

washingtonpost.com

Held in My Homeland

By Haleh Esfandiari

Sunday, September 16, 2007; B01

The steel door closed with the clang of finality. Suddenly, I was cut off from the outside world, surrounded by four high walls. And completely alone.

In solitary confinement.

It's difficult to describe the feeling that overtakes you when you enter a prison cell. First comes overwhelming dread. Then disbelief: How did I end up a political prisoner? And doubt: Will I be here for weeks, months, years? Will I be able to bear up under the pressure?

On May 8, I was arrested by agents of [Iran's](#) intelligence ministry on suspicion of working to destabilize the Islamic Republic. For the next 105 days, this cell in Ward 209 of [Tehran's](#) Evin Prison would be my "home."

The cell -- really a room -- was of reasonable size, as it was two cells joined together. It was bare but clean. A brown wall-to-wall carpet covered the floor. In one corner lay a blanket and a copy of the Koran. Against one wall stood an iron sink with a broken faucet. Along another were two steel doors, only one of which was used to enter and exit the room. About eight feet up one of the walls were two rectangular windows that looked out onto a flat roof. They were open to let in fresh air, screened to keep out flies and barred to keep in prisoners.

Through these windows, I could glimpse the sky; sometimes at night I could see the moon. The third time I saw a full moon, it hit me that I had been imprisoned for three months.

I had flown to Tehran last December to visit my 93-year-old mother. But in January the authorities prevented me from leaving. I underwent many weeks of intensive interrogation by intelligence ministry officials, centering on my activities as director of the [Middle East](#) program at the [Woodrow Wilson Center](#) in Washington. When my questioning abruptly stopped for six weeks, I thought I had answered all the queries satisfactorily. But then I was summoned to the ministry and taken into custody.

Twenty-four hours later, I was brought before a revolutionary court magistrate. He was polite but businesslike as he drafted an arrest warrant accusing me of endangering Iranian national security. The charge seemed ludicrous. I, a 67-year-old grandmother, was being accused of threatening the security of the most populous and powerful country in the Middle East because I had organized conferences in Washington on Iran and other states of the region. But the implications were frightening.

To be in solitary confinement means to cling to hope and to struggle with despair. For nearly four months, my only human contact was with prison guards and interrogators. Early in the third month, I was given access to newspapers and provided with a television set. But even then, I was unaware of the media attention my imprisonment had generated, of the campaign that my family and supporters had set in motion to secure my freedom, of the letters signed by hundreds of academics, intellectuals, and well-wishers on my behalf, and of various governments' intercessions with the Iranian authorities. All I knew was my confinement.

My questioning resumed in prison. It ran along the same lines as it had before my incarceration. But the

Advertisement

A new fuel

sessions were shorter, never lasting more than three or four hours, and the approach was gentler. It made me wonder why I'd been imprisoned at all.

There's always a certain calculus in encounters between interrogator and detainee. I decided from the beginning to remain polite, to maintain a certain formality and distance and, because I had nothing to hide, to answer truthfully.

The interrogators' tone, in turn, remained correct and civil. They did not threaten; they never mentioned formal charges or a trial. On occasion, they took the trouble to explain their concerns about U.S. intentions in Iran -- explanations that seemed to reflect Intelligence Ministry thinking.

This is the belief that the Bush administration, entangled in [Iraq](#) and [Afghanistan](#), no longer contemplates military action against Iran. Rather, it hopes to encourage a "velvet" revolution, like the peaceful ones that occurred in [Georgia](#) and [Ukraine](#). To achieve this end, it uses think tanks, foundations and even universities to organize workshops for Iranian women, to invite Iranian opinion-makers and scholars to conferences and to offer them fellowships. In time, the officials believe, the administration hopes to create a network of like-minded people in Iran who are intent on regime change.

Iranian officials also seem to believe that an alert and vigilant Islamic Republic is successfully foiling -- and effectively discouraging the United States from pursuing -- this coordinated plan. Over many weeks of questioning and discussion, I tried to convince them that the [Wilson Center](#) is not part of any such scheme. I don't believe I succeeded in that, but I do think that in the end they came to accept that I, at least, was not engaged in any conspiracy.

I always felt confident that the center and my family would never abandon me. But there were still moments when I wondered whether I'd been forgotten or whether I would ever get out of Evin. I decided from the start that if I was to avoid falling apart, I had to impose a strict discipline on myself, maintain a positive attitude and use prison rules to my advantage. To stay focused, I avoided thinking about my family -- even though I dreamed of my leisurely Sunday morning coffee with my husband, Shaul, and my weekend dinners with my daughter, Haleh, and my grandchildren.

Interrogations aside, I had the days to myself. I adopted and stuck to a strict regimen of exercise, walking (or pacing) in my cell and outdoors when allowed, and reading. I noted that, though they were at first amused by my frenetic activity, some of the female guards were soon pacing up and down the corridor themselves. While exercising, I wrote an entire book -- a biography of my grandmother -- in my head, editing, transposing paragraphs, rewriting passages.

I spent the first night sleeping uncomfortably on the floor on a single blanket, having rejected the offer of a cot, which I didn't think would be good for my lower back pain. But then I asked for more blankets. I folded six to make a bed. One I rolled up and used as a bookshelf and another as a shelf for my clothes.

Ward 209, which was reserved for political detainees, had its own routine. Breakfast was available after 6 a.m., lunch was served at noon, and dinner around 7. I organized my day accordingly. I would get up at 7 a.m. and exercise on the floor for an hour, then shower and dress. After breakfast I would resume exercising until it was time to go out on one of the two rooftop terraces available to the inmates. Both were surrounded by high walls. One terrace was quite small. It included water faucets and clotheslines for the female inmates. I washed my T-shirt and slacks there every day. The other was large and open to the sky, and excellent for walking. I surprised the guards one day by insisting on continuing to walk back and forth even though it was raining.

I spent as much time on the terraces as I could. Sometimes, I was allowed many more hours outdoors than the regulation one hour a day. I was always alone and never met another inmate on the terraces. But one day I saw

a white butterfly. I thought to myself: "I am compelled to be here, but what are you doing in this place?"

At 6 p.m. every day I would shower and change. I remembered a friend telling me that at her English boarding school, everyone had to change for dinner, and I had seen movies in which the British aristocracy did the same. So I would put on an unironed T-shirt and a wrinkled but fresh pair of cotton pants and sit down in grand style to read books between 6 and 10 p.m., stopping only to eat.

One of the guards brought me books from the prison library -- mostly on Shiism and Islamic subjects. [Kian Tajbakhsh](#), another Iranian American prisoner who lived and worked in Iran and could get English language books from home, was allowed to share books with me, including Dostoevsky's "The Idiot" and Georges Simenon's police thrillers. They made excellent prison reading. In return, I was once allowed to send fruit to Kian.

My mother came to visit me during my third month of captivity. I hadn't wanted her to see me in prison or to see how much weight I had lost. But the visit did us both much good. I couldn't help thinking about the [Irbil five](#) -- Iranian officials arrested by U.S. forces in Irbil, Iraq, in January and, I was told, denied any family visits. The subject of humanitarian gestures such as family visits had come up repeatedly during my exchanges with my interrogators.

In early August I learned in a general way of the letters exchanged by Woodrow Wilson Center President Lee H. Hamilton and Iranian leader [Ayatollah Ali Khamenei](#). This communication, I believe, provided the breakthrough that led to my release, which seemed as sudden as my arrest.

Late in the afternoon of Aug. 23, my senior interrogator came to Evin and told me to pack my things. I was free to go. Ten days later I had my passport, and on Sept. 3, I boarded an Austrian Airlines flight for [Vienna](#).

I watched as the hostess secured the plane door, the sound of its closing signaling my return to my family, my friends and my freedom.

[Haleh Esfandiari](#) is director of the Middle East program at the Woodrow Wilson Center and the author of "Reconstructed Lives: Women and

Iran's Islamic Revolution."

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

© 2007 The Washington Post Company

Ads by Google

Military Transition

Open a Spring-Green franchise with our Military Assistance Program.
Spring-Green.com

Recruit Cleared Veterans

Veterans with active clearances Search by clearance and expiration
www.recruitmilitary.com

Work at Home Myths Busted

Forget The Hype. Here's The Real Way to Make Easy Money At Home!
MakepeaceTotalPackage.com/BigBucks/