

TRIED BUT NOT TESTED!

Memoires of an Imprisoned Student

Saif al-Islam Eid

Log 2

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MENA PRISON FORUM
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Tel.: + 961 1 553604
P.O. Box: 25-5 Ghobeiry
Beirut - Lebanon



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By means of forward

In Egypt, as in many other MENA countries, the number of *political prisoners* can only be guessed at. The figures could vary from one or two thousand to tens of thousands! Whatever their number may be—though this is not a minor point—the most important issue is that these prisoners are not being designated as political prisoners and are often labelled as common criminals or are, even though such a label seems grotesque, sometimes added to the catchall category of *terrorists*.

Looking at this situation from afar, a first reaction might be distress at the idea that in this part of the world people are still imprisoned for political activity or issues related to mere opinion. Looking more closely, an observer might well express his or her indignation at the number of people who are victims of such horrific policies. Look a little harder—and even after an only brief examination of the conditions of incarceration and the ill-treatment that people in these prisons are subject to—and any moral individual would surely express outrage.

Even accepting that conditions in Egyptian prisons are a source of serious scandal, we need to be aware of the fact that they tell us little about prison as a human experience; an experience that each prisoner lives in their own unique way. And we should note, too, that these differences are

present not only when the incarcerated person is in prison, but also, and importantly, afterward—sassuming that the prison experience does have an afterwards... These various experiences differ even from those of inmates who share the same cell.

Luckily, if one can say that, the details of some of these experiences are available; prison literature exists...

This brings us to what follows, to this very testimony. On January 24, 2014, Saif al-Islam Eid, who was in his first year in the Faculty of Economics and Political Science at the University of Bani Sweif, was arrested at a checkpoint while heading to the north of Egypt to spent the holidays with his family—he was accused of plotting against the public order. Around a year later, on February 9, 2015, he was declared innocent of all these charges and was set free.

So far, one might say, there is nothing unusual in Eid's story, and Eid himself probably understands very well that hundreds of individuals, including university students, had been arrested and taken to prison before he was, and that not all of them had the good fortune to have their case come to trial relatively quickly.

Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, Eid's experience is not limited to that period in his life. His father also served a prison sentence as a political prisoner.

Against this background, Eid recounts in these pages his almost unbelievable travails in prison, due mainly to his determination to be allowed—as he should have been—to sit for his exams. Eid was first incarcerated in the prison of Ab'adiyya, located in Damanhour, in the north of Egypt, not very far from where he was arrested. There he insisted on his right to take his exams. Because of his determination, he was punished by the prison authorities and found himself tricked into being transferred to the prison at Fayyoub, south of Cairo, where he waited to no

avail for an examination committee to come and allow him to sit his exams.

This, essentially, is the plot of the Memoirs. Although the story Eid tells cannot compete with countless narratives about physical torture—and although he hints several times at having himself undergone physical ill-treatment—he cleverly skips these details, focusing almost exclusively on his own individual predicament: that of not being able to take his exams, and consequently missing a year of university.

Eid stresses that his case is not unique and that students represent a special category within the demographics of Egyptian inmates. He exposes in detail what he considers to be an unwritten government policy behind the massive number of students being arrested and incarcerated people who represented, and continue to represent, the spearhead of Egyptian political activism.

As well as the interesting, important contents, the strength of these Memoirs (the second publication in the *MPF Logs* series) stems from the fact that they are a subjective account of the single-minded determination of one student—a student keen to learn and to pass his exams. Clearly, it stands as a statement against injustice, but it also demonstrates that “individual resistance”, even in the name of passing exams, is “self-defense”...

Happily, Saif al-Islam Eid graduated from university in Egypt in June 2018, and afterwards chose to leave the country and move to Doha. There he obtained a Masters in Political Science and International Affairs in 2019, and he is currently continuing his research on Islamic political movements and political transition processes in the MENA region.

This text was drafted in May 2019, when, according to Eid, he felt “strong enough to revisit this episode of his life”.