

Activism In Prison

This brief guide was put together in 2017 to assist human rights activists who are at risk of being jailed. Rachel Lehr and Emily Sherwood at Case Western Reserve University Law School were the lead researchers under the supervision of Law Professor Avidan Cover.

This guide is split into two parts. The first section offers an overview of some techniques used by activists to help themselves and help others while they are in detention. The second section describes specific activists' experiences.

What follows has been compiled through interviews and secondary source research. Our list of techniques is not exhaustive, nor is it intended to be a comprehensive manual for how activists might cope in jail, but should be considered a modest attempt to initiate a discussion and to prompt further useful examples or ideas for coping strategies or advocacy techniques. We are not endorsing or suggesting that activists embark on any of these if jailed. All of the techniques carry risk, and in the case of hunger striking, extreme risk. But we hope this guide will encourage activists with experience of being in jail to share useful ideas with others

If you have suggestions for additions to this report please email HRDS@humanrightsfirst.org.

Prison Writing

While it is impossible for all activist to write while in prison, many do. Some concentrate on their prison experiences while others find ways to continue advocating on the issues they worked on before being jailed.

There are risks, of course. Retribution is possible. After **Bahraini** human rights defender Nabeel Rajab had articles published in international media he'd written from prison he was charged with new offenses as a result.

In **Egypt**, prisoner Ahmed Said penned a letter about his political beliefs and his commitment to advocating for human rights. Ahmed wrote that his false imprisonment would not deter him from continuing to call for democracy in Egypt. This letter was smuggled out of the prison and published on Amnesty International's website. Other human rights organizations saw Ahmed's letter and shared it on their sites.

In **Cameroon**, Enoch Meyomesse used his writing to advocate for fellow prisoners. Meyomesse wrote an essay describing the prison conditions that was shared via PEN international. It drew attention to corruption of the prison officials, the extortion of the prisoners, and their unsanitary conditions. Meyomesse also contributed to PEN's Books for Prisoners Campaign, which advocates for UK prisoners to be able to receive books in the post from friends and family members, by writing a piece that supported the initiative.

In **Azerbaijan**, Ilgar Mammadov wrote a letter explaining how the extraction of fossil fuel was connected to the detention of Azerbaijani political prisoners. The letter was published by "nopoliticalprisoners.org", a site run by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and available at nhc@nhc.no.

In **Azerbaijan**, Khadija Ismayilova was able to write from prison. She says she had five lawyers throughout her term in jail, and would give each a few sentences to remember. Then the lawyers would meet to piece the writing together. Ismayilova would also write pieces to the court as legal motions, saying they were related to her case. She knew that the judge would never read what she wrote but would dismiss them and turn them over directly to her lawyers who could then deliver them to the press.

In **Turkey**, novelist Asli Erdogan spent 132 days in prison because she was connected to a pro-Kurdish newspaper. While in jail she wrote a letter to PEN describing Turkey's suppression of other journalists. PEN published the letter on their website.

In the **United States of America**, Mohamedou Ould Slahi wrote a book about his experiences, *Guantanamo Diary*. With the help of his lawyer, he was able to publish a redacted version of it while still detained.

Advocacy on Behalf of Other Prisoners

Prisoner advocacy takes a variety of forms, including writing to highlight conditions, but here we include more direct advocacy. Some activists bring skills into prison other prisoners don't have. Jailed lawyers can help fellow inmates fill out forms and paperwork, medics can help sick prisoners who have not received adequate medical attention.

In **Egypt**, surgeon Ahmed Said was able to conduct medical exams and provide diagnoses to fellow inmates, who were often denied medical assistance by prison officials.

In the **United Arab Emirates**, activist Ahmed Mansoor used his law school experience to educate his fellow inmates on the UAE legal systems and help them to write defendant statements. He also helped prisoners who had been tortured to document their experiences, and gave them contact

information for international human rights organizations.

In **Azerbaijan**, Khadija Ismayilova helped those she felt were unfairly imprisoned write their applications to the court and asked her lawyers to help as well. She would also pressure doctors to help prisoners who fainted or who had severe medical conditions by "making a lot of noise about it." Ismayilova says she prevented several suicides.

Building Relationships within Prison

Some prisoners maintained that establishing a civil relationship with prison staff and prison spies can de-escalate dangerous or tense situations and enable the activist to carry out a level of advocacy.

In the **United Arab Emirates**, Ahmed Mansoor said he always made a point to be civil with prison guards and officials, saying that trying to remain pleasant and never raising his voice to guards made them easier to deal with over time. He also said he tried to befriend those sent to spy on him. Some admitted they were informers and agreed to pass false information to the authorities.

In **Azerbaijan**, Khadija Ismayilova said that while she did her best to remain civil to the Azerbaijani prison staff, she refused to ever ask for or accept favors. She also told her cell mates soon after she arrived in prison that they should feel free to report anything they see her doing to the prison officials if they would benefit from passing information.

In **Iran**, Nasrin Sotoudeh and other women prisoners heard that Hoda Saber, a human rights activist, died from a heart attack during a hunger strike. Saber was imprisoned in the men's ward and many of his fellow inmates continued to hunger strike. Sotoudeh and the other women grew very concerned for the men's health and safety and wrote the men a letter urging an end to their hunger strikes. They sent the letter through the prison's mail system, which the

authorities intercepted, and demanded to know who wrote the letter.

The ward's security officer interrogated and threatened the women in an attempt to learn who wrote the letter. A group of 30 women prisoners interrupted the interrogation. When he asked who wrote the letter, Sotoudeh asked him, "Is that a question we must answer?" The officer said no. Sotoudeh told him that they would not be answering his question. The women left and none of them was punished. The letter was later smuggled into the men's ward.

Utilizing Media

Contacting outside media to expose prison conditions or to advocate for outside issues can be an enormously effective, if dangerous, activity.

Some prisoners leak statements via their family or lawyers. This technique relies on the human rights defender having friends, family, or lawyers willing to assist in smuggling out information. This technique is most effective when the human rights defender is fairly well-known before their imprisonment or if a well-known organization or publication is willing to give the human rights defender a platform.

In **Iran** Atena Daemi is still serving her original sentence but stays in touch with the media through her mother who has been giving interviews on her behalf. Daemi has also successfully smuggled out letters explaining the violent and illegal circumstances of her arrest.

In **Bahrain**, prominent human rights defenders Zainab Al Khawaja, Nabeel Rajab, Mahdi Abu Deeb, Ali Alekry and others have all managed to have pieces published in the international media to highlight their country's repression.

In the **United Arab Emirates**, five detainees charged together leaked statements to international media and human rights organizations about the details of their unfair trial. They used another inmate's phone card and dictated statements to

family or friends. Another method involved handwriting statements and smuggling them out in other inmates' legal documents.

In **Turkey**, Asli Erdogan wrote to PEN International about Turkey's suppression and mistreatment of journalists. Once published on PEN's website, Erdogan's letter also allowed her to connect with and thank her supporters.

Hunger Strikes

Hunger striking remains a controversial and dangerous method of activism. Some human rights defenders use it as a tactic of last resort. Some prisoners report an improvement in conditions after their hunger strikes, others do not.

In **Iran**, in response to the arrest of her attorney, her being forcibly subjected to a "virginity test," and verbal abuse from a prison guard, Atena Farghadani began a hunger strike. On the fourth day of refusing food and water, Farghadani received emergency medical treatment for low blood pressure. Farghadani's request for a transfer to another prison was approved and she ended the strike.

Self-Care and Coping Mechanisms

Attending to self-care is a prerequisite for effective advocacy in and out of prison. Jail presents a new set of challenges for activists including pressures on mental health.

In **Egypt**, Ahmed Said and his fellow detainees distracted themselves from prison life by playing chess with pieces they made from soap.

In **Libya**, Jaballa Matar coped with the stress of prison by frequently reciting poetry.

In **China**, Peter Dahlin was kept in solitary confinement and interrogated in one of China's secret prisons. To keep his mind occupied he recited the lyrics to his favorite songs and did basic calisthenics exercises.

In Iran Atena Farghadani coped by making art with improvised supplies.

Personal Stories

Ahmed Said

COUNTRY/REGION: Egypt

ACTIVITY: Letter writing, social media advocacy

DESCRIPTION: Ahmed Said was arrested under false pretenses and sentenced to two years' imprisonment for attending a non-violent protest.

Letter Writing

While imprisoned, Said penned a letter about his political beliefs and his commitment to advocating for human rights. Ahmed wrote that his false imprisonment would not deter him from continuing to call for democracy in Egypt. This letter was smuggled out of the prison and published on Amnesty International's website. Other human rights organizations saw Ahmed's letter and shared it on their own sites.

Social Media Advocacy

Said's family and friends kept Said's wrongful imprisonment in the public eye and highlighted human rights abuses in Egypt in general by using the hashtag "#freeahmedsaid" on social media. Said's family members also gave interviews to international journalists. Said was eventually pardoned and released from jail, perhaps in part due to the pressure social media and news outlets placed on the Egyptian government.

Medical Exams for Other Prisoners

Said is a surgeon and was able to give medical exams as well as diagnoses to his fellow inmates, who were often denied medical assistance by prison officials.

Coping Mechanisms: Said kept his mind occupied by playing games; he and other inmates carved chess pieces out of soap.

Enoh Meyomesse

COUNTRY/REGION: Cameroon

ACTIVITY: Writing

DESCRIPTION: Enoh Meyomesse was detained for three and a half years, from 2011 to 2015, for his political activism and the views that he expressed in his writings. While imprisoned, Meyomesse used his writing to advocate for the rights of others. Meyomesse wrote an essay describing the prison conditions that was been shared via PEN international. Meyomesse's essay drew attention to the corruption of the prison officials and the extortion of the prisoners as well as the unsanitary conditions. Meyomesse also contributed to PEN's Books for Prisoners Campaign, which advocates for U.K. prisoners to be able to receive books in the post from friends and family members, by writing a piece that supported the initiative.

Asli Erdogan

COUNTRY/REGION: Turkey

ACTIVITY: Prison Writing/Letter Writing

DESCRIPTION: Asli Erdogan, a successful novelist, spent 132 days in prison because she was connected to a pro-Kurdish newspaper. While imprisoned, she wrote a letter to PEN describing Turkey's suppression of other journalists. Erdogan addressed the letter to Millie Rode, the Secretary General of Danish PEN, and PEN published the letter on their website.

Coping Mechanisms: Erdogan emphasized in her letter how much she appreciated the "voices that reach [her] from the outside in the forms of letters, postcards, and solidarity events. She described these as her "only tie to life." Erdogan also received books from her lawyers and mailed to her by her friends that she drew comfort from while she was in solitary confinement.

Ahmed Mansoor

COUNTRY/REGION: UAE

ACTIVITY: Negotiation with prison officials, demands to the court, issuing statements, prisoner education, government advocacy, hunger strike, nonconfrontational methods. At the time of wiring, in May 2017, Ahmed Manor is back in jail after having been arrested on March 20, 2017

DESCRIPTION: Ahmed Mansoor is a vocal advocate for democratic reform in the UAE who was held for eight months in 2011 until he received a presidential pardon. Throughout his detention, Mansoor and other members of the UAE Five advocated for their rights and the rights of other prisoners using the following methods:

Negotiation with Prison Officials

■ Wrote Letters to Prison Officials

Mansoor wrote letters to prison officials asking to be treated like other prisoners which entailed being allowed to play sports, have visits without police escorts, and utilize the prison library.

■ Refused Transfers

Prison officials transferred the UAE Five without warning multiple times to socially isolate them and prevent them from maintaining physiological stability. Mansoor and the other UAE Five eventually told prison officials that they refused to be transferred again and would have to be transferred by force in the future. Subsequently, they met with a managing prison official who agreed to stop the arbitrary transfers.

■ Court Presentation

The families of the UAE Five informed them that the media would be present at one of their hearings. To create better press coverage, the prison attempted to take the UAE Five to the hearing in their everyday clothing despite having taken them to prior proceedings in both arm and leg shackles. Mansoor and the other UAE Five refused to be taken to court in their everyday civilian clothing. Eventually, they

reached a compromise with prison officials that allowed them to wear handcuffs and their prison uniforms but not wear leg shackles.

Demands to the Court

At every hearing Mansoor and the other UAE Five would present a list of lawful demands to the court. The demands included: launching an investigation into the death threats that Mansoor had received, making the hearings public, and providing them access to case documents. After the judge refused to act on these demands, the UAE Five left the court room and refused to participate in all subsequent hearings.

Issuing Statements

In order to gain publicity and put pressure on the UAE government, Mansoor and the other UAE Five leaked statements about their harassment and their belief that they were not receiving a fair trial to international media and human rights organizations. In order to get information out of the prison, they used another inmate's calling card and dictated statements to family or friends. Another method involved handwriting statements and smuggling them out in other inmates' legal documents.

Prisoner Education

Before being detained, Mansoor was a second-year law student. He used his legal knowledge to educate his fellow inmates on the UAE legal system. He assisted them in writing defendant statements. Additionally, he helped prisoners who had been tortured document their experiences. Mansoor also gave these inmates the contact information for international human rights organizations so they could publicize their abuse.

Government Advocacy

After their case gained international notoriety, a government-run human rights association visited the UAE Five during their sixth month of detention. The group refused to meet with the organization and instead insisted that the organization look into the prison's forced labor program, stating that this would demonstrate to the general population that the

human rights association could be effective. The organization agreed and the next day the prison released a statement that inmate workers would be paid for their labor. Prisoners were, however, paid only a nominal amount.

Non-Confrontational Methods

■ General Manner

When interacting with prison officials and guards, Mansoor always remained civil and pleasant. He stated that he did not have issues with these people as individuals but could not just stand by while his rights were violated.

■ Treatment of Spies and Officials

Mansoor tried to remain friendly and courteous to his fellow inmates. Eventually he became very close with an inmate who disclosed that he had been told by prison officials to write reports on Mansoor's activities and communications. Mansoor was able to uncover other spies and convince them to feed the government false information.

Atena Daemi

COUNTRY/REGION: Iran

ACTIVITY: Suing IRGC intelligence organization; Reaching Out to the Media

DESCRIPTION: Atena Daemi was sentenced to 7 years in prison for making Facebook posts that were critical of the Iranian government and for attending peaceful protests.

Legal Recourse

While still imprisoned, Daemi filed suit against the IRGC Intelligence Organization of Iran for "violent and illegal means of arrest". The Iranian government retaliated by pressing additional charges against her, but Daemi has been acquitted of these charges. As of January 19, 2017, no action has been taken on Daemi's excessive force complaint.

Reaching Out to the Media

Daemi is still serving her original sentence but stays in touch with the media through her mother who has

been giving interviews on her behalf. Daemi has also had successfully smuggled out letters explaining the violent and illegal circumstances of her arrest.

Gevorg Safaryan

COUNTRY/REGION: Armenia

ACTIVITY: Allowing his lawyer to speak to the media

DESCRIPTION: Gevorg Safaryan, an activist and member of a political opposition group, was arrested when the Armenian police tried to disperse a gathering in a public square. Safaryan's lawyer has spoken publicly about the legal details of the case and the misconduct of the Armenian courts. Safaryan's lawyer insists that Safaryan was not given a fair trial; the court was biased against him and arbitrarily refused to let the defense call witnesses. They have started the appeals process. These public statements allow human rights organizations to publicize not only Safaryan's case but the human rights abuses and violations of due process perpetrated by the Armenian government.

Peter Dahlin

COUNTRY/REGION: China

COPING MECHANISM: Reciting lyrics, exercise

DESCRIPTION: Peter Dahlin is a Swedish national and founding member of The Chinese Urgent Action Working Program, an organization that aimed to give legal and financial assistance to human rights defenders in China. On January 3, 2017 he was arrested under suspicion of endangering national security then detained and interrogated for 23 days in a secret prison near Beijing. Dahlin was kept in solitary confinement, which began to have negative effects on his mental health. In order to keep his mind occupied he tried to recite lyrics to his favorite songs and did basic calisthenics exercises.

Atena Farghadani

COUNTRY/REGION: Iran

ACTIVITY: Art and Hunger Strike

DESCRIPTION: Atena Farghadani is an artist and open critic of the Iranian government's treatment of women and anti-birth control policies.

Art

Farghadani was first arrested in 2014 after drawing cartoons that depicted Iranian parliament members as animals. She continued to make art during her year of imprisonment. She improvised art materials by deconstructing disposable cups to use as canvas. Her artwork and improvised supplies were eventually confiscated.

Hunger Strike

Farghadani was arrested again in 2015 for insulting the supreme leader of Iran when she spoke out about the deplorable conditions in Iranian prisons. At a hearing, Farghadani shook hands with her male attorney, which led to him being briefly arrested and her being forcibly subjected to a "virginity test." Farghadani began a hunger strike in protest of the exam and verbal abuse from prison guards. On the fourth day of refusing food and water, Farghadani received emergency medical treatment for low blood pressure. Farghadani's request for a transfer to another prison was approved and she ended the strike.

Karla Avelar

COUNTRY/REGION: El Salvador

ACTIVITY: Petitions, prison grievances

DESCRIPTION: Avelar, a trans woman, was imprisoned between 1996 and 2000. Throughout her time in prison, Avelar was abused and raped repeatedly. After her release, Avelar filed several grievances with El Salvador's Human Rights Ombudsman that eventually led to the creation of a separate prison housing unit for trans women and gay men. Avelar has also used petitions to advocate

for causes that have ranged from the prisoners' right participation in recreational activities with the women's unit to the right of prisoners to wear women's clothing to the removal of abusive guards.

Khadija Ismayilova

COUNTRY/REGION: Azerbaijan

ACTIVITY: Prison Writing, Relationship Management, Advocacy on Behalf of Other Prisoners

DESCRIPTION: Khadija Ismayilova was arrested for writing in opposition to the Azerbaijani government.

Prison Writing

Ismayilova was also able to write from prison. While Ismayilova was unwilling to talk about her best techniques because there is a risk she will be imprisoned again, she did expand on two ways she would smuggle her writing outside of the prison. Ismayilova had five lawyers throughout her incarceration, and she would give each a few sentences to remember. Then the lawyers would meet to piece the writing together. Ismayilova would also write pieces in court, saying that they were a motion. Ismayilova knew that the judge never read her motions so the writings would be handed to the judge, immediately dismissed, and then handed directly to the lawyer who could then deliver them to the press.

Relationship Management

■ Treatment of Fellow Prisoners

Ismayilova developed relationships with her fellow inmates by avoiding judging them for past indiscretions and always lending a listening ear. At one point during her imprisonment, the government told the press that Ismayilova was attempting to eliminate prisoner benefits. This news eventually reached the prisoners, and Ismayilova was nearly attacked several times. Knowing that she would always be the weakest in any fight, Ismayilova would respond to aggression using a quiet voice so that her fellow prisoners would have to lower their own voices to hear her. She would then explain that the

prisoner had been deceived. The government tried again to incite violence by telling the press that Ismayilova was secretly Armenian. This effort failed largely because Ismayilova had by the time formed strong relationships with her fellow prisoners. Ismayilova credits her survival in prison to the help and advice she received from her fellow inmates. Because she had a relatively easy life previously, their knowledge of the prison hierarchy and its unique culture was invaluable.

■ Treatment of Spies

Ismayilova also treated her fellow inmates well because several of them were spies for the prison management. Upon entry to her cell, Ismayilova told her cellmates that if spying on her would help them receive better treatment, then they had her permission to report her actions. Ismayilova claims that this made the spies feel guilty, and, as a result, she was able to leak false information. For example, Ismayilova had a spy tell prison officials that she was smuggling her writing in her sanitary pads. Then, while she was on her period, a guard was forced to search her used pad only to find nothing hidden inside.

■ Treatment of Prison Officials

Ismayilova was extremely stern with prison management, and emphasized repeatedly that she found it important to never ask the prison officials for anything. Ismayilova is extremely afraid of heights, and she slept for months on a top bunk, sacrificing her sleep, to avoid asking the prison officials for a “favor.” Ismayilova refused to ask for improvements to her own situation; she would only ask for improvements on behalf of others. After publishing her first article from prison, Ismayilova was put in solitary confinement. When she was brought to the warden, Ismayilova told him that she did not want to be removed from solitary confinement. She instead stated that she liked her cell because “there was a window there.” Ismayilova also stated that having

documentary proof when speaking to prison management was important.

Advocacy on Behalf of Other Prisoners

Ismayilova also advocated for the rights of other prisoners. Ismayilova helped those who she felt were unfairly imprisoned write their applications to the court and often asked her lawyers to help as well. She would also force doctors to help prisoners that fainted or that had severe medical conditions by “making a lot of noise about it.” Ismayilova also prevented several suicides. One of the original false charges against her had been that she incited suicide, so Ismayilova would joke with suicidal prisoners that if they killed themselves then she would be blamed. Ismayilova would also give prisoners hope, telling those addicted to drugs that this would be a chance for them to build a new life for themselves.

Coping Mechanisms: Ismayilova used humor to cope with her situation. Ismayilova smiled continuously and used her positive attitude to confuse prison officials. Ismayilova advises other prisoners to “enjoy every difficulty.”

Iran—While imprisoned, Nasrin Sotoudeh and the other women in her ward collectively wrote a letter to the men’s ward. The prison officials intercepted the letter and began interrogating inmates about it. Upon learning of the interrogations, a group of thirty women went to the security officer. They stood in solidarity and interrupted the interrogation that the officer was conducting. When he asked who wrote the letter, Sotoudeh asked him, “Is that a question we must answer?” The officer said no, the women collectively refused to answer. The women left and none of them were punished. The letter was later smuggled into the men’s ward. Had the women not stood together, at least one of them would have faced punishment for trying to contact the men’s ward. ■