

I took my kids to visit their dad. We were all a bit nervous as we prepared to go. I only decided to tell them that we will be visiting their father the morning of the visit. Khaled's mother and sister also came along. Everyone was a bit nervous. I decided to only take Amena (5) and Fatema (4) this time. Khaled had sent a note the day before with one of the other families visiting that we should come today and bring the kids. He had mentioned that he had gotten permission for the kids to visit him. I decided not to bring Abdelrahman (7.5) this time around since he was still having a hard time comprehending the fact that his father was in prison. He avoids speaking about the situation and gave several excuses as why he wasn't feeling up to coming. I didn't pressure him as I knew his sensitive nature might make it difficult for him.

As we stood in a very long line to enter the main gate of Tora prison, Amena's eyes darted around glancing worriedly at the row of army trucks that stood in front of the prison. She finally asked me what they were doing there and I told her that they were the army and their job was to protect the country. I don't think she believed me, but I couldn't get myself to tell her the crude reality of the situation. As we continued waiting for about two hours, I watched the line move very slowly and wondered who were the rest of the people waiting in line with us and what were their stories. I wondered who were visiting criminals, and who were visiting political prisoners like me. Unfortunately in a country like Egypt where there is a huge gap between socioeconomic classes, it was easy to point out. I said hello to many of the women that I had seen on my many previous waits in front of Tora in the never ending lines at the prison. We had exchanged horror stories on who they were visiting, when and how they were arrested, and what the conditions they were being kept in.

When we finally passed the main gate, all our bags were searched and the officer took Fatema's doll, Lola, and said that we couldn't take it in with us because he needed to open it up to see what was inside. Fatema's eyes filled with tears, and I explained to him that it was a talking doll and contained batteries, and he reluctantly gave it back to her. I moved into the next room to get searched, and abruptly covered both my daughters' eyes so as they wouldn't see one of the female security guard's very obscene and humiliating search of the other visitors. Luckily we were searched much more politely and quickly left.

As we waited for the bus that would be taking us to our section of the prison (Tora is huge and contains 7 prisons within its gates) many people asked us where we were going. Every time I mentioned "Aqrab" they looked at me like they wanted to ask who we were visiting at the high security prison. After another long wait we were transported to the high security facility and submitted our ID cards and applied for a visit.

When our names were finally called and we were taken through the prison door, all our things were searched again, especially the food and clothes that I had brought to give to Khaled. I hurriedly tried to repack and reorganize the bags after the officers had flipped them upside down, and my two little girls held on to my clothes very scared by all the yelling and shoving that was going on around them. When that was over, we were taken through several barred prison doors, one after the other, and were finally led into a very small room that was divided into two by a glass window and two phones on either side of the window. I held my little girls and refused to enter the room. I told the

officer that we were promised that the children would visit their father face to face and that I didn't want them to see their dad like this. I insisted that Khaled had done nothing wrong and that we shouldn't be treated this way. For the thousands of prisoners at Tora, there was only a select group of political detainees at the Aqrab facility that were being made to visit through the glass window, and Khaled was one of them. In solidarity with the rest of the detainees who were striking this new visitation process, we had refused to visit under these conditions over the entire last month. We only came today with hope that the girls would be able to see their father in the regular visitation room. I sat down in the hallway and an officer came up to me and told me to calm down and they were getting permission for the kids to visit their dad face to face and that I should just continue with the visit in the meantime. I waited a few minutes and then heard Khaled's voice from inside the little room and reluctantly entered. A smile lit up Khaled's face as soon as he saw Amena and Fatema and he immediately started joking with them. They took turns calling him on the phone and in a few minutes, Khaled, as he always did, had the girls laughing. He told us about his cell, about how things were starting to become a bit more bearable, and about how he finally was allowed to go out into the outdoor area for an hour a day, after not seeing the sun for almost a month.

Near the end of the visit the prison guards allowed Amena, Fatema and Khaled's mother to pass over to the other side for a few minutes and say goodbye to Khaled. Khaled hugged his two little princesses very hard and I held back tears as I watched from the other side.

We said good bye and left not knowing when Khaled would see his daughters again. As we walked back the long path to the heavy iron main door of Aqrab, the officer told us he knew that we were good people and that we didn't deserve this treatment. I somehow could not accept his mediocre apology as he was, by choice, a part of this very unjust system.

*Sarah Attia  
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