Gaza man says Hamas forced him to divorce after torture

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After months of torture and interrogations in a Hamas prison, Palestinian activist Rami Aman says he was offered an unconventional proposition: Divorce your wife and you are free to go.

Aman had recently signed a marriage contract with the daughter of a Hamas official, and the ruling Islamic militant group apparently wanted to dispel any insinuation that it supported Aman’s outreach to Israeli peace activists. He says he eventually caved into the pressure. Now he says the love of his life has been whisked out of Gaza against her will, and he may never see her again.

“I realized I was sent there to do time until I break up my relationship,” Aman said in an interview on the roof of his Gaza City home.

It was the final humiliation in a saga that began with what he believed to be an innocent online meeting with Israeli peace activists. Instead, the episode landed him in a notorious prison cell known as “the bus,” and ultimately destroyed his marriage. His experience shows the tough constraints on free expression in the Hamas-ruled territory, and the militant group’s hostility to any talk of coexistence with Israel.

“The deplorable treatment of Rami Aman by Hamas authorities reflects their systematic practice of punishing those whose speech threatens their orthodoxy,” said Omar Shakir, Israel-Palestine director at Human Rights Watch.

Aman did not think he was doing anything subversive when he joined that fateful Zoom call last April. Amid the widespread closures at the start of the coronavirus pandemic, Aman wanted to discuss the “double lockdown” in Gaza, which has endured 14 years of a tight Israeli-Egyptian blockade against Hamas.

“I wanted to let people know more how it is when you live under Israeli occupation and siege, deprived of the rights the rest of the world enjoys,” said Aman, a 39-year-old freelance writer.

For over two hours, Aman and his group of peace activists, the Gaza Youth Committee, talked about coexistence with dozens of Israelis.

As word of the meeting leaked out, social media filled with angry comments branding him a traitor. Some urged Hamas, which has ruled Gaza since 2007, to act.

Aman said that on April 9, he and seven members of his group were summoned to Internal Security, the agency that deals with dissidents and people accused of spying for Israel.

He said he was blindfolded and quickly sent to “the bus,” a room where he said detainees are forced to sit in tiny kindergarten chairs for days or weeks at a time, with few breaks.

“They did not present any evidence against me,” Aman said. He said he would sit in the chair from 6 a.m. until 1 a.m., except when he was taken away for questioning or to pray. He was only allowed to remove his blindfold when he went to the bathroom. His captors called him by his prison number, 6299.

The questions focused on the Zoom meeting and who might have been behind it. Aman was accused of collaborating with Israel -- a crime punishable by death.

He said at 1 a.m., the “bus riders” were allowed to sleep blindfolded next to the chairs. They would curl up in their jackets on the cold floor before they were woken up a few hours later for the Muslim dawn prayer. In a 2018 [report](https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/10/23/two-authorities-one-way-zero-dissent/arbitrary-arrest-and-torture-under), Human Rights Watch documented similar accounts.

Aman said he spent 18 agonizing days on the bus before being moved to a tiny cell.

Then the questioning took a strange new turn.

Just two months earlier, Aman had signed a marriage contract with the daughter of an exiled Hamas official based in Egypt. The couple did not have time to celebrate their wedding with a formal ceremony due to a coronavirus lockdown, but they were considered married under Islamic law.

Aman said he met her in 2018 after she separated from her first husband. He said she believed in the message of peace and joined his team in several discussions with Israelis. He asked not to publish her name, fearing it could bring her harm.

Aman said his new wife was arrested with him but they were quickly separated.

“She doesn’t want you,” an officer told him. “It’s better you both divorce.”

For two months, he said, he resisted the pressure to break up. On June 28, she finally visited, telling him she had been released on bail.

“This was not the woman I knew,” he said. “It was clear she was under heavy pressure.” Officers sat in the room.

He refused to grant her a divorce.

In July he was transferred to Hamas’ central prison. There was no more interrogation or torture.

In mid-August, he said he finally signed the divorce papers after he was promised he would be released the next day.

Yet he remained in captivity for two more months. On Oct. 25, Egypt opened its border with Gaza to allow a Hamas delegation to travel to Cairo.

The next day, a Hamas court convicted Aman on the vague charge of “weakening the revolutionary spirit.” He was released on a suspended sentence.

Only then did Aman learn his wife had been taken with the Hamas delegation to Egypt and turned over to her family.

The Associated Press contacted the woman, who confirmed she was forced into the divorce and wanted her husband back.

A senior Hamas official believed to be involved in the affair did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

Aman spends his days speaking to his lawyer, human rights groups and texting Hamas officials. He also has learned he is barred from leaving Gaza.

Eyad Bozum, an Interior Ministry spokesman, said the issue is “on its way to being resolved,” without elaborating.

For now, Aman has put aside his political activism. “Now I have my personal battle: return to my wife.”