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Israel: Remembering Walid Daqqa, a prisoner with a ‘heretical belief in life’

Sunday 12 May 2024, by [MATAR Anat](#) (Date first published: 24 April 2024).

Walid and I shared a political, personal, and philosophical correspondence for two decades. Even in death, he accompanies me on the path of truth.

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On the wall in my study hangs a large picture. Swirling silver Arabic letters, delicately drawn on black cloth and decorated with green leaves, spell out a phrase based on the commandment of Caliph Ali ibn Abi Talib: لا تأسفوا على طريق الحق، حتى لو تبعه القليل — “Do not despair of the path of truth, even if few follow it.”

This handiwork was created by my friend Walid Daqqa while he was in prison. Walid passed away earlier this month at the age of 62, following complications of various diseases, including cancer. As far as I’m concerned, the artwork is his last will and testament, the distillation of what he would pass on to the world.



Walid Daqqa at a hearing at Be’er Sheva District Court, January 23, 2018. (Oren Ziv)

I met Walid almost two decades ago, after I established the Israeli Committee for Palestinian Prisoners together with Tamar Berger and Sanaa Salama-Daqqa — Walid’s upstanding and ever-determined wife and a good friend of mine. When Walid first heard from Sanaa about our small project, he wrote to me, marking the start of a years-long political, personal, reflective, and philosophical correspondence. In order to convey even just a glimpse of the unique character of the person we lost this month, I want to share some excerpts of what he wrote to me from within the prison walls.

But before I do so, it’s important to explain the circumstances that led him there. The four-decade campaign of incitement against him — which has continued and intensified after his untimely death — obscures the man who walked the path of truth.

No reprieve

Walid Daqqa is a native of Baqa al-Gharbiyye, a Palestinian city in Israel. In 1987, he was convicted of involvement in the abduction and murder of the Israeli soldier Moshe Tamam, which took place three years prior. According to the authorities, although Daqqa never saw Tamam — neither at the scene of the abduction, nor at the scene of the murder — he played a role in relaying orders from his handlers in the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) to others in the group. Daqqa always denied the charge of commanding the group.

The plan was to abduct and use an Israeli soldier as a bargaining chip, transferring him first to Jenin in the occupied West Bank and then to Syria. The indictment claimed that Walid instructed the others to kill the soldier if the plan veered off course. This, horrifyingly, is what occurred. Four days after his abduction, Moshe Tamam was found dead. Walid only learned of this after the fact.

Despite being sentenced to life in prison for his involvement in Tamam's death, Walid fought to clear his name. The military court in Lydd/Lod that tried Walid's case was dismantled years ago because it failed to meet the standards of Israeli civilian courts; Walid sought a retrial, but his request was denied.



Walid Daqqa at a hearing at Be'er Sheva District Court, January 23, 2018. (Oren Ziv)

In 2012, after a fierce public struggle, Israel's then-President Shimon Peres agreed to commute his life sentence and those of other Palestinian prisoners accused of murdering soldiers. The sentence was fixed at 37 years, meaning Walid would be released in 2023. But five years later Walid was convicted again — this time for his role in smuggling phones into prison — and was sentenced to an additional two years.

Over the years, Walid filed various requests for clemency, a reduction in his sentence, and ultimately for his release on humanitarian grounds, after doctors predicted last year that he had no more than two years left to live and required an urgent bone marrow transplant. All these requests were denied. And so, left without adequate medical care and separated from his family, he died this month, one year into his additional two-year sentence.

No one, either from the Israel Prison Service (IPS) or the hospital where he died, bothered to inform Walid's family; they learned of his hospitalization and death from social media. The mourning tent erected outside his home was [violently dismantled](#) by police, and his body is [still being held](#) by Israeli authorities. The High Court approved the IPS's request to keep holding Walid's body until at least May 5, possibly due to the fact that it may be included in a future hostage-prisoner exchange deal with Hamas.

'I have a Jewish sister'

The Israeli public's reaction to Walid mirrors its reaction to the current war in Gaza: it is stuck,

exclusively focused on the moment of Israeli pain, even as brutal violence is unleashed on Palestinians. In the case of Walid, that moment is the murder of Moshe Tamam. But even if you freeze time at this moment, it is unclear why Walid should be the target of decades of Israeli vitriol: contrary to the narrative obsessively recounted online and in the media, Walid was not present at the scene of the abduction or the murder, and did not know that Tamam was killed until afterward.

In any case, Walid himself was not stuck in that moment in time at all. On the contrary, as a man well aware of his rationality, subjecthood, and freedom (I'm deliberately using the Hegelian terms Walid used to describe man in general and himself in particular), he repeatedly and publicly expressed complete remorse for his actions.

After the signing of the Oslo Accords, he believed that he could express himself fully as an Israeli citizen. He took unusual action and asked the IPS to revoke his affiliation with the PFLP. Walid joined Balad, the democratic Arab nationalist party based in Israel, and to the extent that was possible given the constraints of his imprisonment, he played an active role in the party.



Palestinians protest outside Megiddo Prison, northern Israel, August 22, 2021. (Oren Ziv)

His writings were critical and profound, original and without a shred of sycophancy. As a result, over the years he has become one of the most prominent and respected Palestinian intellectuals. From his unique perspective outside of time (he called his prison sentence "[parallel time](#)") and place, Walid was able to articulate the challenges at the heart of Palestinian and Israeli societies, and their possibilities for growth.

Walid's insight and courage also touched those around him in prison. I heard this from prison officials, who praised his influence on other prisoners: he spent hours with young prisoners, teaching them about the importance of nonviolent struggle, devotion to life, and the disastrous consequences of armed struggle.

One day, I was surprised when I found a postcard in the mailbox from a prisoner whose name I had never heard before. This prisoner, who was also sentenced to life imprisonment for murdering Israeli soldiers, wrote that he had heard of me from Walid and was convinced that joint Palestinian-Jewish political struggle was the right path.

For one man to have such an influence is extraordinary. Here is what Walid wrote to me about these conversations:

I read [other prisoners] our letters ... and I see that eventually things change and permeate and create a change that sows questions in their souls around the absolute truths they believed. Your letters, Anat, long ago stopped being just letters. Our relationship has long been more than just a relationship between a Jew and an Arab, and when I mention that you are Jewish, I do so emphatically and deliberately. Because of this, I wanted to scream: I have a Jewish sister. The success of our relationship and your organizing is not measured, in my opinion, by whether I will be released as a result of it. We're already doing well. Your letters are a mirror I put in front of those who want to know how ugly they are when they judge people by their origin and religion.

Walid's insistence on the equal dignity of all people was grounded in his rigorous philosophical thinking. A highly reflective person, he enrolled at the Open University and completed a master's degree in Democracy Studies. At some point in our correspondence, the idea even arose that I would supervise him through a PhD. We fantasized about him one day writing a dissertation that would connect the work of Hannah Arendt with that of Foucault — an exploration of totalitarianism, imprisonment, enlightenment, and the human image. That fantasy never came to pass, but Walid's writing was nevertheless consistently infused with intellectual and moral insight.



Sanaa Salama-Daqqqa at a hearing for her husband Walid at Be'er Sheva District Court, January 23, 2018. (Oren Ziv)

'To feel the pain of humanity is the essence of civilization'

Dear Anat, hello,

There are areas we do not know and are not even entitled to define, among them success and failure. Is living by certain principles — as individuals or as a society — a success or a failure? Is being a human a success or a failure? Some things are neither successes nor failures. To be a person is to be a person ... This is an end in itself, or the end of ends. When the law of gravity stops working, we are not talking about failure but about the disintegration of the universe, something beyond the concepts of success and failure. So too, the human universe: society, and within it the human individual.

When someone ceases to act as a person, it is disintegration. I once wrote that the essence of man and human culture is to feel the other. Numbness in the face of horrors is like a nightmare for me. To feel people, to feel the pain of humanity — this is the essence of civilization. The will is the essence of the intelligent man. The act of doing is our physical essence. Emotion is our spiritual essence. And feeling — sensing people and feeling their pain — is the essence of all human culture.

The Arab-Israeli conflict is already being waged — especially in the past decade — in a reality of “liquid modernity,” as Zygmunt Bauman put it ... Rationality and morality are becoming two poles on an axis that continues to lengthen and the poles grow ever distant. In the present conflict, any means has become a legitimate means as long as it achieves a certain result. Both sides, Israeli and Palestinian, have learned quickly from the other, thanks to the media, to the point that we have become alike. In the absence of morality, it is not at all important what is reality and what is its reflection.

In response to my skepticism about the optimism that arose from his analyses and about our ability to persuade others to share narratives, Walid replied:

It is impossible to convince those who commit genocide, those who have renounced human civilization based on rational calculations, to see the error of their ways; not with the words and language of civilized peoples. This kind of society and leadership, which has removed itself from

human society, is doomed to die. A society that has stopped speaking the language of humanity and created another language for itself cannot and will not understand the language of persuasion. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has not reached this level, although the killing and hostility have reached alarming proportions.

Palestinians protest in front of Ofer Prison, occupied West Bank, December 19, 2019. (Ahmad Al-Bazz/Activestills)

I do not propose to be alarmed or hasty in giving up the means of persuasion and influence. This kind of renunciation is a recognition that we have reached a situation where the other side is not a human interlocutor. Factually, this is not the case. This, despite the fact that there are influential groups in both camps that not only use terminology taken from the Holocaust, but have plans and ideas, some of which they attribute to God's inescapable will, and market them as a kind of historical necessity. These plans and ideas have not yet become a central and cohesive agenda or a political force, but they are identified with political forces currently operating in Israel and in the Arab and Islamic world.

It's hard not to shudder at these words. I wonder how Walid responded to October 7 and its bloody aftermath — but between then and his death, there was no contact between us. Like all Palestinian political prisoners, Walid was [cut off entirely](#) from the outside world when the war began, with the IPS banning family visits and even the exchange of letters; only occasional visits from lawyers are permitted.

The refusal of death

Hello, Anat... Hello, my dear sister.

It's hard to be optimistic and believe in life when there is so much destruction and death in our region, but the refusal of death is a fragile faith in life. And fragile faith is preferable to surrender.

"Are this Arab man and Jewish woman truly siblings?" the postcard examiners at the prison gates, the postmasters, and perhaps many others will wonder when they do not understand the depth of the connection begotten by the refusal of death.

This heretical belief is strong and penetrates every wall and crosses every barrier, because it cannot be categorized ... This belief has no nationality and no religion. This heretical belief is the new religion that grows out of revulsion at destruction and ruin, and out of a strong desire to live. Heretical faith is spreading and is carried by Arab and Jewish mothers and parents as a prayer that their children will be the last victims.

Few are the people with whom I want to be in very private moments of freedom and who might rejoice in my joy. I would be very happy if you would be among them.

Goodbye, my dear sister.

I believe that I was privileged to receive from Walid the wonderful picture of Ali ibn Abi Talib's teaching because he recognized in me a shared belief in the refusal of death: the insistence on clinging to life and seeing the full value of the other and of ourselves.

One day my cellmate said to me: "Tell me, haven't you given up on saying good morning to that guard who opens the cell door and doesn't bother to answer you every day?! Don't you have self-

respect?! Enough, don't tell him good morning." At that moment, I didn't have much to answer my friend. But I didn't give up, and I didn't stop saying good morning to the guard, because I didn't give up on being human ... Because every good morning is a reminder to the guard that I'm a human being, and every good morning reminds him that he's a human being, and the fact is that he doesn't answer because he's afraid to acknowledge that fact, and if I stop my good morning, it means that his fear won me over and turned me into something else.

I won't let prison change me or control me. And in your words, I am a subject who has will and consciousness, I will not let myself be turned into an object. It is my self-respect, to have free will in prison. This mirror that I put up every morning for the guard — it will change him. And it does.

Despite his relentless belief in life and humanity, Walid was denied the fundamental right to have a family. The IPS refused to allow conjugal visits for Walid and Sanaa, and a court subsequently upheld that decision. So Walid smuggled his sperm out of prison, and nine months later Sanaa gave birth to Milad. Just recently, I visited them in their home, which was decorated in anticipation of Dad finally being released.

During his attempt to have a child and after the birth of his lovely daughter, Walid wrote and published two children's books. The first, "The Secret of the Olive Tree," tells the story of a child born through the same creative, defiant, and life-affirming means by which Milad was born. The child in the book, Jude, organizes a small group of friends — the rabbit Samur, the bird Abu Risha, the cat Khanfour, and the dog Abu Nab — and together they manage to reach Jude's father's cell in prison.

There, they learn an important lesson: the future lies in learning, in education, in independent thinking. The future of the Palestinian people lies in bright and peace-loving children.

My dear Anat, the day is not far when we will meet at my home and at your home, and we will reminisce about all this suffering with memories that will only strengthen us to continue to fight for peace and freedom and social justice.

This, we were not granted. But Walid will accompany me in another way: walking the path of truth. I don't walk it alone. It is not crowded, it's true — but we are not alone, Walid. May your mighty soul be bound in the bond of life.

Anat Matar

P.S.

• +975. April 24, 2024:
<https://www.972mag.com/walid-daqqqa-palestinian-prisoner-letters/>

A version of this article was first published in Hebrew on Local Call. Read it [here](#).

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