

Memo From Cairo

## Why Freed Dissidents Pick Path of Most Resistance

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CAIRO — When political dissidents who challenge authoritarian leaders are locked away in prison, when they are tortured and their families threatened, the goal is to break their resolve, to crush their spirit, to silence them.

So how come so many get right back to it when they are finally freed? What compels them to fight on at the risk of great personal sacrifice?

Last week, Fathi al-Jahmi [died](#) a prisoner of Libya. He was a father, a husband, an older brother, a sharp critic of Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi. In 2004, after 18 months in prison, he was set free. But he was supposed to remain silent, to go home and vanish from public view. His family begged him to comply. He refused.

“He suffered so much, the torture, he really felt he had no choice,” said his younger brother, Mohamed Eljahmi, in a telephone interview from his home in the United States.

All across the Middle East, indeed the world, authoritarian governments use the power of punishment to try to intimidate and silence.

The practice may succeed as a deterrent, spreading fear among those who have not yet experienced the chill of a jail cell, the debasement of a strip search, the pain of electric shock.

But for those who have already faced the worst, the threats often have the reverse effect. In Iran, the state once jailed [Emad Baghi](#) for his work against the death penalty and in support of prisoners’ rights. In Syria, Michel Kilo was [locked up](#) after calling on President Bashar al-Assad to build citizenship and rule of law. In Egypt, [Saad Eddin Ibrahim was imprisoned](#) because of his work in support of democracy.

As Mr. Jahmi did, they each chose to continue to speak up when they were released.

“If I abandon my cause, then I will let them accomplish their goal,” Mr. Kilo said in a telephone interview after being released this month after three years in prison.

“No, I have not been broken,” he said, his voice still frail and weak.

[Ayman Nour](#), a former presidential candidate and sharp critic of President [Hosni Mubarak](#), served four years in Egypt’s Tora Prison after being convicted of charges widely regarded as politically inspired. But the night of his [release](#) in February, he appeared on Egypt’s most popular television talk show and resumed his attacks on the government.

Are these dissidents extraordinary? Are they crazy, perhaps, or egomaniacal, as some critics have said? Or are they all too human, fighting to maintain a sense of personal worth that the state has tried to strip away?

There are, of course, many reasons different people in different cultures choose the path of most resistance. But the most compelling, the activists themselves say, particularly in a Middle Eastern culture that honors martyrdom, is that prison becomes a defining and hardening experience, cementing their convictions and removing any temptation to compromise their beliefs.

Curiously, Middle Eastern leaders make the same mistake that they often warn the West about: humiliating their people, many of whom then find personal meaning and dignity in fighting back. “What’s interesting is the role the regimes play in keeping the likes of Kilo or Fathi permanently committed to their conflict with the government,” said Sarah Leah Whitson, director of [Human Rights Watch](#)’s Middle East and North Africa division.

Very often, freedom comes with so many limitations, Ms. Whitson said, that the dissidents feel more productive behind bars. Mr. Nour, for example, [recently told](#) a visiting class of journalism students from [Northeastern University](#) that he wanted to go back to prison, because he had greater impact there than on the outside. He told the students he had not been allowed to practice law, to work in politics, or even to open a bank account.

Speaking from his home in Damascus, Mr. Kilo said: “There is no doubt that when it comes to political power we are weak, but from our intellectual point of view we are not wrong, we are not defeated. I have not been defeated. But can any policeman come and take me and put me in prison right now? Sure he can.”

It is certainly not just the way of dissidents in the Middle East. The Nobel laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has had her freedom restricted for more than a decade for her opposition to Myanmar’s military junta.

In Albania, [Fatos Lubonja](#) was 24 when the police knocked on his door. At the time, Albania was a Stalinist police state. The police found his hidden writings, antigovernment ideas he had not yet even published. Mr. Lubonja was sentenced to five years in prison.

By the time the Communist government fell, Mr. Lubonja had spent a total of 17 years as a prisoner. When the new government set him free in 1991, he had options: to cash in on his life as a dissident of the old government, or to speak up against a new one that he said was itself authoritarian.

He said he had no choice.

“It is a matter not only of dignity, it is the sense of your life,” he said in a telephone interview from Italy. “It’s your choice of life, and if you give up you will lose your sense of your life.”

“Tarnishing Egypt’s image” was the reason Mr. Ibrahim was sentenced to six years in prison in 2002. He was freed by an appeals court after 10 months. He suffered from nerve damage and had trouble walking. Mr. Ibrahim went right back at it, criticizing Mr. Mubarak. While he was out of Egypt attending a conference two years ago, he was charged again — and warned not to return, or else face prison. He has lived in self-imposed exile since. On Monday a court overturned a two-year sentence he had been given, and there is talk he may now return.

“It is almost like, shall we say, like a slide, you get into this feeling of mission and you become obsessed with it,” Mr. Ibrahim said in a telephone interview from the United States, just before the verdict was issued.

He recalled a difficult moment a year into his exile, when his two grandsons visited him in Istanbul. “One of them said, ‘Grandpa, why don’t you stop, apologize to President Mubarak and come back to Egypt?’ ”

“I had never discussed politics with these children,” Mr. Ibrahim said the other day. “I said, ‘Apologize to Mubarak?’ I said, ‘Why apologize?’ ”

“They said, ‘We want you back.’ ”

“I said, ‘When he apologizes to the Egyptian people, I will apologize back,’ ” Mr. Ibrahim recalled.

He said he had no choice.

Mona el-Naggar contributed reporting.