Our Palestine — Article — 24 August 1983

The largest prisoner exchange operation in the history of the Palestinian revolution

On November 24, 1983, the largest prisoner exchange operation in the history of the Palestinian revolution took place, carried out by militants from the Palestinian National Liberation Movement, Fatah. This exchange involved the release of 4600 prisoners in exchange for 6 Israeli soldiers.

Operation Details:

As recounted by the militant operation leader, Issa Hajj, from the district of Tiberias, orders were issued by the leadership of Fatah after the withdrawal of forces from Lebanon, necessitating the capture of a number of soldiers. The group notified the leadership about the presence of an Israeli patrol that regularly passed

through the northern area of Bhamdoun via a heavily wooded and rugged valley to the Hamana area, a Lebanese village under Syrian control.

"Our groups set out from the advanced secret base, dressed in military uniforms similar to those worn by members of the Phalange party. As we approached the target, we agreed not to speak and to communicate through signals. An Israeli armored vehicle had unloaded its cargo, consisting of eight soldiers armed with individual weapons, ammunition, and supplies sufficient for the entire day. Due to the summer heat and the rugged road, fatigue had taken its toll on the Israeli soldiers by the time they reached the ambush, where they immediately lay on the ground, assigning three of them to guard duty.

At zero hour, I advanced and entered the midst of the soldiers, but my attire and demeanor, along with my weapon, did not indicate that I was a militant but rather a member of the Phalange party. I shook hands with one of the soldiers and spoke with him in French, which I had mastered in my studies. I focused my conversation on one of the soldiers as if I had known him for some time. Then I approached that soldier and placed my foot on the heel of his rifle. At that moment, when my comrade arrived at the site, I asked the soldier to stand up, placing my rifle against his abdomen and pulling the trigger, preparing to fire. The soldiers at the site were astonished, and one of them attempted to open fire, but one of my comrades spoke to him in Hebrew, saying, 'Do not shoot if you want to return to your mother safely.'

The Israeli soldiers realized they were surrounded, and their commander ordered them not to resist. At this moment, our third comrade arrived, and the soldiers realized they were surrounded and unable to do anything. I asked my friend, who was fluent in Hebrew, to tell him that we were militants and did not want to kill or harm them unless they attempted to resist, and that the site was surrounded from

all sides. The soldiers were shocked and surrendered. We knew there were 8 soldiers at the site, but we found only five.

At this moment, a soldier emerged from among the trees, and my comrade ordered him in Hebrew to throw his weapon or he would not return to his mother safely. The soldier's comrades saw this and threw their weapons, raising their hands, followed by the other two soldiers.

Although the capture operation was complete, it was not over for the group of militants. They still had the task of transporting the prisoners from an area filled with checkpoints and military positions belonging to various organizations. Initially, I went alone to the base and informed them that the capture operation was successful. In order to overcome the problem of transporting the prisoners to the Bekaa region and the issue of checkpoints and positions scattered in the area, an agreement was reached with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command to contribute to the prisoner transport operation. The vehicles of the Popular Front enjoyed greater freedom of movement at the checkpoints and positions scattered along the road.

The prisoners were divided into two groups: the first group consisted of two prisoners in a vehicle belonging to the Popular Front, leading the way, and the second group consisted of six prisoners in a vehicle belonging to Fatah, following behind. In this manner, the checkpoints and positions along the road to the headquarters in the Bekaa Valley were crossed. However, the Popular Front insisted on keeping the two prisoners. When the militants arrived at the headquarters in the Bekaa Valley, joy prevailed, and the prisoners were handed over to Mahmoud Al-Aaloul. The leadership in Damascus was informed of the capture operation.

Negotiation Stage with Israel:

The negotiations with Israel lasted approximately a year and a half and involved international entities, including the Red Cross and the UNIFIL. Participating in these negotiations were the leader of the revolution, Yasser Arafat, Khalil al-Wazir, the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Revolution, and Nabil Abu Rudeineh. The demands of the General Commander of the Palestinian Revolution were:

Release of prisoners detained in Ansar, Nabatieh, Sidon, and Tyre.

Release of one hundred prisoners and detainees from prisons inside Israel.

Recovery of the Palestinian Research Center archives.

Release of passengers from the ships Cordelia and Hanan.

The document stipulated that the exchange operation would take place in three stages:

First Stage: Movement on the Lebanese shore where Israel releases the passengers of the first plane from Lod Airport to Algeria.

Second Stage: The Red Cross receives the prisoner soldiers in exchange for Israel allowing the release of the second plane to the prisoners to Algeria.

Third Stage: At the moment the French side receives the prisoner soldiers, Israel allows the third plane to take off towards Algeria, provided that the detainees of Ansar camp who chose to stay in Lebanon are released. The Palestinian prisoners were transported by French Jumbo jets from Lod Airport to Algeria.

Commencement of the Exchange Operation:

The operation began at the port of Tripoli in northern Lebanon at ten o'clock on Thursday, November 23, 1983, with an unusual movement where steamboats were on standby, tightly guarded by Fatah forces. Only Yasser Arafat's assistants and some officials of the International Committee of the Red Cross were present. The captured soldiers were transferred to the port and then from the boats to a French ship flying the Red Cross flag, located 8 kilometers off the coast of Tripoli, where Samuel Tamir, the head of the Israeli delegation, received the prisoners from the Red Cross delegates.

A similar operation took place in southern Lebanon where the Israeli military command approached the Ansar detainees, offering them the choice to stay in Lebanon or be transferred to Algeria. Out of 3600 detainees, 1024 chose to go to Lebanon and were transported in 120 buses, while the rest were selected for transfer to Algeria and placed in small groups in Ansar prison. They were then transported under strict guard to Lod Airport until French planes transported them to Algeria.

The prisoners were distributed as follows:

4700 Palestinian and Lebanese prisoners in Ansar prison, of which 1024 went to Algeria and the rest returned to Lebanon in their cities, villages, and camps.

65 detainees in Israeli prisons, including 52 sentenced to life imprisonment, including eight Palestinians.

35 who were detained in a maritime piracy operation carried out by Israeli naval

vessels.