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Janan Abdu with her two daughters outside a closed-door hearing on her husband Ameer Makhoul's arrest, 12 May 2010. (Oren Ziv/ActiveStills)

I used to tell my husband, Ameer Makhoul, "One day, they'll come for you." As chairman of the Public Committee for the Protection of Political Freedoms he'd begun to organize an awareness-raising campaign to push back against the security services' harassment of our community, the Palestinian citizens of Israel.

Come for Ameer they did, late one night this May, pounding at our door, ransacking our house and terrifying our two teenage daughters. And now I've joined the ranks of Palestinian prisoners' wives, many thousands of us from the occupied territories as well as within Israel. His 13 July hearing — persecution really — could begin the legal nightmare that ruptures our family for many years. This is the likely course of events unless Ameer gets a fair trial and his coerced statements are rejected or suppressed by the court.

"Democracies don't fear their own people," Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in her 3 July speech in Poland at the 10th anniversary meeting of the Community of Democracies. "They recognize that citizens must be free to come together to advocate and agitate." But the head of Israel's General Security Services said three years ago that Palestinian citizens' organizational efforts for equality constitute a "strategic threat," even if pursued by lawful means.

That's not how democracy works. We may be a minority of 20 percent, but our rights to organize and insist on full equality and civil rights ought to be sacrosanct. That's what our entire community believes. The Public Committee that Ameer chaired was established within the framework of the High Follow-up Committee for the Arab Citizens of Israel, the community's overall coordinating body. It's a vital position and the leading organization protecting our civil rights.

And now he faces the most serious charges leveled against a Palestinian citizen of Israel since the creation of the state in 1948. He is accused of being a spy (for the Lebanese militant group Hizballah) and having contact with a foreign agent. His trial will likely last for months.

After his arrest, Ameer was held incommunicado for 21 days and tortured. Then Israeli officials pressed their charges, based on the "confession" he made during this time, when he was deprived of

sleep, shackled in a painful position to a small chair and not allowed to see his lawyers.

Ameer denies all charges. As he said in his first letter from Gilboa Prison, he was “forced to explain to them in a very detailed way how exactly I did what I didn’t do, ever.” And if the prosecution needs any more information to make its case, all they have to do is use “so-called secret evidence, which my lawyers and I have no legal right to know about.”

Clinton’s Krakow speech focused on civil society: Ameer is a civil society activist. He directs Ittijah, the Union of Arab-Based Community Associations — a coalition that brings together 84 nongovernmental organizations. Clinton criticized several governments by name — but not Israel — for intimidation and assassination of activists. Why does America’s drive to promote human rights stop at Israel’s door?

Throughout his life, Ameer has struggled for the rights of the Palestinian citizens of Israel — there are more than 35 laws on the books that discriminate against us — as well as those of the Palestinian people overall. He has the ability to lead and to convene diverse viewpoints, bringing them together across sect and ideology. His ability to network locally, at the Arab level, and internationally, coupled with his clear strategic vision — this is what Israel is trying to silence.

The youth also look to him for leadership, which infuriates the Israeli security services. They told Ameer so when they hauled him in for questioning during our community’s protests against Israel’s assault on Gaza in December 2008-January 2009.

During that interrogation they threatened to put him away if he kept up his activism, saying, “We can ‘disappear’ you. You should know that the next time we bring you in you will not see your family again for a long time.”

The few times we’ve been allowed to visit him thick glass has separated us and our meetings were taped. Ameer asked me for a copy of my new book to read in jail, but they wouldn’t let me even take him that. My daughters really miss their father. They often say, “If only we’d been able to hug him before they took him away.” That’s one of the things that hurts them most, not being able to hug their father.

Ameer still suffers from the torture and abuse inflicted on him, and they still try to break his spirit. They only allow 20 people into the courtroom even though it can hold many more, so when he sees it empty, he thinks no one cares. But far more people want to attend the trial than they allow in — family, community activists, politicians and supporters from all over the world.

I have never thought of myself as a “wife” but rather as Ameer’s partner in life and in activism. But these days, as I wait with the other wives for our allotted visit, I find myself reflecting on the traditional Christian marriage vows: “What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” No man, I think, unless he’s an Israeli jailer.

Clinton spoke of “the cowardice of those who deny their citizens the protections they deserve.” Ameer deserves the protection of the law: the right to meet his lawyers in private — Israeli officials have been taping those meetings too; the right to see the evidence against him, much of which the prosecution plans to withhold on security grounds; freedom from torture; and inadmissibility of confessions secured under torture. When will Clinton call for a Palestinian activist’s human rights and an end to his persecution?

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