge, or to eat it all, or to swipe two pieces of fruit from under the iron bed, where we hung the bags of vegetables and fruit.

Almost every day, the following would occur, beginning with a cry: "I can't stand this anymore! Terrorists and thieves!"

Then the cries would multiply, echoing throughout the dormitory:

"God break her hand!"

"God give her cancer!"

"Lord, may she be poisoned!"

Often the thief herself would be the first person to cry out unthinkable curses, after having satiated her senses with the coveted food.

Regardless of whether food is offered or not, or is sufficient or not, no one can keep hungry eyes away; that is a cardinal sin. It often happened that one of us would prepare something that would disappear before she herself could taste it.

After we finished eating food; any food; we would recite a prayer, one that expressed our most dearly-held, shared hope: "May there be relief."