

Prison of Sednayah

During the Syrian Revolution (Testimonies)

2019

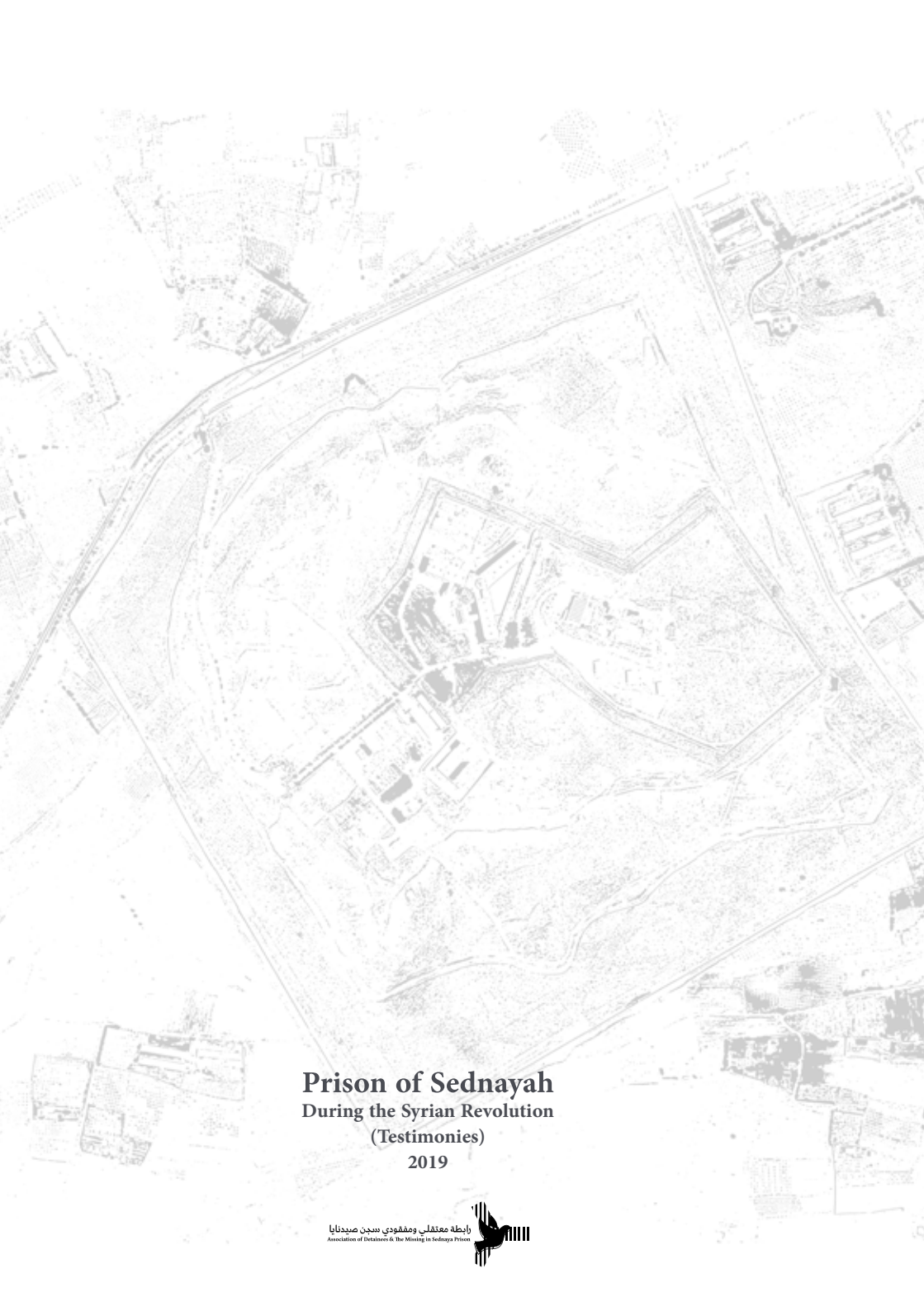


WARNING: some of the following testimonies may be graphic to some readers, as they contain violent torture details.

رابطه معتقلي ومفقودي بسجن صيدنايا
Association of Detainees & The Missing in Sedaya Prison



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A Thank you Note:

The Association of Detainees and Missing in Sednaya Prison extends its sincere gratitude to everyone who helped accomplish this historical document. A special thanks is due to all prison and detention comrades, survivors, families of detainees and missing, families of martyrs who granted the association their invaluable trust. They trusted the association with their testimonials about their detention period or their beloved one's detention experience in Seydnaya. These testimonials came together to tell the story of the darkest most criminal place in the world. Gratitude is also due to the survivor artist Najah Al Bokai, who enriched the book with his magnificent drawings describing the atrocities of the terrible prison.

The drawings accompanying the texts are the work of the artist Najah Bekaa, a Syrian fine artist. He studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts at Damascus University. Then he graduated from the Regional School of Fine Arts in Rouen, France. He served as a teacher at the Arab League in Damascus.

He was detained several times for his participation in Syrian protests against the Syrian Regime. The last detention was in 2014, where he was held in Damascus Central Prison (Adra).

During his detention, he witnessed the practices of Syrian regime and intelligence officers against the detainees inside detention centers and when he was released he reflected on his experience and translated these violations into paintings you will see in this report. He left Syria in 2015 and was granted political asylum in France.

Prelude

This book contains testimonies of former prisoners imprisoned in the prison of Sednayah during the Syrian revolution in addition to the story of a prisoner's sister about a visit his family had made to see him, and a testimony of the wife of a forcibly disappeared husband about whom she received confused news that her husband was detained in the prison of Sednayah, which she likened it to a black box.

The first testimony was given by a former prisoner, an Islamist who was referred to Sednayah in May 2011, i.e. two months after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, when the Syrian authorities were, at that time, busy closing the file of former political prisoners, most of them Islamists, and started referring military personnel charged of defection to the prison.

Since the early period of the revolution, harsh treatment of detainees charged of supporting the revolution started to flow on the surface. They were subject to beating by wooden or iron sticks on all parts of their bodies, including their heads; "It wasn't beating, rather, it was execution by beating" as one of the prisoners said. He witnessed the killing of several prisoners after every torture "party" committed by the jailers who had full freedom to punish and humiliate officers of all ranks, accusing them of betraying the country which "they had been nourished from its fortunes."

In a few months, the prison was emptied from its former prisoners with whom the prison directorate avoided encountering after the long sit in they had made in 2008, and was crowded again by prisoners of the revolution, military and civilians, during the years which followed the outbreak of the revolution in March 2011.

Most of the military prisoners were arrested in their units due to security reports accusing them of planning defections after they were hastily mobilized by the authorities to face the protesters. After being investigated in the various branches of the military security in Syrian cities, some times without investigation, they were referred to the central branches of security services in Damascus, the capital: Branch of Officers' Affairs No. 293, branch of Military Personnel No. 291, Palestine branch No. 235, Investigation branch No. 248, and many others. Detainees spend unlimited periods of time in these branches during which they were tortured by several means, mainly, the wheel, and the suspension (suspending the detainee from the handcuffs on his wrists, with his legs dangling hardly can touch the floor, for hours, for a full

day and even for longer periods. Usually, the investigation concludes when the detainee, being exhausted from torture, admits all the charges against him, and then he will be referred to the prison of Sednayah, (which at 2011 hadn't been ill famed with the brutal practices that floated after the revolution), believing that there, he will be relieved of the inhuman treatment he had been subjected to in the security branches.

To transport the detainees to the prison of Sednayah, they are lined to a long iron chain, with one hand cuff on the wrist of the detainee and the second one hung to the chain linked with all the prisoners. They climb up to the vehicle specialized for this purpose. It is a truck with a totally closed metal container, dubbed the "Carcass Vehicle" because it is similar to the trucks used to transport carcasses of slaughtered animals from slaughter houses. Deprived from all their human rights, nobody tells them their destination. From the distance the vehicle crosses, some of them estimate that they are going to Sednayah. Then, those who had heard about the brutal treatment in the prison start telling stories they know raising fears and agonies among the others who start invoking God to help them.

Arriving in the prison, at the gate of the "Red Building" dubbed (Mercedes), known for the harsh treatment the prisoners receive in it, harsher than that of the "White Building," the container's door opens, military police in charge of this first military prison in the country, receive prisoners by quickly laying them on the ground cursing them naughtily, as if they were bags of onion thrown on the ground. The bruises the prisoners have due to throwing them on the ground at the gate, are nothing compared with the "reception party" prepared for them in the long corridor of the building. This party is a primary session of hard torture applied on all the detainees transferred from the security branches or detention centers of the integrated Syrian security services.

The more important the security branch, the harshest is the torture detainees receive in it. But, in Sednayah, the story is different. One of our witnesses said fifteen prisoners were killed, from the one hundred who were cuffed to the chain in which he was tied to. The reception party in Sednayah takes a few hours. Detainees are ordered to take off all their clothes to be totally naked, and to prostrate to receive sessions of beating by jailers who move from one prisoner to another, all of them laying on the ground bleeding.

During this session of torture, prisoners handle their personal items, documents and money to the "deposits;" their personal information and documents are registered in files. They receive information about the prison routine. In the detention centers of the security branches jailers use blinds to cover eyes of the detainees so that they don't recognize the investigators. In Sednayah, eyes blinding is self-imposed. The prisoner must cover his eyes by lifting his T-shirt to cover his head, and put his palms, not his fingers, on his eyes so that he can't

recognize any of the jailers. If anyone opens his eyes to look around, he will be punished by gouging them out.

During recording the personal details, prisoners are submitted to all kinds of humiliation. One of our witnesses said that the jailer instead of asking him the name of his mother, he asked him the name of "the whore" who begot him. He also said that detained doctors, lawyers, officers and journalists are specially received by all kinds of torture out of the hostility the jailers have against them. Jailers are complicated, illiterate, sectarian, and regionalists. They are young; 18-20 years old and have deep hatred against graduates, social figures, well to do or older men. Prisoners who have well-built bodies are targeted more than the others, jailers always try to humiliate them by (breaking their -heads- will).

After the reception "ceremony", prisoners are given the lesson of "the train" to apply it whenever they are ordered to move in groups. The lesson says prisoners should stand in line, everyone should hold the waist of the prisoner in front of him, bend down putting his forehead on his rear so that it is impossible for him to see anybody around.

After drawing out bodies of those who die during the reception ceremony, jailers shout; "Stand, Stand, Train, Train, Train." They direct the first prisoner to lead his colleagues down along stairs to the cells where new comers are put for a period from two weeks to six months, depends on the mood of the prison's chief.

Cells areas are diversified, originally, they were solitary cells, but they are always incredibly crammed. One of our witnesses said that he was squeezed with 28 prisoners in a cell not more than 4 * 3 m including the toilet pot. Another one said they were nine in a cell 2 * 2 m.

The prisoners will not enter the cells without another session of torture and receiving a list of instructions: "Here, everything is done by orders, order for eating, order for drinking, order for sleeping, and order for waking up. Any violation will be punished mercilessly. Here, no talk, no whisper. whenever you hear a sound in the corridor, you kneel down inside the cell. When the cell door opens everyone should kneel down, not stand, in the toilet. From now on, you are sons of bitches. Whenever you are asked you reply, we are sons of bitches." If the answers in any cell are not loud and sonorous, prisoners will be severely punished for being slacken.

The following day, or may be after two to three days, prisoners may receive their first meal. All those whom we had their testimonies said that deficiency of food was the hardest punishment in the prison, it is even worse than beating which may easily cause death. Many times, the average share of a prisoner was not more than half of an olive, two spoons full of rice or bulgur, and half a loaf of bread for the twenty-four hours of the day.

The jailer has the utmost freedom to take out any prisoner from the cell and to torture him for

no reason, or just to waste time. He may order prisoners to extend their hands, heads, or even legs from the little window down the cell door to beat them or even press them with his boots. He may punish the whole cell by spelling water on the ground of the cell. In Sednayah the weather is generally cold, therefore this is an incredible punishment which may take several days, during which the prisoners are totally naked. This punishment will not end unless one of the prisoners die.

After spending the defined period in the cells, which is up to the jailers' mood to estimate or to unexplained estimations of the prison administration, detainees are moved to the higher levels of the building to be put in dormitories, where life is supposed to be less bad than in the cells, although this is not a rule.

Dormitories of the "Red Building" are unified in area, seven meters long and five meters wide, with a bath in the corner. The average number of prisoners in each dormitory, during the Syrian revolution, was thirty-five prisoners. There isn't any kind of furniture in the dormitory except 2-3 blankets for each prisoner. Prisoners moved from the cells to the dormitories receive a list of new instructions: "You sit here; food will be brought to you. No sounds, No whispers." Jailers teach them the position they all have to take whenever a jailer enters or opens the little window of the door: kneel down in consecutive rows according to their numbers, faces to the wall opposite the door and hands behind or covering the eyes. A prefect to the dormitory is selected randomly from among the prisoners or upon his personal wish. He will be the main link between the prisoners and the jailers. "A dormitory prefect is destined to die" one of the witnesses told us. He is subject to severe beating for any reason or even without a reason. Many times, a jailer enters the ward and shouts in the corridor: "Pimps of dormitories" or "Pigs of dormitories" ... all of you in shorts...He beats them and then leaves.

Speed and counts were of utmost importance to the jailers, always preludes to harmful beating. When they bring food, jailers count from 1 to 3, during this time the prefect should take out the empty bowels of the previous meal and enter the new ones. When the jailer finishes counting, he closes the door which is usually not fully open. If the prefect fails to fulfill his duties during this short time, the heavy door will close on him, breaking any of his limbs or sometimes, killing him immediately. For this reason, two types of men can accept this position; either a "Fidai," a commando, or a Shabiha believing that this position is a privilege and a rare opportunity to practice bullying on his mates as is the case in the detention centers of the security branches.

For the first model, a commando, we have First lieutenant, Rance al-Mesleh. He volunteered

to be prefect of his dormitory instead of a sick prisoner the jailer had randomly selected. He was tortured and beaten refusing to give the jailers names of the prisoners who violate the instructions.

For the second model, a Shabiha, we mention Shadi Said, a popular singer who had revealed his loyalty to the regime by singing a song, greeting Bashar al-Assad. When he was moved to the dormitories, he told the prisoners that he was arrested because he tried to convince a security warrant officer to join the Free Syrian Army by promising him a large amount of money.

Jailers are always free to beat prisoners at any time. "Sometimes they beat us four times in the day," one of the witnesses said. Other witnesses spoke of a torture session every two or three days using all the tools available to the jailers: - "belt of the tank motor," a hard rubber belt used on the motors of tanks. It removes the skin where it strikes, - brass quadruple cables, made of four brass wires twisted together, - green PVC water pipes named Lakhdar Brahimi, mocking the Algerian UN envoy to Syria who has the same name, (Lakhdar in Arabic means green), - the Harawaneh which is a compressed silicon rod originally used for soldering plastic parts. It doesn't wound or break bones, but it either kills the victim in time or cause him unusual pains, - the iron pipe which the prisoners dubbed Umm Kamel, it kills after two or three strikes, the electric stick, in addition to kicking with the military boots.

Add to these tools the arbitrary beating and the random punishments. In the prison of Sednayah, prisoners were subject to a punishment called, the "Prison's Wheel" which is a night session of torture. It starts from the first dormitory in the first floor, going up to the last dormitory in the third floor. One of the prisoners said the wheel should leave behind it at least one victim dead in every dormitory. In spite of this, prisoners always line in rows kneeling down, waiting impatiently the arrival of the torturing team to end the horror they feel from the sounds of tortured prisoners, likened by one prisoner to the sounds of ghosts in the center of an abandoned city.

Methodology of torture in the prison of Sednayah is different from that of the security branches. There, torture is mostly practiced to have information or, sometimes, to humiliate the detainees. In Sednayah torture is practiced just for the sake of torture. "Sednayah prison is devoted to punish the Syrian revolution" said one witness. Another witness commented: "In the security branches torture is mostly used to have information or confessions. If it is a punishment, it continues until the detainee cries of pain because his silence is considered a challenge to his torturers. In Sednayah, it is the opposite, you have to receive beating in silence, if you cry, beating will increase."

Sometimes a prisoner is referred to the Field Court of the military police in Qaboun. In a brief

court session of no more than two to three minutes, the judge asks the defendant about his charge, then dismisses him. The court decision is always kept secret to the prisoner who, from this mission, as it is called by the prisoners, only gets beating in his way from and to the prison, in addition to spending a horrible night in the prison of the military police where detainees are crammed over each other to communicating lice and scabies, if they were not previously infected.

Theoretically, the prisoner has the right to be visited by his family after being brought to the court. Before that, he is considered one of those forcibly disappeared persons because no one knows his whereabouts. Practically, some families could arrange a special visit by bribing or by the mediation of some influential. Having a permit for a normal visit, which is allowed every three to four months, is not possible without different complications, long procedures, and many times, bribing.

Visits are allowed in two days every week. Many prisoners described the process of being visited: In the morning, jailers announce the names of the prisoners to be visited, the prisoner gets ready to get out of the dormitory, jailers wait him out to start beating and cursing him until he bleeds: "Move you son of a ..., you want to take the blessing from the chest of your mother? Your wife is here to visit you? Probably yesterday she was sleeping with your brother."

They drag him into a room 15 m long and 10 m wide where all the prisoners to be visited from all the wards are gathered. In the room, there is always a barber holding a machine to remove the hair of prisoners and to beat them. When one's turn comes, he is led by at least one jailer to the meeting room. He stands in front of a mesh and his visitors, escorted by another jailer stand in front of another mesh. Between the two meshes a sergeant stands to listen to the conversation. Before the visit, prisoners are warned to talk briefly: "How are you? How is your health? I am fine. Everything is alright. And so on." It is forbidden to mention names; they might carry messages. For example, it is forbidden to say; "How is my brother Mohammad?" All questions should be of general nature: How are my brothers? How are my aunts? or How are my uncles?

Jailers treat prisoners in front of their visitors with cautious kindness. They warn them in advance of any violation: "Beware... you will come back to me.... or... Later you will be punished." They do so in the best cases, but usually they tell him: "Look, your mother is out...I'll do so and so with her in front of the mesh." The punishment is already decided if the prisoner violates the instructions or if any of his visitors utters a word nervously. If things go smoothly during the three minutes of the visit, the jailer leads the prisoner out while his visitors are seeing him off with their eyes, and whispers in his ears: "Hold up...Be proud of yourself." Once they cross the separating distance, the jailer kicks him off pushing him a few meters

forward, after which he should prostrate waiting the bag of clothes his family had brought him to be thrown on his head. Then the jailer orders him to stand, that is to keep kneeling down because he returned to the prison routine. Generally, the family brings a lot of clothes to the prisoner, which mostly, very little of them is delivered to the prisoner, especially his used ones. Jailers steal the new clothes.

Many times, family members fail to recognize their son until his name is announced by the jailers because of the fearful loss of his weight and sickness, result of torture. The prisoner also may not know his little children because they had already grown up.

In spite of the joy of meeting their kin, prisoners of Sednayah congratulate themselves if their names were not announced for a visit. Some of them ask those who are to be freed to contact their relatives and advise them not to repeat the visit to avoid the humiliation and torture which may lead to death, as was the case of the judge Nayef Faisal al-Rifai who was killed after his wife's visit.

al-Rifai was a military judge, a captain. He was arrested in March 2012 after he had been called to one of the security branches accused of cooperating with the revolutionaries and of leaking execution decisions issued by judge Mohammad Kanjo Hasan, chief justice of the military field court. In the prison, al-Rifai was subjected to double torture, to beating with the most fatal tools. Jailers ordered him to take off his clothes all the time, poured cold water on him, and humiliated him daily. When he returned to the dormitory from his last visit, a soldier, named Eissa Mohammad, prisoners say he killed hundreds of them, struck him with an iron pipe on his stomach causing him internal hemorrhaging. He died in April 2014. When his family started preparing a condolences ceremony, security men prevented them.

After the visit, the prisoner returns to the dormitory trying to interpret every word he had heard from his relatives in a way that may give hope of being set free and the regime will fall after a short time. The prisoners were completely isolated from the outer world, therefore, they ruminate what they hear in the visit, and during the five hours of mingling with prisoners from other dormitories to predict any news of the world or about the prison itself.

There were rare opportunities to smuggle little letters in the clothes, if they were not discovered or the clothes were not stolen by the jailers. Generally, people outside the prison do not have information or evidences to what they say to the prisoners.

In some cases, prisoners deduced certain information about events outside the prison from the reactions of the jailers inside. Some- times they were nervous and invent excuses to punish the prisoners. If their reactions were accompanied by cutting electricity and water off, prisoners will believe that the battles had approached the prison, and it will soon fall to the revolutionaries, and prisoners, who were in such times receiving double sessions of torture, will be shortly liberated and set free.

One witness said that treatment had improved before Geneva 2 conference in January 2014. Beating nearly ceased, central heating was operated, director of the prison toured the dormitories and the prison's doctor followed him to estimate the degree of scabies infections. Jailers distributed medicines on prisoners. This relax continued until news spread that the conference had failed, and things developed to the worse.

In May 2013, a faction of the Free Syrian Army succeeded in assassinating the prison director, brigadier general Talat Mahfouz. The assassination was reflected negatively on the prisoners. Witnesses said that the real dilemma started in that year and the years that followed. Torture increased, punishments doubled, blood spots covered the walls, prisoners' liquidation started, and diseases spread. Prisoners died due to the deterioration of their immunity, water and electricity, were cut for long periods, sometimes for seven or eight consecutive days. Food was rare, jailers poured it on the prisoners' heads or on the floor and tread on it. Sometimes they put it in the toilet. It became normal for the jailer to open the dormitory door every morning and ask: "Do you have a (Fteeseh) or no?" and prefects used to say: "Yes we have one ... two."

"Fteeseh" in Arabic means a dead animal.

As a punishment, jailers used to deprive prisoners from food or sometimes to release themselves from the duty of distributing it. Many times they gave the share of a complete ward of nine dormitories to one dormitory, depriving the other dormitories. Generally, the share specified for the whole ward is hardly sufficient to one dormitory. The individual's share of food for the whole day doesn't satisfy a little child.

Depriving prisoners from food was an easy routine as a punishment. When they deprive a dormitory from food, they bring food in bowls, put them at the door of the dormitory, leaving the prisoners to guess if they will enter them or they will give them to other dormitories. Prisoners hear jailers putting food at the door, if not entered to them in a short time, they understand that their share will be given to another dormitory.

A witness said: "After spending sometime in the prison, we forgot the outer world, we forgot our families, we forgot why we were there, we even got used to beating. The only obsession we have was when food will come?"

Prisoners became very thin, deep cheeks, protruding chest ribs, the fattest of them is not more than 50 kg. Many of them had changed into wolves, each one tries to snatch his colleague's share of food, just to survive. Many times, four or five days passed without any thing to eat, and when food is brought each one can't have more than a half or a quarter loaf of bread. Prisoners used to eat orange leaves, egg shells, olive seeds and consequently, they didn't need to empty their bowls in the toilet. Stomachs are always empty.

Number of those who die from hunger, exceeded the number of victims of torture. Quarrels between prisoners increased, always about trivial shares of food. A witness from the dormitory of seclusion, specified for tuberculosis patients, remembers that two prisoners quarreled over which egg they will have, the red one or the white, their voices were loud, jailers heard them shouting and decided to punish all the dormitory by depriving them from food for five days, during which some of them died including the one of the egg quarrel.

Jailers always determined the way how liquids, like tea or soup, should be served with meals. This way depends on the temperature of the liquid, if it is cold, they would spill it on the floor, so prisoners scoop it with their hands and drink it with all the hair and dirt collected in it. Many times, they couldn't wait, they suck it direct with their mouths. If the liquid is hot, they spill it on the heads of the prisoners who are always squatting. Tea leaves stick to the heads or on the shoulders of the ones in front, and those behind fight to eat them.

Food became a dream; only lucky prisoners can see in the night and can court it in the day time. Groups of three to four prisoners sit close to each other and whisper the ways of cooking rice, Okra (lady's fingers), and Shakriyeh, (Yoghourt and meat), sometimes on how to prepare pastries and how to taste them. In the night, some of them swear they felt the flavors of food in their mouths. Prisoners from the coastal regions tell those from inner cities about fishing and how to prepare sea foods. They quarreled over the best foods in Syrian regions, voices rise up and debates heat rendering these moments into utmost pleasure because they speak about food.

In this context, a new trade was born in the dormitories. It was based on an unusual currency: bread. For example, one can swap his share of jam, which is no more than a spoon full distributed in rare happy days, for a loaf of bread. Another, who exercises whenever possible, may buy shares of the others of egg so that he can, one day, eat one full egg. Another may buy a sweater to warm his body, from a colleague who had been visited by his family, against three to four loaves of bread paid in installments, quarter of a loaf of bread daily.

This trade developed in some dormitories to an extent of appointing a former merchant to define the prices of commodities in line with the principle of order and demand. Sometimes the prefect might intervene to solve disputes on questions like unifying prices inside the dormitory, controlling rivalry, and banning dealing with persons who fail to manage their resources wisely, and consequently, they had a "trade deficit." Trade developed to the level of complex vending of a certain kind of newly devised foods like mixing egg, bread shreds with yoghurt.

Water supply may cease due to a break in the water pipes in freezing days or as a punishment. When water is rare, one glass could be sold for two loaves of bread.

Frivolity of the jailers' orders may reach the extremes because they are completely free handed. One witness told us that hair cutting was implemented by throwing several machines linked to one wire to be used by the prisoners. One day the order was: "All...haircut." The machines didn't come. Prefects of dormitories informed the jailers. The reply was: "Do it your own ways." Some prisoners didn't take the reply seriously because it is illogical. The day after, when the jailers realized that their orders were not obeyed, they brought all the prefects of dormitories and started beating them violently until two or three of them died. Again, they repeated the order: "Tomorrow...all should have their hair cut." The threat was serious, so prisoners started snatching threads from blankets and from the dish washing chaffs to present them as hair. Even in this, they were cautious not to tear blankets, because a blanket in Sednayah, is much more important than a prisoner.

It is difficult to wash with cold water in the dormitory, therefore, sometimes, prisoners were taken to a bath at the end of the ward. Seven or eight prisoners enter a bath room together to wash under either boiling or warm water. To and from the bath, beating continues none stop and prisoners, already fainting, fall on the ground.

One witness who spent two years in Sednayah said that he went twice to the bath, one of them was a long event; he remained 3-4 minutes under the shower. Another witness said that the time allowed in the bath of the dormitory is about ten seconds counted by the jailer: "one, ... two ...three, ...four.... quick you pimp, five...six..., seven, Quick you pimp...eight ...nine... ten." When pronouncing ten all should be out of the bath lining in the "train."

Lack of cleanliness, rarity of food and continuous beating played a critical role in communicating diseases like scabies, tuberculosis and others which killed hundreds of prisoners.

Performance of the prison doctors differs from one to another. Witnesses agreed that they have never seen a doctor examining or treating a patient. Sometimes doctors beat the patients as they did to Rance al-Mesleh. Beating may develop to execution. Prisoners said one of the doctors was a killer, therefore they gave him the title of butcher. The good doctor is the one who can only watch movements of prisoners and give the weakest of them a number to be referred to Tishreen military hospital.

In the hospital, patients will realize that they will not be allowed to enter the hospital, rather, they will be put in a special cell out of it where it is possible for a soldier to give the patients general medicines without any examination, and return them back. If they were permitted to enter the hospital to have some tests, they might be beaten on the way from and to the closed vehicle (the fridge).

One witness said: "We were thirty prisoners referred to the hospital. When we arrived four of us had already died. The following day they took me to help them put the bodies of those

who died in bags. They were more than 15, killed by the doctors and the Shabiha."

Another witness told us a horrible story about the hospital's cell which is about 200 m far from the gate of the hospital. The road to the cell was covered with big white pebbles. Because the patients are already week and bare footed, some of them were unable to walk, and fall down, soldiers sometimes support them to reach the cell. To avoid doing this, the responsible warrant officer appoints a prefect to the cell, then orders the patients to do some exercises, if any of them fails to do, he orders the prefect to pull him aside and liquidate him using a cloth and a stick especially prepared for this purpose. In this way, a cell prefect may kill four or five of his colleagues to enjoy the relatively rich meals offered to them in the hospital. Nothing in Sednayah is easier than killing or field execution. Twice a week, fifty to three hundred prisoners are executed or killed by beating on sensitive parts of the body, like the spine, the head or the stomach, in addition to the deaths resulting from hunger, sickness or torture. It is normal a jailer comes in the morning to have the following dialogue with the prefect:

- What is this you pimp? referring to a body laid on the ground.
- "He died." The prefect replies.
- "He died or Fetess?" the jailer asks again. "Didn't you kill him, you asshole?"
- No sir he died by himself.
- What is the name of this son of a bitch?"
- So and so sir.
- Alright, wrap him with a blanket and throw him out. the jailer orders.

Two prisoners should draw the corps of the dead out in only five seconds counted by the jailer. If they fail to do that, they will be beaten brutally.

To face all these atrocities, the prisoners have nothing to do but to resort to God, whether they are religious or secular. Although prayers are totally forbidden under harsh punishments, most of the witnesses whom we had interviewed used to pray in different discrete ways, silently or seated. If they had a rare opportunity to pray normally, i.e. to kneel down or prostrate they would do that with utmost caution. The prison witnessed many sessions of reading the Holy Quran, especially "the Surahs" believed to be protective or evil repelling. More than one witness told us personal stories of such experiences.

This is all what a prisoner can do in the prison, in addition to dreams interpretation and day dreaming. Once, a cell held a course about Syria's modern history. It passed peacefully. A neighboring cell saved parts of their food to make chess pieces. When the jailers discovered that they punished them by drenching their cell with water, one of them died of cold.

Until now nobody knows who committed all these horrible atrocities. Looking at jailers is extremely dangerous in the prison of Sednayah. If any prisoner recognizes a jailer, he will

soon be killed. If a prisoner talks to a jailer and he just replies without beating him, then the prisoner is fortunate and the Jailer is a good-hearted man. Although some of the jailers are less hostile than the others, it is difficult to recognize them. Many stories started with good gestures and ended with catastrophic surprises. The main dialect adopted in the prison is the Alawite. Although most of the jailers are Alawite, those who are not use it as a sign of bullying and authority.

There is not enough information about the structure and staff of the prison. The directors whom the association succeeded to identify are:

- Brigadier general Talat Mahfouz. He is from Draykish- Governorate of Tartus. He chaired the prison since before the revolution until he was assassinated in May 07, 2013. Before that he chaired Palmyra prison.
- Colonel Ibrahim Hasan: from May 08, 2013 to the end of 2013.
- Brigadier general Adeb Smander: for two months from early 2014. He was commander of the military police in Latakia.
- Colonel Mahmoud Maatouq: From February or March 2014 Until he died in December 12, 2018. He is from Latakia.
- Colonel Hussein Mohammad: from Latakia.

Most of the witnesses whom we had interviewed gave their real names, unless they felt it is necessary to conceal them for a reason or another like: (Abu al-Fateh, Abu Omar, Mohammad, Abu Anas al-Hamwi and Umm Ali)

Testimonies



Testimony of Abu al-Fateh

On May 2011 we arrived in the White Building (W.B.) in the prison of Sednayah. We were seven persons transferred from "Palestine branch" of the military intelligence service. The military police took us to a room, ordered us to take off our clothes, all of them, for inspection. We refused, some of us stayed in their under wear, others kept their trousers. Prisoners were surprised by this order. Arrival of officers accused of defection had started a long time, and jailers used to treat them rudely. We started arguing with them loudly, the officer contacted the prison director. They needed time to get used to our responses and to realize that we were old prisoners, members of an Islamic organization.

They isolated us in a special room, the last one on the right of the "W.B.," adjacent to the room of the supervisors of dormitories. Our room had a window looking at the nearest mountains, so we used to see from afar a Shepherd who daily comes with his cattle, and to wait him as a procedure of sociability. We felt better than we were in the prisons of security services. Jailers treated us kindly, different from their treatment to those in other dormitories, and we were surprised by the harsh way they used to treat defecting officers. They used to torture them in the corridor in front of our dormitory, we heard their voices and could see them from the mesh at the bottom of the door. Interrogators used to ask detained military prisoners about their ranks and cities, and accuse them of betraying the "Country which they had been bred on its resources." Any soldier had the freedom to abuse and humiliate any officer prisoner regardless of his seniority.

I remember that one day we heard loud noises and sharp cries. Jailers were inspecting the dormitories one after another. They used to take the prisoners out and punish them violently. Frankly we collapsed, although they did not approach our room. Just a few moments later, an officer entered our room and told us that we will be transferred to another prison where we can join other members of our Islamic organization, and be treated better and can be submitted to courts... The torture we had seen and heard was harsher than all we had seen or heard of in the prisons of the security services. We were sure that some of them had deceased result of the severe beating with iron rods and wooden sticks on all parts of their bodies, including heads. More than once, during our stay, we witnessed torture "parties," and every time the military police cleaned blood and pus spots from the corridor after they end torture sessions.

When we were in Palestine branch, of course before start of the revolution, jailers used to stop torture if the prisoner loses consciousness. They were keen not to let him die during the torture course or maybe they were implementing orders of the prison director. But here, in Sednayah, they used to beat defectors with iron rods on their heads, and when the victim falls silent, they continue beating him. In fact, it was not beating, it was execution by beating.

We asked to bring us newspapers so that we know what is going on in the world, and they brought them. They brought us heaps of papers two months old, i.e. since the start of the revolution. We already have an idea about the way the regime fabricates news, so we could understand the real news from between the lines published in official newspapers which are forbidden to tell real facts. For example, once a paper said that the authorities had launched a campaign to arrest "terrorist groups" in Baniyas, and we understood that there were revolutionary movements in the city, and so on.

They treated us well, and they used to buy us whatever we want from "external canteens," with the money we had in the "deposits." Every now and then, an officer, probably a lieutenant, used to visit us, show us cordiality and ask us if we need anything.

We wanted to meet members of our group who were jailed in the Red Building, so we asked to be transferred there, but they advised us to wait until after being tried. In fact, two weeks after our arrival, we were submitted to a military court held inside the Red Building. There, we met our colleagues who were relaxed and apathetic about the instructions of the prison director, Talat Mahfouz... who was extremely arrogant but used to deal kindly with older prisoners. He warned us not to raise troubles and told us: "If you keep quiet nobody will harm you." When our mates saw us led to the court blinded and hand cuffed, they protested loudly and asked the head of the court to transfer us to their ward.

We stayed three days only in the political prisoners' ward in the Red Building when at the start of June, they began to release some prisoners and transfer others to civilian prisons in their governorates. I was transferred to Damascus Central Prison (in Adra).



Testimony of Taha al-Bakkour

My name is Taha al-Bakkour, born in 1982 in the city of Kafr Zita in the province of Hama. I am a graduate from the English department, Damascus University. I started my mandatory military service in June 2010, followed a course in the school of the military police in Qaboun. I was assigned to the military police branch in Latakia.

Since the days of the Egyptian revolution, the security committee of Latakia used to convene in the command of the military police in Sheikh Daher neighborhood, opposite of the unfinished building of the governorate. The Syrian revolution started and began to spread in many cities. The first demonstrations in Latakia started in March 25, 2011. Since that time, we were ordered to face them. We were given different government cars to move, cars of the agricultural department for example and in civilian clothes.

On Saturday March 26, some demonstrators passed in front of our branch and started shouting. Elements of the branch used their guns, killed six and wounded others. There were formal orders not to use live ammunition without a permission. Therefore, a committee arrived from Damascus to investigate. Elements of the branch fabricated a story about planting explosives in the trunks of palm trees inside the wall of the branch. They claimed that the demonstrators started shooting and the military police responded in self-defense. One of them offered a false testimony claiming that he found some bullet envelopes in the gas station opposite the branch where the demonstrators were marching.

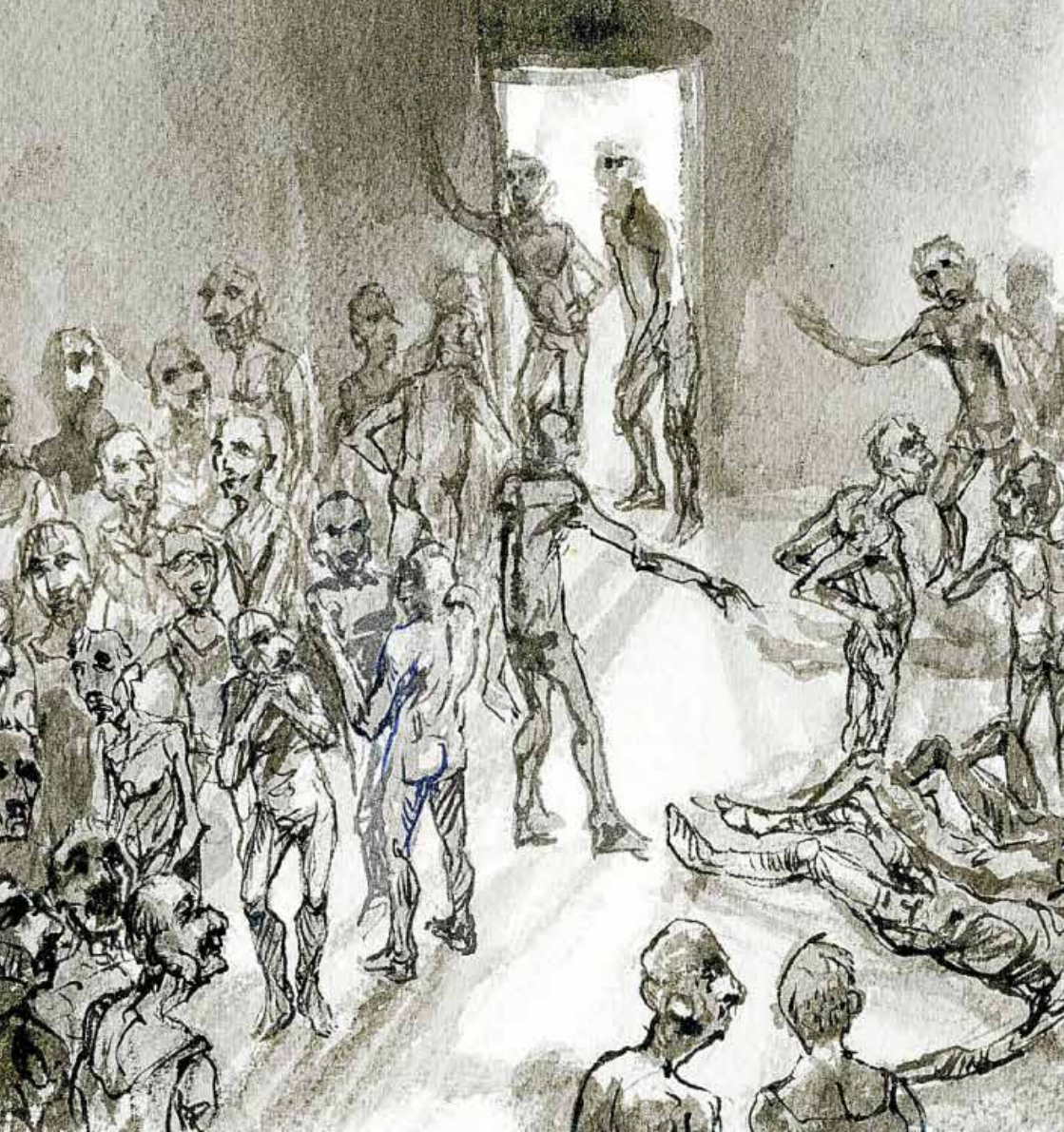
Later a joint check point was established by the military police and the special forces in Ugarit square in the city center. I was one of the elements of the check point. We started to communicate with elements from the special forces to consider the continuous violations of the security forces and the Shabiha in Latakia. After a while we decided not to shoot at the civilians, and in case we were forced to that we thought of either refusing the orders or to defect. The intelligence services discovered our plan and arrested the special forces elements first and then elements of the military police. We were 11 staff sergeants, soldiers and volunteers, 4 from the special forces and the rest from the military police, 70% of us were university graduates.

Military intelligence branch in Latakia arrested us in Latakia on May 31. They interrogated us, and in 22nd of June they referred us to "branch 291" in Damascus. In 4 June they took us to the interrogation branch where we spent 15 days, after which, in 19 July we were referred us to the prison of the military police in Qaboun to spend one night and be transported to Sednayah prison in the following day.

In Sednayah we were received with the usual tool of torture, the wheel. Then they put us in

the White Building for 15 days and then to the solitary cells of the Red Building. After that we were moved to the dormitories, each 3-5 persons in a dormitory. At that time the number of detainees for participating in the revolution was small. Military detainees were about thirty and the civilians were about sixty. Because we were few, one jailer could beat all the prisoners of a dormitory. Sometimes they came four times every day to beat us. I can say that all kinds of torture were practiced on all of us. The most difficult of them was deprivation of food and water for long periods.

Testimony of Khaldoun Mansour



Arrest and Interrogation

At 07.00 a.m. the fifth of December 2011, I was arrested in the military unit where I was serving. I was led to “branch 293” where I was brought in front of the chief interrogator at 11.00 P.M. of the same day. They brought a civilian person whom they said my mobile phone number was listed in his cellular phone. They asked him what does he know about the First Lieutenant Khaldoun. He said that I used to deal with them, meet with them and help them in planning operations against officers from the Alawite sect who participated in storming Qatana and committed atrocities against its population.

I denied all the charges. At 02.00 P.M. they led me to a room where there were fifteen persons from the military intelligence. A few minutes later, the interrogator entered the room and told me that he received orders from the chief of the military intelligence to detain me. They took the rank epaulets off my shoulders, hand cuffed me, blinded my eyes and led me down into a solitary prison cell. A week later, they interrogated me again and used a wheel to torture me. Again, I denied all their charges.

After 15 days in the solitary cell, they transferred me into a collective dormitory, then to “branch 248” where I spent one week in a solitary cell. On January 20, 2012, I was transferred to Sednayah prison. There, a horror movie was played in reality. I realized that all what was taking place in the prisons of the security branches is a game compared with what I will see in Sednayah prison.

To Sednayah Prison

When they moved us from “branch 248” they gave us all our personal items which we had when we were arrested. They call them “deposits.” They hand cuffed us, blinded our eyes and put us in a big closed truck (known as the fridge). Naturally we did not know our destination, but when we arrived, I had a short quick look around to realize that we were in Sednayah prison, where I had been detained in 2008, but this time in the “White Building.”

Elements of the military police opened the door of the truck near where I had been seated. There was no ladder or stairs to get down, so they held us one after another and threw us on the ground as if we were sheep. During that we heard all kinds of naughty curses harming the honor of our mothers, sisters and wives. When on the ground, they ordered us to lay down procurrent, hands cuffed behind us and our eyes blinded. They took our names while beating us. They led us one or two floors underground in the “Red Building,” took away the

handcuffs and kept the blinds on our eyes, and ordered us to take off our clothes. We did not expect to take off the under wear but we were ordered to do that.

They distributed us on totally miserable solitary cells where there were taps with no water, and obsolete toiletry. After 30-35 days there, they led us up to dormitories, 35-40 persons each with three military blankets for each prisoner.

There, I spent about two years and a half.

In the Dormitory

When distributing meals, they mix all kinds of food together. They put the breakfast, the lunch and the dinner, all together, in one bowl. Many times, they put the foods on the floor, and some times in the toilet in order not to allow us eat them.

During distributing meals, the staff sergeant or the sergeant, responsible of the dormitories, would ask prefects of dormitories to take out any one who violates orders in the wards. Prefect of the ward, a prisoner himself, would find himself in a dilemma, either point to those who violated and by so he saves himself, or denies occurrence of any violation and be beaten on behalf of all the prisoners in the dormitory.

Beating was executed with all the means available in the hands of jailors, wheels, electric sticks, blackjacks or the red plastic hoses. In the final days of my imprisonment they added iron pipes dubbed "Umm Kamel," the name of a comic character of an old traditional Syrian TV series. To use it, jailers would order the prisoner to put his hands on his eyes and to lower his head down.

Once, the jailer used it against me. He called me..., of course I responded immediately. He asked: "Do you know Umm Kamel?" I said: "NO." "Now you will know it." he said. He directed one blow to my head, I, unintendedly, opened my eyes to see total blackness. I ran inside the ward and hid among my colleagues. He cursed and followed me to beat me again on my backbone. I fell down, lower part of my body paralyzed for 10-20 seconds. I started crying and spontaneously said: "My God, I did nothing to deserve this punishment." He shouted: "You're calling your God? He is already down in the basement cells," and struck me again on my right shoulder. My friends were standing, faces to the wall as usual, because it is prohibited to see jailers. If jailers notice that anyone had seen their faces, they would take him, poke his eyes and return him back. I ran towards my mates, fell down unconscious and the jailer left the ward. I remained so for about fifteen minutes. When I woke up, I asked my colleagues to help me stand on my feet, to be sure I am not paralyzed. I started sobbing, they joined me,

helped me stand and, thank God, I stood stand.

In another round of torture, they broke one of my ribs, then one of the soldiers advanced and hit me on my left limb, result of which I became sick for 45 days, during which they did not save me of torture. Even though one has a broken bone, he wouldn't be saved from slapping, kicking or cursing.

During our stay in the prison we all, excluding very few of us, kept hoping that the revolution will be victorious and that we will be liberated from this tyranny. For example, one of us used to sit in the corner of the ward and repeat: "It's over...we are finished. We will have the same destiny of the Moslem Brothers, never be free forever. Tomorrow they will liquidate us...and then they will execute us." That was really frustrating.

Death or Execution:

One of those who deceased in the prison was a colleague of mine in the military academy, Ayham Qanzoua, from Latakia countryside. He died of illness. One day we woke up to find him suffering from fever, reddish eyes with blood dropping from his nose. Another one, Khodr al-Qasem, from Talkalakh, died of the same illness. The judge, captain Faysal al-Rifaie, from Daraa, also died from torture.

I loved al-Rifaie because he was optimist. He always said: "We will be set free and we will get rid of this criminal," he means Bashar al-Assad. After the last visit his wife made to him, he knelt down in front of the jailer covering his eyes with his palms, as usual, a soldier kicked him on the stomach. When he returned to the dormitory, he was totally exhausted. He sat on the floor weeping: "Sons of the bitch killed me." He uttered. Three days later, we were having breakfast when he asked us help him go to the toilet. I tried to help him up but he fell down between my hands. A fellow with little knowledge of medicine examined him and said: "May God bless his soul" declaring his death.

We washed his body and wrapped him with a blanket. When the jailer came the next day, he looked at the dormitory prefect and asked: "You pimp, what about this?" (Jailers used to dub dormitory prefects "dormitory pimps." The man said "He died." "He died or *fatas*?" (A slang expression of humiliation to the dead) the jailer asked. "*fatas*" the prefect answered. "Hope you didn't kill him" the jailer commented joking. The prefect said: "No sir, he died by himself." "OK...pull him and throw him out." The jailer ordered.

Hellfire Ward

We were in ward C, known as the hellfire ward. This title was not far from the truth. For example, it was not allowed to have any clothes other than the ones we wear. Once, three months passed with no water in the tank, it was perforated. Every day they brought us forty liters of water to be used by forty prisoners.

Psychological torture was even harder than body torture. For example, one of the jailers might come and open the door window, in this case, the regulations say that all prisoners should immediately run to the end of the dormitory, turn their faces to the wall, kneel down and cover their eyes and faces with their hands. It was totally forbidden to look back and see the jailer. He used to open the door window whenever he wants and to curse our mothers, sisters and wives with the meanest and ugliest descriptions. Every time we wished he would come and beat us instead of hearing his dirty glossary.

One of the dirtiest punishments they used to practice on us is selecting any two of us, order them to stand face to face and slap each other on the faces with their slippers. This punishment was meant to humiliate the prisoners who are no more than numbers in this prison.

In the final stage of our imprisonment they executed prisoners indirectly by beating them on sensitive organs, the spinal cord, the head or the stomach. In mid-June 2014, we were released from prison in two groups. After which no more prisoners were set free collectively from Sednayah prison, prisoners were released singly.

Testimony of Abu Omar



The Arrest

In one of the early days of November 2011, I had a night off duty, a routine, we, in the Syrian military call it a night leave i.e. spending the night with the family at home. Returning to the camp the following morning, I saw a car parking in front of my tent, it was the battalion commander car. It was unusual for a battalion commander to visit a junior officer, First Lieutenant, like me, at the early hours of the day. He hugged me tightly with kisses and warm greetings, an unusual behavior that heated my surprise. A few minutes later he told me that the regiment commander wants to see me. The regiment is one of the special forces' regiments. Its command was in a camp used to train university students (a system applied to prepare male students to the mandatory service after graduation). I joined the battalion commander in his car and departed the battalion camp in the city of "al-Qusayr" in our way to the regiment command.

When we arrived in the main square of the camp, I saw the chief of staff of the regiment, an Alawite officer from Baarin, a village of Masyaf. He was known for his extremist Alawite sectarian orientations. He, in his turn, hugged me warmly, took my hand and escorted me to the office of the regiment commander. There, he pushed the door violently, and pushed me inside the office with a surprising force. Inside, there were three men, one of them sitting on top of a closet inside to the right of the door and the other two on both sides of the door. They were security men. Once I was in the office, the three of them jumped on me and started searching for arms, a pistol or a bomb. I had neither of these. I was full of fear and unable to understand what was going on.

They hand cuffed me...

I looked around to see two other company commanders, one of them was short. Later, he died under torture in the prison. The other was from the city of Ariha in Idlib. Both were handcuffed, faces to the wall. I asked those who attacked me: "What is the problem?" "Shhhh, keep silent, not a word, just stand near your colleagues!" I obeyed. They brought bags, put one on the head of each of the three of us and led us to a minibus.

They took us to "branch 261" the military intelligence branch in Homs. There, they put us in cars, and drove to "branch 293" the officers' branch in Damascus.

In Damascus

In Damascus I realized that there were many detainees around. I couldn't distinguish any of them until they removed the bags off our heads and replaced them with eye blinds. They were 59 Sunni officers from the regiment, eleven of them were company commanders, and the others were platoon commanders.

In "branch 293" they immediately led us on ladders to the basement, where there were cells each one is 75 * 60 cm, with a pot to be used as a toilet and a water tap. This means that one should spend all the time squatting.

Ten days passed, nobody asked me anything. I was totally tense, need to understand what is my charge? Where and why I am here?

After ten days, the door was opened, an eye blind was thrown at me to put it on. They handcuffed me and took me to an elevator which, I guess, climbed several levels. They took me to an interrogation room. There I saw a clock pointing at eleven, but I couldn't realize whether it was day or night. One of the persons in the room, with civil clothes, said to another: "Sir ... There is still only one hour to the end of the official time." I understood that it was night.

Interrogation started. They took me down to the room of Shabeh, (which means suspension). There, I saw an old man being tortured by a soldier from Aleppo. He was treading on his body and cursing him. From time to time the soldier was summoned to take tea glasses to the offices. That means he is no more than a janitor given this detainee to "entertain" him. I asked the old man about his charge. He said: "I am a brigadier general, commander of Marjal-Sultan air base." which is a helicopter air field near Damascus. I was shocked and panicked. I said to myself, if this general is being tortured this way, what they will do with a little officer like me?

I looked around and saw a row of bathrooms, in each of them there was a man suspended from his hand cuffs to a pipe extended through all the cells. One can hardly touch the floor with his toes. This is suspension or in Arabic "Shabeh." Some of them were bleeding from their wrists, others were weeping from severe pains. Once any of them tries to put his toes on the floor the cuffs will press his wrists. If he lifts himself up to ease the pain of his wrists his feet will swell. Horrific scenes. I realized that some of them had been suspended for a long time so their feet were swollen and their skins were bleeding.

They suspended me for 24 hours, after which they took me to the interrogation room again. There, one of them told another: "Take him to the Saloon." They took me down to the "Saloon," a corridor in which one stands hand cuffed in the middle, forbidden to rest on the

walls. In the saloon there were four detained officers from our regiment and a civilian from Daraa. I asked him "What is your charge?" "Participating in demonstrations" he answered. He was yelling for help. When I asked why all the shouts, he said that the jailer prevented him from going to pee since yesterday, and at the same time was pressing him to drink water and threatening to beat him if he pees in his place.

I advised him to pee, he did it. When the jailer came back and saw him, he slapped him forcefully. He fell on the ground. The jailer wound his male organ with a rubber and forced him again to drink water.

We spent sixty days in the branch prison with a daily routine of beating and suspension. Once I was on the verge of unconsciousness, result of suspension with hands cuffed behind me. I started reading a verse from the Holy Quran which mean: "Who will aid the victim if he invokes to God and who will release him of pain." Soon, a major called Samer, as I remember, approached me and put his foot in my mouth to silence me saying: "Whom are you calling? Who will release you from pain? Allah? Who is Allah? Your God? Call him again to see how he will come to your aid! If he comes, I will punish him with you, I'll suspend your God beside you if he comes here. Call him again, I am waiting for him." A minute after, he went, head of the branch, Rafiq Shehadeh, came, asked me about my charge, ordered them to untie me and to take me to the dormitory.

After two months in the branch, I was transferred to Sednayah prison. I thought that it will be better there, but later I realized that real suffering would start after entering the Sednayah prison.

In Sednayah Prison

On January 4, 2012, fifty persons including me, were transported in a closed truck, say a trash container. In front of the truck, two members of the prison team ascended to the container to carry us one by one, hand cuffed, and throw us on the floor randomly, on the back, on the side, no difference, as if they were throwing bags of onion. Once in the prison, with continuous beating, they took our personal data and led us five by five to the wheel session of torture, completely naked. Two jailors, one to the right, the other to the left, started beating the prisoners. When finished, three jailers transported them one by one, one holding the right leg, the second the left one, and the third draws him on the ground from his hands along a stair to a cell underground.

We spent twenty days in the cells. A jailer used to come to throw food to us as if throwing

stones. Eggs fall on the ground, break out and scatter on the floor. We ate them because food was scarce. We were five officers in the cell. Every day a jailer brought two loaves of bread and two boiled eggs, sometimes with yoghurt on the bread, as if we were cats. Every time the jailer comes, he punishes us with the wheel. Torture in the cells was unbearable, we were totally nude in a very cold weather, Sednayah is known as a summer place. They gave each one of us three blankets full of lice, one of them is soaked with water. We didn't use it. We used one as a mattress and the second as a cover.

In the Dormitory

Twenty days passed in the cells underground. Then we were told that they will move us to the dormitories upstairs and treat us as human beings. In case anyone violates the regulations he will be returned down to the solitary cells. At the door of the dormitory they beat us mercilessly and ordered us in. As in the cells, they used to throw food on the ground. we collected it and ate it. In spite of this, one can say that the prison was relatively "good" compared with what will happen in the following year and the year after. They used to beat us "only twice" weekly, and food quantities were satisfactory.

At the start of 2013 the massacre began. Prisoners started dying one after another. In our dormitory rarely a week passes with one or two cases of death, if not more. Scabies and bugs spread densely. Torture increased after the prisoners had killed Talat Mahfouz, director of the prison, who was succeeded by a real criminal.

Liquidating prisoners started.

When we entered the dormitory, there were six prisoners, four from ar-Rastan, one from east of Hama, and the sixth, Ali Eissa, from ad-Dumayr. Ali Eissa had clashed with an Israeli patrol during the offensive on Gaza. He seemed to have a pronunciation problem. After we familiarized with him, he told me that he had spent eight months in a solitary cell with no one to talk to. So, he started losing pronunciation. He was stuttering and pronouncing unintelligible words. His colleagues in the cell told us later that they tried to help him pronounce letters properly, and he had relatively improved. This man was a hero.

After a few days they brought new prisoners, one of them was Rance al-Mosleh.

Rance al-Mosleh

He was major in his military training course: Specialization: Signal. He was delegated to Iran to follow a course there. Soon after he returned, he became victim to report writers, so he

was arrested. He was a real man with the whole meaning of the word. When the jailer came and asked who wants to be prefect of the dormitory, all prisoners sneaked away. We all knew that destiny of the prefect is death because he will be target to the jailers. The jailer selected an old sick man to take this responsibility, Rance soon advanced himself as an alternative. A dormitory prefect knows well that he will be subject to merciless beating which may lead to death. When a jailer enters the dormitory he would stand at the door and shout: "Dormitory prefects," or "Dormitory pimps," or "dormitory pigs" ...all of you, take off your clothes and keep the shorts," then he would start beating them with a green PVC pipe used in plumbing, just for fun, then, he leaves.

Jailers ask prefects about the names of trouble makers. Rance usual reply was always "No rioters here." And he was always beaten for this reply. In fact, there were no trouble makers among us, we even dare not breathe. Often we told him to give certain names to evade being beaten and his typical answer always was: "We will die in a way or another. We are brought here to die. I will not be reason of torture to anybody. I don't want anyone to stand in the day of judgement between the hands of Allah and say Rance oppressed me. Let them beat me to death." Many times, we tried to convince him to evade beating, but he refused. Therefore, we decided to put a list of names of virtual rioters every Monday to be punished and to please the jailers. But the result was the same, jailers tortured them and Rance was not saved.

We were completely isolated from the outer world. We adamantly tried to know any news, but in vain. Even talking was prohibited. If a jailer comes and hears a whisper in the dormitory, he would beat all the prisoners. To communicate with each other we used signs. Rance's wife used to send him little messages on small pieces of paper 5 * 2 cm, inserted with the rubber of the trousers she used to bring him. She used to write outlines of what is happening outside. Her news was confidential, but her visits were very rare, once every four months. In short, we all used to wait her visit to be informed about the developments in the outer world.

Routine of Visits

Jailers announce the names of those to be visited. The prisoner gets ready to go out of the dormitory and to be beaten to bleeding, and then to be drawn to a large hall, about 15 * 10 m, where all those lucky prisoners from all wards are crowded. In the hall there were two barbers, each with a machine to remove the hair of the detainees. Then the prisoner is escorted by two soldiers on the right and left and a third one behind him. He should stand in front of a mesh and the visitors stand behind another one. Between the two meshes a soldier walks to

listen to the conversations. Before the visits, prisoners are advised to limit their talks to: "how are you? how is your health? I am fine, everything is alright, and so on."

Items brought by the visitors do not go to the prisoners directly. They take them to a special section in the prison to be examined. Items of each prisoner are put in a bag with his name on it. All bags are inspected thoroughly. Once, they discovered news written on the inside of a piece of clothes. Jailers steal most of the prisoners' items. If any of them was sent ten pieces, the jailer would give him only one saying: "One piece is enough for you" and he takes the rest!

Jailers know nothing about washing clothes. Visits were allowed to twice a week, on Sundays and Wednesdays, and each time they confiscate the new clothes brought to the prisoners and give them the old ones they were wearing.

Once, Rance was called for a visit, he returned "worn out" with his mouth full of blood. They dropped him in the dormitory and left. We all ran to know the news from the paper in his trousers. He pulled the rubber, took the letter, read it and put it on his chest. We asked him about news, he said: "No news, it is private."

To speak about military hierarchy, I precede Rance in two courses. In Syrian military terminology I am his grandfather, i.e. I am senior to him. We had a good relation, which encouraged me to insist on asking him about the content of the letter he received. He said "Nothing important." And that was all. We used to recite the Holy Quran before sunset. In that day we read "al-Waqia (surah)" by heart. Again, I asked him about the content of the letter.

It was normal for those who receive visitors to return and say that they were told everything is alright and good and shortly we will be released from prison, even though their visitors did not say anything like that. They do it to raise the morals of the prisoners and help them conquer the fatal frustration they suffer. Rance always used to do that. He always said that prisoners suffer from unusual pressures, they do not need to hear bad news. Every time he returned from a visit, he used to say that his visitors hinted that the regime will fall, the Assad will be removed, and all prisoners would be set free. A breakthrough is on the track.

I insisted on him to tell me about the letter he received, he looked at me cordially and said: Look my "grandpa" ...when I was arrested, my daughter Fatima was nine months old. Today my wife told me that she began to walk, and started calling my father: "Papa." His tears ran out on his cheeks. His father was a brigadier general in the air defense corps, he cared for the child after his son was arrested.

The situation was utterly emotional. I started consoling him and at the same time remember

my two sons: Omar and Ali, how I used to take them to our farm, and to teach them swimming in the stream near the well. I always asked myself: "How are they now?"

Sickness and the Hospital

One day, Rance was very ill. A prison doctor came to examine him. Imagine, the doctor who came to treat him began beating him! He knocked him on his mouth, two teeth fell down and he was referred to the hospital because he had tuberculosis or asthma, I don't remember. He was transferred to Tishreen military hospital. We waited his return to know any news from the outer world. When he returned, he told us the story of his medication: "patients were transported by a vehicle assigned to carry trash. When we arrived in the hospital a soldier gave each one of us an Aspirin tablet. They put us in the vehicle again and returned us back. On the way to and from the hospital beating did not stop."

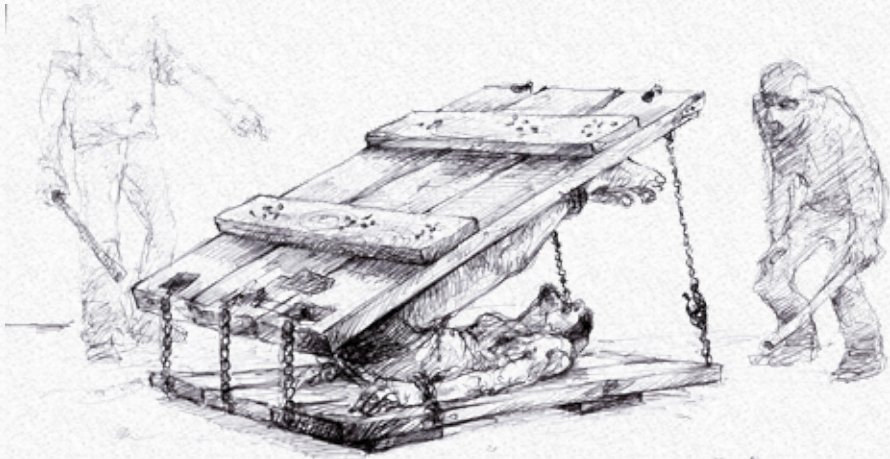
Once a prisoner from our ward was taken to the hospital. When he returned we discovered how fine we were. He told us that the situation in other wards is much worse than in ours. One of the patients discovered dry vomiting from another patient on the floor of the vehicle, he scraped it and ate it out of a chronic hunger!

Scabies plagued many prisoners in other wards due to absence of cleanliness. Until then we were saved from this plague which will sweep all wards of the prison later and kill many prisoners. When Rance was moved to the hospital he picked the plague from one of the patients and carried it to us. Two or three days after his return he started to scratch his body. In a few days we all were infected. We scratched our bodies to bleeding, then painful abscesses covered our bodies. Scabies pains plagued us all. When asking jailers for medicines they started beating us.

Despite his good manners, some of our colleagues blamed Rance for carrying the disease, avoided sitting with him or eating with him! He was patient and kept silent in his difficult status. Gradually he began losing weight until he became a skeleton.

One day, he fell on the ground with only his eyes moving. We realized that he was dying. The following day we told the jailer that Rance had died. He said: "wrap him in a blanket" we shrouded Rance and put him near the door. The jailer said: "He didn't die yet. Leave him here." In the afternoon, he came with another one and took him away.

Testimony of Mutasem Abdul Sater



April 2018

They took us to “branch 248” for a temporary stay. We heard that this will take one or two days before referring us to Sednayah prison, but we were kept there for a month and a few days. They were very difficult days making us dream of the day of taking us to Sednayah, or to be returned to “branch 293” where they first took us. It is true that we were tortured and beaten during interrogation, but being confined in a solitary cell underground without uttering a word was extremely unbearable. When they took us out, we couldn’t open our eyes naturally because they had got used to the dimness of the cell.

To Sednayah

At last our “dream” came true. We were referred to Sednayah. We were 25-30 persons. They handcuffed us, tied us with chains and led us to a closed vehicle as if we were sheep. On the way to Sednayah we wished a miracle would occur, the car would tumble and we all die or be able to run away. This did not happen. We heard sounds of cars and imagined how the people outside were leading their normal life.

We arrived in Sednayah. We couldn’t see the prison from the closed vehicle, dubbed the fridge. Inside, we found ourselves in a square. They ordered us to bow our heads in order not to see their faces. They checked our names with the documents they have. They ordered us to take off our clothes, and began beating us from 12.00 p.m. to 05.00 p.m.

Then, they divided us in groups of 7-8 prisoners. They took us to a basement about 20 steps down, dark and wet with sounds of human beings being tortured. They ordered us to lay down procurrent, faces down, and started beating us again, then they entered each group into a room less than 2 * 1.7 m with a little toilet. The jailer started calling our names and asking about our charges while slapping us on the face, followed by beating on the feet until we lost control on our bodies.

They kept us in the small rooms for a long time. We had no idea about the arrangements in the prison, so we thought that we will spend all what remains of our lives in these rooms. The rooms were very cold, the floor was always wet and we had no blankets. Food was very scarce, we had nothing but water to fill our stomachs. Our jailer throws the food on the floor to be eaten by those who are extremely hungry. Every day we had a course of beating for no reason.

In the dormitory

At the end of March 2012, i.e. after about eleven days, they took us from the underground cells, climbed long stairs although we were exhausted from fatigue and from relentless beating. We arrived in a dormitory. It was totally empty, nothing in it. They entered us and without seeing their faces, we heard them ordering: "You stay here, food will be brought to you here. No sounds and whispers." They taught us the position which we should take every time a jailer comes in, to sit squatting, faces to the wall and hands behind the back. After a few minutes one of them threw four soap bars and said: "You pimps, wash up," then they brought two military blankets of unbearable smell for each one of us. Every two prisoners shared blankets, three on the ground and one as a cover. After the painful torture we had suffered in the dim basement we felt that we were in paradise!

The following day they brought us the breakfast, one complete egg for each person and enough bread. Lunch was cooked bulgur (Borghul) which filled our stomachs after long painful days of hunger.

Few days passed, suddenly they entered the dormitory and created an atmosphere of terror. They asked those wearing military uniforms to take them off and throw them outside. Then they beat us on the wheel. This procedure became a routine repeated every week.

They appointed one of us, colonel Nidal al-Haj, prefect of the dormitory. He had to present three names of trouble makers every week, or two or three of us would volunteer on behalf of the others to receive the daily punishment.

The responsible of the dormitory was a staff sergeant, dark brown face, 170 cm full body, we gave him a nick name; al-Dairy (from Deir ez-Zur) to discover later that he was from Manbij, Aleppo countryside.

Days passed and we dare gather in the corners of the dormitory and whisper to each other. Whenever we feel that the door window is being opened, we soon turn and face the walls.

After a few months, food began to worsen, treatment became harder, and life conditions in the dormitory created frequent differences for silly reasons between the detainees.

One day, the jailers entered and told us that we can buy detergents by "bills," a system known in Syrian prisons which means paying exaggerated prices from the money we have in the "deposits." We paid to buy tooth brushes and tooth paste, then we were allowed to buy medicines, also by bills. It was a privilege to allow us buy medicines without a prescription from the doctor whose presence was a sign of pessimism, because we had to be completely naked when he enters. There was a possibility to register to go to the hospital but we dare

not exploit this blessing. Once, one of us went to the hospital. When he returned, he told us that they put him in the hospital's detention room, gave him two envelopes of antibiotics and one envelope of analgesics without being examined.

In spite of this, the trip to the hospital was an opportunity to be pampered.

Death

Water might be cut off for seven or eight days consecutively, so we had to rationalize using it. Food quantities dwindled, and jailers began to throw food on us. Prisoners started to get sick and die due to the deteriorating immunity of their bodies.

In 2013 beating became a daily routine, it was very severe and blood spots began to smear the walls. The first one who died in front of me was Khalil Alloush from Daraa, a lieutenant colonel with an athletic body. Once, they entered the dormitory and he dared speak to them. They beat him and broke his shoulder and hand. In the morning they transported him to the hospital where they beat him on his kidneys and returned him in a much worse situation. Despite his clear sickness they came to beat him. Two or three days after returning from the hospital he died.

First lieutenant Abdul Aziz Sweid from Kafr Nabl got sick. He was assigned prefect of our dormitory. After one month he started to hallucinate. This did not save him from being beaten. Sick prisoners were subject to beating more than healthy ones because of their violations of the regulations. Abdul Aziz was Tall and well built before he began losing weight. At that time, he was the heaviest of us, 50 Kg. When he died, they put him beside me! They took our blankets and clothes and we sat completely naked. I felt my health was gradually deteriorating. Scabies spread among us and we started scratching our bodies to bleeding. Scabies was severe on me to an extent I did dare tell the sergeant when he asked who is infected of us. I showed him my scratched body and asked for medicine. He brought me two packs of Benzoate and 20 antibiotic capsules. He asked if I know how to use them, I said no. He taught one of the prisoners how to massage my body and wash it with cold water. I told him that I shall not forget this favor. This behavior encouraged us to ask him bring us medicines and more bread. Relatively, he treated us kindly. One month passed and he disappeared, we realized that he was moved from the prison.

Days passed and I, in my turn, started hallucinating. I could no more distinguish those around me. Mohammad Qassoum, may God bless his soul, took care of me. After getting out from the prison I knew that he died there.

One day they called for “Ahmad Khaled Tarieyeh” and asked him about his birth place. He was from Ar-Rastan. They ordered him to put his finger prints on a paper without reading it. That was normal. We were not allowed to know the content of such papers. Our faces were always to the wall, so we didn’t know that they were beating him. After a few minutes of their departure we felt free to turn our faces and look around us. We found him laid on the ground, we thought that he was exhausted or sick, but he was dead.

In the Court

After three months in the prison they started submitting us to courts and allowing visits. Duration of the visit was three minutes only. We used to ask those who return from the visits and interpret any word they had heard from their visitors as a sign of a near release, or that the prison will fall to the Free Syrian Army.

Returnees from the courts were always frustrated and exhausted from the severe beating they receive. They always returned with severe cases of scabies which is widely spread in the prisons of the military police in Qaboun.

I remained one year and a half victim of forced disappearance, nobody knows anything about me until I was submitted to the court. I spent a night there in a room nearly 5 * 4 m with about 200 detainees heaped over each other swapping scabies and lice.

The following day they entered me to a judge who ordered taking the blind off my eyes. He asked about the eleven charges against me. I denied them all. He said: “INKeli Wlak” which means get away, you... asshole. I did.

The Visit

One month after the trial I was summoned for a visit for the first time. Before that, I dreamt of a visit and showed my colleagues how I would walk to the door to see my visitors. Visits were limited to Sundays and Tuesdays every week. One Tuesday the jailer entered and called my name. He said “Lift your sweater to cover your head.” I did. “Move... you ass hole” I moved. They collected 6 or seven prisoners from other wards who had visits, led us all to a wide corridor, then I knew that we were in the third floor.

My visit was on July 07, 2013. The good sergeant, himself, led me down. I understood, only then, that he was moved to another ward, not out of the prison. Before the visit, they cut the hair of the prisoners. My lip was wounded and I had a slap. They took us to a large hall to wait. All of us were squatting and every time one tries to sit on the floor he will be beaten or kicked

by an anonymous jailer. Waiting started at 10.00 a.m. till 04.00 p.m. I felt I am going to die. At the end I heard my name and I was told to wear my sweater properly.

In the visit hall the prisoner stands in front of a metal mesh and the visitor in front of another one with a narrow walk between them where a sentry walks and another one stands behind the prisoner. When I saw my family, I started weeping. I saw my wife and two daughters, Sana and Naheeda. I love this scene a lot and passionately like to recall it although it makes me cry every time I remember it. I couldn't recognize the two girls because of the long time in the prison and the way they had grown up. This is why I couldn't speak to them in the first visit.

I thought that my youngest daughter was the elder because I left her sister in the same age. I did not know the elder. I asked the little one to talk to me: "I am dad my love, my soul." She kept silent. She was only months when I left her. Strong exhaustion was clear on my wife's face.

Like a spark, the three minutes passed. I told them good bye with tears in my eyes. A jailer asked me: "You pimp, why are you crying?" and started beating me!

After the visit they gave me a bag with a towel and two sets of under wear only. It is impossible for any visitor to bring just these items for a prisoner. I knew later that my wife had brought me three brand-new pajamas, several under wear sets, and many other items. "Sons of a bitch" expropriated all of them.

I climbed the stairs to the third level totally fatigued. I tried to forget my family during the months in the prison, but now, their images have nested in my mind, waiting for the second visit which we were told not to wait it before three months. I started counting days and hours. The three months passed very slowly, I thought they were years.

Execution and Punishments

In this period scabies spread fast among us. Food was scarce, and death spread its wings wide over the prison dormitories. Jailers used to announce names of defectors from the army and lead them to nowhere, sure, to execution. Our numbers started to decrease, so they moved those who remained alive to other dormitories. One of us was appointed responsible of distributing water on dormitories equally. We arranged shifts of two to clean the dormitory daily in case we have enough water. We formed something like a court to solve the differences that started to arise between us, result of the shortage of food and water. Prisoners, sometimes, quarreled, and if their voices reached the jailer, he would torture all prisoners of the dormitory for a complete night or take them to solitary cells.

Frequency of torturing prisoners increased for no reason, just so, an entertainment to the jailers. One frequently imposed punishment was drawing blankets from the prisoners. A jailer might enter the dormitory and orders the prefect to pour cold water on our heads, or shouts: "Arms up" leaving us in this case for a day or two, during which they bring food, as usual, and put it in the middle of the dormitory prohibiting anyone from approaching it.

Norms of Prison Life

We suffered a lot from lack of sugar, so dreams were the only source of having sweets. Since I was released from prison I turned into a gluttonous sweet eater!

I'll tell you how we used to "cook." Please don't be surprised. We did not have anything that might be used for usual cooking. Instead, we resorted to fancies. Three or four of us gather to whisper explaining the way of cooking rice, okra (ladies' fingers), or preparing cookies!

We used to pray collectively although that was prohibited. At the bottom of the door there was a metallic mesh, one would sit near it to watch and alarm us in case any jailer comes. Once, jailers noticed that four of us were praying, they beat them in a way that prevented them from standing erect for two months. They confined them in the dormitory bath fort days.

We were not able to know the time, no watches of course, so we estimated the time of dawn prayers from the early morning birds' songs.

Patches of blood decorated the walls. We used to clean our wounds with dirty pieces of cloth. Medicines became totally forbidden. Treatment had drastically worsened. Neither of us would dare to be a dormitory prefect because they would wear him out by beating and kicking. To avoid this, we reached an understanding to swap this role among us.

New ways of bargaining spread among us. Suppose I have an extra half a loaf of bread; I can use it for buying some olives from another prisoner. Once, inspector of the wards found some olives preserved by a prisoner. He threw them away saying: "Are you saving? The food you have is more than enough for you."

Many times, they deprived a dormitory from food for no reason or just to save themselves distributing it. Once they gave us the share of the ward of 10 dormitories and deprived the other prisoners from food. Anyhow, the food specified for the whole ward was hardly enough for one dormitory.

We assigned two of us to distribute food. This did not solve the problem, instead it was reason for differences about the size of shares.

In the month of Holy Ramadan or in the Bairam, one would sit on the small space allowed for him, (a space of one tile and a quarter or a half, it depends on the number of prisoners in the dormitory) looks around to see all prisoners weeping, and you can just Say: "O my God, help us!"

We collected olive seeds and started amusing ourselves by playing chess or checkers on squares we drew on a dark shirt. Soon the jailers discovered that and beat us to death.

After two or three months in the prison they started taking us to a bath inside the ward, completely naked. They would enter seven or three prisoners together to a bath room and open very hot water on them. In the way to and from the bath beating does not stop. Being weak and bare foot, some of us may slip on the wet floor to be beaten with the green PVC hoses*. We always returned from the bath with wounds.

The Second Visit

Three months passed after the first visit, and they called my name for a new one on a Sunday. They escorted me to the hall, of course, after beating me mercilessly. In the hall, there was my father, my sister, my wife and the two daughters. My father was in his eighties. He begged the jailer to take care of me because I was innocent. The jailer said "Sure Ya Haj" which means "sure uncle." They try to prove they are so kind with the prisoners. A family visit costs my family a stay in Damascus for at least twenty days to apply and follow the application at different security services. They used to hire an apartment or be hosted at some relatives during this time. That was costly and tiresome just to spend three minutes with me.

My wife asked me: "Why you don't wear the clothes I brought you last time?" A surprising question I dare not answer. I just said: "it is better like this." She looked at the jailers and asked: "Where are the clothes, I brought him last time? Why you didn't give them to him?" O my God, this is a big problem, the jailer looked at me to answer. I said: "My clothes are up in the dormitory; I feel good like this."

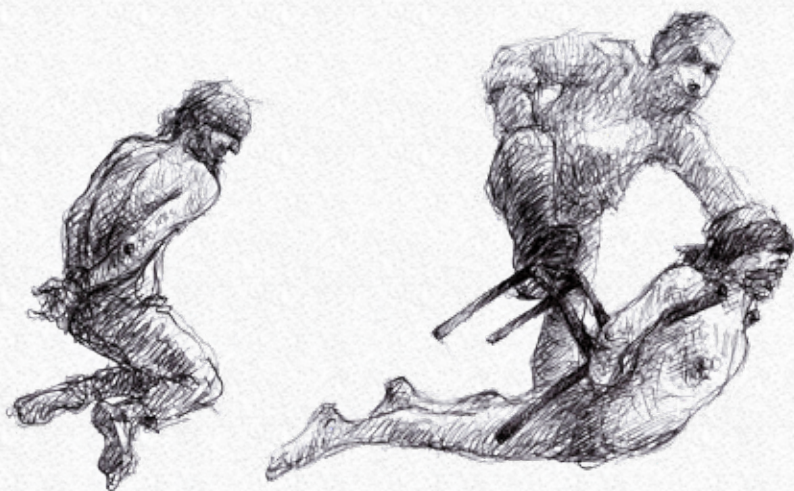
After the visit, this dialogue cost me a red death beating during which the jailor was repeating: "You need new clothes son of a pimp?!"

This time they gave me the bag of clothes which my wife had brought after taking only the brand-new ones leaving to me the old garments brought from my wardrobe.

I have headache now. I can realize how man can bear, wondering how we could get out safe from that hell!!!!

* Green PVC hoses are widely used in Syria in plumbing. Jailers use pieces of them to beat prisoners.

Testimony of Ashraf al-Hussein



They arrested us in the Military Academy, transported us to the Military branch of Investigation No. 293, where they kept us for more than one hundred days, then they deported us to the prison of Sednayah.

When we arrived at the prison of Sednayah, they entered us into a gloomy corridor where we felt that it was a horror studio; many corpses laid on the ground, drenched with blood. The walls and the floor were stained with spots of dry blood, exactly as if we were entering a slaughterhouse. They registered our names, and ordered us to take off our clothes to be submitted to an extended party of beating. Then they entered us into cells, they call them solitary cells, but they squeezed inside them any number of human beings they can. The ceiling of our cell was dripping abundantly. We felt as if we were under the rain in the open air. I believe that was intended.

We spent fifteen days in that cell subject to relentless beating with every meal of food. Due to the severity of beating, we wished not to have food, result of the unbearable torture and humiliation practiced upon us with every meal they offer.

When they moved us from the cells to the dormitories, we believed that we will be moved from hell to heaven, so we thought at that moment; having in mind that they will not beat or humiliate us there because we have already become old prisoners. Unfortunately, that was not true, rather, they continued beating us just for beating.

Food was another story; sometimes they put it out of the dormitory for the following day, or they throw it on the floor, but most humiliating was throwing it on the heads of the prisoners. They used to bring the three meals of the day all together, and even then, the share of the whole day was not sufficient to feed a little child.

In the days of visits, each one of us used to take a corner of the dormitory praying not to be privileged with one. We even communicated wills, demanding from those released from this hell, to visit our families to quench their heated anxiety and to tell them not to think of visiting their son if they ever want to see him alive again, because he might be killed after that visit. Jailers beat those called to meet members of their families on their way from the dormitory to the meeting room, and return them back under heavy beating. One of my colleagues, "a son of our case" as we used to say, was called to have a visit, after seeing his family they dragged him back to the dormitory. I stole a look and saw them beating him with a 1.5 m metal pipe, a tool was extensively used in torturing us. We dubbed it "the death pipe" because two or three beats were enough to kill the prisoner.

At our first days in the prison they used electric cables, quadruple cables, to beat us. They

were cables plaited twice, so they have four wires twisted together. They also used green PVC water pipes. These tools can kill too, because beating was arbitrary, it saves no part of the body; the head, the belly, the legs or the hands. They used to beat us as if they were shaking dust off a wool fleece, while our eyes were closed. Kicking with the military boots is even more harmful than beating with the metal pipe, because it will, sure, cause death if it is practiced on the belly.

Result of shortage of food and lack of exposure to the sun, diseases spread among prisoners in a way that any illness, like flu, or a simple ulcer on the skin, would lead to death due to the deterioration of immunity systems of our bodies and absence of any medicines.

A doctor used to visit us every two or three days, and used to ask a typical question: "Who of you is sick?" No one will dare raise his hand out of fear from the doctor whom we called the butcher, because any one who dares raise his hand to say he is sick will be beaten to death by the doctor.

In one of the days of visits, jailers came to call those of us required for a visit. The jailer opened the little window on the door and called the name of one of us. We all were kneeling down, faces to the wall, and only the prefect has the right to answer. He didn't hear the jailer well, and begged him to repeat the name: "Yes sir?" The jailer didn't understand that the prefect didn't hear the name well, he thought that the prefect said that the prisoner is present in the dormitory. He opened the door to take him out. The prefect repeated the question, when he heard the name well, he said that the prisoner is not in our dormitory. The jailer burst in anger accusing the prefect of mocking him. He laid him down on his back, called four prisoners to hold his hands and legs, threatening anyone of them to take his place if he releases a hand or a leg. The jailer started beating the prefect and jumping on his chest, until he fainted. He ordered pouring cold water on his body to be sure that he died. When they pour water on the prisoner he didn't move, his body remained motionless, so he ordered us to put him in the bath room. After a short time, we realized that our colleague was still alive. We changed his clothes, wiped his blood and took care of him. In that same night his chest swelled large and he died.

One of the most tragic events was about having our hair cut. When they want us to have our hair cut, they used to throw three or four hair cutting machines linked to one wire from the little window of the door. After we use them, they give them to the next dormitory and so on. One day they gave the order: "All should have their hair cut" but they did not bring the machines. Prefect of the dormitory informed jailers that no machines were brought to us. The

reply was a new order: "Do it the way you like!" But how?!! Some of the prisoners believed that this will mean nothing because the order is illogical, others were afraid of the results. We broke some ceramic tiles from the walls of the bath room and started shortening the hair of each other as much as we can. When they came the following day and found that we haven't done it the right way, they ordered prefects of the dormitories to get out to the corridor and started beating them mercilessly until two or three of them died. Again, they repeated the order: "Tomorrow all should have their hair cut," and they left. We realized that the illogical threat was serious!! But what can we do now? We started plucking hair from our heads, beards and moustaches!!

Testimony of Imad Eddin Chahoud



Imad 2019

Judge Nayef al-Rifaei

I knew judge al-Rifaei in the “Red Building,” Sednayah prison, in 2012, and we remained together until he was killed in April 2014

Judge al-Rifaei was of excellent morals, highly respectable, from a noble family in Daraa. His father, Faisal al-Rifaei, was discharged from the foreign intelligence service in 1975. Nayef, like me, was born in 1974, therefore we were close to each other. He told me that he had the secondary studies certificate, and went to the United Arab Emirates to work there. Then he returned to Syria, studied law, and applied to work in the military judicial department. His wife is an English teacher in the schools of Darayya. She is Hind al-Hamed, a displaced person from the Golan, her brother is Firas, head of the state security branch in Homs. They had two girls; Julia and Norma. They lived in Sahnaya. As a military judge in the military judicial department he was assigned a Jeep Waz, a Russian made vehicle for his transportation.

In the prison, he was not distinguished from the others, rather he was subject to torture more than other prisoners. His sister was arrested by the air force intelligence service accused of smuggling a wanted young man from Daraa.

al-Rifaei supported the revolution with his full heart and mind. He was accused of supporting the revolutionaries in Damascus and of leaking secret documents of execution issued by judge Mohammad Kanjo Hasan, chief of the military field tribunal. Kanjo Hasan is from the village of Khirbet al-Mazah of Baniyas. Al-Rifaei was also accused of giving the addresses of Kanjo Hasan who opted to live in the Dimas Equestrian Club to be safe of assassination. This accusation included three judges: Nayef, Nimr al-Nammour from Qudssaya who fled before being arrested, and the third, a judge I forgot his name. Nayef was summoned to the court only once in October 2013. There, he was tried by his subordinate, Samer Moalla, son in law of the ill-famed intelligence officer, Abdul Fattah Qudsieh. Moalla is husband of Futoun, Qudsieh's daughter, as al-Rifaei told me.

After the last visit of al-Rifaei's wife, a jailer named Eissa Mohammad, from Safita, returned him to the dormitory. I believe that Eissa Mohammad alone, had killed more than 1,000 prisoners. In the dormitory, Eissa ordered al-Rifaei to kneel down and started beating him on the stomach with an iron pipe, and then left the dormitory. Five minutes later, al-Rifaei started to bleed from his mouth and fell unconscious. In the prison there was a second-year student in the faculty of medicine, his name was Mohammad al-Qasem, he died later. I asked al-Qasem about the situation of al-Rifaei, he told me that mouth bleeding is a sign of stomach hemorrhage. Nayef, originally was well built, 190 cm tall, but he lost a lot of his weight due to

hunger and sickness. He had a cardiac problem and was used to take two kinds of medicines, one of them is fluid for blood. At the beginning, they used to give him medicines but later they denied him that privilege. When he started to bleed, we had nothing to give him excluding water to wash his face and mouth. I gave him an orange slice, he vomited it and died. May God, the almighty, bless his soul.

Medication in the Prison

If you register for medical check in the prison, this means your end, result of the beating on the way to and from Tishreen Military Hospital. Even doctors beat the patients. When jailers escort a patient to the hospital, they give him a number, in order to mention his name. Once, I registered, and they gave me the number 2,529. We were about 30 prisoners referred to the hospital, when we arrived, four of us had already deceased. The following day, they ordered me to help put the corps of those who died in the hospital in plastic bags. They were more than 15 who were killed by the Shabiha and doctors. I believe that the number of those who were killed in the hospital is much higher than those killed in Sednayah prison.



Testimony of Manal al-Rifaei

On this day, March 22, 2012, they arrested Nayef, my brother. He was in our house, he said farewell to me, to my mother, and to my daughter and told us he will report to the intelligence branch which had summoned him, just to know what they want from him. He had received guarantees that the interrogation in the branch will be no more than questions and answers, after which he will return home. We tried insistently not to let him go. I had arranged, in cooperation with some defecting officers, to take him to Jordan, but he refused.

He went to the “branch of Patrols” in al-Kiswah. We contacted him several times during the first few hours, and he replied all our calls. At 09.00 p.m. his mobile phone was out of the grid. Our hearts fell down and we didn’t know about him any more

After seven months we visited him in the prison for the first time. My second brother, Samer, arranged the visit with the help of an official of a prominent position. My mother and Samer went to see him. He had lost weight but still in good shape. My mother succeeded in gaining the sympathy of one of the guards who opened the mesh between them allowing her to hug him. He whispered something in her ears, she failed to comprehend because she was crying heavily.

The same official who arranged the first visit arranged a permit for another one. I was glad I will see him. Unable to imagine his real size now, I bought him many things; several sizes of pajamas and under wear sets. I said to myself the items that will not fit him could be used by another detainee. I chose woolen fabrics to warm him, and dark colors to enable him to use them long before washing them.

On March 27, 2014 I packed the items I had bought. My mother, Samer and I, left at an early hour. During our trip to the prison they tried to prepare me psychologically in order not to be shocked when I see him, telling me that he would be thin and different from Nayef whom I had known. I tried to draw his image in my mind, but what I saw was worse than all of my worries.

When we arrived in the prison, I imagined that the mountains around it were weeping. The air was rather cold but I had the feeling that it was suffocating. Draught, dryness and a dreary building. They collected us, all the visitors, in a square. Our eyes were searching the windows around us. I asked myself: “Behind which one my brother lives?” I felt that faces of the guards were dropping black. Are those the evils who imprison my brother?

It was horribly painful, and at the same time tiresome to my old mother who had no chair to rest on. She hardly found a stone and put her weak body on it. A long time passed in waiting. I took one of the pieces I had bought for my brother and put it on me saying to myself that he, later, will smell our scent in it!

They called the visitors to get in. After a long time sitting on the stone, my mother couldn't raise her weak body quickly, one of the guards told her: "Enough, enough, stay here. If you are not in a hurry to see your son, you better go back home." We told him: "take it easy... an old woman, she hardly can move... her legs dried up of the long time waiting... We are helping her."

My brother and I supported our mother to stand. They entered us into a large hall the like of a school class room, with desks, a board and broken windows. They started inspecting our bags to determine what is allowed and what is forbidden. We said to ourselves; anything will reach him will be alright.

In the hall, we waited a long time. In the court yard we spent about two hours, or may be less than that because we were in a hurry to see Nayef. Inside the hall, time was endless, two hours more were an age.

I noticed that the guards were escorting some of us, of the visitors, and return them back quickly with eyes full of tears! I asked myself where do they take them for this short time? Why they return back weeping?

Our turn came, they called us. Samer supported my mother who was unable to walk quickly and climb stairs. I was jumping every two steps together to gain time and see my brother more than the four minutes given to us.

I entered a hall where on the right there was a mesh divided into three parts, behind each one stands a person, but all of them were strangers. One of the guards called me to give him the bag I had brought with me at the end of the hall. I said: "But my brother isn't among those behind the mesh." He took the bag and told me to wait. I looked back and saw my mother behind the second part of the mesh. I approached her with dissatisfaction. I have scrutinized the faces of the prisoners just a while ago, Nayef was not among them. I looked at the person who was in front of my mother but did not recognize him. I looked at my mother, she was crying, I looked at the man again: who is this? What's wrong with my mother? Did she lose her mind? I heard her saying: "How are you my son?" ...I told her: "This is not my brother! Who are you talking to?!"

Suddenly... I felt as if the ground had slipped under my feet and the sky had pressed on my chest. Horrible feeling while I was moving my eyes between my mother and "my brother." It was impossible for a sister not to know her brother.

He was very thin. His hair is like the hair of newly born babies, something like dander, like hair on a cats' belly. His mouth interior shows a missing tooth, his eyes gazing at the ceiling! He

wasn't looking at us, he was not with us, he was in another world, his hands were behind him. I looked at him scrutinizing his features. He had nothing of Nayef whom we knew, not at all. I had the conviction that he is not my brother and that my mother is talking to a stranger. I tried hard to look at him as Nayef, my brother, or to talk to him, but I couldn't.

He looked at me and asked me about my daughter, Dalia. Then, this is my brother. It is him. He answered all the questions of my mother and my brother, Samer with "al-Hamdolillah" Thank God.

- How are you?
- al-Hamdolillah.
- What happened to you?
- al-Hamdolillah.
- What about this al-Hamdolillah?

My brother asked him: What about you? What happened to you? And his only answer was: al-Hamdolillah.

My mother asked him "Is there anything wrong with you? Why your hands are behind you? Is your hand cut?" The guard shouted at him: "Show her your hands." Slowly and heavily my brother could raise his hands, stretch them up and returned them back.

How much did they torture him to be in this state of distraught? How much did they break his will? Sons of a bitch.

The four minutes' visit was like ages, ages of torture and vanquish. When he turned back to leave, I saw his trousers slipping down of his waist with no power to raise them up. I felt that his legs were no more than two worn out ropes. I imagined how much they will beat him now because I have heard that they beat the prisoners after the visit.

When we left the prison, our mother said: "your brother will not live long... Do your best to take him out of this hell." I knocked all the doors I know, saved no beg for mercy, and tried everything I could. In vain

After one month exactly, on April 27, Nayef, my brother died. He went to the heavens' mercy, and we relaxed because he was no longer between the hands of the killers. He was released of suffering and torture.

His loss is still burning our hearts, especially that he who killed him is still killing other people feeling no guilt of his crimes, nor how he had hurt us and destroyed our lives. Neither my mother, nor me can resume our past life which had turned upside down after the unforgettable four minutes we spent in the prison. Our life had totally changed after seeing the effects of torture and oppression on my brother.

In whose face shall we shout? To whom shall we complain... They do that by orders of a judge representing justice?

On the sixth of May we knew that Nayef died. The official who arranged our visits to him telephoned my brother and told him: "Probably something had happened to your brother; you better check at the military police." When Samer asked the military police; "Is it true that my brother had died?" They were only keen to know who had told him the news. After a long debate they told him: "Go...Go...he died nine days ago and we buried him" so simply! They told him he died of tuberculosis.

In 2015 some of the detainees who were released by a pardon decree, contacted me. Nayef, my brother, had begged them to do. I met them and they told me the story of his imprisonment in details.

Most important thing they informed me about is the whisper my brother had told my mother in her first visit, which she felt uneasy because she couldn't realize what he whispered in her ears: "Winds cannot shake mountains."

It is true that they broke the mountain, but it is enough to know that he was detained because of his unshakable belief in the thought of freedom, for which he was martyred and risen to heaven believing in it. I am pretty sure he did not regret his choice.

We started arranging the procedures of condolences in our mother's house. The Shabiha stormed the house and prevented us. Why should we receive consolations of a traitor?... a traitor who died in prison?!

Testimony of Haytham Khattab



The martyr brother Abu Faisal al-Rifaei, may God bless his soul, was one of the very honest men. He was a military judge from the border town of Nassib - Daraa.

I didn't witness his killing. He was in a neighboring dormitory. We used to hear sounds coming from their dormitory when they were beaten by the jailers. Their sounds were terrific; I can't describe them.

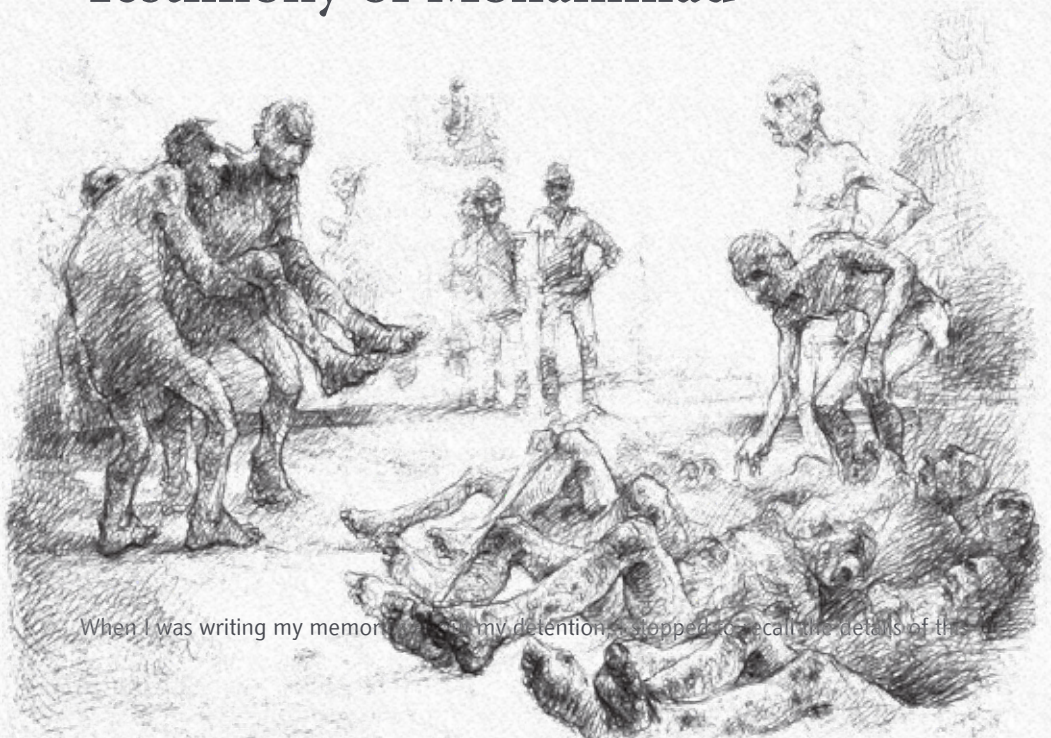
We heard of his martyrdom the day he was killed. I was not in his dormitory because they had separated us long time ago.

When we were together, he was at the verge of nervous breakdown in addition to his physical deterioration. They saved no tool to torture him, electric sticks, Iron tubes, plastic hoses... etc. Many times, they ordered him to take off his clothes to be totally naked even from his underwear, and they pour cold water on him. He was forced to sleep on the floor in the coldest nights of winter. He hated to be visited by anybody because they take him to the visit hall and return him under relentless beating.

He was tall, well built, but he was completely exhausted from hunger. He was a moving skeleton, his sight was fearful due to his unusual thinness, in addition to scabies and the physical and psychological illnesses.

He was an unusual man, a judge, therefore they intended to humiliate him daily and continuously.

Testimony of Mohammad



When I was writing my memoirs of my detention, I stopped to recall the details of the

story. It happened four or may be five months before I was set free. They called my name for a visit... "Cover your head with your sweater." I did. Walk son of so and so, son of a bitch... You want to take the bless from the C...t of your mother? Your wife is here to visit you? Just yesterday she was sleeping with your brother who remained outside."

These humiliating curses continued accompanied by beating and kicking until we arrive into the barber saloon where we take the position of squatting against the wall, sweaters still covering our heads. Then the jailers get in; "squatting- slanted" while treading on our bodies, kicking us and beating us with a green PVC tube dubbed "Lakhdar Brahimi" * While the barber was enjoying himself by beating our faces with his machine.

My sweater was slightly porous allowing weak visibility. When I entered the barber saloon, I noticed a person lying down on the floor in the middle of the room. He was extremely thin, a skeleton, He was my little pampered brother in the family, Ahmad. I knew his body well but his thinness raised my doubts. I prayed God to be not him. Man, always has hopes although on the edge of collapse. When he moaned, I realized that he was my brother!

My face was to the wall, the barber/jailer called me. Cut one side of my hair and left the other, half of my moustaches and left the other. He was playing. Of course, my eyes were closed, if one opens them, he would be beaten by the machine on them.

After he finished, he kicked me to return to my place. He asked his colleagues: "The animal who is laying down in the center, why did you bring him? Take him away and throw him in the trash box." Visitors arrived in the hall, jailers started calling our names to move to the hall. One of them came in and mentioned the name of my brother, no body answered. Another jailer told him: "May be he is the son of a bitch in the middle of the room?!" They forgot about him. After a while they called my name and realized the similarity of the family name and the father's name. The jailer asked me: "Is this son of a pro...te your brother? Come you ass hole, carry him." I ran eager to hug him, to hold him tight, to protect him with my body, whatever.... I held him on my back. Although I was very thin, I could carry him because he was very light. "Brother...I am tired" he told me. I didn't know what to say to encourage him in such a condition. I said "Take it easy...God will help us" they allowed me carry him to the door of the hall laughing at me and beating both of us. When I arrived, one of them told me: "throw him here." I put him down and that was the last time I touched him.

They entered him into the hall. Here I'll continue the story as my mother and two sisters who were present told me. Two jailers raised him up, drew him to the mesh. One of them supported him by his hand from behind. My sister saw him, and told my mother: "Look, Look, at

this young man ...how his family would see him in this state?" My mother looked at him and said: "Really, pity him..." how his mother would bear to see him? The jailers called the name and told my mother: "Here is your son."

At the beginning she said: "Impossible" she talked to him. He failed to reply, they took him out and put him on the floor. They looked at me and said; "Your turn." I entered trying to hold up. What can I say? One jailer was on my right, another one on my left, and a third was standing behind me, between the two meshes there was another one and two of the jailers with my family. The dialogue can't be more than "How are you? How is everybody? Bring me clothes." When the visit was over and I got out of the room, one of the jailers surprised me: "You son of a ... come here." I approached him 'What is this, he ordered me to kneel down, another one came like a gangster with about ten jailers. One of them asked about my brother who was laid on the floor. "What is this?" another one said: "This one pretended to be sick in front of his family." The other said: "Alright... we will try him artificial respiration with him."

They stretched my brother on his back and the last one started jumping on his neck. It is impossible for me to forget the sound of his whoops between the kicks on his neck while the jailer is continuing jumping over him and asking: "Are you breathing? My brother says no. Then we should break his chest bones...probably there is a problem in the lungs." All of them continued kicking him. He could only whoop and sigh and started bleeding. One of them said "Look ...the son of a ... filled me with blood."

I was still kneeling down with one of them putting his foot on my head. He pressed hard on my head and said: "prepare yourself ... it is your turn." What a man can do in this situation? I told myself silently: "My God ...this is your judgement and I accept it."

A few minutes later, another one came. He seemed to be of a higher rank, He asked about my brother "what is this?" one of them said: "this one ...fatas (died)." "Take him away" he said. They whispered a little about me and said "This one too...take him back to his dormitory." And they did.

* Lakhdar Brahimi is a former Algerian foreign minister. He was appointed UN envoy to Syria during the war. His first name means the green. Jailers use green PVC tubes to beat the prisoners, jokingly dubbing them "Lakhdar Brahimi."

Testimony of Muneer al-Faqeer



Ghost of Sednayah

It was not to my knowledge that the 9th of September 2012 will be my last day in the branch of Patrols 216 close to the branch of Palestine. There, I spent three months, after four months during which I was moved between branch of Storming (Mudahama) and the Administrative "branch 291." All these branches belong to the Military Security Service.

In that day, they called me, with other "prisoners of my case" a term used to describe those arrested on one legal case. They returned us to "branch 291" where we were received with a brutal reception party. They took us to a basement, to the section of personnel where they obliged us to sign papers without even knowing their content. They gave us the deposits which we had when they arrested us and then put us in a room where we found many sugar bags, which were a spark of pleasure alluring us of eating as much as we could of it after a chronic hunger.

A staff sergeant came to take us to a dormitory. We noticed that the branch was rearranged during the past few months, the country had entered a state of war. In the past time I was there the dormitory was occupied by 60-70 prisoners, now every dormitory is crammed with about 120 prisoners. They had no place for us, the new arrivals, so they put us in the corridors to be kicked by the jailers on their way in and out, threatening us of execution and cursing us with the meanest words.

At that time, we had not any idea of our destiny. We met one of the prisoners who was brought several months ago from the prison of Sednayah to be investigated again. He told us horrible stories about the situation in the prison of Sednayah, which we did not take them seriously. It was out of our mind to believe that that the crimes committed in the prison of Palmyra after the turmoil of the eighties would be repeated again¹.

After a while they called us, handcuffed our hands to our backs, put us in a van and started beating us with rifle butts all the way to the building of the military courts which we hoped the judges will order setting us free as they used to do in the first months of the revolution. I am from Damascus and was able to estimate that the van had arrived at barracks of the military police in Qaboun. The staff sergeant in charge of us talked to the guards at the entrance and we understood that they will report us to the field court. It was a shock we couldn't believe, we convinced ourselves that either another group of prisoners was meant by that or we hadn't heard them right. At the door of the court another brutal reception was waiting for us. They

1 In 1982, an armed movement took place in Syria and thousands of people were arrested. The prison in Palmyra received hundreds of prisoners who were later killed inside the prison by the "Defense Companies" a military unit commanded by Rifaat al-Assad, brother of the former president of Syria, Hafez al-Assad. (the translator).

entered us into the personnel section of the court where they put our finger prints on papers we couldn't even see because our hands were cuffed to our backs. Before entering us to the hall of the court they asked each one of us a few quick questions in not more than two to three minutes. Then they took us to the prison of the military police which was of two dormitories with about 200 detainees waiting to be deported to other places. The prison was a temporary place of residence, or rather a waiting station for those who will be distributed to other detention centers.

Prisoners' speeches usually focus on two issues: the situation outside the prison and their future, their destiny. After we lost hope of being set free, we diverted our communications with some of the prisoners about cases similar to ours in order to compare our situation with them. We were told that deporting us to the prison of Sednayah is a great possibility, but again we lied to ourselves; Why sending us to Sednayah since we are not more than peaceful protesters? Until that time, we have heard a lot about that prison, and we were keen to know the difference between the red building and the white one although this was not of our business, because we, out of our good will, "decided" to go to another prison, like Damascus Central Prison in Adra, or to a prison like it.

In the morning of the following day they called the names of all the prisoners in our dormitory and divided us into two groups: Hands of the prisoners of the first group were cuffed forward, and their heads remained up as usual and they took them away. We, the twenty-seven prisoners of the second group "of our same case and other cases" related to the revolution, brought from several security branches, handcuffed us, hands to the back, obliged us to look down and blinded our eyes. The young man in front of me was courageous enough to ask one of the military police: "Where are we going now?" The answer was: "To the prison of Sednayah. May God help you!"

When they lined us waiting our turn to get in the "Meat Vehicle" with the closed box especially prepared to transport prisoners, I told my colleagues the bad news. It was a shock for me and for every one of us, we were fully assured that Syria was returned back to the years of the eighties.

In the vehicle we started to cry and recall what we had heard about this prison and did not believe it. In the vehicle, with us, there was a prisoner who had been returned back from the hospital to the prison. He told us more detailed stories about life in the prison. I was the eldest among the prisoners, born in 1979, ten years before the oldest of them. I tried to stick together and to encourage them saying: "Hold on- Be strong" and proposed to recite texts of the Quran and pray during the long journey to the prison.

In the Prison

We arrived at the first gate, heard the sound of the little window of the vehicle opened and closed again. We felt that the guards wanted to be sure of the load of the vehicle which will be allowed to go into the building. The vehicle stopped at a check point which we believed it is the entrance of the white building, but it stopped in front of the red building which we realized later that it is the worst.

The terrifying calm was interrupted by sounds of running feet and human beings approaching the vehicle and climbing its iron steps, a soldier opened the little window and shouted: "Get down you whores... more impolite curses" as if reciting a poem. Our eyes were still blinded, we rolled on the vehicle's steps, some of us fell on the ground hurting a face, a back or a hand. Others had their clothes torn or shoes thrown away. A beating session started. Our main concern was not to let the blind on our eyes fall down, because the blind of one of us slipped down from his eyes and he was rewarded with double beating.

I remember that we walked about five meters, climbed two stairs, and then entered a corridor. There, they ordered us to take the position of prostration with our foreheads touching the ground, and started beating us brutally by green water PVC tubes they called "Lakhdar Brahimi."² The day before we heard of it. Beating was horribly painful.

The military police who escorted us from Qaboun took off the handcuffs from our hands peacefully, handed us to the prison jailers who also belong to the military police, and left. The prison jailers ordered us to blind our eyes by lifting up and forward our sweaters or shirts to cover our heads. They started giving us the rules of the prison. Each one should cover his eyes with his clothes in the way they ordered us, and to put our palms, not fingers, on our eyes in a way not to see any of the jailers and recognize him. Blinding eyes here is personal, who violates the rules his eyes will be gouged out.

They obliged us to take our shoes off and to handle our possessions to the deposits section, under continuous beating while registering our IDs, personal names, father's name and name of the "whore" one's mother, or you will be beaten. When the jailer asked to mention the name of the whore, I responded objectively by "What?" and he struck me with Lakhdar Brahimi, repeating the question. I ignored him; he beat me again repeating the same words. I told him the name of my mother.

During the reception, some prisoners; like doctors, engineers in particular, lawyers, officers

2 Lakhdar in Arabic means green, The PVC tube is green and was called so after a UN Algerian envoy to Syria who formerly was foreign minister of Algeria, Lakhdar Brahimi.

and journalists are treated in a distinguished way. They were tortured in an artistic way reflecting the feelings of hatred the jailers have towards them, being inferior to them. In fact, one can easily notice series of complexes they have: they are sectarian, regionalists and bearing hatred towards classes of the society. They were, illiterate and young; between 18-20 years old. They reflect their feelings of animosity especially towards those who have scientific degrees, social positions, well to do people or those older than they are... Even athletes incite their hatred to an extent they want break their heads, i.e. humiliate them.

Some of the prisoners declared their true careers, to be double tortured. I concealed my degree in engineering and told them that I am a computer electrician, and so they registered me.

Ali, one of the members of our case, was a professional basketball player. He was immense, they kept him back while we entered the cells, in order to practice their talents of torture on him. They beat him hard and rode on his back moving from one side to another just to humiliate him. He was good hearted, respectable and delicate. This treatment broke his pride. After two months, his body refused food out of his desire to die evading this deadly treatment.

It was clear that administration of the prison gave jailers absolute freedom to torture prisoners. We understood, from our experience in the branches of security and the prison of Sednayah that every action is systematic and executed by specific orders and instructions.

After handling our deposits and registering our personal information, it was time to be taught the lesson of the "train," which means bowing down, each one holds the waist of the one in front of him, and faces looking down. They led us down on a steep stairway, the distance between steps is 20-25 cm. Maybe this was the only case prisoners were not beaten in the prison of Sednayah while getting up or down the stairways taking the position of a train in order to avoid slipping of any of the prisoners which will create chaos and pull all the prisoners down.

In the Cell

Jailers continued repeating "get downstairs...get downstairs" until we reached cells, where new prisoners are jailed. In the space between cells one of the jailers ordered us to take off our clothes: "In three counts you must be nude like when you got down from the..... of your mothers." When he finished counting, we all were totally nude, those who hesitated to take off all of their clothes were beaten to bleeding. The jailer ordered us to lay down on our bellies and to raise our feet up saying that each one of us will have 10 strikes, if he utters a sound counting will rise up to 100. I am fully sure that they were not satisfied by only 10 strikes. It is

true that the number did not reach 100 but numbers of strikes were high.

Methodology of torture in the prison of Sednayah is different from that in the security branches where torture is practiced mainly to get information, to humiliate and to revenge. But here, it is different; torture is practiced just for torture. The prison of Sednayah was specialized for punishing the Syrian revolution. In the security branches a jailer continues beating until he has the required information, regardless of being true or false. If beating is punishment for disobedience of orders or for a problem in the dormitory, or any other reason, it will continue until the prisoner shouts of pain because prisoner's abstention from crying is considered a challenge to the beater. But here, in Sednayah, it is the opposite, if you shout, punishment will be doubled. A prisoner should receive beating silently.

After the beating ceremony, a jailer shouted "All Up," we stood up, they inserted each nine of us in a square cell 2 * 2 m, with a toilet occupying one third of the area of the cell and separated by a wall. In the first night they jammed all the nine of us in the toilet ordering us to keep silent. Banning speaking was a punishment which continued with us during our stay in Sednayah.

Clothes of each group were brought and dropped at the door of the cell. They were inspecting them when they heard our low voices inside trying to arrange the standing of the nine of us in that suffocating space. They ordered us to extend our hands one after one from the little window at the bottom of the door to beat us.

One of the jailers shouted reciting the instructions of the prison: "Here... everything is done by orders... you eat by an order, you drink by an order, you sleep by an order and you wake up by an order. Any individual act will be severely punished. No Talks, no whispers. Whenever you hear any movement in the corridor you must take the position of squatting, not standing, inside the cell. From now on you are sons of whores." To be sure of our obedience he asked us one by one who we are, and every one replied by the typical answer, "We are sons of whores." In one cell the reply was not loud and enthusiastic as they wanted it, all prisoners were punished for their looseness in the reply.

In each cell there was a bowel. Prisoners put the empty bowel out in the morning. When food is distributed, they receive another one, or sometimes receive the same bowel again. When we entered our cell, we found a bowel full of soapy water. It seemed one of the former prisoners had been washing his clothes in it when he was ordered to leave the cell.

The first night passed, but it was impossible for all of us to sleep in that little space, so some of us got out to the cell itself and slept there. It was totally forbidden to do that but, fortunately, no one noticed.

In the morning of the following day the cell door was open and they threw bags of our clothes. That was a memorable moment of joy.

A few minutes later we heard jailers throwing bags of bread at the doors of the cells. Then they ordered us to put the bowels out from the little window at the bottom of the door. I volunteered to do this job and extended my hand from the window to be beaten because I was not quick enough to do that. We started to learn the rules of the prison which were always accompanied by beating. Because of a former injury in my hand, my colleagues decided that I do not put the empty bowel out or the full one in, because this was always accompanied by beating on the hands. I refused, and in the third day I was keen to put out the empty bowel as quickly as possible, I succeeded, but I failed to enter the full one. It was mandatory to do that in parts of a second. I did that, but in that day, it has potatoes in the bottom covered with rice and jam on top. During drawing it from the little window, some jam touched the upper side of the window. The jailer said "Extend your hand" he beat it and said "Clean the door." During wiping the external iron edge, he started pressing my hand with his boots until it bled. We understood that new comers to the prison of Sednayah should spend two weeks to six months in the cells of the prison before being moved to the dormitories upstairs. Our group spent five months in the cell which were totally difficult. Those brought from the civil prison of Adra had special treatment mixed with unusual threats: "Coming from Adra, you dogs? You were happy there; here you will forget the name of Adra." This was negatively reflected on us although we were brought from the security detention centers. The group with which we came were brought from the prison of Adra, some of them were accused of arranging a mutiny there, so we were treated like them in the reception party and in the long duration of staying in the cells.

Dailies of the Cell

The colleagues elected me prefect of the cell. In the second day we decided to put a plan for our daily life which we didn't know how much it will take in the cell. In the first day we didn't pray, or we prayed singly, standing and totally nude. In the second day we decided to divide our prayers as following: Dawn prayer, noon and afternoon prayers together, and so the sunset and evening prayers. We didn't know the direction of the Kiblah, but we estimated it randomly.³ There will come a day when we will go to the prison of Sednayah as visitors to check whether we had estimated the right direction of Kiblah, the Kaaba. We decided to pray

³ Moslems pray five times a day directing faces towards the Holy Kaaba in Mecca: The dawn prayer before sun rise, noon prayer at about midday, al-Asr prayer two hours before sun set, the Maghreb prayer at sunset and al-Isha prayer after the fall of total darkness.

seated towards the wall opposite the door, if a jailer showed up, he will find us in the required position. We prayed collectively, not singly. These days were the days we felt that we were closer to Allah (God), more than any other days of our life. We practiced hymns regularly, we arranged a schedule for learning and reviewing the Quran by heart, so we learnt many of its chapters. Many of the texts helped us raise our morale to help each other, and encouraged us to steadfast and insist on bearing the idea of justice, which highly empowered us to bear the atrocities committed against us in the prison. We repeated some of the chapters continuously: al-Mulk in the morning, al-Waqia in the evening and al-Kahf on Fridays.⁴ I remember that once we forgot al-Mulk surah. One of us slept for a while and had a dream of a prisoner trying to beat us with Lakhdar Brahimi, but failed to do that. so, he told him angrily: "stop reciting that surah because it prevents me from beating you," After that, we were keen to recite that surah in particular. Amazingly, when any of us forgets to read it he was punished!

We realized that water was running in the pipes and there was a small bar of soap, we started washing alternatively in the toilet with utmost secrecy, because if they hear the sound of water and that we are washing without permission, the punishment will be great.

To sleep we told Ali to sleep in the toilet because of his immense body. It was only possible for six of us to sleep on the floor of the cell alternating face to feet and vice versa, with two prisoners remain standing, also alternatively. Contact of our bodies helped us finding some warm but to sleep on one side for long hours, without being able to move was really exhausting.

All the prisoners in al-Assad prisons have developed a belief in dreams, or let me say most of them. regardless of their cultural or educational level. Usually a prisoner always searches for a certain kind of support. So, in every cell or dormitory appears a dream interpreter, even if he hadn't the background of that practice before. Usually he inherits this "experience" from a former prisoner who preceded him and was released from the prison for some reason or another. A dream interpreter interprets dreams according to fixed constants; if you see that you were at a school or at a mosque, this is the prison, if you leave the school or the mosque this means you will be set free... there is an abundance of details former prisoners know them very well.

In our case, the dream interpreter remained in the prison of the security branch. We learnt a lot from him, so we created a daily program titled "I had a dream" to be performed after breakfast. Each of us would tell what he had dreamt of the night before, and we all exchanged interpretation due to the absence of an authorized interpreter, depending on what we had

4 These are titles of recommended surahs of the Holy Quran. Surah stands for a chapter.

heard from this or that interpreter in the branches. It was an amusing episode in which we conditioned not to have words about foods or drinks, believing that seeing them in the dreams is a reflection of the will of the dreamer to have them. We also dropped the dreams of being set free, because they come out of a burning desire to make it true. Generally, we preferred dreams with symbols far from the routines of our daily life.

Immediately after waking up we support our faith spiritually with prayers and hymns, followed by a physical support, food, and a psychological support from the dream episode. To busy ourselves, one of us started lecturing about any subject he knows better than the others. We arranged turns for reciting verses from the holy Quran, a course about the modern history of Syria, which many of the revolution youth know nothing about it because their families avoided talking about the past for reasons related to security. Daily, we opened debates about the Syrian revolution to evaluate its latest events. Of course, all of these activities were practiced in whispers and in short times, fifteen or maximum thirty minutes for each. The largest part of our time was dedicated to caution, attention and awareness of the sounds coming from outside the cells, and always in the position of squatting expecting the moment when the door of the cell opens up.

One of the terrifying moments for a prisoner is hearing the sound of the door or the lower window being opened followed by the voice of the jailer: "Hey, you pimps, each one of you extends his hand." We should extend our hands one after the other to be beaten. Sometimes jailers used to take off their heavy boots and step toe to listen if any of us was whispering. Suddenly, silence is cut by a sound coming from the window ordering: "your hands." In this case we have to extend our hands consecutively to receive beatings. The sound of the window of another cell was always an alarm of a terrifying action, taking prisoners to places only God knows of them.

Sometimes a jailer asks prisoners to get their heads not hands, from the little window and starts beating the prisoner. In other occasions he orders legs to be extended, he tied them to the handle of the door so that the upper edge of the window presses the legs causing additional pain to that of beating. Once, a jailer ordered prisoners of a close cell to extend their hands one after the other. From inside the cell he heard the voice of a man from Baniyas, to whom we were introduced later in the dormitory, saying: "My son I am an old man...I am fifty-five years old." The jailer said: "An old man! OK, one cable for each year." And so, he did. Later, the old man died, may God bless his soul.

In spite of this awful life, there were beautiful sounds, sound of water running through the

pipes after long dryness. The sound of bread bags being thrown at the doors of the cells in the morning. These sounds were symphonies to the ears of the hungry prisoners and melodies of life for which we always thanked God to hear them. Once a fierce battle took place between the armed opposition and the regime forces, on the road leading to the prison, so food was cut off from us.

Gradually we could distinguish if the bread bag thrown at the door of the cell was complete (8 loaves) or missing some loaves, just from the sound it gives when falling on the ground. One of the beautiful sounds we used to listen to, was the sound of birds which pacified our feelings of isolation. Unfortunately, cells on the other side of the ward were deprived from these sounds, including the sounds of corn beans being cracked when the criminals outside prepare popcorn for themselves. We used to smell it. It was agreeable in one hand but annoying in another. It reminded us of popcorn, smelled it on fire while we are starving due the meagre quantities of food offered to us. Normally, the share of a prisoner is no more than two spoonful of bad cooked rice, we even hear its sound when putting it in the bowels, as if it is raw, not cooked. The share of a prisoner from olive is no more than half, or in the best cases, one complete olive mostly flavored with diesel oil. We had been victims of a real famine. The share of the nine of us can hardly suffice an average man. Therefore, we were obliged to eat the green leaves which come mixed with olive, or oranges, shell of eggs which we discovered that it was very tasty, not forgetting potato skin.

In the cells there were nothing to busy or entertain us; only solid walls and the hard tiled floor. I tried to invent something new being an information technology engineer. I used to write, with my finger, some equations and programs, and when possible occupy one quarter of a tile to write my memories on it, of course virtually, because we had not any means to write with, we rather registered it in our minds.

In the neighboring cell, despite the rarity of food, they saved part of it, kneaded it again and made pieces of Dhama (draughts)⁵ from it to fill their time. When the jailers discovered that they punished the prisoners by drenching their cell with water in a freezing time of the year. That punishment continued for three days and was only lifted after the death of one of the prisoners. In another cell, there was a young man who always begged jailers not to beat him. Every time a jailer asked him to stretch his hand he refused saying "For God's sake sir, don't beat me." Every time he said that or a similar sentence, the jailer would curse God. After some

5 Dhama is a public game popular in the countryside of Syrian cities similar to chess.

time, the jailer got angry, took him away saying: "Come with me I'll take you to Israel."⁶ He really did, he took him away and the prisoner never returned... The jailer came back to the cell and said "Did you see what will happen to the one who speaks a lot? He goes in a one-way trip with Israel, and at the same time he leaves an extra space for his companions."

Our cell has two great advantages; the first is a hole from which we could see faces of the criminals, columns smeared with the blood of those who were here before us and our bloods. I still keep secret the number of the cell in order not to be publicized and they close the hole, there will be someone who could benefit from that hole in the future. The second is the faithful atmosphere which granted us secret protection.

Once they decided to torture all the prisoners of the cells. We were in January, and temperature was -5. It was night when jailers started opening door windows of the cells calling the prefects: "You pimps of the cells, tell everyone to take off his clothes totally naked, collect their clothes and put them out. You too take off your clothes and put them out." When all were naked, he ordered them to lie on the ground head to feet and feet to head. I said before that the cell was too small, therefore we sleep alternatively. This time the jailer ordered them to lie on the ground close to each other although this was very difficult. Then he ordered the prefect to open the tap to cover the floor with cold water. Even if the jailer leaves the cell, water should continue flooding until a prisoner dies. When we heard the cries in that day, I whispered to my colleagues to invoke God to protect us. Indeed, when the jailer arrived at our cell, he opened the little window and looked at us. We were awake but pretended to be in a sound sleep. He gazed at us for a long time, closed the little window and went away.

We were nine in the cell, seven of us were from Damascus, so we had many visits, with each one we asked our families to double the number of clothes to satisfy all of us. We were clothed sufficiently with several layers. One day jailers threw to us a hair cutting machine linked with a cable outside the cell and ordered us to help each other cutting our hair. We took off our clothes, piled them on each other to reach the ceiling. When the jailer opened the little window, he was surprised. He was from the eastern region and used to become a criminal in the company of Alawite jailers, but when he is alone, he is reasonably satisfied by cursing only without beating. He asked us about the source of these clothes pretending anger and promising of depriving us from visits, something was not in his authority, and said he would ask for some clothes for those who have nothing to cover their bodies. We agreed enthusiastically because most of the prisoners were nude, or in the best cases, half nude, may

6 In Islamic tradition, Azrael is identified with the Quranic Malak al-Mawt «angel of death».

be for months. In the following days we used to put what we can dispense of these clothes in the corner. Many times, we heard the same jailer asking a prisoner "You...Why aren't you dressed up?" then he comes to our cell asking for a shirt or a sweater. Thank God, by so, we could help several prisoners in other cells.

One day, a prisoner from our cell was called for a visit. He availed the opportunity and told the same jailer: "Sir, we have spent more than five months in the cell. You told us you will made us forget the prison of Adra, basically we didn't come from Adra, we just came by chance in the same vehicle transporting Adra prisoners." The jailer said nothing and went to tell his commander that. After a few days they decided to move us to the dormitories appreciating our behavior during the past five months, describing our cell the "ideal" one.

I previously said that there were seven prisoners of the same case in the cell, and two more who came from the prison of the military police in Qaboun. In the cell we lived together for five months during which we knew every minute detail about each other including the private family stories, but because of deep darkness of the cell we couldn't identify their faces, and they couldn't see ours unless we entered the dormitory. There we started asking each other, who are you? Are you?

Battle of Hunger

I proposed something to my friends which I had called the "battle of hunger," urging them to manage that struggle wisely to conquer hunger. Although I had an appetite higher than they have, and was fatter than most of them before the prison, they were less patient because of their young age. They couldn't bear saving any of the little food we were given. I, myself, decided to keep some bread for the night to have a dinner every evening. Moments of waiting dinner, which mostly was just bread, was one of the most joyful moments. Every evening I used to tell myself: "After a few moments I shall eat" as if I was invited to a banquet in one of the most prestigious restaurants in Damascus.

One day I saved half a quarter of a loaf of bread for dinner. I put it in a plastic bag behind the water tank so that the jailer can't see it if he enters the cell, and because there was no other place to hide it. I said we used to sleep alternatively. There was, with us, a Salafist young man who was killed later. In that day he was hungry, did I say hungry? When we were not hungry? So, let me say that hunger bit him severely that night and couldn't sleep in the time I was sleeping dreaming of eating the piece of bread I had saved. When my turn came to wake up, I got up, went to the bathroom to bring the bag of bread to find it empty. In the morning I

asked my colleagues about it, no body answered, but he tried to change the subject. I said I shall never forget the man who deprived me of the piece of bread which my stomach was squeaking dreaming of it. He tried to silence me and began to cry, I couldn't utter any more words, sure had he not been starving he wouldn't have eaten that tiny piece of bread.

The man assigned to distribute food shares should be just, accurate and honest, because no one was ready to let go even a leaf of a lemon tree or the skin of an orange slice. Everyone needs everything to help him survive and stand on his feet. Most of the differences between prisoners were centered about distributing food. Once two prisoners got angry with the rest of us and decided to eat by themselves, in the corner of a cell 1.5 m long. Later they apologized and pledged to give part of their share to a colleague every day. Once they offered a rice sandwich, the length of one finger, the next time they offered an olive, and so on.

Out of deep hunger, whether in the cells or later in the dormitories, we started dreaming of food. Dreams developed into courses of learning cooking. I didn't ever try to cook in my life, but now we decided to teach each other whatever we know about food recipes. We dreamt of food exactly like, forgive me for this example, having dreams of sex. We imagined kinds of food and were tasting them virtually. In the night we felt the taste of the imagined food in our mouths. For example, I adore Shakriyeh.⁷ Because I always spoke about it, court it and imagined it, many times I woke up with its taste in my mouth as if I had just eaten it.

In the cell, there was with us a young man from Latakia, later he was killed, and in the dormitory, there were several men from Baniyas, both are coastal cities. These two young men described to us methods of fishing, kinds of fish and ways of cooking it. We were in bad need to such courses to fill our days with something amusing. Many times, debates heated over the best dishes in every city or region. Rivalry was strong between the cuisines of Damascus and Aleppo, particularly about "Sheikh al-Mehshi."⁸ Voices rise high and discussions heat up but those were the happiest moments in the prison. Why not? Aren't they about food, the source of life? In a certain stage of imprisonment, one's brain ceases thinking of being set free, and of thinking of women, but it keeps thinking of one desire only: "I want to eat!"

Once we thought of how confectioners prepare the twisted kunafeh, the baklava and other oriental sweets. No one of us had an idea about that, we started guessing, in that day one of us was called for a visit. When his family asked him about himself, he wanted to please them saying that he is fine to an extent of thinking of baklava, twisted kunafeh and harissa. I was

7 Shakriyeh is a kind of Syrian food made of large pieces of meat cooked in Yoghourt.

8 Sheikh al-Mehshi is also a Syrian food made of zucchini stuffed with meat and pine nuts and cooked in yoghourt

called for a visit immediately after him. When jailers escorted me back, I saw him laid on the door of the cell and being beaten just because talking is prohibited in the cells, add to that he was “insolent” to the degree of speaking about baklava and Nammoura.⁹

During our stay in the cell we didn’t eat any kind of meat, but in the dormitories, they were bounteous enough to offer us a strange kind of chicken of which I remember only the skin and the bones.

In our first day in the dormitory I saw a prisoner with his head rattling inside the trash bin in the bath room. I realized that he was eating the remains of bones. At that time, he surprised me, but later I was obliged to eat, sell and buy the bones.

When cells put their bowels out to be filled with food, jailers collect them in the middle of the corridor, put potato, rice and jam together in the bowels which were too small to have sufficient foods to satisfy nine men.

Personnel of forced labor are assigned of distributing food. Usually they are prisoners for violating military rules serving in the white building. From a hole in the door of the cell we saw one of them in the corridor with an empty can of jam in his hand. He still had two bowels to supply with jam. He didn’t know what to do, he thought a little, then he spat in the can, shook it to mix his saliva with the remains of the jam, and distributed the product on the two remaining bowels. We couldn’t know if one of the two was ours, but we ate the content. It was unreasonable to exclude jam because it is a basic material of sugar which helps us survive. The meal with jam was a social event, but can’t be compared with halawa¹⁰ which was of the worst kinds. No one would accept to buy it, for us it was a treasure. In the most important rare opportunities we were served baklava, especially in national days, Day of the Army, the anniversary of the Baath party holding power in the 8th of March 1963. Each prisoner receives a small portion of the bad halawa, but it was delicious.

Ali, the immense young man I told you about, owned a women fashion shop in one of the classist neighborhoods of Damascus. He was of fortune and couldn’t adapt with prisons dirty food. He was shocked of the kinds of food, suffered of severe dehydration and diarrhea, vomited everything which entered his stomach until he died of hunger.

In the dormitories they always intended to pour food on the floor, tread in it with their boots to subjugate us or because of their anger of what is happening out of the prison. In our cell there was a pharmacist who had an important position in the branch of an American medical

9 Baklava, kunafeh, harissa, and nammoura are popular kinds of Syrian sweets.

10 Halawa is a kind of sweet made from sesame and sugar, usually eaten with breakfast

company in Damascus. We had elected him to distribute food for his interest in cleanliness. One day, jailers entered us food, while we were squatting, faces to the wall and our hands covering our eyes. The pharmacist saw them putting the bowl of food near the bathroom which was 10 cm higher than the ground of the dormitory. They skimmed the water on the floor of the bathroom and toilet and added it to our food of lentil soup and rice, they poured the food on the ground, tread it and pressed the six eggs they had brought for 25 persons and left. After sometime we turned our faces, no one had seen what happened except that man who was busy distributing shares of food as usual. After he was sure that we ate everything he told us what happened. Some of us got angry with him because he didn't tell us before. He said that he had concealed it to enable us to have food, otherwise we would starve. Once a jailer asked us: "Who doesn't like the food?" It was the first time we hear someone speaking to us kindly in Sednayah which allured one of us to speak. We signed to him to keep silent, because we can't trust jailers. It took us some time to calm him and to say that the food was good. In other cells prisoners fell in the trap and expressed their dissatisfaction to pay a high price extending their hands and legs to be beaten brutally.

Deprivation of food was easy for the jailers and for any reason. If the prefect is late in snatching the bowl of food, they beat his hands, take the bowl and deprive all of the cell from food for two or three days.

As I said before, our cell was distinguished by having a discrete hole in the door through which we could see them giving two opposite cells larger bowls with relatively larger quantities of food. In the dormitories we crossed our information with others who told us that there were distinguished, privileged or dangerous prisoners. We doubted that Lt. Colonel Hussein Harmoush, the famous defector officer was in one of these cells.

Water outages

Many times, we had water outages, and when it ran again, we used to bath in the toilet with very cold water. Soap was rare, they give all the cell one quarter of a bar of soap. During our stay in the cell water was cut off for a long time twice, and in the dormitories once or twice. In both cases, we were about to die of thirst. The toilet was filled with feces. Fortunately, we had not much of that because of the chronic shortage of food. We cleaned ourselves with pieces of cloth cut from our shirts.

Once, water cottage continued for a long time, and our feeling of thirst reached unprecedented levels. In the horrible silence of the cells we heard one of the prisoners calling slowly

“water...water.” Another one from another cell repeated: “water.” A third did the same. A prisoner from our cell was encouraged, he started shouting: “Water-Water-Water...” Uninterruptedly, suddenly all the prisoners repeated after him with one voice: “Water, water” Jailers hurried to see what is happening, we felt that an important person was among them, probably the director or his deputy. He shouted at us: “Shut up, shut up, I’ll cut water for one month, I’ll let you die of thirst.” We thought that he was serious, but after about fifteen minutes we heard sounds of rapping and tapping of water tanks carried by soldiers running down the stairs to our cells. They ordered us to give them the bowels, and they filled them with water. Unfortunately, the bowel we have had a hole, so half the amount of water spilled on the ground and we drank only half the amount given to us, then we started licking the dirty spilled water on the ground.

In times of long outage of water, some of it remains in the pipes, which many times, initiated battles among the cells to suck the little drops in the pipes through the hose of the toilet.

Many times, toilets broke and blocked for one reason or another, especially in the cells, and dirt runs out to the cells. Such a problem may continue for days instigating the jailers to get the prisoners out of the cell, beat them, and repair the toilets. Once, for no reason, tap of the toilet broke in the hands of a prisoner, he was brutally punished.

Sometimes administration of the prison cut the water intendedly, or due to a defect in the pipes carrying water to the prison or to the whole region. Once water was cut intendedly until we exhausted of thirst. For unknown reasons jailers wanted to punish a cell by soaking it with water. They usually do that by pouring water in the cell through the little window of the door. Because the cell has no gutter, water rose to the height of the toilet which is 5 cm higher than the floor of the cell, allowing water of the toilet, including human wastes, to mix with that on the floor of the cell. The jailer continues pouring water not knowing what is happening inside the dark cell. A smart prisoner put the bowel at the window inside the cell to fill it with water. The prisoners drank the water and filled the bowel several times. With the last tank poured in the bowel the jailer realized what was happening, “You are filling water you pimp” and started beating him until he started bleeding. In spite of this, he, and his cell mates were glad of their “Victory.”

Yes, in some cases we felt that we are victorious! Once, the regime’s situation outside the prison was threatening, battles reached the gates of the prison of Sednayah, and a shell fell inside the prison. Jailers were very tense and started punishing us for no reason. Electricity was cut because a shell hit the cables outside. One of them came shouting: “who asked why

electricity was cut?" None of us said that, we were in the dormitories, so we said "May be someone in the other dormitory." He accused all the dormitories and punished them one after one mercilessly. We laughed silently though we know that such punishment might cause the death of some of us, out of our belief that what angered them are our brothers who were tightening the rope on their necks outside the prison.

Trade of Food

I have known this trade in my last days in the prisons of the security branches, and I practiced it again in the prison of Sednayah, and understood that it was common in the various dormitories of the prison. This trade means that prisoners buy and sell some of their extra food shares using a bread coin, whose value goes up and down according to the available quantities in the "market," the dormitories. Daily bread share of the individual is between half and one and a quarter loaf of bread. Once, for unknown reasons, they rewarded us with a bigger share, two loaves for each of us, a precedent that was not repeated.

Food was brought in a small bowel to the cells, and in two; medium and large bowels, to the dormitories because they have larger numbers of prisoners. In the large bowel they put a quantity of rice hardly can suffice 25-30 prisoners of the dormitory. On rice they put sauce and 2-3 pieces of potatoes and eggs. In the smaller bowel they put lentil soup and orange. In each dormitory two persons, usually elected for their accuracy and cleanliness, distribute food. The rest of the prisoners are divided into groups to facilitate distribution, each group has a head assigned to distribute food on his group mates, by so, food is distributed equally. Here the trade starts, for example, jam is highly required to supply the body with sugar, but some do not like it and prefer to sell their share, which is no more than a spoonful, for one loaf of bread. A piece of halawa is sold for one and a half loaf ... it was expensive, so was a piece of baklava, which is very rare. Chicken was expensive too. A share of rice is usually sold for three quarters of a loaf, depending on the state of the market. Differences might arise in the market, which means that the prefect should intervene to solve them, to unify prices in the dormitory, and to control rivalry.

One of us was a merchant, so he was appointed as an evaluator and arbitrator. For example, they give one orange, sometimes two, to all the prisoners of the dormitory. The orange might be large or small, it depends, here the arbitrator should define the price of orange share in that day. His evaluation is generally accepted and the list of his prices is accredited. In this trade, some prisoners did very well, others were subject to losses. The trade developed to have a branch for debts and accounts. One of us once said: "I have an account of two bags of bread" which was a real fortune. Others used to buy food in credits, eat it immediately, and

day by day they became indebted and were obliged to spend days in hunger. The dormitory prefect intervened and prohibited treatment with some prisoners who were unable to manage their resources wisely. He prevented them from buying and selling to enable them to eat their shares regularly.

Trade of food developed into an operation of composite sale. A sandwich of "halawa" for example, or a certain mix of foods invented from the ingredients of the meal, like mixing egg with chicken meat or with diluted yoghurt, were sold for alluring profitable prices. When the prefect prohibited this trade, prisoners practiced it discretely under the blankets, until it was revealed and strictly prohibited.

Some groups devised what they called "Food Project." It means saving and accumulating foods, and buying foods in credit for a definite day, usually distinguished with sufficient food. That day was a real celebration as if one is released from prison.

The last thing I remember about food is the turn of cleaning the bowels. After distributing foods, one of us is usually assigned to wash the bowels. He wipes them thoroughly to save the remains, any remains, margarine, salt ...whatever, to eat them later with his food. That was done alternatively and an opportunity for rivalry.

Whatever the level of fraternity among prisoners, the common life of prison, and the belief of the revolution was, differences among prisoners about trifle things, like a food share or the individual's area in the dormitory are inevitable. Altruism is difficult in cases like these unless the individual is of a high level of morality and good conduct.

Dailies of the Dormitories:

If the door of the dormitory is opened, and the jailers are moving around, we should stay squatting, faces to the wall opposite the door. If anyone opens the window and notices that you are going to take the required position, he will understand that you were not ready, and you will be punished brutally. When the door of the dormitory is closed, we feel free to move and even to practice sport if possible.

Prayers in the prison of Sednayah, singly or collectively, are definitely prohibited. Their punishment is unbearable. If any prisoner is detected praying, he will be punished by moving him to the cells. If he is essentially in the cell, they might kill him. Therefore, we used to pray secretly, with our eyes or with the least of movements. Sometimes we prayed in the night when we knew that they had slept.

We fasted in Ramadan and in other months. In fact, all our life was continuous fasting. Many times, the only meal arrived after sunset. Generally fasting is less dangerous than praying which denotes that you are a Sunni.

Jailers select prefects of dormitories. Some of them treat their mates in a bad way, others in a very prestigious way. When jailers enter, we, all, should be squatting in several rows, our hands covering our eyes, behind us the prefect himself in the same position. To his right, squat the punished prisoners wearing only their under wear. Jailers usually start beating the prefect first, and may kill him, then they start beating the punished prisoners or anyone who moves in their presence, many times for no reason.

In the first days in the dormitory, our prefect was a young good man from Qalamun. Later, they brought a man named "Shadi Said." He was a popular singer, originally from Aleppo, but living in Latakia. He told us that he allured a security staff sergeant to join the Free Syrian Army, only for money. The deal was detected and he was arrested. When we were in the cells, we listened to a dialogue between Shadi, who introduced himself as a singer, and another prisoner. When the jailer asked him to prove his talent as a singer, he sang a verse praising Bashar al-Assad. When they moved him from the cell to the dormitory he was in a miserable state. We sympathized with him and gave him some clothes. When he was appointed prefect, he started bullying and threatening us.

We adopted a certain rule to distribute the extra clothes to those who need them more; the naked has priority to those who just want them to feel warm. When everyone is satisfied, the prisoner can sell his extra pieces of clothes for two loaves of bread.

Groupings in dormitories are usually formed on regional bases. Prisoners from Damascus, Idlib or Latakia, with one or two from other regions would form a group. The common accent of the jailers is the Alawite, but we could distinguish between real Alawites and those who impersonate themselves as Alawites to bully us, like what Shadi had done to become a prefect. Because all the prisoners we met were Sunnis, this regionalist discrimination created discrete violent reactions suppressed in the hearts of the prisoners.

A jailer might come in the night usually calling: "Pimps of the dormitories" to hear voices of the prefects responding: "Yes sir." "I have heard a sound." If they deny that, they will hear him saying: "I don't lie!! I heard sounds! Tomorrow I want five from every dormitory." If the prefect abstains from giving names he will be beaten brutally, probably to death. So, he was obliged to select victims by turn. The prefect must invent a guilt for every prisoner selected to be punished, because the jailer will ask the prisoner: "What did you do?" and the prisoner should mention a guilt he had or had not done. Guilts are so trivial, like passing the separation line between the bath room and the space of the dormitory, or approaching the door of the dormitory which is a great crime. Talking or whispering is also a guilt which deserves

a punishment. The prisoner has to choose a guilt to be punished for, which might lead him to death.

Once, I was selected with those to be punished. They used Lakhdar Brahimi, but this time it was 5 inches' diameter. They beat me on the head, I lost consciousness several times. They did not beat the group all together, rather they beat one after one, while they were a group. After being beaten, one should creep to be crammed in the toilet. When I arrived there a prisoner had arrived before me. I remember that we both were bleeding and our bloods mixed in the toilet pot. When the jailers left the dormitory, our mates hurried to wipe blood from our bodies.

Once, after beating the selected five prisoners, jailers ordered them to stay in the bath room. If any of them goes out all the dormitory will be punished. We abided by that as much as the door of the dormitory was opened. We got our mates out when the door was closed. Even this was not totally safe because jailers, sometimes, pretend closing the door, but stay inside to see what we are doing.

In the dormitory we have two prisoners who spent eight months in the cells. They were frightening, their skins were black because of a certain disease. Their bodies were totally covered by scabies ulcerations. Each one weighs about 35 kg. They shivered continuously; they were nearly separated from their environment unable to talk properly. Prisoners of the dormitory took care of them until they died. We understood that they were members of the "Muslim Brothers" who returned from Iraq in a reconciliation agreement which did not prevent arresting them after the revolution.

Like in the cells, water was cut several times in the dormitory. We used to climb to the water tank in the bath room, tilt it down to have the few drops of water remaining in it mixed with grains of sand. Once, water cutting continued longer than usual and thirst dried our veins to an extent that water trade spread in the prison. Jailers used to bring us small quantities of water enough to give each of us a glass of water. Some of us sold their share for two loaves of bread. We tried to issue a law to ban trade of water but the prefect of the dormitory did not agree.

Water was very cold in the dormitory, therefore months passed without daring having a bath, and they did not take us to the baths of the prison.

Going to the bath has a special routine: In the morning, jailers order all prisoners in the dormitories to be nude ready for the bath. After two to three hours they come to escort them to the baths in the form of a train while beating them. In the bath they enter two or three of them

to a door-less bath. Water rushes out of the shower either very hot or cold. Once we start cleaning our bodies, orders came to get out immediately. To avoid beating, we ran quickly, some prisoners slipped down over each other to be beaten mercilessly. To return to the dormitories, prisoners take the position of the train while the jailers are beating their wet bodies. I remember that in the prison of Sednayah we were taken to the bath twice, the second took a longer time, it continued for 3-4 minutes.

When we were moved to the dormitories, they told us that we can buy detergents from the "Detergents Canteen" with the money we have in the deposits. We bought large quantities, reserve for the future, for five times their real price outside the prison. We almost consumed all our savings on the quantities and because of the high prices, but it was a unique opportunity.

Our most beautiful moments in the prison were when we start the dawn prayers, followed by the morning hymns. I used to recite my hymns while walking to and fro, before arrival of the jailers.

We communicated learning the Quran, those who excel in reciting teach the others. If none of us learns the whole Surah¹¹, we collect the verses from each other to complete it... If any of us was sent to the hospital or to any security branch he would return with new verses to fill the gaps, we had. I remember that we collected all the verses of "Mohammad (surah)" excluding the last two ones which we couldn't remember. When they reported me to Hospital 601, I met a "Hafiz" (reciter by heart) who was taught by "Sheikh Bakri al-Tarabishi" specialized in the seven readings of the Quran. With him, I reviewed "Al Imran surah" and the last two verses of "Mohammad surah" and returned to the prison.

One day one of us was totally depressed, and it happened that he found a text left by former prisoners before the revolution, a Quranic verse that says:

"And who so ever fears Allah and keeps his duty to Him, He will make a way for him to get out (from every difficulty). And He will provide him from (sources) he never could imagine. And who so ever puts his trust in Allah, then He will suffice him. Verily, Allah will accomplish his purpose. Indeed, Allah has set a measure for all things."

When he read these verses, he changed into another man believing that this was a divine message sent for him.

In the prison, sleeping is by order. Once a jailer ordered us to sleep, we did. It seems that his colleague did not hear him when he gave the order, when he saw us sleeping, he threatened

11 Surah is a chapter of the Holy Quran

to punish us the following day. In the following day they came, beat us, ordered us to take the blankets out and they filled the dormitory with water for two months. Three of us died. Prisoners in another dormitory were ordered to stay in their underwear, many of them died. One of the pleasant moments in the prison, if there is any, is to receive the order of sleeping. Spreading the blankets quietly, then closing eyes and sleeping soundly was the best time of the day because in it, we ran away from the reality. We always wished not to wake up. Rumors of pardons were abundant. We created some of them from dream interpretations or result of false analysis of some events.

One of us returned from the hospital with a bottle of medicine, they allowed him to keep it. After finishing it, he used it to keep some tea in it. When they discovered that, they beat him hard but God saved him.

Diseases, including scabies, spread in the dormitories. They gave us no medicines. Only one jailer used to give us anti diarrhea tablets. We had a prisoner from the ill-famed "branch 215" who had met a dermatologist who told him that he couldn't find information about some of the diseases spreading among the prisoners. This colleague had a new illness called "Limbs fall" result of gangrene. Cold in the prison of Sednayah was very strong to a degree if you walk bare foot, your feet will stick to the ground as if you put them in a freezer. Despite that, he walked barefoot because of the inflammation of his feet. He was recommended by an important official, so they gave him a new bandage every 2-3 weeks. When we changed his bandages, we noticed that his feet were decadent with a smell of rotten corpse. Once, he took off one of his toes and threw it away feeling no pain: "It died" he said.

Before Geneva 2 conference was held in January 2014, treatment improved, and beating almost stopped. They operated the central heating. Director of the prison toured the dormitories wearing a false face of cordiality. He asked "How are you my sons? Sure, you feel warm here more than in your homes. Right?" One day they ordered us to take off our clothes and turn our faces to the wall. A doctor visited all the dormitories to estimate the spread of scabies. They gave us "Povidone" and antibiotic tablets enough to cure 70-80% of the ulcers and wounds in our bodies. It continued so until the talks failed. At that time, I had been set free, but I knew that the treatment returned worse than it was.

After killing the former director of the prison, Talat Mahfouz, treatment worsened. Before that, there was no tradition of killing a prisoner every day from a dormitory or at least, a wing. After that it became normal the jailer opens the door of the wing to ask: "Who has a

Fteeseh?"¹² Prefects of dormitories would answer: "One...two... etc." In the afternoon, they come back to take the names of those who died: "What is the name of this son of a bitch?" then they order the dormitory prefect: "Wrap him in a blanket and throw him out." So, we did. When the corpse is out, they kick it and drag it impolitely. They hate even the dead.

The Visits

For the first instant, a visit to the prisoner is a source of joy because he can see his relatives, know their news and some information, but he discovers later that it is a source of horror because of the deadly beating which accompanies him from and to the dormitory.

Visits take place on Sundays and Tuesdays, Sundays for military prisoners and Tuesdays for civilian ones, although this is not a rule. In the early morning they inform prisoners of the visits, then they collect them from the wings and lead them in the train form, bowing down and looking at the ground, with beating and kicking. Instructions to the jailers, state that the visit should be accomplished as quickly as possible. We all were bodily weak and feeble while the jailers were of high physical fitness. Walking was one of the main concerns for us because we don't move in the dormitories. Therefore, we started practicing light exercises on Saturdays and Mondays preparing ourselves to a sudden visit. We always felt dizzy and fell down during walking because of our law pressure, and they always beat us to stand and continue walking. They used to collect us in a large empty freezing hall to prepare us for the visit, squatting, faces to the wall. Prisoners from different dormitories used to avail the opportunity to talk with each other and to know the news of their friends; who died of them, and who is still alive. Talking was prohibited under severe beating, but we couldn't lose the opportunity. In the room, there were heaps of shoes and slippers, left by the new prisoners because they will spend their imprisonment bare foot. In the time of the visit they allow us to wear any pair of shoes or slippers in front of our visitors. If the prisoner is naked or half naked, they give him the blue suit, which is the uniform of the prison, and take it back after the visit.

In that same room they collect the sick prisoners who will be sent to the hospital. In one corner of that room there was always between 5-10 corpses of dead prisoners.

A jailer enters the room to cut the hair of the prisoners on number zero. When the prisoner's turn comes, they lead every five of them in the train form too. Between the room and the visit mesh there is a corridor where they order you to raise your head from the position of bowing down and hands on your eyes. "Get up now to see your family and to hear the instructions

12 A term used to humiliate dead bodies

of the visit. It is forbidden to give any information about your state in the prison." Once they ordered us to speak about life in the prison positively. It is forbidden to say anything about our legal status and our judgements which, originally, we know nothing about them.

It is forbidden to mention names! You can't say how is my brother Mohammad? or my sister Nadia? It is totally forbidden to mention any names. You can ask general questions: How are my brothers. How are my aunts and how are my uncles?

In the best cases, the jailer warns the prisoner from violating these instructions telling him: "Look, be careful, you will return to me." Generally, jailers -say: "your mother is on the mesh, I can do such and such with her on the mesh."

Between the prison and the normal world there is a blue curtain, when you pass it you will find yourself in the visit hall. The jailer, whom you can see now and probably identify his voice, puts his hand on your shoulder and gently guides you. He stands to your right, while another one stands with your visitors. Between you and your visitors stands another jailer in the corridor between the two meshes. You are responsible of your words and the words of your visitors. If they make a mistake you will be punished later. Duration of the visit is two minutes and in case there is a support from outside, it may extend to five minutes, and if the support is from an important official, they may open the window and allow you to kiss your visitors. When the time is over, the jailer tells you: "Say good bye to your family and tell them if you need anything." You ask them to bring you clothes and towels in the following visit.

We were always keen to ask for white clothes so we can see lice in the dark.

The same jailer guides you out, and while your family are seeing you off silently, he whispers in your ear: "Straight up ... Be proud of yourself." Once you pass the blue curtain, he would kick you for no reason to push you meters ahead. After that, you must kneel down, take off what you were having in your feet and wait for the bag your visitors have brought you because they will throw it on your head. The jailer will order you: "Up," and you must get up and understand it as, "Kneel down" because you have already returned to the normal life of the prison. While you are still kneeling down, they take your thumb and put it on the receipt of deposits. The higher amount of money your family can leave to you is five thousand Syrian Lira. Once it is in the record of the deposits it is difficult to tamper it, but it remains frozen without interest as long as the prison directorate prohibits you from buying food, medicines or detergents.

This is true if your conduct during the visit is satisfactory, but if you make any mistake, they will beat you, and while guiding you to the dormitory, they would steal the deposits, another

form of punishment. If the violation is great, they may deprive you of future visits or they will beat you to death.

At the end of the visit, they give the prisoner the clothes his family had brought him, and he has to carry them to the door of the dormitory where they check them again to steal the new items and leave the used ones for him.

The visit was a nightmare, and Jailers do everything they can to reveal their sectarian and regionalist back grounds to harm the prisoners. The first question they ask is: "Where are you from?" If you tell them you are from Damascus, for example, they would explode in anger because you participated in the protests without being in need of money. In their opinion, all the Damascenes are rich. Then they ask you about your neighborhood, the richest the neighborhood, the more you will be beaten. Despite that, one of our colleagues was exaggerating in his financial position. If he is asked about the price of his house, he would duplicate it several times, or about his properties he would increase their numbers, just to raise their anger which was always present.

Because of my accent, I was beaten several times. They ordered me to pronounce the word orange. I was supposed to stop replacing the pronunciation of certain letters in the way they do. When I pronounce them as they want, they stop beating me.

When a family flies of joy for having a permission for a visit, the prisoner will be frustrated. We even congratulated each other when our names were skipped out in the list of the visits. Once, a mother came to visit her son, they told her he is in a "mission." What mission, she was standing in front of an ambulance carrying his body.

To the Cell Once More

"Mission" in the prison terminology means departing the prison temporarily to the court, to the hospital, or to one of the security branches to be investigated again and to return, because in these cases, the prisoner remains in the registers of the prison, even if he was absented for two years.

When we were in the dormitories, a new file was opened in the air force security branch with my name in it, so I was called for investigation, where I spent five months during which the regime used chemical weapons on the Eastern Ghouta in August 2013. At the end of September that year, my "mission" finished and they returned me to the prison of Sednayah. It was the tradition in such cases to return the prisoner to the same group in the dormitory, but the responsible staff sergeant told me; "What, you, poor man? What is going on in Damascus?"

I told him; "I don't know and nothing happened." He said: "you are a liar." He looked at the soldiers and told them: "Take him down to the cells and let him forget what happened in Damascus."

In the cell, I found three persons like me, returning from different missions. The decision was to spend a disciplinary period in the cells to forget the news they had heard in order not to spread them in the dormitories. In the cell I spent about one month and a half in very bad conditions. The ceiling was dripping, the cell was very cold and we have no blankets. They punished us for the sounds of breathing and snoring. Prefect of the cell should identify the perpetrator of the crime of snoring or he, himself, will be punished or all the prisoners in the cell.

At the end of the disciplinary period the jailers called me to take me back to the dormitory. They asked me what we were talking about in the cell? I said that speaking is prohibited. They were smoking, they put off their cigarettes on my body while I was kneeling down. One of them asked me: "Haven't you forgotten what happened in Damascus?" I said that I have already forgotten, I even didn't know anything. They beat me lightly and took me to the dormitory.

One of the prisoners in the cell was brought from the white building. They put him in the cell to forget the news which he had heard. He was the first who assured me the cases of executing prisoners in the white building. Before that, we believed that death cases were always result of beating, torture and hunger.

Prefect of the cell was a rude man from Homs countryside. He asked me what was my charge, I told him, "I was chairman of a coordination," he said the usual punishment for this crime is execution. I isolated myself in the toilet, alone, hardly can eat. I imagined how they will lead me to the execution. I realized that I shall not be able to see my family again. I concentrated my thoughts about the afterlife and started asking God's pardon for what I had done in the past. I imagined the last moments of my life, will it be hanging or shooting? I imagined that I will not die whatever the tool they will use to kill me, and that I will get out of my coffin and run away to freedom. Strange thoughts invaded my mind. One day, prefect of the cell asked me why I don't eat. I told him it is not important if they will execute me. He asked me the source of these news, I told him that he told me this. He half laughed, denied what he had said and started pacifying me until I started eating again.

Later on, I knew that he was right, all coordination's heads were executed even if they were peaceful, because they were responsible of what the authorities called "riots."

The Executions

Two times a week they take prisoners to “extradition,” i.e. execution. In the evenings, they call some names for unknown reasons. At first, we thought they will transfer them to better places believing that there is no place worse than Sednayah, may be to the prison of Adra. We envied those who were called, and pitied ourselves. We told those who were privileged to be extradited to phone our families from Adra prison, which has telephones, to reassure them on us, but long periods passed, many of them went away and our families, who visited us, did not mention that anybody had called them.

They used to transport prisoners to be executed by cars at twelve o’clock in the night, one car goes, and another comes after ten minutes to carry another group. This was repeated more than twenty times in the night. It took us time to understand that it is the same car, or may be only two cars, that go and return between the white and the red building, a distance of 200 m, where executions take place. They used to gather them in one of the dormitories close to ours in the first floor, where they may spend one night. They always were between fifty and three hundred, depending on the execution lists. They used to beat them brutally, something we couldn’t understand, why beat a man going to be executed?

The Last Night

One day, our group was organizing the “Food Program” I had mentioned before. That day I and a colleague of mine, prepared a plate of bread, orange and jam. It was very delicious. That night we slept soundly, glad to smell freedom in that meal.

The following morning, I slept a little after the prayer, and had a dream that I had bathed and cleaned my body with warm water and removed all the blackness from it forever. I narrated the dream to my colleagues with a sense of optimism. After two hours’ jailers brought us the bread and called my name, my partner of the orange meal, and a third one from my “Case,” and took us to a dormitory where there were other prisoners. In that day there were no visits, so we thought they will take us to the execution. Instead of that, they took us to a room where there were several staff sergeants. We were kneeling down and blinded as usual. One of them ordered us to stand straight and to look at them normally because his “excellency the president” pardoned us. They handled us our deposits, and one of them escorted us to the gate of the prison advising us to avoid making problems and to enjoy our life. He also told us that each one of us has to pay 1,200 Syrian Lira, due to the prison. That was a lie of course,

because there was no receipt. I hastened to pay it from the deposits I had for the three of us, considering it a gift. The jailer took the money and said "I am sure that you are terrorists and you will return to terrorism. His excellency, the president, made a mistake by pardoning you, anyhow, it is alright."

Testimony of Abu Anas al-Hamwi



Before starting my story, I would like to beg any one who can do any thing to help the detainees in the prisons of the regime not to hesitate to do his best to relieve them from the hell in which they live. The situation of the detainees in Syrian prisons is unbearable. It is true that the Syrian regime is bombing and killing the Syrians, but this is only part of the atrocities practiced inside the prisons where unbelievable ways and means of torture are used. Horrible ways of punishment, no human mind can ever imagine. I hope to convey the reality to you hoping no one would accuse me of exaggeration, because, really, it is difficult to convince you that what I am saying is real facts and not fantasy. Believe me, all what we, the detainees, said and will say will not portray the pains we had suffered in these pieces of hell.

Arrest and Interrogation

I was a little over sixteen years old, immediately after passing the exams of the secondary stage, average 90%, when I was arrested by one of the check points. My father had raised me on a special way of life: School in winter, and an institute of learning the Quran in summer vacation. My knowledge of the outer world was, zero. I participated in the demonstrations against the regime in our region, but I have never used weapon nor have known how to use them. Because many of my relatives had participated in the armed opposition, I was arrested on August 27, 2014.

I was transferred to the branch of the military intelligence in my governorate where they accused me of charges, I have never heard of before: shooting two check points of the regime, planting an explosive charge, and attempt to assassinate an officer. I had no knowledge of any of these charges but arbitrary arrest is very common in Syria: either because the soldier on the check point did not like me or because of a fake report written by an informer to one of the security services for personal purposes. Two thirds of those whom I had met in the prisons had no activities in the revolution, neither in the demonstrations nor in military actions. The only armed men I have met were the few Shabiha who were fighting in the militias of the regime and were arrested. I had rarely met any of the opposition armed men in the prisons of the regime.

In the intelligence branch, the jailer ordered me: "Take off your clothes," I took off the T Shirt, he ordered me to take off the trousers, I did. He ordered me to squat the military way of which I had no idea. He started shouting: "squatting, squatting" and I don't know what to do. He started beating me saying: "you shout in my face!" and continued beating me. He ordered me to take off my underwear, but I didn't realize if he meant it really. It was strange and unac-

ceptable to me, but, at the end I responded because of the intense beating. I was very shy to reveal my private parts to strangers, while he was busy inspecting my clothes.

Then, he led me to a place in the basement I realized it was a cell, there were two persons there before me, one for 47 days, the other for 13 days. The cell was 150 cm long and 1 m wide, at the end of which there was a tap and a toilet hole. There was also a multipurpose bowl. It was used for food, for water and for cleaning one's self after visiting the toilet. For two days I couldn't eat of this bowl, but in the third day I understood that there was no other choice, and started, obliged, to use it.

While I was waiting my turn for torture, in the first days in the cell, I heard the voice of a woman being tortured, begging the interrogator: "for God's sake sir... I shall never repeat it again." After a while I heard another woman shouting. My flesh shuddered, adrenaline level jumped in my blood, I was eager to do anything to help. When they took me to be tortured, I didn't care for myself as much as I was thinking of the women. When they returned me back to the cell, I told my friends about what I had heard with utmost agitation. They smiled and told me that the number of detained women is about half the number of detained men. Later I used to see the women being led by the jailers to the W.C. once a day, always running to avoid the beating of the jailers, to convince myself that me, being in the prison, is nothing beside those women. Torture was less annoying to me than the idea of the possibility that one of these women being tortured and humiliated in this way be a relative of mine.

The following day I was summoned for interrogation. I denied all the charges against me. At the beginning the interrogator tried to convince me to confess without beating. In the second session he slapped me a little, but in the third session he lost patience, started beating me with sticks, with PVC tubes, and with two kinds of whips, the first an electric wire and the second is part of a tire. He tortured me by beating me on the feet, by electric shocks, by suspension and by the wheel while I was blinded and my hand tied behind me. One day, the interrogator ordered a soldier to take away the blind off my eyes. I was totally exhausted, couldn't see where I was, dizzy, and totally strained. "Look at your right." The interrogator ordered me. There was a man they had started torturing him before me. "Do you see him?" he asked. "Yes sir, I see him" I replied. "He is dead!!" I was shocked. His body was swollen result of torture, so was mine, stained with the colors of rainbow, blue, red, green and yellow.

The interrogator said: "You either lay down beside him and die, or you confess." That was after ten days of my arrest. I was young and delicate, never practiced any hard work, from home to school, and from school to my home. At the beginning I decided to be solid hearted

and not confess, but when I saw this man, I yielded down and decided to confess to avoid death. They may detain me for some months and then they will set me free to join my family who know nothing about me.

I confessed all the charges I heard him saying unaware of what I said. He was pleased, ordered me food and water. I thought the circle of torture was finished and he will refer me to a habitual prison, but they returned me back to the cell. After two hours. At mid night, he ordered me back to the interrogation room. "you confessed that you had attacked so and so checkpoint, and you had planted an explosive charge." "yes sir, I did" I replied feeling relaxed for avoiding torture, but he surprised me: "Now tell me... how did you do that and with whom?" I had no answer, I felt obliged to fabricate a story which will not expose me to a great legal punishment. I told him that we, young boys, were put in the lines behind the armed men, filling bullets but not firing. Had I told him that I had fired on the army soldiers he would have killed me in place.

In the Baloni Prison

After two or three days, they took me out of the branch's prison. On the road to Damascus there was a temporary detention center dubbed al-Baloni. Here, there was no severe torture, only a few lashes at the entrance. We stood in a row to deliver our personal items to be kept as deposits, which, in my case, was only my identity card because the money I had when they arrested me had already evaporated. One soldier was writing our personal data on a paper, a huge Alawite officer with thick moustaches standing beside him. He asked me my name, I told him. "what is your crime? You are still young. What did you do?" I started replying: "Ustaz I didn't..." (Ustaz in Arabic means teacher). He interrupted me: "What? What did you say? Repeat, repeat." Again, I said: "Ustaz..." the soldier poked me advising me to tell the officer, Sir." I didn't know that the word "Ustaz" has a connotation of humiliation in the Syrian army. I had in mind the opposite, I thought I was honoring him. I tried to apologize repeating the word Ustaz every now and then. He ordered me to sit in the corner. Later he approached me and started cursing me with words I had never heard all my life, words that can not occur to a human being, and started beating me on every part of my body. Two soldiers came. "Yes sir...What did he do." They asked. He ordered them: "Beat him ...he is saying, Ustaz, to his master." They started beating me using improper Alawite words, they seemed they were not Alawites. I can not forget that day, I was a school student and used to repeat the word "Ustaz" for respect!

In the Branches of Damascus

Two of my detention colleagues supported me and helped me enter the dormitory of the Baloni prison, totally debilitated. We remained there for ten days, then we were referred to the military police in Qaboun, and afterwards to Palestine Branch. Where ever they take the prisoner, there is always a reception party, a primary torture session which increases in severity according to the importance and level of the security branch. Nudity and squatting are habitual performances repeated in every branch. We were introduced to "Lakhdar Brahimi" a PVC green pipe dubbed so after the UN envoy to Syria.

The "reception party" in Palestine branch was the hardest. They entered us, 95 prisoners, tied to one iron chain. Three of us were killed in the reception. Food was relatively sufficient here. Which means that every one of us can have 2-3 loaves of bread daily, and they beat us daily in order not to believe that we are here just to eat. They used to enter the dormitory every week or ten days and beat us all, or take us individually or two to three of us out to be beaten and return us for no reason.

After that, I was referred to Branch 248 of the military intelligence. There, we had a reception party, after which we were not beaten. We had hope of being set free. One day, they called names, I was one of them. We were about 100. They tied us to one chain with one of the cuffs on the wrist and the other connected to the chain.

They put us in the fridge, a closed vehicle with high small window lets through which light and air get in. We looked from the window to know where they were taking us. One of us, who used to live in Damascus and knows its roads said: "Guys...May God help us" We asked him why, he said: "We are on the road to Sednayah." I haven't heard of the name before. I asked: "What is Sednayah?" More than one of them said together: "Now you will see what is Sednayah." They started invoking God they put us in the White Building. I did not understand anything, neither what is Sednayah, nor what is the white or red building! I saw marks of fear on the faces of the other prisoners wondering why the fear after what we have experienced? I asked them. One of them said: "For how long have you been detained? what are the branches you have visited?" When I told him, he said: "You better consider the period of your imprisonment and the branches you have visited a picnic with your family." He thrilled me... and continued: "What you have seen is no more than a picnic compared with what you will see in the place we are going to." My heart fell in my chest and I started praying God to help me.

In Sednayah; the Reception

When we got out of the fridge, they ordered us to take off our clothes totally nude, to hold the waist of the person in front, to bow and put our foreheads on his back in a way not to see any of the soldiers. In the security branches they used to blind our eyes, but here they didn't. We were like a train of one hundred persons, the first thing we did was climbing high stairs. We found ourselves in a large hall in the center of which there was a desk to receive the deposits of the new comers.

In Sednayah, the reception was exceptionally horrible. Who survives it will be able to continue living in this hell? There, I knew the "Harawaneh," a hose of compressed silicone originally used to solder plastic items. The Harawaneh is neither sharp to wound nor solid to break bones, but it either kills the person immediately or causes him an unusual pain, more than any other tool of torture.

I was nearly at the end of the queue to handle my deposits. Beating did not stop. I discovered later that this just an introduction. During handling the deposits real beating starts, after that, the prisoner faces a wall, prostrates on the ground with his body uncovered to the jailers, 15-20 of them, started beating him all together, until a new prisoner comes to be beaten in turn and so on.

I was the youngest of those cuffed to the chain, some of them were in their fifties or sixties. When my turn approached to the deposits desk, two soldiers with Harawanas asked me my age, I told them I was born in 1997. They said: "What brought you here in this young age? What did you do?" I told them I did nothing and I am here by mistake. My face was to the ground since it is totally forbidden to look at any of the jailers or look right or left, so I did not see them. In Sednayah if you see the face of a Jailer, it means death. They asked me about my story. I told them the details having in mind that they will sympathize with me due to my young age. They told me: "Get out of the queue and give us your envelope." I stood aside, and gave them the envelop of the deposits. They ordered me to raise my hands up and open my legs wide, they started cursing me and beating me on my genitals. They hit my penis seven times with the Harawaneh. I will never forget that. With the first hit I felt I was going to die, and wished they would kill me to get rid of that horrific pain.

Sometimes, in the branches of security, crying, asking for help, signs of fatigue or of repentance may help. Here in Sednayah they give opposite reactions. When they saw that my body began to shiver involuntarily, they increased beating me.

Tools of beating in Sednayah are: The Harawaneh, the metal pipe, the belt of a tank's motor

which removes the skin, and the quadruple cable, made of two pairs of brass cables wound together. When they beat with either of them you feel that your body had lost senses, you stop feeling pain until the torture party finishes, your body calms down and you restore your senses.

The "reception party" in Sednayah continued for 4-5 hours. Of the one hundred prisoners who arrived with me, not less than fifteen were killed.

Every 2-3 days a chain like mine arrives in the prison and a similar number of victims die from torture. Killing people in Sednayah is a usual practice.

To the Solitary Cells

When they finished beating us, they pulled the bodies of the dead prisoners aside and shouted: "UP UP...Train...Train...Train." We did it the same as we had done it the first time. The jailer directed the first prisoner in the train, we descended the stairs, my genitals were swollen due to beating. I felt strong pain to walk, descending the stairs was painful, especially the jailers were on both side of the stairs beating us relentlessly. We descended 3-4 levels underground. We arrived in solitary cells, in front of each there was a jailer entering a number of the prisoners in.

The cells area was 3 * 3.5-4 m each. Inside every one there was a toilet. We were 28 prisoners. My testicles swell and I couldn't walk, sit, or even stand. It was very, very difficult to bear. Each one of us had an area of one tile to sit on, so we alternated standing and sitting. We were nude, crowded and attached to each other. I begged those near me to understand my problem. Three of them stood to allow me stretch my legs apart. The cell was always dark with only a red small lamp hardly the 28 prisoners can see faces of each other.

We remained for two days without food or water. In the third day they brought us water and gave, all of us, one loaf and a half of bread and 15 olives. We were starving. We didn't know how to divide this strange meal on this number of persons. Every two shared an olive. We distributed the bread. Every one had a morsel. Some of us ate, the others didn't. I was busy of my pain which did not stop aching me in my sleep, standing or sitting. The following day our share was three or four loaves of bread. The day they bring us a small bowl of rice, hardly seven or eight spoons, they deprive us of bread.

The Prefect

For each cell they appoint a prefect. The jailer enters the cell, selects one of the prisoners randomly and appoints him a prefect, orders him to kneel on his knees, face to the wall, and starts beating him until he is unable to stand. He forces him to raise himself up and tell him that he is appointed prefect of the cell, lists to him the instructions he should follow other wise he will kill him if he violates them. In short, the prefect is designated dead.

One prisoner in the cell next to ours, used to shout continuously because he lost control on his mind. We dubbed him (al-Fasel) "the disconnected." One day the jailor followed his shouting, asked prefect of the cell: "Who is shouting" and the answer was al-Fasel. Jailers in Sednayah call prefects of cells (Arsat) "pimps." The jailer told the prefect: "Look Arsa, If I hear his voice after five minutes, you will die or both of you will die." The prefect understood that he will die definitely if he couldn't silence this lunatic. He held the neck of al-Fasel, twisted it, and killed him. When the jailer returned in the evening, he asked the prefect about al-Fasel. He replied: "It's ok, he is finished." I couldn't imagine that things like this could happen between prisoners. The prefect killed a man to survive. The jailer admired the prefect and raised his voice so that all the prisoners can hear him: "You pimps...listen to me. It was planned you stay in these cells for 25-30 days. Tomorrow morning, we will take you out of them as a reward to this prefect."

In the Dormitory

By so, we had spent only thirteen days in the cell. They took us to a large dormitory, ten meters long and six meters wide, with a bath room. The dormitory was clean as if not used before. We found in it some detergents which were very necessary after the long days in the cell. In the dormitory I started to walk and do some exercises, my genitals started to recover gradually. In the first four days in the dormitory, they didn't bring us any foods! We lived on water. We saw no body. In the morning of the fifth day they brought us breakfast: Bread and a bowl of olives, each one of us had two and a half olives.

We were 35 prisoners in the dormitory, which I knew later, this was the largest number of prisoners usually they put in a dormitory. We were 28 from our cell, they brought seven prisoners from another cell including the prefect who killed a prisoner to survive. He was young, with long hair. I forgot his name but I still remember that he was from al-Fuah, of Idlib. He was a Shabih in Damascus, free to do whatever he wants until he differed with his superior and was brought to Sednayah prison.

When the jailer came in to select prefect to the dormitory, we knelt on our knees, faces to the walls opposite of the door. We were two lines, the jailer selected the same prisoner, took him from among us, beat him three times so he could hardly speak. "you ass hole, you are pimp of the dormitory." He started giving him the instructions: "Any voice heard or violation committed in the dormitory you will be punished."

The new prefect started bullying and even beating us. One day one of the jailers hated to see his long hair, warned him to have it cut in two days or he will die. We couldn't understand how the prefect will have his hair cut with nothing to cut in the dormitory, no scissors, no knife or any sharp tool. The warning was serious, so the prefect started to pluck his hair, feeling pain but unable to cry. The jailer reminded him of his punishment every time he visited the dormitory.

In the following morning, only some hair was plucked from his head. Our feelings were confused. He is a Shabih and had killed one of his mates, al-Fasel, and tried to humiliate us and harm us., but, at the same time, he was a soul among us. We hoped they would punish him in a way or another but not to kill him. One of us suggested cutting a piece of ceramic in the bathroom and use it to cut his hair. He accepted, started to beat the ceramic with his fist until it bled, but in vain. We, started one after another to help him, including me although I hated him. Fists of many of us swelled until a small piece was broken. They started shaving his head, feeling pain, but dares not moan. Because he couldn't moan, he started weeping. He was saved from death and changed his treatment towards us.

The Wheel

That was the seventh day in the dormitory. Tomorrow, they will beat us for the first time here. It was about one o'clock after midnight when they started to beat all the prisoners of the prison, from the first dormitory in the first floor to the last dormitory in the third floor. This method was called the "wheel" because it runs on all parts of the prison, contrary to the punishment of a ward or dormitory only. When beating started, we heard horrific sounds. We started invoking God they finish those before us and come to us to get rid of this nightmare. We were in the 7th. dormitory of the second floor. When they arrived in our floor we had to wait until they have finished the first, the second....so on to the 7th dormitory! We died one hundred times just from hearing the cries of the prisoners.! At last they came in. I can not describe the beating, but all I can say is that they ended it with two of us dead. In future times five, six or even seven prisoners may die in a ten minutes party.

The following day we informed the jailers of those who died to take their corpses out. In our dormitory we know of the corpses of other dormitories from the past night: five in the first dormitory, three from the second... and so on. Gradually, we started to know the regime of the prison, we will be beaten two or three times weekly, and every time someone must die. Every time the number of prisoners decrease, they bring new ones. Arrival of prisoners has no end.

Food

At the beginning, we ate singly, until we discovered the system of the "Sofra." Dormitory prisoners are divided into groups, each one is headed by a prisoner known as head of the sofra. He receives the food of his group from the prefect of the dormitory and divide it on the members of his group. As I said, we were thirty-five prisoners, divided ourselves to seven sofas, each one had five prisoners. Prefect of the dormitory had to divide the food they bring us into seven shares, one for each sofra.

After some time in Sednayah, we forgot the outer world, our families, even why we are here. We acclimatized with beating, the only obsession we had is when we will have food. We lived in hunger, lost a lot of our weights which we succeeded in preserving them in the prisons of the security branches.

One day, we discovered that the prefect and another prisoner who used to help him take shares of food larger than what usually used to have. We quarreled with them, our voices were loud, the jailers came in and sked about the source of the noise, they were told from our dormitory. A group of 10-15 jailers entered and started beating us. We were nude.

While beating us they cursed us because we were quarrelling for food and we pointed to the two blaming them for that. Every one had a share of quarter of a loaf of bread and a few olives. For lunch we had either bulgur or rice. The prefect fills his palm with either of them and puts it in the open hands of each of us one by one standing in line. There were no culinary, each one had to manage eating the amount of food given to him in his hands.

That day, after beating us, they entered us into the bath. In the corner of the dormitory there was a bath and a toilet. I can't tell you how they have collected 35 persons in a space 2 * 2 m. They warned us, who gets out of the bath will die. It was really impossible. some of us were forced to pop out of the bath because of the unbelievable crowd. Whenever any one shows off the bath they beat him hard obliging him to dive in the heap of bodies with all of his force pushing some one else out to be beaten. We remained so until the jailers got tired an got out of the dormitory.

Half an hour passed, some of us started encouraging the others to get out of the bath thinking that the party was over. We did not realize they were listening to us behind the door of the dormitory. They entered again, this time with electric sticks. The ground of the bath was full of 4-5 cm deep of water, our bodies were cramped and stuck to each other, when they stung the first at the door with the electric stick electricity ran through all of us. The first one died soon. We remained stuck in the bath room for five days, deprived from going out to the "vast space" of the dormitory. When any of us needed to go to the toilet, they let him out to return soon to the bath room. They brought us no food, when any one of us feels thirsty he moves to the toilet to drink from the tap there and returns.

The prefect and his aid made something they called the mattress. It seems that he had learned how to make it in the prisons of security branches. He was brilliant in making it having in mind that he can do the same here. The mattress is nothing more than several blankets put on each other and fixed with ropes taken from tearing old blankets.

When the jailers came to punish us, they saw the two mattresses and the remains of the old blankets. This was normal in the prisons of the security services, but here, in Sednayah, the blanket is much more important than the prisoner. Once you tear a blanket you write your obituary by your hand. The jailers asked what are these? Who made them? We refused to answer, one of the jailers swore if we don't tell him he would kill all of us. One of us, at last, said that these are mattresses made by the prefect and his aid. The jailer started cursing both of them, and ordered them to get out of the bath. They received beating I have never seen it before in my life. Jailers alternated on beating them, each with his own tool of beating. Usually one sting of the electric stick is enough, but one of them fixed it on the prefect for 45 seconds after which he was half paralyzed for several days.

At the end, one of us was courageous enough and asked the jailer to pardon us. He responded to our repentance and allowed us out of the bathroom. He warned us of making any noise in the future and promised to bring us food the following day. Of course, this pardon was accompanied by curses. We hailed the staff sergeant because he did not kill the one who dared asking him to forgive us.

In the Dormitory of Hunger

After fifteen days in the dormitory we heard of something they called it, "dormitories re-shuffle." We didn't understand what was meant by that until they started taking us four by four and moving us to other dormitories. So, I was moved with three others to a dormitory of thirty prisoners. Now my story begins!

In the new dormitory we saw dead persons walking. Skeletons on feet. I was frightened when

I saw them: they were very thin, deep cheeks, and prominent rib cages, the fattest of them was no more than 35-40 kg. At that time, I was seventy kg, my weight which remained the same in the prisons of the security branches. Food was satisfactory and I practiced sport even on the area of the one tile, my share in the dormitory.

We tried to communicate with them. I was afraid from them and from becoming like one of them. In the dormitory there were six sofras, each of five prisoners. We, the new comers made the seventh. The three other prisoners with me were "sons of one case," that is they were, in the Syrian prison's terminology, charged of one case. They were from Jisr al-Shughur - Idlib, the oldest of them was called Nadeem Kaheel, to whom I was close because of his noble manners. I realized that one of them was from my region, his name was Mohammad Hashem al-Aqraa, respected and loved by all the prisoners for his good manners and seniority in the prison, he was prisoned in 2011.

Abu Hashem al-Aqraa approached me, I told him my story, he gave me a pair of trousers and a shirt to put them on. We knew that there was a system of visits in the prison of Sednayah. Some of those in the dormitory have pajamas, a shirt or a sweater...I was totally glad to wear the clothes Abu Hashem had brought me from a young man from our region too. He was called Husam Mawwas, and he had already been visited by his family. Revealing my genitals was something of great shame to me. I used to cover them during time prayers which I did not neglect even in my worst conditions. Now I can pray normally, like the others.

I had my ablution and prayed with my body covered...That was a source of utmost pleasure to me.

Abu Hashem spread it in the dormitory that I was from his region and he is responsible on me, anyone who harms me will harm him. I didn't understand it first, what will happen? A few days passed before I realized that it was all about food. The prisoners had been changed into wolves; each one tries to take the share of his colleague in order to survive. Abu Hashem's warning was enough. Later on, even when my share of food was unguarded on the floor in front of all the prisoners no one tried to touch it. Abu Hashem was not the dormitory prefect but he volunteered to clean it, and he excelled in that.

Food was brought, eggs and olives. The share of our sofras of four persons was one egg and a half and half a loaf of bread. Abu Hashem told me not to exchange my share by myself, but to tell him to do that on behalf of me if I want. I did not understand that too, but later I realized that there was a trade based on bread. For example, a prisoner buys from another who had a visit, pajamas to cover his body, for three or four loaves of bread to be returned one quarter

of loaf daily. The one who doesn't like eggs can sell his share for half a loaf... and so on.

After our first breakfast here, we put the egg shells and the olive seeds aside. Three prisoners approached us and asked: "Do you need them?" We wondered of their question and asked them why? They said: the egg shells. I thought they were talking about cleanliness, I told them I shall throw them away but I do not know where, I am fresh in the dormitory. They repeated the question if we need them! Spontaneously, I said no. The scene turned dramatic when their hands violently snatched the egg shells. I felt that my heart pulses jumped to one thousand out of fear. I jumped back and shouted: "What are you doing?" they said: "You are new here, you will understand later." What shall I understand? They said they eat egg shells, olive seeds, everything!

Abu Hashem told me I am new, and I have to calm down and I will understand everything later. I shouted: "what shall I understand? What is going on in front of my eyes?"

After one month, one month and a half, food became scarce. Four or five days may pass without anything brought to us. Then a meal of a quarter or half a loaf of bread may be offered. I used to eat egg shells and olive seeds, like the others.

Four months passed in the dormitory at this routine, we sleep, wake up, wait for the little food, eat it whole gluttonously, differ on it. I shall not speak about beating because it was repeated to become part of our life. Even death was normal, some may die of beating, others from sickness or hunger...So was our life here.

Death of Abu Hashem

One day, Abu Hashem al-Aqraa, the man who taught me everything and took care of me was sick. He taught me to economize in bread and to save it for the rainy days. He kept my savings of food so no one can steal them. Those starving prisoners couldn't bear seeing the bread of their mates. Bread was our main food. Because I practiced sports, I used to buy eggs from him and pay in installments. One day I took one egg, one complete egg from him and promised to pay for it later. Days passed and my share of bread was only one quarter of a loaf. He always refused to take it. It took me one complete week to pay the price of one egg. which was half or three quarters of a loaf.

Before he fell ill, we had sick prisoners. Some of them were totally weak to move or to eat in addition to diarrhea. I used to help Abu Hashem in cleaning the dormitory and removing the waste of those who were unable to move or control themselves. Another prisoner used to help Abu Hashem, Hameed Marwan Yassouf, from al-Ghab, Hama countryside, who died and told me to inform his family if I was released one day.

When Abu Hashem's illness developed, Hameed and I took the responsibility of cleaning the dormitory. Later I knew that Abu Hashem had tuberculosis. I took care of him and massaged his body to relieve him.

Abu Hashem's illness worsened, one day before he died his temperature jumped high, I soaked his shirt as a pad and put it on his forehead to let it drop. The next day he died between my hands and told me to inform his family if I was, one day, set free. I did.

When someone dies in the dormitory, we used to inform the jailer when he brings food. They send two soldiers with a stretcher, put it out of the dormitory and order us to take the dead out. Prefect of the dormitory should cross up the dead's feet, and tie his hands on his chest. When the jailer orders the dead out, two prisoners carry his body out within five seconds counted by the jailer. If they fail to do that, they will be beaten mercilessly.

Speed and counting seconds were very important to the jailers, we were always under threats of beating. When jailers bring food, they count to three during which the prefect should bring out the empty bowls and take the full ones. After counting, the jailor shuts the door violently while the prefect is entering food. The heavy who metal door may break one of his organs or kill him instantly. That is why most of those who died were prefects. Didn't I say that the prefect is a dead person?

Hussein Died Too

In this dormitory our prefect was from Aleppo, one of his relatives was with us too, Hussein. Hussein was young, an Education Faculty student in Aleppo University. We became friends, and started reading the Holy Quran together. In the security branches I had learnt many "surahs" (chapters) and during the seven months I spent in this dormitory I looked for some one who knows other chapters to read them to me, and for those who do not know to read it to them. That was a source of relief to me. Hussein wanted me to read to him "Yasin surah." We started to read it together, he was about to learn it by heart when he showed the symptoms of tuberculosis. He couldn't eat any more, and he gave me his shares of food. I refused to take them, so he gave them to the prefect of the dormitory who gave them to those who need them more.

In one of the midnights, I heard someone calling my name. I woke up. It was Hussein under a blanket in one of the angles of the dormitory pointing his finger to me. I approached him to see what he wants. "Nothing" He said: "Just sit beside me and read me Yasin surah." I won't forget that night at all. He said: "just sit beside me, put your hand on my forehead and read Yasin surah." I did that. When I finished, I asked him if he needs anything more, he didn't

reply. I thought he slept. I went back to my place to sleep. In the morning I discovered that he had died while I was reading for him. I wept him from my heart and I still do.

We washed him the Islamic way and informed the jailer of his death when he brought us breakfast: "Sir we have a dead prisoner" He replied in his Alawite accent: "You have a Fates?... (a humiliating word for the dead) Keep him. Later on, we will take him" Hussein's corpse remained two days in the dormitory before they took it away. During that time, I looked at him unable to eat or to speak to anybody.

Mohammad was Killed Too

Once I said that when a jailer enters, we should quickly run to the wall facing the door, squatting with our faces to the wall and our backs to the jailer. Our number was large to the space of the dormitory so we used to take that position in three rows, with the new comers in the third row who receive the hardest beating. Abu Hashem's place was in the first row opposite the wall for his seniority. Me being the youngest, I was in the third row. Because of my young age and his sympathy towards me, he wanted them to swap places to save me from beating, decreasing the possibility of death, I did not accept. One of the prisoners in the second row swapped his place with mine and told me he will sit behind me to protect me from beating. The first time I entered the dormitory I recognized his face. He was tall with dark skin from the eastern country side of Hama, married and had two daughters, I think his name was Mohammad, I did not know more about him because I had no opportunity to be close to him.

When we agreed to swap places, and the jailers came to beat us the following day, I took my place in the second row, Mohammad was behind me. When they beat us, our bodies fall on each other, I exploited my small body and laid my body on the ground so the others would cover me. When they left the dormitory, I was soaked with the blood of Mohammad with his big body laid over me. I told him: "Mohammad... it is over... they left, get away so I can move... you are about to kill me." He did not reply.

Mohammad died to protect me, so did Husam Mawwas who gave me the clothes to cover myself. Husein died, and Mohammad Hashem al-Aqraa died...I became lonely.

The other Mohammad Died

Death plagued our dormitory on a daily basis and for various reasons.

I entered this dormitory with three prisoners from Jisr Jisr al-Shughur, three of them of one

legal case. They were relatives. When the first was arrested, under torture, he gave the names of the other two, Nader Nadeem Kaheel, and another one, his name was Mohammad too. He was born in 1995, an engineering student in a private university. We became friends, the three of us of similar ages.

One day Mohammad was summoned for a visit. When he returned, his face was pale, and his eyes were buggy. He was changed into another man, always absent minded and weeping. He stopped eating and drinking. When we force him to eat, he keeps chewing the morsel in his mouth for half an hour unable to swallow it. We knew why when he told us that his mother and aunt visited him, and he saw how much his mother was sad. He was very close to her, so he suffered from depression which exhausted him gradually until he died in front of our eyes.

Dormitory without a Prefect

Because of the relentless strong beating, the prefect was unable to do his duties. One of the prisoners volunteered to replace him, but he was slow in drawing the bowls of food, once the jailer finished counting, he closed the heavy door on him breaking his back.

After this, no one dared accept being a prefect. One of the prisoners proposed to take the position on condition of having an extra share of food, we did not accept. Food was our main obsession. We decided to remain without a prefect provided that every day one of us do the mission and we share the food equally. Lack of experience was critical in the mission of receiving the food because the door closed on many of us during that process leaving half of us handicapped. My turn was late, I prayed it will not come.

I changed from praying discreetly, just moving my eyes, and started praying seated and prostrated. I started encouraging the others to follow my example. Prayers are totally prohibited under the punishment of beating to death. I told myself: "Beating is a daily practice whether we pray or not, so let us pray."

In the dormitory, there was a young man; Ahmad. He narrated to us the sad story of his life since he left his father's house in the age of nine, how he went to Damascus to live in the streets, homeless, and how he moved to live with his uncles in Lebanon, where he worked and improved his financial status. When the revolution started, he decided to return to Syria, join the army and defend his country, loyal to the regime. On his way to Syria, they arrested him at the borders under the charge of evading the mandatory service, and was brought to Sednayah. Because of the destitution he lived in his early years "his heart was dead." He got used to beating. He was careless, of bad manners, used to steal food of his mates, but generally he was good hearted.

One day his turn came to receive the food. After finishing that task, he called the jailer who had passed several dormitories. The jailer threatened to beat him if the reason was unimportant. When the jailer returned, Ahmad told him that our dormitory is without a prefect. Ahmad sprayed oil on fire, the jailer started cursing God, and Ahmad with the meanest curses: What? You have no prefect!!, I'll show how to be a prefect! The food the jailers had just brought us was bulgur and soup. They were five. They put Ahmad in the middle of the dormitory, poured the hot soup on him and started beating him. He started yelling begging for mercy asking them to stop beating him to tell them something important. The jailers stopped to know what he wants to tell them. Ahmad said: "Some prisoners pray in the dormitory!!"

When I heard this sentence, my heart fell to my stomach. Soon I shall be dead. Ahmad played it well, he didn't mention names. He said all the prisoners pray so that the punishment will be collective, something we got used to. When the jailer failed to have names from Ahmad, he struck him with the Harawaneh on his mouth, broke his jaw and left him unconscious. That was not all, he poured the bulgur on Ahmad's body, left the dormitory giving the order: "Start eating."

The food was on Ahmad's body and around him, mixed with his blood. In spite of this, many of us ate it and drank the sauce as usual. It was the first meal after two days of starvation.

We expected Ahmad to die, but he was well built. For ten days we offered him our shares of soup to drink it with difficulty. When his jaw improved it was arbitrarily tilted making it difficult for him to eat and to talk even after his full recovery.

Food Again

There were two ways to offer food; beating first and then the meal. In the second they pour food on our bodies if they have no desire to beat us. When they bring what they call "tea" for breakfast, they pour it on our heads while we are squatting. It was always hot. Tea leaves stick to the head of the man in front of me or on the shoulder of the man beside me, and we ate them. We used our palms to make something like a ladle to collect as much as we can of the poured tea to drink it. The floor was dirty because we sit naked on it, but we were in need of something sweet and of a liquid other than water. We did the same with soup at lunch. At the beginning I hesitated to do that, but out of the chronic hunger I submitted and did like the others. Sometimes, to gain time, we put our mouths on the liquid poured on the ground to suck it with all the hair and dirt in it.

I remember that they treated liquids according to their temperature, if the liquid is cold, they would pour it on the floor, but if it is hot, they pour it on our heads.

The number of those who die from starving was bigger than the number of those who die from torture.

Once, they left us three days without food, In the third day they brought us something we haven't seen before. The beautiful smell of the margarine in bulgur and lentil soup filled the whole building. We waited our turn eager to hear the door open and take the bowls of food. When they entered the food, we all ran to take it even before the door was closed. We made noise, the staff sergeant called the jailers and they started beating us. Then he lifted the soup bucket which we were waiting to reach our bodies, and poured it on the floor. He poured the bulgur in the toilet. Some of us ran to the toilet and started scooping.

I started crying... I wanted to shout...I didn't know what to do. It is impossible to erase that scene from my life...

Amounts of food were very little. One, two, or three days may pass without food. When they bring the individual share is no more than half or three quarters of a loaf of bread. Rarely we had a full loaf. In two years, I remember I had a full loaf once or two times.

Now I believe that starvation is the most difficult way of torture. Man can get used to beating. You may wonder of me saying this, but it is true although torture in Sednayah caused death hundreds of times. At the beginning we were afraid of beating, but after some time it became normal. Whenever a prisoner dies you just say: "May God bless him." We got used to everything except hunger. Some times we asked our colleagues to sit on our bellies to help us bear hunger.

Breakfast was always olive and potato with tea. Many times, they throw olive and potato on the floor, tea was poured on our heads if it is hot, or on the floor if it is warm or cold. Lunch was either rice or bulgur with soap or sauce. Soap was offered like tea, on the floor or on our heads according to its temperature. Once, months passed with nothing hot to drink. A hot liquid was a dream. We believed that drinking any hot liquid will be enough to stop the diarrhea which plagued many of us and will rid our bodies from bacteria.

Share of every one of us from soap on the floor was no more of four to five spoons, with a lesser number from rice or bulgur. Of course, we had neither spoons nor culinary. I just estimated the amounts.

Inside the dormitory we had plain water all the time. We drank a lot of water to ease our hunger, but water was calciferous and trepid, many times it caused diarrhea and kidney problems.

The Bathroom

We were able to wash our bodies in the dormitory, but that was very difficult for most of us because water was very cold. Sednayah is a summer place, the prison was built on a hill surrounded by a chain of high mountains capped with snow most of the year, even in Summer. That was reason for lack of water which freezes in the pipes. I used to bath regularly although it was more difficult than beating to avoid scabies, which spread in the prison.

There were hot water baths in the prison! Yes, that's true, but we all wished time of bathing not to come. The ward where we were has nine occupied dormitories and one was empty, changed into baths.

I wish I had a camera to photo the way in which we had to bath. They order us to take off completely nude, take us one dormitory after the other starting from the first one. We take the position of the train which I described at the reception. Each one holding the waist of the one in front of him, heads on the backs in order not to see anything or anybody. When the train starts seven to ten jailers run with it beating the prisoners continuously. Who slips down they beat him violently, and may kill him and throw him in the dormitory! Those who are lucky arrive in the bath safe.

The bath has seven or eight rooms. Every three, four or five prisoners get in together to stand under the shower of warm water, the only means of washing (no soap). We used to push each other to stand in the center under the small and slow shower, to drink something hot and to clean our skins as much as we can to protect ourselves from scabies. Can any of you imagine the share of water the prisoner can have taking into consideration that the time of bathing is limited by ten seconds only and the jailer is counting: one, two, three, four, quick you pimps, five, six, seven, eight, nine, tennnn!!" over.

Once he utters the last number we should all, the dormitory tenants or those who survived of them, be out taking the position of the train. Who happens to be late will be beaten to bleed, to have a limb broken, or to be killed.

I have already said that I was in the seventh dormitory. This means that six dormitories have already bathed before us and the floor have become wet which may increase the risk of slipping or falling to trigger the anger of the jailer who will beat him to faint or to die. Therefore we always prayed not to be taken to the bath.

Mohammad the Third

His name was Mohammad too, a Turkman from Aleppo. He was a soldier in the army of the regime, with a friend of his whom we called Abu Skander. (Alexander). He did not attend in his unit against a bribe given regularly to his commander, known in Syria as “pay roll card.” Mohammad, with three of his colleagues, used to sleep at Abu Skander when they have a leave to avoid long travels home. One day, a slander against Abu Skander brought him to interrogation which started with a charge of evading mandatory service to a charge of cooperating with the armed groups. Under torture he admitted the charge. When they asked him about his partners in the conspiracy against the state, he gave them the names of his four friends. They arrested them all and brought them to our dormitory.

Mohammad told me the following story: “we were fighting with the army at the front line with only fifty meters between us and our enemies. We were in a tent behind the trench when they arrested us. Then who were those whom we were fighting? How is that? What about our friends who were killed in the battle?”

When I was set free, Mohammad was still there, I don’t know anything about him, but I witnessed the death of Abu Skander of emaciation and sickness.

The Prison’s Doctor

Sometimes, jailers come with a doctor. We receive them squatting with faces to the wall. They order us to stand, squat and run in the place. When the doctor notices who can’t respond or perform slowly, he calls him, ask him his name. Whatever the answer is, the doctor slaps him several times and writes on his elbow a number saying: “your name is not so and so... Your name is 11,833. Don’t forget it” and then he orders him to return to the row. I remember this number because it was mine when I got sick.

In the following day, when a chain of prisoners will be sent to the hospital, Tishreen military hospital, the jailer, at the door, calls the number. When the prisoner replies: “yes sir” as usual, the jailer enters and starts beating him to death and leaves him in place or sends him to the hospital bloodied!

Did I say hospital? Tishreen military hospital was a phobia, a genocide center, a holocaust, a grave yard. I can’t describe it. It was another Sednayah prison. No one from our dormitory went there and returned!

In spite of this I wanted to go there. May be, I have got bored of the dormitory after all the dear people to my heart had died in it. Other prisoners were led to unknown places. I was a

modest athlete, but I intended to slow my motion to pay the attention of the doctor. He called me, wrote on my hand and asked me my name, I read the number written on my elbow. He was pleased

To Tishreen Military Hospital

The following day they called my number, I got out. They collected the patients from all the dormitories in one waiting room. Some of them were dying, others heavily breathing. Those who were unable to walk were drawn on the stairs while being beaten. I noticed that the accent of one of the patients is similar to mine. I realized that he was from a village near to mine. We started a friendly talk. When they take us from the waiting room to the closed vehicle, "the fridge" they don't help those who can't get up the vehicle. We helped each other. Generally, we had small weights, about 30 kg each.

The road to Tishreen hospital takes between three to four hours. When we arrived, we knew that they will not enter us in the hospital but to a cell 4 * 2 m out of it with a toilet in the corner. In this small space they crowded between 25 to 30 prisoners. When we entered the cell, other prisoners from Sednayah were getting out of it. Some of them stayed.

One of the old prisoners took the responsibility of lining us in a row. He made mistakes in arrangements and in counting. The staff sergeant got angry and called: "Who likes to be a prefect?" the prisoner from my region volunteered to be. It was not his first visit. He arranged us quickly which pleased the staff sergeant and told him to select an aid, he selected me. I became a "prefect aid."

I didn't know what is the meaning of this here! When the staff sergeant left, my colleague, the prefect, (agreed to call him the uncle) came and told me that our mission is very difficult. I asked him why? He said the staff sergeant will return and order the patients to run and squat in the place. Who will do good will enter the hospital, and we will be ordered to liquidate those who fail?

I was shocked to hear that. I asked him: "what do you mean by liquidating them?" He said: "we have to kill them" I asked again: "what are you saying?" he repeated what he had said adding: "If we don't do that we will be killed, and if we do it we will eat a lot."

I realized that the prefect of the prison's cell is a hitman. He is a prisoner, like the others, but he is ready to kill them to eat a lot of good food offered here in big quantities.

To get rid of this ordeal I proposed to the prefect to feed the prisoners and train them in the time available so they all can do well. The former prefect and his aid had already saved a big

quantity of food; more than forty pieces of potato, a half kilo of olives and other kinds of food. We divided this amount between us, we the 25 prisoners, everyone had a share equal to what we have in a week or days in Sednayah prison. After eating, I frankly explained to them what the prefect had told me, to motivate them to move.

From the prefect I knew the following scenario. In the evening the staff sergeant will come to escort us to the door of the hospital, a distance of 150-200 m covered with white big pebbles. Because the prisoners were bare foot, some of them will collapse and fail to walk, the soldiers will be obliged to support or draw them. To avoid this trouble, the staff sergeant used to order the patients to do some exercises in the cell. If some of them fail, he will order the prefect to draw him aside ordering him: "do your job."

Liquidation in the cell of Tishreen military hospital is performed as follows: The patient will be laid on his back with one soldier holding his hands and another his legs. The prefect arrives with a short stick and a shawl prepared for this purpose. He puts the stick on the neck of the patient and winds both the stick and the neck with the shawl. Then he twists the stick several times, the shawl gradually squeezes the neck of the patient until he dies.

In this way the prisoner kills four or five of his colleagues daily.

In order the prefect, and I, not to be forced to kill any one that day, (it was impossible for me to kill), we nourished the prisoners well. When the staff sergeant came, he was astonished. He took the first group to the cell and returned to take the second without giving orders of liquidating anybody.

In the morning of the following day, the prefect was released from the hospital and returned to Sednayah with the morning chain. I became the prefect of the cell. They brought breakfast; a big bag of olive, about 5 kg or more. There was no need to divide it. I put it in the middle of the cell so every one can eat as much as he wants. We couldn't consume it. At noon, every share of bulgur was five times bigger than in Sednayah. It was fairly sufficient.

Here I confess that I kept two shares for me. Prefect of the cell should stay alert all the time. This duty needs two persons a prefect and an aid. I had no aid, so I kept some food for me to help me stay awake. In the evening a young prisoner came begging for food. I divided it between the two of us. Another one came after a while and I divided what remained between us saying I am obliged to keep awake and I need some food to help me do.

That was the first and last time I was appointed prefect, just for a few hours. The following day they called my name (number) to return. I believed they will return me to the dormitory, but they led me to what they call the "dormitories of seclusion." What is this? It meant that my imprisonment will be doubled.

In the Dormitory of Seclusion

They entered me into a dormitory I haven't seen before. In it I found the uncle. I asked him why we are here, he said in the hospital they examined our saliva which proved that we have tuberculosis, so they referred us to this seclusion dormitory. Here they give each prisoner one blanket. Every two prisoners share the blankets. They sleep on one and cover their bodies with the second. So, we did. We started to eat together. After two days he became unable to eat. He gave me his share, I refused it and tried forcing him to eat it... In the third day he exchanged his breakfast and lunch for tea. He put fragmented bread and made tea soup. He ate them all. I was glad he did. In the evening we talked a lot about our two neighboring villages and imagined how we shall visit each other after being set free. In the morning I tried to wake him up, he did not respond. I jumped from my place, lifted the blanket to find him dead. I didn't know him well. He was a good hearted one. I was glad to hear his accent. But realizing that he died at night, and that I was beside a dead person created a feeling of horror inside me. I started praying not stay long in the prison unless I will be released safe and sound. The idea of dying after long years of suffering is a difficult one.

The uncle died...May God bless him. We prepared him for burial and they took him out, I don't know where to.

I thought that beating here will be less because we are sick, and quantity of food will be better. On the contrary, food rations decreased to a frightful level. Once they left us six days without food, then they brought each of us a quarter of a loaf of bread and one olive.

We had to take three tablets of medicine every day, but they brought us only two.

I thought I am brought newly to prison. All of the prisoners here were hungry selfish wolves although some of them spent months in the dormitory of seclusion. The conditions of famine forced some of them to think of killing their mates to take their food. I started yearning to the old dormitory and to the atmosphere of friendship and cordiality in it. It was heaven compared with this hell.

When I think of the period of my imprisonment, I see it not more than stairs rolling down, each one makes me look back to realize that I was in heaven. In the former dormitory I believed that there is nothing worse than Sednayah, but now I see that Sednayah prison has various levels of misery. Thank God. the seclusion dormitory was my final station in Sednayah.

In Tishreen Hospital Again

After two months in the seclusion dormitory a young man, just coming from the hospital, entered. As usual, we interrogated him asking about his story. He said he was in Tishreen Hospital and the prisoners were offered a lot of "potato's omelet" (cubes of potato cooked with eggs and onion). After two days without any kind of food, this young man came to make me dream of (potato's omelet).

It was long time since I forgot to think of getting out from this hell. I stopped thinking of my family, of being freed from this place which became my life style and my society.

When I heard the new comer, I knew that the hospital's cell has no prefect. I decided to go there. My colleagues tried to make me change my mind recalling the killing of prisoners in that cell. I insisted. The new comer asked me why, I said it is the potato's omelet, he said it is offered on Mondays and Thursdays. The day was Tuesday, I decided to go the following Thursday.

As usual the doctor visited our dormitory, I slowed my motion pretending to be sick. He called me and gave me a number. The following day they put us in the waiting room which had patients of different illnesses. Some of them were dying, others were exhausted, most of them were going to death, to liquidation, but they don't know that. We climbed to the fridge and helped them get up. The fridge moved...we arrived in the hospital.

Our chain this time was fourteen patients, seven of them were dying, they took them directly to the cell. A good-hearted soldier noticed the pale faces of the rest of us, seven more prisoners, he told us to sit in the sun. One year and three months had passed my skin did not see sunshine. I saw it from the window, but wasn't exposed to it. Now, all I wanted is to allow it to penetrate deep in my skin. Had the sun been close I would have hugged it!

We were seven, just beside us there was a transparent trash bag. The patient beside me poked me to look at it. When I saw it, I wished there was remains of food in it. I have never imagined myself searching deep in the trash to eat although only water was my food during the past three days., We planned, we the closest to the bag, to avail the opportunity of the absence of soldiers and grab the bag to eat whatever we find in it. If they see us, they would liquidate us immediately.

When the time was suitable, we pulled the bag and started emptying it, we found orange skins, tea leaves, cigarette wakes, we ate all that. We wanted to try any taste other than the bulgur, rice and olive of the prison. I found six bundles of green onion tails. I took them out, my colleague saw me, snatched them from my hand! I told him I'll give them to you, leave

me some, we quarreled, the bag fell on the ground, the soldier saw us and ran towards us. He started to curse us because we eat from the trash wondering angrily "Do we deprive you from food?" promising to deprive us from food when we return. There were still some tails of the green onion in my hands, I swallowed them quickly feeling that their hot taste was giving me a lot of energy.

The soldier took the prisoner to the cell leaving us, the trash diggers, out. He brought a long tube, Lakhdar Brahimi, started beating us with his full strength. We were mere skeletons. I felt I was dying. It was the most painful whipping since I had arrived in Sednayah. After 15 whips he ordered us into the cell quickly, we were in an awful state. Why are we punished like this, because we ate from trash?

We sat in the sunshine for half an hour, were subject to beating and whipping for more than fifteen minutes. Generally, we were late about an hour to the cell during which the fatally ill were already liquidated...

They led us to the hospital with our heads down, hands on our heads covering our eyes in order not to see anything. I felt we were passing near human beings, I dared look at them. I wanted to see a normal human being not a jailer. When I saw a woman wearing a black dress beside a man wearing shirt and trousers, I felt an overwhelming joy. Even if he beats me now, I will not care. I saw something new, human beings.

This time they had an image of my chest, the following day they returned us to the prison. In the dormitory my colleagues asked me if I had "potato's omelet." I said no, the meal I had in the hospital was very poor, bread only, that was my fifth day without food. When we arrived, the staff sergeant was about to enter lunch meal to the dormitory. A colleague of mine and I were returning from the hospital in a drastic situation, very weak, We, hardly, could walk. I asked my colleague: "What do you say of asking the staff sergeant to permit us eat of the food before distributing it?" He refused the idea saying we will not bear beating and we might die. I said... then let us die.

I asked the staff sergeant; "Sir, let me kiss your hand! For God's sake?" He said angrily "what do you want?" I explained to him my hunger begging him to give me anything to eat, a potato, a handful of bulgur, a piece of bread, anything? He shouted in my face as if he wants to beat me. I told him: "Sir, kill me, beat me, do whatever you want... and let me eat." He said nervously: "you will eat in the dormitory" I said we were in the hospital and they will not give us our share.

I felt I was strong. It was an achievement to talk to a staff sergeant. My colleague joined me begging him. He silenced us.

We entered the dormitory with the bowls of food. As usual, our colleagues were squatting, faces to the wall. Once we entered, we fell down on the floor in a state near to unconsciousness. No one could turn his face, nor eat unless the staff sergeant gives the order of "start eating." This time he said: Dormitory No four>>>the prisoners said yes sir. "The two dogs I brought with me will sit and eat to be satisfied, then you distribute the food among you!"

When he got out, we jumped and started eating with extreme voracity, prisoners' hands stretched to prevent us. Frankly, they were right, we were equal in hunger, but I couldn't stop eating. I took two handfuls of bulgur, when they pulled me away, I took a piece of potato and swallowed it quickly in order not to allow them take it from my mouth. It choked my throat. I was unable to talk or breathe and started signaling them to save me. No one tried to help excluding a good man who offered me water and started beating my back. At last...the potato was swallowed.

I shouldn't have eaten the potato. It was a fault, but in my case, it was difficult to distinguish the good from the bad. That day I felt I will die if I wait distributing the food which usually takes about half an hour. I apologized from my colleagues and explained what happened in the hospital. The eldest of them justified our deed... and they all forgave us. Did I say forgave us? for what? for a piece of potato? Imagine how limited minded we were!

Food Deprivation

The following four days food reached us in scant quantities. In the fifth day two prisoners quarreled over the color of their eggs, the white or the brown. Their voices were loud, so they decided to punish the whole dormitory. They deprived us from food for five days during which we fainted, and some of us died. I felt I was going to die. Unable to walk, I started creeping to get some water.

When they deprive a dormitory from food, they bring food in bowls, put them at the door. the prisoners do not know whether they will enter it or will take it to other dormitories, the order of punishments. We heard them putting our food at the door then somebody take it away!

Again, the colleague of the hospital and I were encouraged to talk to the staff sergeant. We started knocking at the door calling for help. Some colleagues tried to silence us to avoid beating, while others supported us: "let them come, kill us, and end this long torture."

The staff sergeant came, without opening the door he tried to understand the story. It was not the staff sergeant who punished us. Our colleagues told him that two prisoners quarreled loudly, one of them died but we are still punished. Our mission, we the youngest was to cry

loudly to implore him. He said: "Alright... Alright. I'll solve it today." When we heard him, we hoped the day next will come soon, because he listened to us after distributing lunch which means there will be no more food for this day.

The day next, they brought us breakfast, then lunch. We returned to the normal routine.

Yasin surah...Saved us

We spent days exchanging stories about our past life and about our future hopes, and of course about food, how do we prepare meals, their ingredients, and how cookies and sweets are prepared. I started looking for companions to learn the Quran by heart. I used to pray seated, not afraid of what will come after the misery of the prison.

I had learnt Yasin surah by heart from a prisoner who told me: "Yasin is a bless for what you intend" I asked him what is the meaning of this? He told me; "If you want to ask God for something, read it asking God to respond to you or to protect you from evils. I taught it for other prisoners, before any interrogation session, or when I have a problem."

In Sednayah sleeping is forbidden before the order: "Sleeeeeep." They gave that order in different times; at one, at ten, or even before that. Whenever you hear the order you have to sleep. Any sound after the order, the dormitory will be punished.

One day, it was 1.30 a.m. and no order to sleep was heard. We thought that either they were drunk or have forgotten the order. We heard other dormitories preparing blankets to sleep. We were very sleepy, we started to sleep while the prefect was moving between us to wake us, because jailers sneak clandestinely to surprise us. If they find us sleeping, they will liquidate the prefect. After a long argument he helplessly agreed to open the blankets and sleep. Suddenly we heard the jailers: "Wheel" which means a torture party for all the dormitories of the prison, starting from the first floor at 02.00 o'clock a.m. Listening to the voices of those being tortured was a punishment by itself. It was horrible as if you enter an empty city and hear sounds of ghosts and storms.

I was squatting between two colleagues, one to my right and the other to my left. I told them let us read Yasin surah hoping they will not enter our dormitory. They said it is impossible, the wheel means all the prison. They will come to us what ever we do. I encouraged them saying: "You are not more merciful than God, the almighty." I was afraid, like them, or may be more. We started reading swiftly, stuttering and repeating it from the beginning. I read it three times.

I swear, they tortured the third dormitory, passed our dormitory to the fifth without any reason. It was the Quran which protected us that night.

I wept from my heart that night in a way different from all the nights of my imprisonment. While I was reading the Quran, I saw boots of the soldiers moving right or left passing our dormitory as if it is not present. They didn't open the door window or even mention number four. I felt it was a miracle, as if I was set free. I said: "MY God, you protected us this night, I beg you to relieve us from this hell."

Last Time in the Hospital

After a while, I don't know why, I decided to go to Tishreen Hospital for the third time. My colleagues advised me not to do, it is not a game. I knew that, but returning safe from there two times encouraged me to do, may be to eat the "potato omelet," which I failed to have in the past visit. I can't remember.

We followed the same routine until we got in the fridge and the trip started. I looked around me and discovered that some of the patients were from the "Royal Suite." It was a suite especially prepared to receive international human rights committees if the regime was obliged to receive any of them. Its tenants were all privileged by recommendations from officials in the government. It was like usual prisons, where food, water and sports were available, and its guests were healthy.

In the fridge I recognized a prisoner whom I had known in one of the security branches and then thought that we became friends. I saw someone whom I felt he hated me after a few words. When we arrived, he started talking and joking with the staff sergeants freely, he was appointed prefect, but I felt that five or six of the prisoners who were in the fridge became prefects.

In their presence, large amounts of food entered the cell, but we saw nothing of them. Before entering the food, they ordered us to face the wall, When food was brought, they ate ferociously until it was finished. I thought it was delicious, may be potato omelet.

Sometimes, the meal was olive and boiled potato, which those privileged had got bored of, They gave us half of it and kept the second half. When we arrived in the hospital, I had been deprived of food for three days, I felt that my stomach will jump out of my body when I heard the sounds of their mouths chewing the food. I asked the one whom I thought he was a friend, they called him Abu Haider, to give me one morsel, just one morsel, he ordered me to stand. I thought he will give me some food. The one who hated me was looking to see what Abu Haider will do. Abu Haider held me from my neck, lifted me saying in a fake Alawite accent: "you want food?" That was the last sentence I had heard before falling unconscious, on the

ground. I didn't know what happened after that. The other prisoners who were with us told me the following story:

The six of the privileged started beating me and jumping on my body. Each one of them was 70-80 kg. Then they lifted me and dropped me on the ground. They thought I died. They put me with the dead.

Corpses of the dead were heaped over each other. They put me on two of them, and later put over me corpses of two prisoners whom they had liquidated after me. After Half an hour I started resuming consciousness. A painful spark started in my feet

Later, I told this story to a doctor. He told me that my heart had stopped beating for a moment and then resumed pumping blood which made me feel that an electric current was running in my body. I shouted loudly, I thought that all the hospital heard me. The prefects, Shabiha, were shocked, they thought I returned from death, a doctor entered the cell, ordered us all: "stand, what is the story, the prisoners told him what happened. He wanted to know who was shouting?" Some looked at him to tell him, he ordered us all: "face to the ground" It was prohibited to see the face of a doctor. He looked at me and said: "Come here." I did not respond. He said: "You the last one to the right, come here" I approached him looking down. He told me to raise my head and look up, I told him this is prohibited. He insisted I look at him in the face. I raised my head, I saw him, he was young, about 27 years old with a light blond beard. He asked me: "Who was beating you?" I said; "No one sir." He repeated the question but I dared not tell him the truth. He asked me about my name, my town and my charge, then asked me: "Are you hungry?" I felt he was kind, I said yes. I haven't eaten for four days. He said: "Those prefects, sons of bitches don't give you food!" I was afraid, I thought he was cheating me to punish me like what they do in the prison. I said: "Sir ...they give us food...but I am very hungry" He ordered a soldier to bring me some thing to eat. The soldier returned with a large amount of bread and put them on a table out of the cell. One of the prefects moved to bring them to the cell. He stopped and told me to bring them. When I brought the bread, he told me to take a loaf and distribute the rest on the prisoners equally and to take a share like them.

Once the doctor left the cell the Shabiha attacked me, took the bread and ordered me to return to my place. The bread was enough to give each prisoner one full loaf, but they took it and gave every one of us a quarter of a loaf. They gave me half a loaf because I did not betray them. Abu Haider looked at me and gave me a quarter of a loaf. That day, I ate three quarters of a loaf, the only time I had during my stay in the prison of Sednayah!



Testimony of Muhab al-Qutainy

My name is Muhab Salaheddin al-Qutainy. I was arrested on the third of January 2017 in “branch 290” of the Military Intelligence, I remained in this branch for 33 days. There were large numbers of detainees there, and torture is practiced by all means that can be imagined; beating, kicking and suspension.

In the fifth of February they moved me to “branch 248” in Damascus, which is the interrogation branch of the military intelligence. There, it was a little better than in Aleppo, crowds of prisoners were less, torture also. There were cameras in the dormitories, so discipline was better and the number of prisoners who die was less than in Aleppo. During interrogation, the prisoner suffers all kinds of torture, suspension on foot for 48 to 72 hours, this depends on the interrogator’s decision. There was also the ill-famed suspension for one hour, the beating with the well-known PVC tube dubbed “Lakhdar Brahimi.” Food was very scarce and bad. Normally interrogation in this branch takes about 60 days which can be extended to 90 days for any inconveniences. I stayed there for a longer period because they kept all the detainees brought from hot spots to use in expected prisoner swapping operations.

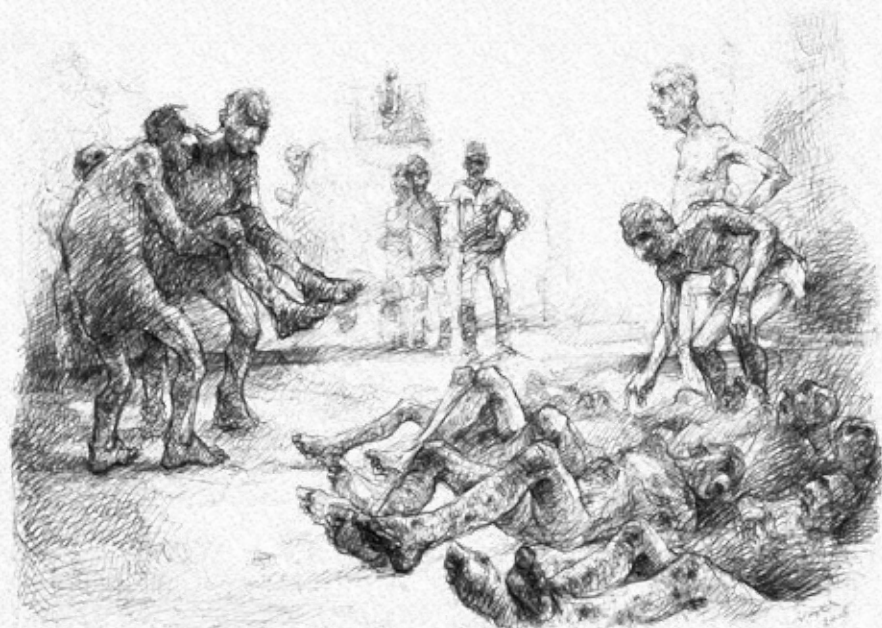
I was referred to Sednayah prison on September 20, 2018. There we were received with beating as is the norm in the Red Building, then they put me in a solitary cell until 12 November, the same year.

The conditions were very bad, food was very scarce, not more than one loaf a day. Food was distributed in three meals; breakfast two pieces of olive and tea usually put on the floor of the cell. Lunch was either rice or bulgur with lentil soup or pasta sauce. It was unbearable so we always threw it away. Dinner was boiled potato. Door of the cell can be opened twice a day, the first for offering breakfast and the second for lunch and dinner together, served at noon. The jailer was free to beat us any time, for any reason in addition to curses and terms of humiliation. He enjoyed that. We used to hear sounds of beating prisoners in the dormitories which I did not visit. I spent two months in the cell which was only 3 * 3 m with a toilet, with two prisoners. All we could do was eating and sleeping. Sleeping was prohibited in the day time, therefore we alternated periods of sleep due to the small size of the cell, and to alarm the two mates when the jailer comes.

Torture included beating and suspension. We used to hear those who were suspended without knowing where they were. Beating was up to the jailer who usually takes the prisoner out of the cell in the night to beat him, just for fun. They used to take us out of the cell for beating or for suspending us.

One prisoner was released before me, I followed him, leaving the third for his destiny. After Sednayah, they took me to the branch of the military police for five days, then to Adra prison for sixteen days, after which I was set free.

Testimony of Umm Ali



Our story started with the outbreak of the Syrian revolution. At that time, we were living in the northern countryside of Aleppo. When the regime started bombing these regions, we were obliged; my husband, our children and me, to move to the city of Aleppo where we rented an apartment.

My husband has a cousin, an informer. He had old problems with my husband's family. When he knew that we left to the regions controlled by the regime, he availed the opportunity and wrote a report accusing my husband of being a terrorist. They arrested him twice.

In the first, it was afternoon when they arrested him. My husband, his seventy years old mother, and I were in the house. They knocked at the door forcefully, we asked: "Who." They said: "Security...open." We opened the door because we had no other choice. They were twenty or more, they started cursing naughtily. They inspected the house and broke whatever they reached of furniture. I felt they were evils not human beings. They have no mercy.

My mother in law started begging them not to take him, they told her: "Mother ... you didn't know how to raise him." They kept him in an inner room. We heard all the curses they told him. They took him barefoot, I followed them holding his shoes. They allowed him to take them.

I followed them and knew that they took him to the criminal security branch. In the first-time they arrested him, things were simple. I mandated a lawyer, "bribed," I paid between three hundred thousand and four hundred thousand. After two months and ten days he was released. The lawyer assured me that he became in the safe side and our troubles had ended. Despite this, my husband was cautious, he proposed to change the house, and we did.

When he was released, he was in a miserable shape. He lost twenty kilos of his weight. He lived in full fear for two months until he was arrested for the second time. The same cousin wrote another report for another and stronger security service. A large group of security men stormed our house. I was preparing lunch when they arrived. They knocked the door in a horrible way, broke it and rushed into all the rooms. It is very difficult to describe the scene. the children were crying, my mother in law was weeping and kissing their feet begging them not to take him. Me too, but in vain.

They took my husband to one of their cars and continued searching the house. In the house, there was a locked safe belonging to the land lady, owner of the apartment. Their commander looked at me and asked: "are there weapons in it" I told him "open it sir." They broke it and, of course, found nothing in it. They stole some tobacco, already in the apartment, and my mobile. My husband's mobile was with him. The scene was extraordinarily horrible. I

remember that when the neighbors heard the noise, they all left their apartments. Our building was one of four levels. Out of a sudden, it was empty of tenants except me, my mother in law, and my children; the elder was ten years old, the daughter seven years and the youngest five years.

I told their commander: "I shall follow you, sir." He agreed. He lied to me. While I was putting on my clothes and covering my head he had already left. It was not the first time. They took my mobile to prevent me from calling anybody to help me. I knocked at the doors of our neighbors. No one answered. I sat in the street and started sobbing.

For one full month I tried to know anything about him. I paid a lot of money, several times subject to scam, until I knew that he was in the air force intelligence unit (al-Jawiyeh). The charge against him in the report was dangerous, participating in the fight with the revolutionaries to control an air base, and that he killed several officers. This time I couldn't reach him at all. I just knew that he was in the branch of the air force intelligence in Aleppo. When the branch was attacked by the revolutionaries and the authorities were afraid of its fall, they moved all the prisoners, including my husband, to the capital, Damascus, by helicopters. This was all I could know.

We, families of detainees always fall subject to scams by those who pretend can bring news about detainees. Our emotions always control us and we pay just to know any tiny news. There were nights we slept without dinner just to save money to give them to those who pretend they know where my husband was. After moving him to Damascus, I lost all news about him, but I did not lose hope. I played the role of the mother and the father to my children, that was not easy for me. But I always said to myself if I depend on Allah (God) and had a definite aim, I can succeed. My aim was to raise my children, to help them complete their learning, and to see my husband released. I took care of them and of their education as my husband and I had planned. Many times, I imagined him out of the prison and felt happy and strong. The family around me encouraged me, but I was alone all the time. I always cried after my children went to sleep. What is their guilt to see me worn out and sad? I always tried to play the role of the father, some-times succeeded and others failed. Every time I took them to a park and they see a father entertaining his children I felt sad and concealed my feelings from them. Many times, I felt I was weak, especially when watching my children growing up. Now, my son is sixteen, his adolescence period is not easy. Had his father been with us, things would have been better.

After the absence of my husband, security men started to harass me. They used to come in the morning and ask for money, calling me wife of the terrorist. God helped me. I did not open the door to them. At the end I was obliged to move from the house in which my husband was arrested. I was alone, a woman, 26 years old with my mother-in-law and my children. One night, at three o'clock in the morning we fled to another neighborhood and lived with a big family, a displaced family too, relatives to my mother.

Later, my worries increased and I decided to leave Aleppo. I felt I am betraying my husband by abandoning him to his fate.

Stories of the detainees are always difficult. Many times, I asked myself "They arrested my husband for a report. Ok, don't they have interrogation to know that the report was fake. Don't they have judges and courts? Don't they have justice? But they are monsters. How do they put innocent people in basements for long years? Had we known that he was killed, we would have prayed for the blessing of his soul, we would bury him. But those forcibly absentees have different stories. May God, the almighty, help their mothers and wives. We are always suffering from uncertainty: Is my husband dead or alive? Every day I ask myself this question." After three years I knew that he was in Sednayah prison. I asked myself: Will he be able to resist? Will he be able to bear torture? Will he be patient? Will I be able to see him again?

Prison of Sednayah
During the Syrian Revolution
(Testimonies)

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