



Not without my daughter

By [Gideon Levy](#)

We first met in the winter of 1998 in Bethlehem. At the time, Etaf Alyan had been released from administrative detention, several months after completing a 10-year prison term for preparing a booby-trapped car and attacking a prison guard. She was a local heroine: Her 40-day hunger strike in prison, in protest over her arrest without trial, ignited a fire in the territories at the time. Veiled and charismatic, the Palestinian "Joan of Arc," as she was then dubbed, told her story.

She was a communist in her youth and an Islamic Jihad activist when she grew up, whose brother was beaten to death by soldiers in 1976 and whose uncle was shot and died in her father's arms in their lost village of Hulda in 1948. In her fast and rather twisted Hebrew, she told me at the time in her thin voice, through the veil, about her man - Israeli prisoner Hafez Kundus from Jaffa, who was convicted of attempting to murder an Arab from Jaffa who had sold land that belonged to the Waqf (Muslim religious trust) to Jews.

Alyan and Kundus met twice in their lives: once at their wedding ceremony, which took place behind bars, and once when he was brought from his prison in Be'er Sheva to try to convince his beloved to desist from her hunger strike. The rest of the time they used to shout to one another through the bars, in prison.

After that we met again on several other occasions, once in the well-kept kindergarten that she set up in the yard of her home in Bethlehem, the "Jihad Kindergarten," and once at an exhibition of works by prisoners that she organized. She often says "with God's help" and "thank God," and she promised me laughingly that she would remove her veil if I took her to visit Tel Aviv.

The years passed. This week we sat in Ramallah in the office of her new husband, Walid Hodali, who was released after 12 years in an Israeli prison. Another prisoner introduced them in letters that he sent from prison to both of them. Hodali and Alyan married about two and a half years ago, and about a year and a half ago, when Alyan was 41, their daughter Ayesha was born. Now Alyan is once again in prison, another administrative detention without trial that has already been extended for a second time. This time, after another 16-day hunger strike, her baby daughter was brought to her, too.

Hodali has three children from a previous marriage whom he is not allowed to see, and now a wife and daughter in an Israeli prison, whom he is also not allowed to see. Only the picture on his computer's screensaver remains - Ayesha at 20 months, gazing at her father.

A real-life Palestinian telenovela.

Hodali says that on the eve of their wedding, they promised each other not to work in any organization any more, neither Jihad nor Islamic, in order not to endanger their liberty again. He works mornings in the Ramallah waterworks, and afternoons in the offices of Beit al-Maqdes, a literary association that is connected to Bir Zeit University. From the heights of a modern office building in central Ramallah, this association publishes dozens of attractively designed books for children and adults. Now they are working on a translation of "Lords of the Land: The Settlers and the State of Israel," by Idith Zertal and Akiva Eldar.

Hodali, a writer, has already published seven books, mainly about prison life. His current project is a book of short stories that he is writing in the name of his daughter, Ayesha. One about how it feels when Mommy is arrested; the second, about looking at Mommy through the glass during a visit to prison; and the third, about Mommy whose detention is once again extended. All through the eyes of the little observer. "I want to ask: What kind of a house is it, without Mommy?" Hodali writes. He explains that these are not political stories.

Ramallah is crowded and bustling as it hasn't been for a long time. The trip between Tel Aviv and the Muqata, the late Yasser Arafat's compound in Ramallah, takes an hour, without getting stuck at any checkpoint. On Arafat's grave, in the courtyard of the Muqata, they are building a mausoleum; entry is free and there is no security check. Until the mausoleum is completed, there is only scaffolding around the site, which is nothing but a concrete floor. You have to ask the Palestinian workers where the exact resting place of the founding father is located.

Walid spent the years 1990-2002 in an Israeli prison. He is 46 years old, born in the Jilazoun refugee camp outside Ramallah. He studied mathematics in Ramallah. In prison he broadened his education to include the study of Arabic literature; he also wrote his books there.

His 14-year-old son died of an illness while he was in prison and he was not allowed to attend his funeral. His other three children are living with their mother in Jordan and are not allowed to enter the territories. He is not allowed to visit them either - unless he promises not to return. Only the telephone and the Internet are left. He hasn't seen his older children in six years, since their one and only visit to him in prison in Ashkelon. First affiliated with Fatah and then the Islamic Movement, Hodali says today that he does not belong to any organization: In the morning, water, and in the afternoon, literature.

"You can work for your people without risk, too. Etaf and I promised ourselves that we would not resume any activity that would return us to prison. Why? Because I hate prison, with a passion," Hodali explains.

Alyan's reputation spread in the West Bank and reached him as well. A gentle and shy man, he smiles in embarrassment when asked about the circumstances of his blind date with her. Actually, it wasn't really a blind date: Etaf had seen him on television, and he also saw her on television, in her veil. Nidal Zalum, a mutual friend and prisoner, begged the two to get married; he thought they were a good match. The prison matchmaker sent letters to both of them, and the rest is almost history.

Walid phoned Etaf several times. They had three or four very brief conversations and fell in love. Afterward she was once again arrested for a year, and love had to wait. When she was released, about two and a half years ago, he phoned to congratulate her on her release. Then he summoned up his courage and drove to her house, to ask for her hand. Alyan had separated from Hafez Kundus two years earlier, and Walid claims that the two were only engaged and not married.

Her family agreed to the match. Two days later they married and went to live in his home in Ramallah. Alyan opened an Internet cafe in the city center, for women only. She is still veiled, but her husband is opposed to this. In his opinion, it's enough for a Muslim woman to cover her hair and her neck, but Walid respects his wife's decision. In 1998, she told me: "I have loved the veil since the age of 18, but I couldn't wear it. At the time, wearing religious clothes in Bethlehem was considered strange. They were distanced from religion. People would ask, why do you dress like that, and I didn't want to fight over things before their time. I couldn't wear a veil, but it was in my heart, and when I felt that the time had come to wear it, I did so. That was in prison, around 1989 or 1990, and since then I've been wearing

it."

On September 29, 2005, about a year after they married, Ayesha was born. Her father says that his life is divided into what happened before September 29 and what happened afterward, just as life in America is divided into pre- and post-9/11. Alyan used to take Ayesha to work every day; occasionally she would pull on her mother's veil and remove it for a moment. He was a writer, she was the owner of a cafe, Ayesha was born, and life smiled on them for a moment. But only for a moment.

On the night of December 12, 2005, soldiers surrounded their house. Hodali thought the door would come off its hinges from the soldiers' knocking. He was convinced that they had come to take him. He says that anyone who has spent many years in prison has nightmares about this moment. Both he and Alyan were afraid of this. Dozens of male and female soldiers entered the house. When Hodali saw the female soldiers he understood that they had come to take her, not him: "We always joked that if they came to arrest me, we would tell the soldiers that I was not connected to anything and that they should take her. But when it really happened, I prayed that they would arrest me 100 times over - just not her."

Ayesha awoke from her sleep, her mother gave her a last hug and burst into tears. Alyan insisted on taking her along and said the law allowed it, but the soldiers refused. Thus the baby was torn from her mother. The next day the neighbors came and offered to take care of the child. But Hodali insisted on raising her alone. During the following months Ayesha stuck to her father - in water and in literature. In her prison, Alyan began a hunger strike, demanding that her daughter be brought to her. After 16 days the authorities at Neveh Tirza prison gave in, and Alyan's lawyer brought Ayesha to the prison. Hodali says he would have preferred to have her stay with him, "but I couldn't say no to her. Could I tell her no after a 16-day hunger strike?"

Alyan is now with Ayesha most of the time in their prison cell. Quality time. In the neighboring cell is another Palestinian mother and her baby. Last week, another baby was born to a Palestinian prisoner; she gave birth in the hospital while in handcuffs. Hodali has tried to send CDs to his daughter, but the prison authorities have not allowed it. Only the lawyer is allowed to visit Alyan. She has been sentenced to six months of administrative detention, which was shortened in the court to four months, which were then extended by another six months, which were also shortened to four months. Everything without a trial, without an indictment, without anyone being certain about the nature of the accusations against the young mother.

Why did they arrest her, I ask Hodali, who says: "They must have some intelligence report based on a collaborator who gets money and informs on people. I'm sure that she didn't hide anything from me and she was not involved in any forbidden activity, but it's easy to accuse Etaf falsely, because of her past."

Ayesha smiles down from the bookshelf in Hodali's office, too. A few weeks ago, when they brought Alyan to the Ofer prison - just three kilometers away from where we are now sitting - to discuss extending her administrative detention, he went crazy: "Three kilometers from here, and I can't see either my daughter or my wife." Phone calls are, of course, out of the question.

"I cannot understand how my daughter is now in prison," says Hodali. "How she dreams without a garden, and how she awakes to the sound of shouts - 'Count off, count off' - and finds herself in solitary confinement. I cannot understand how she will handle this."

Alyan and Ayesha are scheduled to be released in three months and one week, if the administrative detention is not extended once again. Walid Hodali is counting the days.