

Mehdi Aslani

ARRESTED: February 1985
DETAINED IN: Gohardasht Prison
RELEASED: February 1989



1. My name is Mehdi Aslani. I was arrested in February 1985 (Bahman 1363) and was a political prisoner in Iran for more than four years. I was sentenced to five years imprisonment. I was serving my sentence in Gohardasht Prison during the massacre of political prisoners in 1988.
2. I make this statement in support of an investigation into the mass execution of political prisoners in 1988 in Iran.
3. This statement is true to the best of my knowledge and belief. Except where I indicate to the contrary, I make this statement on the basis of facts and matters within my own knowledge. Where the facts and mat-

ters in this statement are within my own knowledge they are true. Where the facts and matters are not within my own knowledge, I have identified the source or sources of my information, and I believe such facts to be true.

Arrest and Detention

4. I was affiliated with the Fadaiyan Khalq Organization (FKO), followers of the 16 Azar (December 7th) Congress. Our group was a small group within the FKO Majority (Aksariat) Organization that opposed the latter's alliance with, in fact dissolution within, the [pro-Soviet Communist] Tudeh Party. We split from the Aksariat Organization on 7 December 1981.
5. On a cold February day of 1985, a clean Renault car with two young passengers, rather well dressed, passed by me while my friend and I were walking toward a newsstand at the Golkar crossroads in Tehran. One of the young men seemed to be looking for an acquaintance; he gazed at me for a moment. I saw a hunter's glint in his eyes and he said something to the driver. Ignoring the car, I stopped at the newsstand and started to browse the newspapers. The Renault stopped when I stopped walking. The two young men in the car did not



match the image of political police I had in mind. In the car I saw a big open photo album between the driver and the front seat. One of the agents got out of the car, came to me, and said, "Be quiet and get in the car." I raised my voice and said loudly: "Didn't the authorities say this year was dedicated to the rule of law and we should confront lawlessness?" I wanted to alert the bystanders to my arrest, so that they could give the news to my family. A few people noticed the brawl and started to gather around us. I started to consider the option of fleeing. The young agent realized what was going on and showed me the firearm he was carrying under his overcoat. When I saw the firearm, I decided against fleeing. But I shouted, "Doesn't this country have laws? You cannot arrest whoever you want in the middle of the day without a warrant!!!" The agent said, "Keep quiet and get in the car or else I will break your teeth." The number of people gathering around us was increasing. Suddenly the agent screamed, "You rascal son of a dog, you ruin young people's lives. You filthy drug dealer, you are distributing drugs in this neighborhood." I shouted: "Everyone knows me in this area, drug dealer yourself." An old woman of our neighborhood came forward and said, "We know his family, I am sure you are mistaking him for someone else. Furthermore, you yourself look more like a drug addict." I became more confrontational. The agent felt that the situation was getting out of control, the driver of the Renault joined him and the two of them tried to force me into the car. I resisted and asked for their i.d. cards. I was trying to make sure that my fam-

ily would learn of my arrest. I shouted, "I have to bring medicine to my old mother who lives a block away at 68 Shahin Street. She is waiting for her medicine." Then I turned toward the crowd and said, "I beg you, don't give her the news brutally; she may have a heart attack." Meanwhile, my companion, who had continued on his way, unaware of what was happening, noticed the brawl and hurried back to the scene. I tried to warn him with signs, but to no avail. He thought I was fighting with a bystander and rushed to one of the agents. The first agent shot his gun in the sky to disperse the people in the street. Then they took us [me along with my friend] to a nearby carpentry shop and called the revolutionary committee's patrol for help. The patrol arrived and they threw a military blanket over our heads and forced us into the committee's patrol car and took us to the detention center.

6. The two young agents who arrested me were members of Tehran's prosecution team. My arrest was accidental. At the time I was under the Ministry of Information watch and they didn't plan to arrest me then [for they wanted to find as many as possible of my fellow militants and arrest a great number of us at the same time]. In fact before the creation of the Ministry of Information in the summer of 1984, all the issues related to arrests, detentions, and interrogations were under the control of the prosecutor's office and the intelligence branch of the Revolutionary Guards. Between 1981 and 1984, Lajevardi, Tehran's Revolutionary Prosecutor, and his team had the upper hand in all matters related to intelligence and arrests. During the



transition and the transfer of responsibilities to the Ministry of Information, there was some overlapping of jurisdiction [with the prosecutor's office and the Ministry of Information each pursuing its own agenda], of which my untimely arrest [was an example], but after that every similar matter was under the control of the Ministry of Information.

7. I call my blindfold my "travel mate." In the early days of the Revolution, the interrogators were called the "Ku Klux Klan" because they wore hoods. But later, most of the time, it was the prisoners who were wearing the blindfolds, and wearing them made us confused and disoriented.

Events Surrounding 1988

8. In the fall of 1987, about ten months before the massacres of 1988, there was a general reclassifying and relocating of prisoners in Gohardasht Prison. The prison was divided into two distinct sections, separating religious and non-religious prisoners. There was this redistribution and questions and answers that felt like an inquisition. The questioning was less about our political stands and more about our ideology.
9. In addition to this faith-based redistribution, prisoners were also divided based on the length of their sentences. Those sentenced to fewer than ten years were held in a ward; and those sentenced to between ten and twenty years, in another location. Prisoners sentenced to more than twenty years were moved to Evin Prison in a process that lasted a few months. Almost all those who were transferred to Evin, except for a handful, were hanged during the summer of 1988.
10. Another notable point was the interrogation around mid-fall 1987, during which Naserian, the Assistant Prosecutor, and Lashkari, the prison guard, asked inquisitorial questions. For example, "Do you pray"? Previously, after an interrogation, prisoners were taken back to their wards, which enabled them to inform their fellow prisoners of the tone of the interrogation. This time however, after questioning, prisoners were held in the administrative part of the ward so that they couldn't communicate with other prisoners. The Hosseinyeh was also in the same administrative section, as were the offices of Naserian and Lashkari. At the time of the questioning we were not paying much attention. It was only later that we thought about all these issues. At the time, we didn't know what was happening and we were not thinking of a hidden agenda. Generally since 1987 the prison situation had been pretty good because the regime was getting weaker on all fronts, on the war front and the political front. The number of *mellikesh*, those who would not agree to be interviewed in order to obtain their release, was increasing regularly, and so did the prisoners' demands.
11. Several incidents occurred in 1988 [before the prison massacres] that lifted the prisoners' morale and in particular gave MKO sympathizers courage and made them more resistant.
12. Before the 1988 massacres, the Liberation Army of the Mojahedin Khalq Organization carried out two important military



operations in the western part of the country: Operation Aftab and Operation Chelcheragh. During the Chelcheragh Operation, the town of Mehran was occupied by the Mojahedin for a few days. This is the origin of the [MKO] slogan “Today Mehran, tomorrow Tehran.” During the same period [two other noteworthy events occurred: first], the chemical bombing of Halabcheh, an Iraqi Kurdish region occupied by Iran, took place, causing the death of 5,000 people; and later [on 3 July 1988] an Iranian Airbus, a civilian jetliner carrying passengers from Bandar Abbas to Dubai, was hit by the Americans [USS *Vincennes* (CG-49)] in the [Persian] Gulf. All 300 passengers [and crew] of the plane were killed. These events testified to the weakness of the Iranian regime on the front and boosted the prisoners’ will to be defiant.

13. Another reason I think the killing had been planned [in advance] was what happened during the Ramadan period in 1988. In previous years, during the Ramadan fasting month, they [prison guards] would bring breakfast before sunrise. The Mojahedin [who fasted] would eat breakfast [before sunrise] and the leftists would keep it and eat it for lunch [since no lunch was served at noon]. Because we had no refrigerators in the ward and the food could go bad, the leftists always asked the guards to have warm meals and the guards always reacted strongly. Surprisingly, during Ramadan 1988 (which was in the spring and thus the weather was not very hot), the guards did not react and responded positively to the leftist prisoners’ request. In fact, in doing so, they acknowledged our

identity as leftists. At the time we totally missed the meaning of [their reaction]. For Ramadan, regardless of the political angle, is also a matter of values and beliefs, and [it was strange that] a regime that publicly lashed ordinary people for eating in public during the fasting period would allow the prison guards to serve Marxist prisoners three warm meals a day. In previous years [during the month of Ramadan], food caused confrontations between prison guards and prisoners. In fact, the regime made us draft our own indictments because in the summer of 1988 they killed leftist prisoners for apostasy. For according to Shari’a law and Islamic jurisprudence, there are four ways to prove apostasy, the most important of which is the accused’s own confession. In fact, with our behavior [eating during Ramadan], we had exposed our leftist identity [and therefore the fact that we were non-believers]. The authorities encouraged us to do so. They were opening the path, or to be more specific, a one-way highway leading to a dark tunnel ending in the cemetery, and they gave us space to drive at the maximum speed.

14. They [the authorities] were looking for an appropriate excuse to justify the physical elimination of 1988, which was not a massacre in the classical sense. As I said, for the leftists, the excuse for the execution was apostasy, meaning turning back from God; for the Mojahedin, it was waging war on God. Before the period leading to the summer of 1988, no Mojahed had the right to call his or her organization “Mojahedin.” If any of them did so, they would smash his/her teeth. But in 1988, they [the guards]



didn't mind. When asked about their charge, the Mojahedin prisoners would use the word "Organization." And prison guards would not react. Then, the prisoners took one step forward and fearlessly said "Mojahedin." Some even said, "the Proud and Respected People's Mojahedin of Iran Organization," but the prison guards had been ordered to let them be. The prison guards' lack of reaction was a trap set for prisoners, who were later executed on that charge. This was the great treachery [that facilitated] the killings.

15. The Mojahedin used the excuse of religious holidays to organize events. Before 1988, if the prison guards got wind of the Mojahedin having celebrations, they would confront them seriously. But at that time [1988], not only did they not prevent them from doing so, they encouraged them. Iraj Mesdaghi, a surviving Mojahed, has written in his book, *Khalil Al Wazir* was killed in the Palestinian-occupied territories. The Mojahedin declared silence in the ward and then started to chant a hymn. First they did so quietly and when nothing happened, they sang louder and still no reaction. They regularly organized protests using the excuse of religious events and nothing happened. In Gohardasht Prison, Naserian, the Assistant Prosecutor, was the de facto manager of the prison. He had been there since 1986 (1365).
16. In prison, twice a day, at 8 a.m. and 2 p.m., they turned the radio on for half an hour so that we could listen to the news. At 2:00 p.m. on 18 July 1988, they announced in the news that Iran had accepted the conditions of the United Nations Resolution 598 to end the war. The news had been announced by the then-President Ali Khamene'i to Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, the UN Secretary-General. Two days later, on 20 July, we heard of Khomeini's officially accepting the Resolution and "drinking the poison." We could not contain our joy when we heard that Khomeini had accepted the Resolution. The prison exploded from happiness that day. We had two reasons [to rejoice]; first, our biggest enemy had been humiliated; second, the society was going to be free from the misery of war. What we didn't know was that for the little sip of poison that Khomeini drank they were going to force us to drink buckets of poison.
17. Normally, daily chores in the prison were done by Afghans and the ordinary [non-political] prisoners. The Islamic Republic was exploiting the Afghans. During the three weeks of the killings, that is from the time the television was taken away, the Afghans didn't come and the guards brought the food themselves. Before the Afghans disappeared, one of them had tried to warn prisoners by making signs that a cleric has come and he is killing prisoners. But the prisoners did not understand his signs and did not get his message.
18. They turned the radio off on 26 or 27 of July, but the television was still there. Fridays were exciting because feature movies were aired on public television in the afternoon. But on 29 July, an hour before the movie was scheduled to air, they took the television away. That day, the ward's guard brought the food on a cart to the door himself and left the cart there. An



hour later, the same guard came back and went straight to the television, unplugged it and put it on the cart to take it out. We protested, saying, “Why are you taking the television now?” They said, “We need to fix these and bring a color television.” Some said: “how about taking it in a few hours so that at least we get to watch the Friday movie?” He responded, “I have orders. I have to take it now.” We told the guard, “the news was not broadcast from the radio.” He said “the guard probably forgot to turn it on.” It had happened before that the guards would forget to turn it on, but not several times in a row. It meant they had cut it off. [That Friday], there were quasi-inaudible radio sounds coming from *zir hasht* [the administrative section of the ward]. The Friday Sermon Imam had become the conductor of the “must be executed” orchestra and the prayer attendants were chanting “the armed hypocrite must be executed.”

19. [The guard] was clearly lying. That day, all prison televisions were taken away. The next day, 30 July, was our turn to get fresh air in the morning. At 8:00 a.m., after breakfast, the guard was supposed to open the door [to let us out]. Sometimes our time was switched with that of ward 7. Surprisingly, neither of the wards was allowed out. There was no sign of the 8:00 a.m. radio news. The two morning newspapers, *Jomhuri Eslami* and *Sobh Azadegan*, were cut off, as were the two afternoon papers, *Kayhan* and *Ettela'at*.
20. The next day, Sunday, 31 July, was our ward's visitation day. But there was no visitation. Some banged at the door to protest.

They said, “We are remodeling the visitation room and there will be no visitations until further notice.” During those days, they did not mistreat prisoners. They only cut off all our means of communication. Cutting off all means of communication without a punishment context was out of the ordinary. Among all the restrictions imposed on us, banning visitations seemed strange considering that the regime had no desire to alienate families. We saw in this a sign of the regime's weakness.

21. Based on the news we heard later, we realized that in July the leadership of the Mojahedin had mobilized its forces from countries around the world for a final attack against a regime that, they believed, was collapsing. But this political adventurism lasted three days. A great number of the Mojahedin were burned, hanged, or arrested in the western towns of Iran, and some of them managed to escape. We learned of this attack a few days later when the state television showed the MKO's burned tanks, the militants' dead bodies, and the POWs. The Mersad or Forugh Javidan operation provided the regime with the excuse to implement a plan that it had prepared before this operation and not because of it.
22. We didn't know at the time that, starting the last week of July, the Death Committee nominated by Ayatollah Khomeini had started the killing of the Mojahedin. We had no information whatsoever about the Mojahedin because they were held in another wing of the prison. The Mojahedin were kept in the left wing of the prison and the leftists in the right side. From ward 8,



- where I was held, we had a partial view of the prison's administrative area. One night in early August, we stayed awake and managed to push the blind up slightly [giving us a view out of the window] in the ward's last cell. We saw a number of masked people loading and unloading a refrigerated truck for meat. We used the last cell in our ward as a kitchen. This room overlooked the lower section of the prison administration's parking area. Looking out through the blind, we recognized prison guards from their green Revolutionary Guard outfits, but their faces were covered by masks. The guards were sanitizing that area. Each of us had a different interpretation, but no one was thinking about death. Later we learned that when they hanged people, the smell of feces and urine on the execution site took over the whole area. Apparently, because of the extreme heat of August and to fight the stench, they felt sanitizing was necessary.
23. A prisoner who was a member of the Tudeh Party, Mohammed Zahedi, who survived and now lives in Belgium, could hear the sound of something being thrown into the truck. He says that he heard that sound 20 to 25 times every day. But this may have been the sound of the first bodies hitting the truck's floor. The rest of the bodies falling on the previous ones did not produce any sound. This usually happened after sundown. We all had different interpretations. One person said, "maybe they are planting flowers and are using pesticides." Another person said: "I read in the news that rotten chicken has been distributed in the city. What if they are trying to make us eat it?"
24. Some prisoners with good taste had planted flowers in the garden. Since we were not allowed out, there was no one to water the flowers in the heat of August. Prisoners kept calling the guards and told them, "since you don't let us go out, water the flowers yourself." A guard called Seyyed Morteza told them angrily, "are you thinking of the flowers? You should be thinking about yourselves." We didn't understand why we had to worry about ourselves. They were slaughtering people two feet away from us and we really had no idea.
25. What I, in ward 8, and other inmates in ward 7 and the subsidiary ward, realized was that the killing of MKO affiliates took approximately 20 days (the last week of July and the first two weeks of August). Later when we read Ayatollah Montazeri's book, we realized that on 15 August, the first day of the holy month of Moharam, the killing of MKO affiliates in Gohardasht and Evin prisons had ended. Owing to the insecurity in important cities such as Kermanshah [caused by the war with Iraq and the fact that the MKO had occupied the western city of Mehran for 72 hours, beginning on 19 June 1988, during its Operation Chelcheragh], some of the MKO prisoners in Dizelabad Prison (in Kermanshah) had been transferred to the subsidiary ward in Gohardasht, and most of the inmates in that ward were hanged in the summer of 1988. Furthermore, between 15 and 22 August, for a week, the Death Committee did not come to Gohardasht Prison. There was a one-week gap between the MKOs' killing and the leftists' killing.



26. For a couple of weeks the prison was calm. On 27 August the killing of the leftists in Gohardasht Prison began. We had no idea about the ongoing calamity. Even when we were standing before the Death Committee, we didn't know why we were there. It was all deception and lies. On 28 August (it was still in the month of Moharam), guards wearing black came to our ward, ward 8. They took us all—there were 80 inmates in our ward. That day there were not enough blindfolds; usually the guards brought the blindfolds. So we had to use towels or anything at hand to cover our eyes. We were not even given enough time to put on our slippers.
27. They sat us on the two sides of the hallway in the administrative section of the prison. A quick interrogation took place in two separate offices. Lashkari was in one office, and Naserian was in the other. One by one, we were taken in very quickly and asked our name, charges, group, if we prayed, if we were Muslim, what we thought of our group, if we would denounce our group, if we would give an interview. It happened very fast and we were not beaten and didn't experience any pressure. From those 80 people, only 17 were separated from us. Apparently these people had given responses that showed that they were not as stubborn.
28. As we were waiting in the hallway, the guards wearing black reappeared carrying their whips. They put us in line and started to lash us on our backs and push us toward the left part of the prison where there were three cells. They squeezed the 63 of us into three rooms and sent the other 17 prisoners back to the ward.
29. We were put in a room without a window. At last, at sunset on the 28th of August, the door opened with difficulty (as the room was filled with people), and a guard appeared with a handheld transceiver. He started to scream violently: "Ten people to the committee." This was the first time we were hearing about the committee. They didn't even call it "court." Before we had time to react, the guard picked ten of us. I was one of them, the last one who was selected and so I was the first one on the line. Lajevardi, the butcher of Evin, was right when he said, "the prisoners analyze any meaningless fact." Later when we, the survivors, tried to figure out what the guard's criteria were for choosing us, we couldn't find any common denominator except our physical corpulence. They took us to the lower level. The delegation was on the ground floor. We had our hands on each other's shoulders and we were blindfolded. We couldn't imagine what fate awaited us. Like robots we were following the guard's orders. At some point I made a mistake and turned in the wrong direction.
30. As a result, the initial order of the line was disrupted. And in the new order, Jahanbakhsh Sarkhosh, an FKO (Minority) affiliate, became the first in line. He had served almost all his sentence; just a few months were left. We were led to the lower level of the prison, near the room where the Death Committee was officiating. They made us sit and wait.
31. Jahanbakhsh was the first to be called in; his ward mates called him Jahan ("world" in Persian). The seconds were slow to pass. A few minutes later, Jahan came out of the



room grumbling. Naserian entrusted him to the guard and said, “Take him to the left.” That was the last time anyone saw Jahan. We didn’t know that a few minutes later, Jahan’s honey-colored, gentle, and kind eyes—the eyes of someone who wanted nothing but the happiness of all the world’s (Jahan’s) inhabitants—would be closed forever. In every prison, it is customary to give a moment to the condemned to say goodbye to his cellmates. But we were not even allowed to hug and kiss Jahan. Jahan was destined to the left and a hanging noose kissed his valiant neck. Had I turned in the right direction given by the guard in the corridor of death, today you would be taking Jahan’s testimony.

32. Among the ten of us, Mehrdad Neshati was the second one to be called before the Death Committee. He was an FKO (Minority) sympathizer. He too had almost finished serving his term. He was born to a Christian father, but because of a problem in his file, they considered him a Muslim. Nayyeri couldn’t declare Mehrdad an apostate [because of his father’s religion]. Some other prisoners also did not accept being Muslim, but since they didn’t defend their ideology, their apostasy could not be proven. So Islam was to be introduced to them with the help of a cable. Naserian had told them, disappointedly, “It is a pity there is only one signature [of one of the committee members] missing for you [to be executed].” However the prisoners didn’t know, at this point, the price they would have to pay for not praying.
33. After Mehrdad, Akbar Alyin was called in and came out with the same verdict as

Mehrdad, “Beat him until he prays.” It was then my turn, on 28 August 1988. As I entered the room the Death Committee was in, I was ordered to take off my blindfold and respond to the religious judge. I was facing three members of the committee who were sitting behind a big desk. From right to left: Morteza Eshraqi, the prosecutor; Hojjat ol-islam Hossein’ali Nayyeri, the religious judge, and head of the Committee; and Mostafa Pourmohammadi, the representative of the Ministry of Information. Nayyeri posed the first question: “Are you a Muslim or a Marxist?” During all these years I had tried to elude the question.

34. I have to say that during my detention (1985 to 1988), we had some margin to maneuver (in our Q and A) that prisoners didn’t have in 1981 to 1984. But with the Death Committee, there was no way I could equivocate. So I responded, “I was born to Muslim parents, but philosophically speaking I consider myself neither Muslim nor Marxist.” The judge said, “but you are charged with being a member of a Marxist group.” I replied, “I was attracted to the FKO pro-justice slogans but not to their philosophy.” He said, “Cut the crap, as if only Marxist movements are promoting justice in this country!”
35. I was standing and responding to questions, when the phone on the desk rang. The religious judge spoke very respectfully with his interlocutor on the phone. Then he hung up and, with his hands, he signaled to his fellow committee members that they had to go. He told Naserian, take him away for now, we will see [him] later. For the first time I got lucky.



36. The Committee left Gohardasht Prison, to come back only three days later, on 31 August. I was led out of the room and joined the six people who remained from our group of ten prisoners. They took us to a big cell. One of the mysteries of the 1988 killings was why the Death Committee stopped working in Gohardasht on 29 and 30 August. As far as I know, no one was called before the committee during these days. Until now, we have been only conjecturing about it.
37. On 31 August, about noon, they took us to the corridor of death. I went in. Hojjat ol-islam Nayeri posed his customary questions about my identity and my charges and then asked the key question, "Are you Muslim or Marxist?" I replied, "I am Muslim." He then asked, "Do you pray?" I said, "Haj Aqa! Up until now, like many other Muslims, I have not prayed. I think if I feigned praying I would be disrespectful to you. Morteza Eshraqi said to Naserian, "Take him away. He will damn well pray!" As I was trying to insist on not praying, Eshraqi said, "A born Muslim must pray. Take him out and shave his mustache. He will pray." Naserian took me by my shirt and brutally dragged me out of the room. Nayeri told Naserian, "He needs to sign the form first and then be shaved and start to pray. And if he refuses to pray, beat him until he starts praying."
38. A mustache is very valuable among Iranian men, and in particular within leftist circles. Well aware of this point, these male chauvinist dispensers of death ordered my mustache to be shaved. At the very doorstep, Adel the evil [guy] responsible for the prison store, shaved half of my mustache and then gave me the form to sign.
39. There were a few paragraphs on this form. I had to acknowledge that I was a Shi'a Muslim and pledge that I would do my religious duties, in particular the prayer. I crossed out the last paragraph and signed the form. Those who signed the form would be taken to their wards. But Naserian got angry when he saw what I had done with the form. He tore up the form and punched and kicked me into a cell where a few *mellikesh* resided.
40. In the cell, I was informed that some of the *mellikesh* had been called that same day before the committee. Luckily, they had been warned through Morse code messaging before their hearing. All those thrown in that cell had refused to pledge to pray. After a few hours, Naserian came with two guards carrying whips. With his languid red eyes, he looked at us and asked, "Why didn't you fill out the form the way it was?" And then he signaled to the guards to start beating us, and so they did. After the beating, we were returned to ward 8 and started to ask after our friends. Where is Ahmad? Darius? Mahmud? Homayun? We were all downcast, tears in our eyes, trying to swallow an explosive anger. *They had simply stopped being, and we were, not so simply, still being.*

Frankfurt, July 2009

