

## POSTFACE

*Simone Othmani Lellouche*



Ahmed Othmani was killed in a road accident on 8th December 2004 in Rabat, Morocco, after attending the first day of a conference on ‘Civil Society as a Means to Activate Reform in the Arab World’. This meeting, which brought together NGO representatives from across the Arab world, was due to present its recommendations to the G8 Forum the next day.

It was in August 2001 that Ahmed put together this book, *Beyond Prison*, with Sophie Bessis, and it was published in French by *La Découverte* in 2002. Even with the passing of time, it is still worth reading for its wealth of insights.

Ahmed Othmani continued his work as President of Penal Reform International (PRI) right up to his death.

In early September 2001, he led a PRI delegation to the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance which took place in Durban, South Africa, and which Mary Robinson’s High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR) had organised. He was active in the follow-up networking that resulted in the 2002 Declaration and Programme of Action.

A few days later, 9/11 happened.

It was on 11th September 2003 that Mary Robinson signed her Preface to this English edition of the book, just before stepping down as High Commissioner for Human Rights. For Ahmed, this

was a highly symbolic gesture. Perhaps he was overwhelmed by the honour bestowed on him. He really wanted to see the English translation of his text (from the original French) – no doubt to have it read by his many friends and colleagues, but also I think because Mary Robinson's text had particularly touched him and had highlighted the international character and importance, as well as the human dimensions, of his combat.

He had succeeded in attaining a high degree of effectiveness in his work and those close to him know that he did not spare himself.

After 11th September 2001, we felt ourselves to be entering a new period of resistance to protect human rights everywhere in a world where they were now threatened, in the wake of the fight rightly engaged against terrorism. We agreed together that we could and should act, each at our own level.

I would like to mention here some of the main achievements of PRI during Ahmed's presidency, as well as some that are more recent, in particular, the Second World Congress against the Death Penalty, convened by PRI and the organisation Ensemble contre la Peine de Mort (ECPM) in October 2004, the proceedings of which are dedicated to Ahmed's memory.

At the opening ceremony, the 11th Congress of the UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice dedicated a short documentary entitled 'Making Standards Work' to Ahmed. Three thousand copies were subsequently distributed to Congress participants and others engaged in this work.

In November 2004, a three-day Conference in Malawi on 'Legal Aid and Criminal Justice' brought together delegates from twenty-six countries, twenty-one of them African. It resulted in the Lilongwe Declaration on accessing legal aid in Africa, later adopted by the African Human Rights Commission in November 2006 and by the UN Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, meeting in Bangkok in April 2007.

Since his death, numerous tributes have been paid to Ahmed Othmani – in Tunisia, France, Lebanon, Morocco, Burkina Faso and Sudan among others. At a memorial meeting held at UNESCO's headquarters in Paris in March 2005, a letter was read out from a group of Lebanese women imprisoned in Tripoli, Lebanon. It went like this:

*To the pure and generous spirit of Mr Ahmed Othmani,  
As if we didn't have enough terrible news in this prison whose  
ugliness continually haunts us and where our hearts tremble with  
fear for those we love,*

*Ahmed Othmani, we remember well your last visit some three  
years ago and we recall the warmth and hope that shone from  
your eyes. The promise you brought for changing our conditions  
in prison, for a more humane regime, for more clement treatment  
of those suffering the throes of time and society and of those who  
were unfair on themselves – this promise remains carved in our  
minds for as long as we live.*

*This brings to mind the adage: The best of men is the one whose  
good works live on after his death. The news of your sudden death  
brought to our mind all the good you had sown, the efforts you  
made to improve our living conditions within this atrocious prison  
and to found an association which made hope the common  
language in our daily life. Since then, hope has never left our sides.  
If it were not for your activism, we would have lost it for ever.*

*The saddest thing is that a cruel fate prevented us from seeing  
you just one last time, from dreaming one last time that great men  
are still standing by our side, notwithstanding all our changes and  
circumstances and growing difficulties.*

*The praise we give you can only be from the words of the great  
poet El Mutannabi:*

*I was not aware before you were buried  
That the stars in the soil live on for ever*

*The inmates in Tripoli Women's Prison, Lebanon*

His actions are not forgotten, and so his work still goes on.

Simone Othmani Lellouche

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