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I am not the Person Responsible, the Occupation Is

Buthina Canaan Khoury tackles a difficult subject in her first feature Documentary, <cite>Women in Struggle</cite>. The film is about four Palestinian women imprisoned in Israeli jails for various offences, ranging from the serious (providing safe houses for members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, surveying targets and planting bombs), to the less serious (waving the Palestinian flag, which was prohibited before the 1993 Oslo Accords). <p> Most of the film centers on the lives of three middle-aged women: Aysha Odeh and her sister Rasmieh Odeh, who were both sentenced to life in prison but spent ten years in detention; and Rawda Basir, who spent eight years in prison. These women joined the resistance in the 1960s and 70s, after Israel occupied what remained of Palestine in the June 1967 war. Towards the end of the film a younger Palestinian women called Terry Bulata is interviewed. She was imprisoned several times in the 1980s during the first Palestinian intifada–a national civil uprising that lasted from 1987 to 1993. <p> The film starts off strangely, with Aysheh Odeh watching a movie on a TV set where a young girl is tortured and thrown into a bucket of water. In the next scene, Odeh is driving the car while Khoury is filming. On approaching a checkpoint (one of hundreds scattered throughout the West Bank), Odeh and Khoury enter into an argument with an Israeli soldier. The soldier is Complaining because Odeh didn't bother to queue up with the hundreds of other Palestinians who had been waiting at the checkpoint all day. Instead she overtakes them on the wrong side of the road and then enters into a pointless argument with the soldier. Khoury's intention was probably to elicit the viewer's sympathy by highlighting the suffering and misery caused by Israel's prolonged and belligerent occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and its impact on Palestinian life (such as restrictions on movement). But entering into a semi-coherent argument with an Israeli soldier (who probably does not want to be there) over the rights and wrongs of the occupation is not the best way to go about doing this. This scene as it is adds nothing to the documentary and it should have been cut. <p> Similarly, the next scene with Rawda Basir is out of place. In this clip, Khoury follows Basir from Nablus where she currently lives, to see her former home in the old city of Arab East Jerusalem. Rather embarrassingly, the current occupant, a Christian Palestinian woman called "Mary," doesn't want a complete stranger barging into her home with a journalist (who happens to have a camera on her shoulder) while she has guests! It beggars belief why it did not cross Khoury's mind that this scene ought to also be cut from the documentary, which is a shame because the film's subject matter is unusual, important and interesting. <p> The most fascinating and shocking aspects of this film are the interviews with the three middle-aged women about their activities in the Palestinian national movement, their experiences in prison, and their relationships with their families during and after their internment. Aysha Odeh, a strikingly beautiful women in her youth, was subjected to sexual torture (similar to the stories one hears today from Guantanamo Bay in Cuba and Abu Ghraib in Iraq) which included being tied up and displayed naked (in front of male officers who touched her), as well as being beaten and raped. At one point Aysha alleges that she was violated with a stick: <p> "No matter how much I screamed, they would not stop. I remember the pain. It seemed like it came out of the belly of the earth and would come through my body like

a twister reaching up to the sky." <p> Despite the passage of time, the sexual torture made it difficult for Aysha to have a normal sexual relationship with her husband. So when he was exiled to Jordan it was a relief for her. But the pain did not stop there. Aysha's sister, Rasmieh was also subjected to sexual torture. The Israelis used torture to force the sisters to confess against one another. In the film, Rasmieh describes an incident when she was brought into a room and made to watch a male prisoner get electrocuted after she herself had been tortured and stripped naked. The man died from the shocks. But for Rasmieh, the worst was yet to come: <p> "Even though I was stripped naked and tortured in front of others, in front of my father the situation hit me at a different level. I was worried about my father; this was a very sensitive issue. I was worried he would die from this incident, as though something major inside him was destroyed." <p> Walls and fences have become a familiar sight for many Palestinians in the West Bank who have discovered that prison seems to follow them wherever they go. When Rawda Basir makes the difficult journey from Ramallah to Jerusalem to visit her friend Terry Bullata, Khoury skillfully uses the camera to portray the concept of imprisonment with what most Palestinians have to live with now. And Aysha put it most pertinently: <p> "You discover that you cannot get prison out of you. You carry it inside you. It confronts you with every detail. Your life in prison dictates to you your behavior to the outside world. In other words, you didn't leave prison; you actually carried it with you." <p> The film explores an interesting subject but it is too long. At least 15-20 minutes could be cut. Khoury needs to keep the viewer engaged and interested. There is too much incidental information in the film that is not necessary for The message she is trying to convey. Khoury also presumes that viewers are familiar with the Palestinian question, and with the story of Jamela Abu Hared, when in fact they may not have any previous knowledge whatsoever of the Palestinian struggle for social justice. And since it is presumed that this film is primarily aimed at a Western audience (since it is subtitled in both English and French) more background information is required. This could be achieved with a voiceover or with maps and supplying additional material on the DVD. <p> Sadly, Khoury does not quite manage to convey the plight of the Palestinian people in the film, nor the pivotal role Arab women have played in Palestinian society and in their struggle for independence. Having said this, the film does contain rare and invaluable testimony to the appalling treatment meted out on Palestinian female detainees in Israeli prisons in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

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