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Among the condemned in Istanbul

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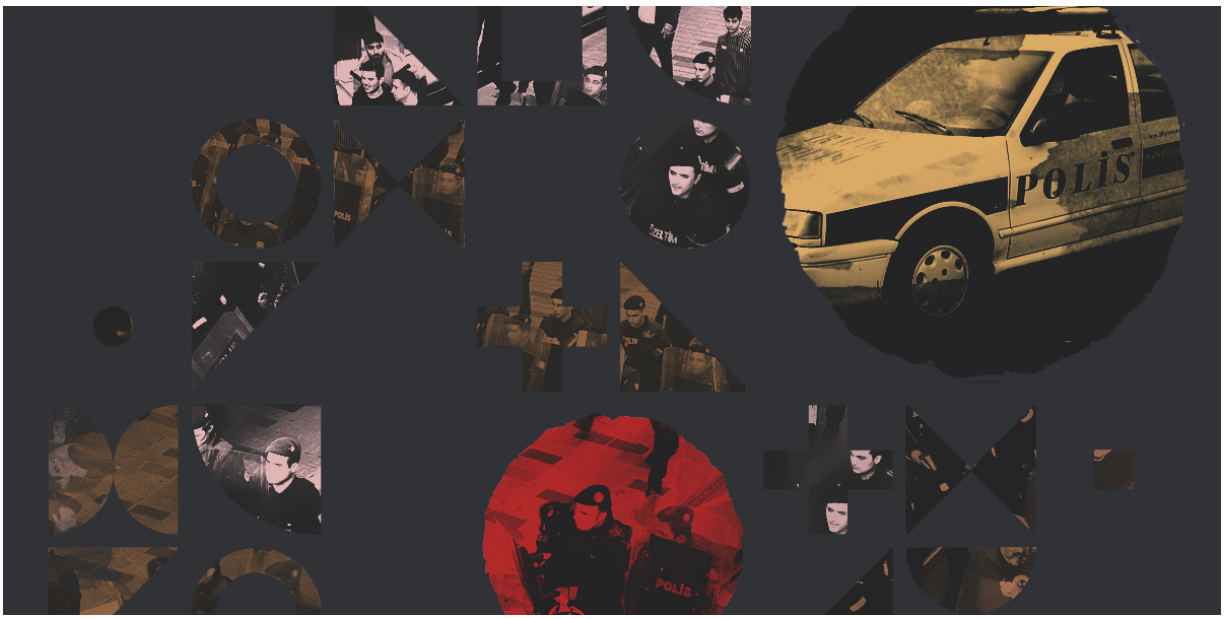

Despite holding all required legal documents, our writer was detained at an Istanbul checkpoint and jailed for two weeks alongside dozens of other foreign nationals, all locked up for trivial paperwork issues, many suffering violent beatings and other indignities.

We crossed the Galata bridge at a hundred kilometers an

hour. Like all his peers, the Turkish taxi driver didn’t know what made him drive at such crazy speed, and harass other vehicles, and insult those cruising slowly as though they were committing a cardinal sin. After the rollercoaster turn following the end of the bridge, we were inevitably held up at the Tarlabaşı intersection; it being rush hour, with a police checkpoint after the traffic light taking up half of the road, leaving only a narrow passage for cars.

The police officer gestured to our driver to pull over into a designated area next to the checkpoint, and asked for our IDs. We handed them over. My beautiful laminated kimlik card,The commonly-used Turkish name for the “temporary protection identification document” granted to many Syrians in Turkey. It amounts, in effect, to a short-term residence permit. too big for my pocket, was now in the policeman’s hands, being closely inspected along with my friend’s tourist visa. The latter was returned, after its number was entered into a device. The policeman held onto my kimlik, however. He seemed unable to understand what was displayed on his screen, so another policeman came over to help him. I too went over to help him, in the manner of one confident there couldn’t possibly be any problem or danger. The card was genuine, after all, and I had committed no offences I could recall. I hadn’t driven under the influence, or burgled any homes, or broken any windows. I hadn’t insulted Atatürk. The card had been issued by the official authorities; I could still remember the feelings of triumph, pride, and invulnerability when the employee at the immigration department first handed it to me.

A third police officer now came over to help the first two. He worked out what was happening, asked my friend to leave,

and ordered me to take off my belt and jacket and step into a booth. He asked if I had any sharp objects in my bag; I said I did not. I was trying to postpone the shock by convincing myself this would all be resolved as soon as they realized there was some sort of mistake. Perhaps my name was similar to someone else's, or they had entered the long kimlik number wrong. My friend, whose face had turned yellow, was trying to understand what was happening, but they told him to leave. Then they turned and ordered me to sign a paper they had printed. I felt weak and thirsty, and asked for a sip of water. I'm not sure al-MaghutMuhammad al-Maghut, a Syrian writer and poet. was right when he said fear disables the knees; at that moment, fear was overwhelming my entire being, reducing it to nothing.

I tried to read the paper in Turkish, but the policeman started getting curt with me, saying this was a procedure that required no back and forth. I turned pale as my eyes fell on the word "threat" (tahdit) on the paper. What threat did I pose? I started running the possible scenarios through my head: was it something I'd written on Facebook criticizing Turkey's "Operation Olive Branch" in Syria's Afrin? Was it because I was a Syrian journalist insufficiently supportive of the Turkish government? Because I disagreed with certain actions undertaken by Turkey's Syrian proxy forces? Because I frequent a bar whose owner is Kurdish? Is there a jihadist with the same name as me? Did they look into my mother's name, my father's name, my surname? Will they deport me to Syria?

What exactly was the problem? The policeman towering over my head offered no definitive answer. I asked him about the word tahdit, and he clarified that it meant "restriction," not "threat:" the latter would be tehdit. Had I

been deemed a threat, he added, I would not be able to talk at that moment. If this was intended to reassure me, it had the opposite effect, for now I knew violence was a possibility. His answer sent another round of thoughts whirling. Dozens of questions rushed through my head, with no answer for any of them. I needed an answer in order to be able to defend myself. Without knowing the nature of the predicament I'd fallen into, I was straining my mind for ways to get out of all the predicaments in the world, as though I'd committed all possible crimes at once.

They put me in the police car and drove me to the new Cihangir hospital. I walked—handcuffed—behind a policeman, still with no idea what was going on. Humiliated, I kept my gaze to the floor as I stood in front of the nurse, who asked me if I'd been subjected to any kind of beatings or insults. I replied that no one had beaten me, hoping to appease the policeman who seemed to await my response anxiously. I looked into his eyes, firmly and honestly, and told him: "Abi,A term of respectful address to an elder man in Turkish. I am scared by all this, and want to understand what's happening." He said he didn't know what the exact problem was, but that the police station would be able to clarify it, and that I shouldn't be scared. But I was.

When I entered the Taksim police station—still handcuffed—an officer sitting behind a desk asked me why I had come. I told him I myself wanted to know the same thing, suggesting there had clearly been a mistake, and the matter would be resolved that day or the next at the latest. He laughed derisively. Only later would I learn his question was aimed at finding out whether I was due to receive a beating from him and his colleagues in the middle of the night. After I'd spent around two hours standing in the

corner of the station, a policeman walked me to the lockup. Even while walking into my jail cell, I was still convinced it was all a routine procedure that would be resolved the next day. After speaking to the others in the cell, however, this illusion was soon dispelled, and my desperate hopes shattered.

Late-night encounters

The lockup was about the size of a middle-income household’s living room, split into two sections by metal bars from floor to ceiling, creating two separate cells. Each of these could sleep four or five people at most. A passageway ran between them, while another led to a bathroom in the corner. When I entered, there were already around 20 people inside. The number then grew larger as officers returned from nighttime patrols with more cargo.

The young men in the cell gave me a sandwich and a bottle of water, and made space for me to sit down. Most of them were Syrians in their twenties; arrested at checkpoints for not possessing kimlik cards, or at their workplaces for not having work permits. There were also some from other places: Iraq, Afghanistan, Morocco, Algeria, Iran, Azerbaijan; ambassadors of the world’s devastated countries in a place they had hoped would be a refuge; prey caught in the trap of assured security that had ensnared so many million others.

They explained to me that the procedures related to the kimlik usually took around two weeks or more. They were

surprised I had been arrested despite holding an official card issued by the immigration department. A young man from Douma, near Damascus, said he had spent 20 days in custody after being detained at his place of work for not possessing a work permit. He said he missed his daughter and wife, and spoke about the prospects that narrowed day by day in this country, to which he had come after being displaced and uprooted from Douma, which he never imagined he would leave. He spoke also about the daily injustices he faced; his constant anxiety and perpetual state of alert, as though he were a hunted animal whose only defense against his hunters was to flee. He said the fear of arrest and deportation back to Syria heightened his senses while working and traveling to his place of work, rendering daily life akin to walking along the edge of an abyss. He spoke, too, about his brother being killed back in Syria by regime bombardment, and other relatives killed in battle, wondering when the axe would fall on his own neck. When he left the cell the next day, having spent 25 days therein, I felt I was losing a friend, so close had our cheerless circumstances brought us. As I bade him farewell, I was transformed from a guest into a host for the cell's new arrivals. Now I was the one handing out the sandwiches and water bottles, listening to their bitter tales.

Another young man from Aleppo, named Ahmad, said he was arrested for lacking a permit to travel outside the province of Kocaeli, about an hour east of Istanbul. He had needed to come to Istanbul, and the permit took a long time to be issued. He risked the journey, and was arrested, and ended up spending around a month in custody until his release. He was an energetic lad in his twenties, full of excitement, whose education had been interrupted. Something of a bigmouth. He believed in traditional "first

principles," and all that derived from them. He believed, too, in the Islamic concepts of halal (permitted) and haram (forbidden), though he was prepared to set them aside as and when needed. His Turkish language skills won him the privilege of going out at night to translate and smoke a cigarette by the door of the police station, or to use his cell phone as a reward. He would stand at the door of the cell and talk to the young women in the cell opposite ours. When a girl from Aleppo arrived, he managed to strike up a conversation, and they became friends. He spent the whole night by the door talking to her. I don't know exactly what else happened that night, because I was trying my best to enjoy a little forgetful sleep. What I do know is the woman spent her first night in the women's cell, but the police then transferred her to the men's cell the next day, when the make-up faded and she took off her wig. It transpired she was a young man in the process of gender transitioning. I don't know how rigorously Ahmad applied his standards of halal and haram to the matter, but in any case a real friendship formed between the two of them, which made him ready to defend her in the event she faced any harm. This human connection resulted in what might otherwise have been hard to imagine: they slept on the same pillow, afraid of the same unknown fate.

The man with no fingernails

A young Afghan man told us he'd been arrested for not possessing certain documents, despite his persistent attempts to get them issued. The difficulty lay in the fact he

had been smuggled into the country. He said he arrived to Turkey after an arduous journey through Iran, during which he was arrested and tortured, having his fingernails pulled out. He also said he was afraid of being deported, as the Taliban had executed most of the males of his family, and he had every reason to believe the same would happen to him. Even if it didn't, anyone coming back from abroad would be thought to have earned a lot of money, placing a different kind of target on his back. His lawyer told him he would most likely be deported, despite the mortal danger this posed to him. His journey through blood and pain was all to have been for nothing, bringing him back to square zero without so much as his fingernails to defend himself.

Degrees of discrimination

Dozens of different people arrived to the lockup during the time I spent there. It was a short time by the standards of Syrian detention, and I'd be embarrassed to even describe it as a "detention experience," for it was a picnic compared to what thousands of other Syrians and their families have gone through. I regard it now as more of a visit, during which I learned first-hand about the situation of refugees and other foreigners arrested for purely procedural reasons, and the scale of abuse and discrimination they face in comparison to detained Turkish citizens, who enjoy rights protected by law regarding verbal and physical abuse, and clarity as to their legal status. Turkish citizens spend no more than one day in the lockup, and no police officer is allowed to assault them or deprive them of information

regarding their detention. Instead of the “son of a bitch” growled at Syrians, Afghans, and Iranians, Turkish citizens are addressed as “my brother” or “kindly [do such-and-such].” Most Turkish citizens know their legal rights, no matter how grave a crime they commit, and can threaten the police with complaints in the event any of these rights are violated, instilling fear in the officers of docked pay or even being fired, which compels them to act with relative decency. Refugees and others from destroyed countries, on the other hand, threatened with deportation, are obliged to receive slaps and insults, and to accept degrading treatment, in silence, being people with no alternative but submission to the superiority of the policeman. They fear the ghost that resides beyond the door, which is none other than their own homeland, threatening to crush their bones, burn their years, and bury their children’s future.

The police officers work in three shifts of eight to twelve hours. The sheer volume of people entering the station every day puts them under considerable pressure. They are required to question people, and record their confessions or statements, before sending them to the relevant court the following day. This applies to those who have committed misdemeanors and crimes, not those arrested for paperwork issues. The latter are instead held for periods of up to two weeks or more, then transferred to the immigration department, where their fate is determined. In most cases, the end result is banal: a paper to be signed; or a warning to return to the province from which they had come. At nighttime, when the pressure on the officers was lower, they would interrogate the non-Turks accused of crimes in the narrow passageway overseen by the men’s and women’s lockups. While extracting confessions, the officers would sometimes dish out violent beatings

whenever called for by their unknown criteria. On such occasions, the night calm was broken by the cries for help, and the other inmates awoke, trying to discern the difference between reality and nightmare, until they realized the punches were landing on others' faces.

The officers did not merely discriminate between Turkish citizens and other prisoners. It would be impossible for an American or European citizen, for example, to be beaten for a forged identity card, as would happen to an Iraqi or Afghan who did the same, whether out of necessity or because they were duped by the crooks who gave it to them. Moreover, so-called "cultured" or "educated" refugees were treated differently to their "ordinary" or "less-educated" counterparts, despite the fact they were all in the country for the same reason: to escape the death and hell of their homelands to the only place available to them. When I helped some of the officers by translating for detainees who didn't speak Turkish, and told them I was an "Arabic language teacher" rather than a journalist (I feared this would be the worst possible thing for me to say), one of them praised me as better than "the other Syrians." This was the worst "praise" I had received in my life; indeed, I took it as an insult, ashamed at having passed this test of worth I didn't even realize I was undergoing, and for which the man with the handcuffs awarded me this medal of dishonor.

In truth, though, to be fair, and also to calm the nerves of anyone else who should find themselves in this situation in future, God forbid: there were some policemen who were humane and kind to a certain extent in their treatment of detainees. You knew them as soon as you laid eyes on and interacted with them. One, for instance, was surprised by

the orders to arrest people who had committed no crimes, when it would have been possible to resolve their cases in five minutes at the immigration department, with no need to detain them for weeks, and bring their lives to a halt, and scare their families about their fates. He was trying to apologize to my mother, who would come to visit me in tears, not understanding the problem and afraid I would be deported to Syria.

Mint sweets

After around two weeks at the station, two lawyers were still unable to get to the bottom of the issue. Ahmad and I were sent to the immigration department in Kumkapı. They refused to let the lawyer enter the building with me, so the lawyer recommended that I didn’t sign any paper without him seeing it first. I entered anxiously, and sat on a desk waiting for the employee. He came in beaming as though we were on a pleasant family trip, and offered each of us a mint sweet. I was struck by the irony that he was trying to console me with a sweet, after my arbitrary detention for unknown reasons had nearly given my fretting mother diabetes. Once again, I felt humiliated, and set the sweet aside. He turned his gaze to his computer system, seemingly understanding my reasons for declining it. I don’t know what exactly he was thinking, but he gave me a paper and told me to sign it. I asked if my lawyer could come and approve it first, but he refused. He told me to read it and sign it, saying, “Either you trust us, or you’ll be arrested again on the street.” Sternly, he ordered me to keep my

phone away and not call my lawyer.

I read the paper several times. My nerves caused the sentences to mean nothing. I couldn't understand the references to specific laws by their numbers, having never memorized the Turkish constitution, nor the texts of the legislation pertaining to these matters. In the end, I risked it and signed the paper. He took it from me with a smile, and then, with the terrifying cold blood of a psychopath, said, "It pleases me to tell you you have just signed your deportation paper." I felt thirsty again, and knew my face must have yellowed. Only when he was sure the shock had sent adrenaline charging through my veins did he reveal, with a mocking laugh, that he was joking. This was evidently how employees at the Turkish immigration office amused themselves: toying with the frayed nerves of refugees who literally feared for their lives. I stared at him, unable to smile. He seemed uncomfortable at that point, and tried to move things along. He handed me a paper and said to show it to the police if they stopped me again on the street. I asked him if the problem had at last been resolved. He said he was unable to resolve it, and I was still "wanted" on the system until such time as a code could be removed from my name.

I left in a foul mood, and scared too, at the thought that this entire ordeal could be repeated at any moment. I spent another month trying to understand the problem with the lawyers, during which time I was afraid to walk in the streets. Finally, we got to the root of the issue, which turned out to be a matter of utmost triviality: I was due to pay 180 Turkish liras (US$35) to the immigration directorate in connection with a tourist visa I had obtained back in 2016.

Swept aside

More than a year has now passed since the start of the Turkish campaign against undocumented refugees on its territory. During this time, the shock instilled by this campaign in the souls of Syrians residing in Turkey, and their relatives abroad, has quietly diminished. Despite the continued deportation of Syrians and other refugees from Turkey, and the growing security crackdowns against them, in addition to the increased racism and public rejection of their presence, media coverage of these subjects has faded almost to nil. With the Covid-19 pandemic and other major social, political, and economic crises dominating the global headlines in 2020, “small” problems of this kind have been swept aside, deemed of interest only to those directly affected by them.

I write these lines today more than a year on from this unhappy memory, fearful of forgetting its details in the hustle and bustle of daily life, and as a result of the never-ending influx of news about deportations and “voluntary returns” from Turkey. The latter’s involvement in Syria grows more negative by the day, and further complicates both the national and regional pictures, placing another heavy weight on the backs of the weakest and most vulnerable segments of society: the refugees fleeing their countries, who want nothing more than to preserve their dignity and ensure some kind of future for their children, having already lost everything else they themselves once had in life.

[Editor’s note: This article was originally published in Arabic on 16 July, 2020.]