

THE TASTE OF DEATH AND LIZARDS
IN AHWAZ'S SECRET PRISON

Yousef Azizi

The Taste Of Death and Lizards (Autobiography)

Translated by: Rahim Hamid

© 2024 Dar Arab For Publishing and Translation LTD.

United Kingdom
60 Blakes Quay
Gas Works Road
RG1 3EN
Reading
United Kingdom
info@dararab.co.uk
www.dararab.co.uk

First Edition 2024

ISBN 9978-1-78871-097-8

Copyrights © dararab 2024



دار عرب للنشر والترجمة
DAR ARAB FOR PUBLISHING & TRANSLATION

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews and other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.

The views and opinions expressed in this book are those of the author(s) and do not reflect or represent the opinions of the publisher.

Text Edited: Marcia Lynx Qualey

Text Design: Nasser Al Badri

Cover Design: Hassan Almohtasib

YOUSEF AZIZI

The Taste of Death
and Lizards

in

Ahwaz's Secret Prison

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

TRANSLATED BY BY RAHIM HAMID



Preface

What follows is a chronicle of my arrest on 25 April, 2005. Through this memoir, which I hope will be published in due course, I will explain the reason of my arrest and the situation of detainees in one of the secret jails in Ahwaz. Although I have a passion for storytelling, I did not want to write about my time in prison; in fact, I thought it inconsiderable compared to those longer and more severe experiences that others had been through, but my friends insisted I do this. One of them told me, “I have nothing to do with reminiscing about routine life, but an experience in prison—even if it is not too long—must be written. This is for the benefit of others, especially future generations.” Of course, I found his view reasonable because it seems that our life will be under the shadow of imprisonment, interrogation, and torture for a long time to come. And incidentally, most prison memoirs are about Evin Detention Centre or other Tehran jails, and only a few have written about their experiences in other cities’ prisons. This number may be close to zero for Ahwaz prisons and for Arab prisoners in Iran. So I held a pen and out of it came this summary. I have published these memoirs in Arabic and Persian, and this is the English version.

When I was released from my solitary cell in the Ahwaz prison, it was a hot summer afternoon, and I felt my whole existence was full of unspoken words. Occasionally, I recounted what I had gone through to friends and relatives in Ahwaz and Tehran. When my colleagues from the *Hamshabri* newspaper came to visit me, I had been released only a few days before. They suggested that I write my memoirs. One said: “like the stories you have written before”. But the consequences

of my release left me no time to do so. For three years, I was taken to the interrogation rooms and corridors of the Ministry of Intelligence and to prosecutors' offices and to the Revolutionary Court. They increased my bail, threatened me and my family, deprived my daughter of postgraduate studies, and imprisoned my son in Syria.

But the tensions had begun even before my time in prison, when Mahmud Ahmadi Nejad became mayor of Tehran in 2003 and radical rightists such as Ali Reza Sheikh Attar, the editor of the *Hamshabri* newspaper, fired me late on 16 September, 2004. In fact, this was start of things, and my arrest took place a few months later.

On 7 October, 2004, a blogger using the pseudonym "Sadeh Dell" wrote:

'Hamshahri' management fires Bani Torof

The rightist and radical management of *Hamshabri* has fired Yousef Azizi Bani Torof, a member of the *Hamshabri* editorial staff and one of its founders.

From the very first days of *Hamshabri* in December 1992, Bani Torof began his job with an invitation from the former vice-editor of this newspaper, and by translating new intellectual and literary genres from the Arab world, thus playing an important role in enriching the journal's stories. He also published great travel reports of his journeys to Iraq, Kuwait, Egypt, Libya, and Oman in this newspaper. Interviews with prominent personalities in the Arab world and his research into ethnic minorities in Iran were among his other works published by *Hamshabri* in the past twelve years. He was, in fact, one of the most active members of the *Hamshabri* staff.

The radical rightist administration of *Hamshabri*, which considers

the newspaper as “war booty”, after much pressure over the past years, eventually fired him as they fired his former colleagues—Kazem Shukri, Janan Sefat and Sabuki—although each on a different pretext. Their expulsion was due to a tendency toward reform, and the expulsion of Bani Torof was because of his research activities around ethnic groups in Iran, especially the Arabs in Khuzestan.

But this “Sadeh Del” colleague, whom I do not know, had skipped over another member of the fired editorial staff. He was Ahmad Zeidabadi, who was in jail while I was writing these memoirs.

Why Was I Arrested?

Some events never fade from the human mind and feel as if they were engraved in stone; these accompany him for the rest of his life. The day of my arrest - 25 April, 2005 - was one of those events.

That day, I was arrested by several officers of Islamic Revolutionary Court of Tehran at my home in the Yousefabad district in Tehran. The story began when a letter was published on an Ahwazi site in April 2005, which was signed by Mohammad Ali Abtahi, the head of the office of former president Mohammad Khatami. The letter dated back to 1998, which was the second year of Mohammad Khatami's first presidential term.

The letter, later known as "Abtahi's letter", emphasized the need to change the demographic structure of the Arab people in Khuzestan province (Arabestan Territory), so that ten years later, the Arabs would become a minority within the province.

On 15 April, 2005, some of the Arab people in Ahwaz city gathered in the Kuyeh Alavi district to protest against this letter by demonstrating and marching to the provincial government building. It should be noted that this district, like other districts and cities and even the province, has two names. One is the official state name, while the other is the name that native Arabs have historically given these places. Sometimes, there is a third name that is used by the city's non-Arab minority. For example, Arabs call Kuyeh Alavi "Daireh" and Persians call it "Shilingabad". You will face some of these dualities in names in this book. The demonstrations in Kuyeh Alavi were

peaceful, but, instead of protecting the protesters, the police opened fire on them. Dozens were killed in this incident. An interrogator who came from Tehran to Ahwaz told me that 8+1 people were killed in the demonstration. He meant that eight people were killed by three policemen and security forces, and one was found dead nearby. What the interrogator claimed may have been the result of a heart attack. Some also claimed 15 demonstrators died in Ahwaz on March 2005. In one of my interviews with foreign media—quoting local sources—I claimed that 50 people had been killed. However, as in similar cases, the authorities, who usually know the exact statistics, refuse to disclose them, concealing the truth. The demonstration later spread to other cities in the province and took the form of a public uprising. Arab activists called this protest an “Intifada,” meaning “uprising” or “protest”. The death toll in these cities rose to tens in a few days.

Security Officers' Onslaught

On Monday April 25, 2005, a conference was held at the Human Rights Centre, headed by Shirin Ebadi. One or two participating friends asked me to attend the conference and give a speech about the massacre of Arab people and the demonstration on 15 April, 15, which had been covered extensively in both domestic and foreign media. I knew Shirin Ebadi before she won the Nobel Peace Prize, and I met her several times at meetings of the Iranian Writers Association, of which both of us were members. I was a member of the Association much earlier than her, in 1977, the beginning of the second term of the Iranian Writers Association's activity. That year seemed, to some degree, to have a free political environment, and the association began renewed activity. I met Fereydoon Tonekaboni, who was a member of the board of secretaries of the Iranian Writers Association that year, and I presented my published books to him and joined the Association. Tonekaboni left Iran after the crackdowns in 1981, and he now lives in Germany.

Mohamad Seifzadeh chaired the meeting of the Human Rights Centre. The centre's headquarters was very close to our home in the Yousefabad district.

Forty to fifty people attended that meeting. Among them were a number of prominent political activists and figures: Isa Sahar Khiz from the Society of Defence Of Press Freedom; Dr. Ebrahim Yazdi, Secretary General of the Iranian Freedom Movement, Dr. Fariborz Reiss Dana; a member of the Association of Iranian Writers; and Mohammad Ali Amoui, one of the survivors from the Tudeh Party

leaders. There were also others who I do not remember now. Some of them lectured. Other founders of the Human Rights Centre, including Shirin Ebadi, Abdolfatah Soltani, Mohammad Ali Dadkhah, Mohammad Sharif, and a number of domestic and foreign reporters also participated. Soltani and Dadkhah were prominent lawyers, later jailed. But later still they were released and fortunately now, as I check in again in January 2022, they are still free.

Among the speakers, only Fariborz Reiss Dana referred to the Ahwaz events, condemned the murder of “Arab people,” and complained to then-president Mohammad Khatami. He compared this massacre to the shooting at workers in “Babak city” of Kerman a few months before, an incident in which some workers were killed.

One of the Ahwazi Arab journalists, Nouri Hamzeh, was with me. Hamzeh went to the organizer of the conference, Mohammad Seifzadeh, and described the sensitive situation in Khuzestan (Arabestan Territory), asking him to add me to the list of speakers, but he refused. When my friend faced this counteraction, went among the attendees and started to complain and explain the situation in Ahwaz. I also spoke for a few minutes about the extent of the repression and the death toll among the demonstrators, and oppression of the Arab people in the province. In my speech, I blamed the government for the people massacre’s and criticized those in power. Shirin Ebadi began to chant slogans, including a slogan that I still remember: “Khuzestan. Khuzestan, the heart of Iran”. The camera from the Islamic Republic of Iran’s state-run media was closely zooming in on me, recording all my words and gestures. And, of course, I knew where copies of those records were going to be sent!

After the conference, some foreign reporters came up to me. I spoke with BBC English, *The Guardian*, and The Associated Press. One of

the audience members came and interrupted me, trying to stifle my comments about the Arab massacre in Ahwaz. He interrupted me several times, with an apparently Persian nationalist logic. It was clear to me that he was a secret-security officer. Basically, these officers are always present at such meetings and often hide themselves behind the mask of a reporter or cameraman.

Later, the Tehran Islamic Revolutionary Court, in its appeal, charged me with speaking with eleven Persian, Arabic, and English media about the events in Ahwaz.

Three years later, in 2008, after attorney Mohammad Sharif had left the board of directors of the Human Rights Centre, he told me that on the same day, 25 March, 2005, the deputy of the Tehran Court had been seen around the Human Rights Building. When Shirin Ebadi was informed, she was scared, because she thought they had come to close the centre.

Agents at our Home

After the end of the Human Rights conference and the few interviews that followed, Nouri Hamzeh and I returned to my home, which was a few minutes' walk from the Human Rights building. It was about one o'clock in the afternoon. I told Nouri: Please assemble news of the event and then send it to the media.

Less than an hour later, the bell rang at our flat. It was about a quarter to two in the afternoon.

My wife, from behind the door, asked: Who is it?

The respondent replied: I'm a postman, you have a letter.

Our building had doors on both sides, and we reached its north-facing door by climbing few steps. The floor below was actually the ground floor. My wife went up the steps, and the agent showed her the warrant for my arrest. At the same time, the upstairs neighbour came downstairs and greeted my wife. The agent gestured to my wife that she shouldn't tell her anything about my arrest. Five of the agents were in the alley and three on the sidewalk. My wife was so worried that she told the agents: "Let me go in before you to inform them about the arrest warrant calmly, because both my daughter and my husband have heart disease."

She left them on this pretext and hurried down the stairs, closed the flat door, and left them behind. The first thing she did was rescue Hamzeh. With her guidance, Nouri Hamzeh left the flat through the south-facing door, which opened onto the back street. The agents,

who had been lingering outside, began knocking on the door and shouting: “Open up!” When Nouri left the flat, my wife opened the door. Eight Revolutionary Court agents, who were hiding their guns under their shirts, entered the flat. If you paid a little attention, you could see their guns.

The first thing they did was shoot video with a camera that one of them was holding. He filmed all the rooms and every corner of the flat. A few minutes after Hamzeh left, the telephone rang over and over. But whenever we went to answer, the agents stopped us, so my wife unplugged the phone. The agents were upset that we were speaking in Arabic with each other and insisted we speak Farsi. But we paid them no attention. I am not used to speaking to my wife in a language other than our mother tongue.

Later, Nouri Hamzeh said that he spread the news of security agents’ onslaught and my arrest to friends and media in the country and abroad through the nearest internet café. In fact, when the news broke, the agents were still at our flat, and I had not yet gone to jail. They took two phonebooks containing the numbers of hundreds of our friends and acquaintances. My wife was only able to tear one or two pages out of the main phonebook, far from the agents’ eyes.

For two and a half hours, security agents searched every corner of the flat. About three o’clock, my wife brought me some cooked plum and rice stew to eat. I could not eat much, because of my deep anxiety. However, I ate a little. I had a severe cold those days, too, which made the situation even worse. Sometimes, during a few of the interviews, I could barely speak to the media. When I was released from jail, while listening to the tapes and videos of my interviews with Arabic TV and Persian radio and TV on YouTube, I realized how terribly hoarse my voice was.

In the midst of the inspection, my wife worried that the agents would go to the underground parking ramp where our storage was located, so she attracted their attention by screaming. She even pretended to faint. Not understanding, I blamed her in Arabic and asked her not to lose control and be strong. But she explained that she was playing a role. By doing so, she wanted to keep the security agents busy so they would not search for anything outside of the flat. In fact, there were some photo albums in the parking ramp that we did not want them to access.

They scrutinized everything and eventually took away some of my books, my computer's hard drive, my archive of articles that had been published in the Arabic and Persian press, as well as my own manuscripts. These manuscripts contained my articles, interviews, and stories that I tore out of newspapers. They also took my unpublished articles, stories, and poems. They packed nine bags in all. Other booty the agents took included tens of CDs and cassettes of Arabic and Persian music and sixty-two video tapes, some of which were private and related to my daughter's and son's birthday parties. Of course, I knew why they took these tapes. They thought they might find something in my tapes such as immoral videos of drinking or dancing or something like that, to jack up my sentence. Although, of course, the more they searched, the less they found.

