

Prisons in Syria

A report prepared by the *Syrian Commission for Transitional Justice*

*Syrian Commission for
Transitional Justice*

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Prisons at the International Level

Prison conditions have always been an important concern of the international community. To that end, many agreements and conventions have been introduced in order to improve conditions in prisons, and to provide a minimum standard for humane treatment. In 1872, twenty states participated in a conference in Geneva. During this conference, the challenges of prison administration was discussed, along with standards for the treatment of prisoners, with the intention of establishing a set of unified principles for the appropriate running of prisons. Further to these, an international organization concerned with prisons and prisoners was established in the capitals of the twenty states that attended the conference.

Since 1885 numerous international conferences have tackled crime prevention and the treatment of prisoners. The **Ninth International Prisons Congress**, held in London 1925, the **Universal Declaration for Human Rights** in 1948, and a number of other conferences, all played an important part in establishing the minimum standards for the treatment of prisoners. These standards were formally adopted in Geneva Summit in 1955, with governments called upon to enact and uphold these standards.¹

The basic model for the treatment of prisoners was initially approved at the Geneva Conference of 1959, and subsequently at the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which was adopted by UN General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI) on December 16, 1966. Further to these, the **Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights**, entered into force on March 23, 1976.

Article 10 of the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights** is particularly important for the rights of prisoners, and includes the following three clauses:

1. All persons deprived of their liberty shall be treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person.

¹ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, available at:
<http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instr/b3ccpr.htm>

2. (a) Accused persons shall, save in exceptional circumstances, be segregated from convicted persons and shall be subject to separate treatment appropriate to their status as unconvicted persons;

(b) Accused juvenile persons shall be separated from adults and brought as speedily as possible for adjudication.

3. The penitentiary system shall comprise treatment of prisoners the essential aim of which shall be their reformation and social rehabilitation. Juvenile offenders shall be segregated from adults and be accorded treatment appropriate to their age and legal status.

It should be noted that Syria is a signatory to the aforementioned covenant.

Further to the aforementioned documents, the **Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment** was adopted by UN General Assembly resolution 39/46 on December 10, 1984, and entered into force on June 26, 1987. The convention affirmed that all states must take all legislative, administrative, and judicial measures necessary to prevent torture on any territory within its jurisdiction. Furthermore, the convention prohibits the invocation of exceptional circumstances, states of war and emergency, and political instability, as justification of torture.

On December 14, 1990 the United Nations adopted the **Basic Principles for the Treatment of Prisoners** pursuant to resolution 45/111. The principles are as follows:

1. All prisoners shall be treated with the respect due to their inherent dignity and value as human beings.
2. There shall be no discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.
3. It is, however, desirable to respect the religious beliefs and cultural precepts of the group to which prisoners belong, whenever local conditions so require.
4. The responsibility of prisons for the custody of prisoners and for the protection of society against crime shall be discharged in keeping with a State's other social objectives and its fundamental responsibilities for promoting the well-being and development of all members of society.
5. Except for those limitations that are demonstrably necessitated by the fact of incarceration, all prisoners shall retain the human rights and fundamental freedoms set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and, where the State concerned is a party, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Optional Protocol thereto, as well as such other rights as are set out in other United Nations covenants.
6. All prisoners shall have the right to take part in cultural activities and education aimed at the full development of the human personality.
7. Efforts addressed to the abolition of solitary confinement as a punishment, or to the restriction of its use, should be undertaken and encouraged.
8. Conditions shall be created enabling prisoners to undertake meaningful remunerated employment which will facilitate their reintegration into the country's labor market and permit them to contribute to their own financial support and to that of their families.

9. Prisoners shall have access to the health services available in the country without discrimination on the grounds of their legal situation.
10. With the participation and help of the community and social institutions, and with due regard to the interests of victims, favourable conditions shall be created for the reintegration of the ex-prisoner into society under the best possible conditions.

Furthermore, other texts and agreements have addressed the subject of prisons and the protection prisoners' rights. These include:

Article 5 of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**:

"No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment."

- **Human Rights Committee, General Comment 20, Article 7** (Forty-fourth session, 1992):²

"The Committee notes that it is not sufficient for the implementation of article 7 to prohibit such treatment or punishment or to make it a crime. States parties should inform the Committee of the legislative, administrative, judicial and other measures they take to prevent and punish acts of torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment in any territory under their jurisdiction."

Principles of Medical Ethics relevant to the Role of Health Personnel, particularly Physicians, in the **Protection of Prisoners and Detainees against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment**, 1982.

Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 1984.

United Nations **Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice** ("The Beijing Rules"), 1985.

United Nations **Standard Minimum Rules for Non-custodial Measures** (The Tokyo Rules), 1990.
Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances, 1992.

United Nations **Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty**, 1990.

Guidelines on the Role of Prosecutors, Eighth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, Havana, 1990.

Most important established standards in the field of prisoners' rights

² Available at: <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/gencomm/hrcom20.htm>

Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, adopted on August. 30, 1955 by the First United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, held in Geneva in 1955, and approved by the Economic and Social Council by resolutions 663 C (XXIV) of July 31, 1957 and 2076 (LXII) of May 13, 1977.

Eleventh United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, held in Bangkok 2005. The principles established in the congress included:

Prisoners shall not be tortured or treated in a brutal manner.

Prisoners shall not be insulted verbally, physically, or symbiotically.

Prisoners shall not be employed to do degrading or inhumane tasks.

The provision of health and medical care for prisoners, including transferring them to hospitals when necessary and in accordance with the recommendations of doctors.

Provision of proper food and drink.

Insurance of safety and security.

Provision of channels of communication for the prisoners with their families and attorneys.

Provision of the prisoner with the necessary information about his rights and duties in a clear manner.

The observance of classification rules, and the placement of each prisoner in a place befitting the nature of his/her crime, type, sentence, and age.

The prisoner's right to the law being carried out in a just manner.³

*Syrian Commission for
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Prisons in Syria

³ Radif Mustafa: Paper written about and at the prison – Syrian prisons: system, and prisoners treatment (4 July, 2005) “Awraq Kutibat Fe Wa An As-Sejn – As-Sojoun As-Suriya: Nethamouha Wa Waqe’ Mu’amalat As-Sujana’ Feha”

There are a large number of prisons in Syria; every governorate has its own prison and there is a prison in every major city. Furthermore, the different branches of the security services have their own detention centers, which are considered to have worse conditions compared with other prisons in Syria.

Every prison in Syria has its distinctive characteristics. However, the prisons make use of similar torture methods and methods of punishments. Some writers had previously taken to writing about the prisoners and prisons in Syria, in doing so establishing a new genre in Syrian literature known as “Prison Literature”. However, the picture painted by these authors has become clearer since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, which began in 2011. Since the beginning of the conflict, the worst and most horrific human rights violations have been perpetrated behind the scenes inside detention centers, with security forces torturing tens of thousands of Syrians. It is impossible to accurately estimate the number of detainees held in such detention centers, as access by outsiders to places where detainees are being held is rare.

Many of the prisoners are political prisoners who were targeted for exercising their rights to free expression and peaceful demonstration, or for helping others to exercise those rights.

Intelligence personnel interrogate the detainees. Usually, detainees are held for months without charge, are subjected to torture and inhumane treatments, and are not permitted to contact their families or lawyers.

The Syrian intelligence apparatus consists of four different and independent branches. Each branch has its own chain of command and functions independently from the other branches. These branches are:

State Security or General Security Directorate

Political Security Directorate

Military Intelligence Directorate

Air Force Intelligence Directorate

The State Security and Political Security branches focus mainly on political cases concerning civilians, such as party activism and matters pertaining to the prestige of the state, while the latter two focus on military-related cases.

The four branches have all been accused of perpetrating human rights violations against citizens and political activists who oppose al-Assad, especially during the demonstrations of the past few years. Furthermore, they are accused of arresting tens of thousands of demonstrators, and carrying out acts of torture, which amounts to the perpetration of crimes against humanity according to Amnesty International. The Syrian opposition considers the intelligence services to be the most powerful regime tool for oppression, killing, and torturing, extant in the Syrian revolution.

Although some prisons specialize in political crimes, while others specialize in ordinary crimes, prisoners from these two categories are largely detained together; for instance, Sidnaya military prison, which is supposedly for political detainees, has a wing for military personnel who perpetrated crimes during their military service, while Adra civil prison holds intellectuals and activists alongside petty criminals, and has a dedicated wing for political prisoners.

Background on the laws that govern the prisons in Syria

Prisons in Syria are regulated by many laws, organizations, and resolutions; the most prominent of which are:

The Syrian Prison System, pursuant to resolution 1222 of June 20, 1966: In accordance with this resolution, prisons were called the Central Institution for Justice and Reform. Since then, penal policies were adopted based on slogans such as “prisoner reform”, “prisoner rehabilitation”, and “social reintegration”. In subsequent years, many legislative amendments have followed the issuance of the **Syrian Prison System**, such as **Decree No. 67** of 1965 which established a prisons division of four branches: (a branch for prisoners, a branch for education and rehabilitation, a branch for food and preparation, and a branch for administrative affairs); **Resolution No. 84** of May 31, 1965 which delineated the functions and powers of the various units of the security forces; and **Resolution 2151** of February 26, 1949 which reassigned prison administration to the police forces.

Resolution no. 848 of May 31, 1965 on the powers and functions of the security units supervising prisons, which were split into three divisions: administrations, sections, and stations.

Decree no. 1643 of 1970, which assigned prison administration to the Deputy Interior Minister, and **Resolution no. 1** of 1981, which established the organizational structure of the national security forces, along with the functions of the prisons’ administrations, branches and divisions, which were re-divided into three divisions called: branches, sections, and stations:

- Branches: administer the prisons of Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, Latakia, and Al-Hassaka.
- Sections: administer the remainder of the prisons, and a prison in each governorate.
- Stations: administer municipal prisons and some of the prisons in major areas.
- Reform institutions for juveniles, which are run by the ministry of social affairs.

- Undisclosed places detention centers including the prisons of the security branches and those affiliated with the security forces.

One of the most notable problems of the prison system in Syria is that it is administratively linked to the Ministry of the Interior rather than the Ministry of Justice, which is detrimental to the interests of prisoners. In addition, some prisons, such as the military police prison, are affiliated to Ministry of Defense.

The chain of command in prisons

The prisons in Syria are the responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior, which is problematic considering that the personnel of the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Defense, and the security forces, are closely affiliated with the ruling authorities. The ruling authority considers any opposition to be a personal enemy, and so it tries to harm those considered to be 'opposition' as much as possible, in doing so undermining the principles of prisoner reform.

On the other hand, some military prisons in which civilians are held are affiliated to the Ministry of Defense, also undermining the principles of prisoner reform and rehabilitation, given the close connection between the ministry personnel and the authorities. Although the Syrian prison system was influenced by reformist principles, being derived from the French system, it is now in need of drastic changes, having become outdated, and only previously reformed in a superficial manner. In the modern world, prisons should be the responsibility of the judicial authority, on account of the direct connection existing between the two.

Classification of prisoners

The Syrian Prison System divides prisoners in accordance with articles 32 through 40 of **Resolution 1222**, in which it is stated that prisoners should be divided by:

- Gender and age (this division determines cells, workshops, dining rooms, and yards).
- Convicts and detainees.
- Types of crimes and sentences.

Furthermore, the law divides prisons by significance where there are standard prisons, high-importance prisons, and central prisons. In standard prisons, prisoners are divided by type (convict-detainee), sentences, and charges. While in high-importance prisons, prisons are classified by:

- Judicial precedents (anyone who had spent at least one month in a prison in accordance with a sentence).
- Detainees and Convicts categorized by type of crime.

Torture and cruelty

Article 30 of the **Syrian Prison System** states that:

“All personnel and guards shall not use brutality against detainees, call them degrading names, talk to them in a foul manner, or insult them”.

Furthermore, the Syrian constitution forbids physical and psychological torture and degrading treatment.

Additionally, articles 319 and 391 of the **Syrian Penal Codes** criminalizes the use of torture. Article 391 states that:

“Anyone who subjects a person to unlawful forms of cruelty hoping to extract a confession to a crime, or to extract information, shall be punished by a term of imprisonment of three months to three years and by imprisonment for life and hard labor if he committed murder, in accordance with article 534 in cases where the perpetrator resorted to torture or brutality against persons.”

Syria has also signed the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, and joined the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights**. Syria has also joined the **Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment** in 2004.

Despite all of the documents and treaties above, beatings, torture, and all manner of degrading and brutal treatments are being used in Syrian prisons against men, women, and even minors - and especially against political prisoners and prisoners of conscience. This has been confirmed by reports on human rights, including the recent “*Caesar*” report.

In its 2012 report entitled “*Torture Archipelago*”⁴, Human Rights Watch documented the use of the following methods of torture:

Prolonged and severe beating, punching, and kicking;

Beating with objects (cables, whips, sticks, batons, pipes);

Falaqa (beating the victim with sticks, batons, or whips, on the soles of the feet);

Shabeh (hanging the victim from the ceiling by the wrists so that the toes barely touch the ground or the subject is completely suspended in the air with his whole weight borne by the wrists - causing extreme swelling and discomfort);

Balanco (hanging the victim by the wrists, which are tied behind the back);

Basat al-reeh, or “flying carpet” (tying the victim down to a flat board, with the head suspended in the air so that the victim cannot defend himself. One variation of this torture involves stretching the limbs while the victim lies on the board (as on a rack). In another variation described to Human Rights Watch, the board is folded in half so that the victim’s face touches his legs both causing pain and further immobilizing the victim);

⁴ Available at: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2012/07/03/torture-archipelago-0>

Dulab, or the “tire method” (the victim is forced to bend at the waist and stick his head, neck, legs and sometimes arms into the inside of a car tire so that the victim is totally immobilized and cannot protect him or herself from ensuing beatings);

Electrocution (with electric prods or wires connected to a battery);

Mock execution;

Threats against the detainee (of execution, rape);

Threats against family members (of detention, rape);

Exposure to cold/heat;

Sexual violence;

Stress positions, such as being forced to stand upright for hours or days;

Hanging upside down;

“Standing on the wall” (The victim stands with his back to the wall. His hands are tied to the wall up by his head. There is a metal pole sticking out of the wall pressing into his back and causing discomfort but he can’t move because his hands are tied. His feet are on the ground);

Pulling out fingernails;

Plucking out hair/beard;

Use of acid to burn skin;

Burning;

Prolonged nudity.

Human Right Watch has also documented the use of torture and ill-treatment in the following detention facilities:

Agency	Name of Branch	City	Head of Branch
Military Intelligence	Branch 215	Damascus	Brig. Gen. Sha’afiq
Military Intelligence	Branch 227	Damascus	Maj. Gen. Rustom Ghazali

Military Intelligence	Branch 291	Damascus	Brig. Gen. Burhan Qadour (Replaced Brig. Gen. Yousef Abdou in May 2012)
Military Intelligence	Branch 235 (“Palestine”)	Damascus	Brig. Gen. Muhammad Khallouf
Military Intelligence	Branch 248	Damascus	Not identified
Military Intelligence	Branch 245	Daraa	Col. Loai al-Ali
Military Intelligence	Aleppo Branch	Aleppo	Not identified
Military Intelligence	Branch 271	Idlib	Brig. Gen. Nawfel al-Hussein
Military Intelligence	Homs Branch	Homs	Muhammad Zamreni
Military Intelligence	Latakia Branch	Latakia	Not identified
Air Force Intelligence	Mezzeh Airport Branch	Damascus	Brig. Gen. Abdul Salam Fajr Mahmoud (director of investigative branch)
Air Force Intelligence	Bab Touma Branch	Damascus	Not identified

Air Force Intelligence	Homs Branch	Homs	Brig. Gen. Jawdat al-Ahmed
Air Force Intelligence	Daraa Branch	Daraa	Col. Qusay Mihoub
Air Force Intelligence	Latakia Branch	Latakia	Col. Suhail Al-Abdullah
Political Security	Mezzen Branch	Damascus	Not identified
Political Security	Idlib Branch	Idlib	Not identified
Political Security	Homs Branch	Homs	Not identified
Political Security	Latakia Branch	Latakia	Not identified
Political Security	Daraa Branch	Daraa	Not identified
General Intelligence	Latakia Branch	Latakia	Brig. Gen. Khudr Khudr
General Intelligence	Branch 285	Damascus	Brig. Gen. Ibrahim Ma'ala (Replaced Brig. Gen. Hussam Fendi in late 2011)

General Intelligence	Al-Khattib Branch	Damascus	Not Identified
General Intelligence	Aleppo Branch	Aleppo	Not Identified
General Intelligence	Branch 318	Homs	Brig. Gen. Firas Al-Hamed
General Intelligence	Idlib Branch	Idlib	Not Identified
Joint	Central Prison - Idlib	Idlib	Not Identified

In a number of cases, such continuous, brutal torture resulted in death. Human Rights Watch has documented deaths in custody in the following detention facilities:

Air Force Intelligence branch in Damascus – Mezzea Airport.

Military Intelligence branch in Idlib.

Military Intelligence branch in Homs.

Idlib Central Prison.

Temporary holding facility in Dara'a stadium

Services in Syrian prisons

A. Food

Article 20 of the **Minimum Standard Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners** states:

“Every detention facility shall ensure suitably prepared food presented at normal mealtimes and of a quality and quantity to meet dietary, hygienic and health standards and, as far as possible, religious or cultural requirements. Clean drinking water is to be available at any time.”

The Syrian regime addresses the food and drinking issue with article 76 which says that meat shall be provided once a week and on holidays. Further, articles 77-78 address the mechanisms for the purchasing of food from the prison commissary.

However, the food is generally bad and is insufficient, both in terms of quality and quantity, to maintain the health of prisoners. Also, poor prisoners usually do degrading tasks for other prisoners to gain very small amount of money.

Food brought by the prisoners' families tends to be stolen, while the food that prisoners buy from the commissary may be taken away by the guards, thanks to a complete lack of any form of accountability.

B. Sanitation

Article 87 of the **Minimum Standard Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners** states:

“Adequate bathing and shower installations shall be provided so that every prisoner may be enabled and required to have a bath or shower, at a temperature suitable to the climate, as frequently as necessary for general hygiene according to season and geographical region, but at least once a week in a temperate climate” and article 88: “In order that prisoners may maintain a good appearance compatible with their self-respect, facilities shall be provided for the proper care of the hair and beard, and men shall be enabled to shave regularly.”

Syrian prisons do not meet the minimum required level of sanitation regarding yards, bedrooms, cells, or provide the prisoners with the necessary facilities for bathing, shaving, washing clothes, and other sanitation tools that shield them from illnesses.

C. Health and overcrowding

Most Syrian detention facilities have been built in line with security concerns, without any consideration for health concerns. There is no doubt that Syria's secret detention centers are completely unsanitary, despite article 90 of the **Syrian Prison System**, which states that a metal small bed with a mattress, pillow, cotton blanket in the summer, and two blankets - one made from wool - shall be provided. These facilities also fail to meet standards concerning heat and lighting, and health service, addressed in articles 92, and 101-112 of the same document, respectively.

There are serious issues with the application of laws aimed at looking after prisoners' interests. Syrian prisons, in general, are extremely overcrowded, with many prisoners sleeping on the floor with only a single blanket. In many cases, older prisoners have been known to rent their beds (which are allocated based on seniority) new detainees in exchange for money.

Most of these articles protecting prisoners' rights are completely disregarded. Overcrowding in Syrian prisons is extreme. In 1993, a fire broke out in two rooms at a prison in Al-Hassaka from an unknown source. Tens of prisoners died in that fire, including Kamal Hissou Farhan and his two sons. This is indicative of the poor state of

the prison service, the overcrowding, and the lack of serious care taken for the lives of prisoners.

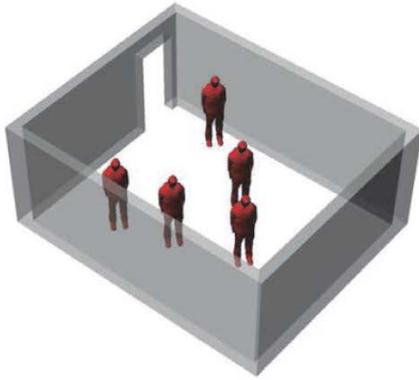
Indeed, detention rooms, which usually are built with an intended capacity of 4-5 people, are filled with up to 40 and even 50 people. At the intelligence branch prisons, crowding is even worse. The cells are usually humid and unhygienic, contain toilets, and suffer from a lack of water. Most inmates do not have space to move or sleep, and suffer from skin diseases, rheumatism, lung infections, and hemorrhoids thanks to the improper food. Many of these disease become untreatable, chronic diseases on account of the poor medical care available (if any is available at all). Sick prisoners do not receive the requisite medication unless they provide staff with bribes. The extreme overcrowding also facilitates many problems and abuses between the prisoners, including sexual abuse.

In terms of heating and temperature, former inmates at Sidnaya prison, for example, confirmed that prison authorities do not make any consideration for climatic conditions.

In conclusion, Syrian prisons fail to meet the standards imposed by the **Minimum Standard Rules for The Treatment of Prisoners** (with the exception of wealthy inmates) in terms of space, ventilation, lighting, and heating.

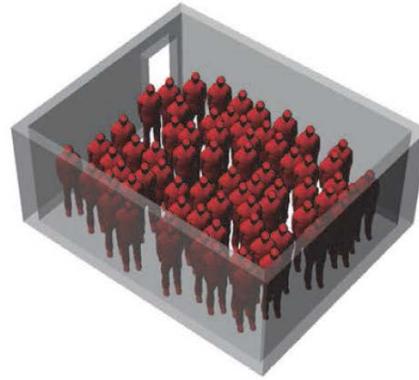
Although the conditions are considerably worse in security prisons, most regular prisons also suffer from a lack of isolation rooms for patients with infectious diseases. They also suffer from shortages of medical staff and medical visits. Although there are no accurate statistics concerning this issue, many prisoners' testimonies, in addition to other indicators, show that mortality rates are increasingly high among Syrian prisoners, on account of the poor health conditions extant, which fail to meet the conditions dictated by both the **Syrian Prison System** and the **Minimum Standards Rules for the Treatment of the Prisoners**.

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Maximum cell occupancy under the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture
 4 x 5 meters, 5 detainees

International guidelines stipulate that accommodations for prisoners should meet a minimum floor space requirement, but do not define what this requirement is. In the above model, each prisoner is provided four square meters, a standard often used by the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture.



Military Intelligence Branch 291 in Damascus
 4 x 5 meters, 70 detainees

"I spent 40 days there in a group cell measuring about 20 square meters. There were about 70 people in the cell. It was so packed that we couldn't lie down to sleep. We had to lean on each other and take turns."

—"Fawzi," who was detained for the second time in August 2011 and held for about 70 days, including about 40 days in Military Intelligence Branch 291. Human Rights Watch interviewed "Fawzi" in Hatay, Turkey, on January 6, 2012

Diagrams produced by SITU Studio and Forensic Architecture, an ERC-funded project.

* From HRW's report: Torture Archipelago

D. Visits:

The **Syrian Prisons System** addresses this subject in articles 65-68. However, in light of the exceptional, horrible, uninhabitable conditions present in the prison, visits are often the only hope for many prisoners, as they provide the only means to communicate with the outside world. These visits are also the only source for supplies.

The state of prisoners allowed to receive visits is better than that of prisoners who are denied any visits by their families. Although there no articles pertaining to the prohibition of visits in the **Syrian Prison System**, prisoners, and their families, are subjected to many questionable practices such as:

Material and moral blackmailing.

Degrading treatment for women.

Preventing prisoners from meeting their attorneys.

Not considering the special need of families visiting from far away, unless they bribes exchanged hands.

Theft of a portion of the goods brought by the families for the prisoners.

Preventing some prisoners from receiving visits, in order to force the prisoners to purchase their needs from the commissary, which usually charges high prices.

E. Education and Work

Articles 114-117 of the **Syrian Prison System** states that elementary education is mandatory for minors, detainees younger than 40 years of age, and any prisoner with a sentence of more than three months (Article 115). Further, attendance at reading sessions and lectures is mandatory for convicts (Article 116).

In reality, education and vocational training in Syrian prisons is badly neglected. At all levels of educational attainment, serious obstacles are placed by prison administrations, which prevent prisoners from completing their education. Furthermore, political prisoners are completely prohibited from completing their education.

F. Working in prisons

Articles 93-100 of the **Syrian Prison System** addresses work in prison as follows:

Industrial units should be established in the central prisons and in all Syrian prisons. These units can be administrated by the state or by contractors. Work should be available to all prisoners (Article 93)

Legislative decree no. 139 of July 31, 1935, amended by legislative decree 37 of February 9, 1942, permits convicts to work in the fields of construction, agriculture, organizational and reform works at municipal and governmental properties, furniture work for the state, and teaching other illiterate prisoners. Wages are determined according to the law or by reducing their sentence one day for each week of work. In order for the detainee to benefit from this permit, he must not represent a security threat, and must not have a sentence for life or for more than ten years with hard labor. This permit is issued by a decree proposed by the minister of interior and approved by the minister of justice. Nevertheless, these laws are not used practically.

Prisoner earnings, according to the law, are divided between the prisoner, his family, his attorney fees, and the state, in order to cover fines, judicial and administrative expenses. The ratios are determined under the supervision of the public prosecution that is charged with executing the ruling. However, a fixed minimum amount is allocated to the convict's family; this amount is one-third of the monthly wage of both parties. The last one-third is divided between the other parties. In the event that the attorney was fully paid, the convict and his family's shares are increased steadily based on how much the convict was rehabilitated.

This is how the prisoner's life is regulated from a legal standpoint. However, in practice many of these laws are not implemented.

Guards, directors, and corruption in Syrian prisons

The close relation between prison administrators and the political and security authorities gives personnel in Syrian prisons immunity from punishment, despite rampant corruption and the use of torture.

Corruption and bribery are common phenomenon in all Syrian prisons. Notable manifestations of corruption include:

Bribes; where the prison can't use the phone, send a message, visit the doctor, and get medication unless he pays a bribe. Also, guards often steal goods that families bring for the inmates, along with portions of the prisoners' food.

Sexual exploitation of female prisoners.

Drugs, especially in Adra Central Prison and Aleppo Central Prison.

The poor treatment of some of the visiting families.

Settling disputes between prisoners in favor of the highest bidder.

All of the above practices contradict Article 30 of the **Syrian Prison System**.

Supervision

The judicial authority's role in supervising prisons is extremely restricted and sometimes nonexistent, especially with regard to the security branches' detention centers. Even when supervisory visits occur, they usually represent a formality and are ineffective.

Civil Associations' and Human Rights Organizations' role in monitoring Prisons

Prisoners' Care is the only association with authorization to access prisons, as it is licensed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, and is under the supervision of the Ministry of Interior. The association has an office in every prison and distributes some aid to poor prisoners and their families. It also organizes certain activities (sporting activities cultural activities, Qur'anic courses, and computer courses).

Other human rights organizations are not allowed to visit prisons and detention centers, on the grounds that they are not licensed. The aforementioned Prisoners' Care group is only allowed in because it is monitored by the authorities.

Examples of Syrian Prisons

Civil Prisons:

Aleppo Central Prison

Location and Construction

Aleppo central prison is located in Northern Aleppo next to a camp for Palestinian refugees, and 3km to the north of Al-Kandi Hospital. The prison is close to Al-Maslimiya town and consists of three buildings:

The old building: The old building's shape is similar to the Mercedes logo. It has four floors, each floor consists of six wings, each wing contains ten rooms, and every room houses 25 prisoners. However, following the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, each room now holds more than 50 prisoners. The first floor is for food and administrative services, the second for detainees, and the third is for convicts.

The Second building: it is still under construction. Allegedly it will be for detainees with drugs-related charges, in order to isolate them from the other detainees.

The Third building (annex): located in the eastern yard. It contains the women's prison and minors' prison. Recently, it has been used to hold detained demonstrators. After clashes erupted in the surroundings area, all the prisoners in the annex have been transferred to the old building.

There is a special wing for "Salafis" who were all transferred from Sidnaya military prison. There is a section for special investigations, which works exclusively on crimes committed inside the prison.

Administration

The prison is administrated by around 25 officers, headed by a brigadier-general, and with a colonel as deputy. The other officers assist the head of the prison, in roles such as director of administrative affairs, and director of the finance section. Each section has a commanding officer, known as 'director'.

Notable incidents

The first revolt

As the Syrian revolution spread to Aleppo in June 2012, prisoner abuses increased inside Aleppo central prison, which was already known for the brutal treatment of prisoners. As the mistreatment of prisons increased, prisoners became enraged. This resulted in the first lockdown, on July 23, 2014, when security forces inside the prisons responded violently to the prisoners' protests, firing live bullets and tear gas bombs (which caused a number to die of asphyxiation). The protests lasted until dawn. At around 05:00 a.m., law enforcement officers entered the prison and arrested more than 500 prisoners, taking them to undisclosed place.

According to eyewitnesses' testimonies, the main reason for these protests was the authorities preventing the prisoners from performing At-Taraweh prayer. It was the first or second day of Ramadan, a holy month in Islam. One of the prisoners told the Violation Documentation Center in Syria about the incident:

“During the first days of Ramadan 2012, which coincided with the last days of July 2012, just after Al-Tarawih Prayers, the prisoners on the third floor carried out a riot. It coincided with the revolutionary activities in the City of Aleppo back then. Security forces countered the riot with full strength; they used live ammunition and tear gas bombs. This lasted for two hours and the result was enormous destruction in the dormitories, with 50 injuries and 35 fatalities. Later, we got to know that the administration of the prison was behind this riot as they incited some ‘spies’ to stir up the prisoners, on account of the fact that Al-Tarawih Prayers had been prevented. About 500 prisoners were taken to the vault of the prison on that day, where they were exposed to severe torture; their screams were heard all over the prison. They were stripped of their clothes and stuffed in a tight place and doused with sewage water. As the authorities gained control again, they closed all the doors of the dormitories, except for those of the political prisoners section who refused to have their dormitory door closed as they hadn’t participated in the Revolt. We were informed that six prisoners were killed under torture, in addition to those killed during the first hours of the revolt.”

“On the day after the Revolt, they took a new group of prisoners. While interrogating them, we heard a close fire shooting. The interrogations continued for a week. Some prisoners died because of electrocution, as they were electrified with high voltage current somewhere near to their hearts. More than 50 prisoners were believed to have been killed during that week, particularly when Security and Army forces entered one of the dormitories and executed many prisoners, including 25 year old Muhamad al-Hussein from Deir Ezzour, who was arrested on charge of demonstrating, and 29 year old Bilal Haj Ali from Der Ezzor – Al-Bokamal (born in 1985).”

“During that day, the prisoners were frightened, especially when they were attacked with smoke and tear gas canisters, as well as live bullets fired randomly through the window. 16 prisoners were killed, some of them under torture. On the next day, a ‘masked group’ from the administration came in, took 10 prisoners and shot them. We also heard that a group of Air Security members came and took some prisoners and executed them somewhere. The total death toll amounted to 30 prisoners. I can still vividly remember the names of the officers who opened fire on the prisoners. They were Muhamad Baroud, Ahmad Baroud, Policeman Rayan, Captain Ziad, Lieutenant Waheed and Captain Ayham”

The second revolt amid the hunger and diseases

“By July 2013, the prison was about to run out of flour, so they reduced our shares to half a glass only. On the first of Ramadan, 10 July 2013, the flour supply was completely exhausted and we got nothing to eat for the three following days. According to the prisoners, the phrase ‘I’m hungry’ became the biggest taboo; if the guards heard any prisoner saying it, he would be taken to the torturing room and beaten with iron sticks until their limbs were broken, and beaten to death with blows to the head. Many prisoners couldn’t tolerate the hunger”.

One of the prisoners who was released, talking about the second revolt:

“After the flour ran out, and the killing of prisoners who asked for food, prisoners in the first and the second dormitories protested about the lack of food, so the guards countered the unrest. However, the prisoners snatched some guns, broke the doors and killed a Military Security colonel.

The army thus countered this revolt by directly opening fire. Six prisoners were killed including Sheikh Abu Hozafa. About 40 were injured and many were arrested. 16 prisoners were killed under torture in the ‘Sawalin’ (small rooms in the vault of the prison) just for saying ‘we are hungry’. The final death toll in that Revolt was 16”.

“On the third of Ramadan, and under the auspices of the Red Crescent, an agreement was signed between the Free Army and the administration of the prison. The agreement said that the Free Army would allow the passage of cooked food four times a week, in return for which the prison would release 10 prisoners each time food was allowed through. The administration of the prison stole most of the food leaving only half a

loaf and two spoonfuls of rice or grain for each prisoner. The agreement lasted for three months including Ramadan, before it was cancelled due to a problem between the two parties. The Red Crescent couldn't bring us any food for 9 days, during which the administration of the prison gave us half a loaf of mouldy bread which we called the 'green bread'. When we ran out of the 'green bread' too, we stayed without any food for 4 days (96 hours). During that period, Officer Ayham came to us every day to say sarcastically 'we are sorry, there is no food tonight so please keep silent and if any of you wants to meet the nymphs of paradise, I can give him this bullet as a passport'."

"Because of this 'green bread' we were infected by a virus that causes diarrhea. The prisoners were terrified, particularly because 50 prisoners died, 23 of them during the first week of October 2013. I still remember some of them like Anwar Ali Hamam, Yehya Mahmoud Manashfi, Abdul Kareem from Deir Ezzour and Haitham Zazo from al-Bukamal. Up until the date of my release, the number of those who were killed by tuberculosis mounted up to a hundred. Another 50 prisoners were killed under torture and 25 others died from various and chronic diseases. Many were field-executed at the hands of the army officers. Some were taken to security branches where they were executed. Upon my release, there were more than 65 prisoners with tuberculosis and they were suffering the poor medical care of the prison, which involved no doctors aside from one officer doctor and four prisoners who helped him."

"Between April 2012 and 13 October 2013, there were more than 400 death cases in the prison. 300 bodies were buried in the eastern yard of the prison. The other 100 bodies were delivered to their families in the period that preceded the siege."⁵

Damascus Central Prison in Adra

Location and construction

Damascus central prison is located in Adra city, in northeastern Damascus. The prison is 20 km away from Adra and covers an area of 10 hectares, containing many buildings, yards, and empty land.

The prison consists of a number of buildings including administrative buildings, a school for the prison, and the building occupied by the prisoners. This building contains 12 standard wings in addition to one wing for political detainees who were transferred from different security branches which is isolated from the civil prison.

There are 12 rooms in each wing except for the first and tenth wings which only have six rooms. Every room has 32 beds, which are, typically, for 32 prisoners.

The Political Security branch administers the second wing, where it holds its political detainees. This wing has six rooms, which are usually reserved for privileged prisoners. The first wing is supposedly an educational school and the tenth is for transfer prisoners (who are about to be retransferred). In theory, each wing is for a specific type of crime. However, due to overcrowding, nepotism, and other reasons, the wings are mixed, and beds are allocated to those who have spent more time in the prison. However, it is not uncommon that nepotism and personal influence affects the distribution of beds. Each

⁵ Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC), A Special Report on Aleppo Central Prison, The Execution and Fatal Starvation Of Dozens of Prisoners , April 2014 available at: <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/reports/1398197682#.VFredfmsVSI>

room occupies an area of 55 m² and always holds a minimum of 50 prisoners. Sometimes, the number of prisoners in each room exceeds 100, and in these circumstances, many are forced to sleep on the ground or in the internal bathrooms.

The other wings are also extremely overcrowded; each room contains 45-100 prisoners. All wings have a yard and a lecture room.

There is no accurate estimate for the number of prisoners held in Adra prison. However, some Syrian human rights organizations believe it to be around 7,000 prisoners, with others estimating it to be as much as 10,000. Kurdish sources claim that there are around 500 Kurdish political prisoners.

Although there are mechanisms to divide inmates upon arrival, in practice distribution and allocation is greatly influenced by nepotism and bribery.

Life in the prison

Testimonies from previous and current prisoners

Prison is a place where prisoners go to be humiliated and degraded rather than a place where prisoners merely spend their terms. During his stay, the prisoner is subjected to various forms of physical and mental torture and ill-treatment that is degrading to the human dignity by all means.

Lives of prisoners differ from one prisoner to another. Prisoners who have spent more time inside, and who are sentenced to life, have more privileges than prisoners with lesser sentences. Usually, the prisoner who has spent more time incarcerated is the leader of his dormitory “Za’iem Al-Qaroush”. Wealthy and privileged prisoners live an easier life in prison - so much so that it might be considered a normal life if it weren’t for the walls.

Fayeq Al-Mier, a political prisoner, said of his time in Adra prison:

“After ten days of sleeping on the floor with one blanket, one of the prisoners agreed to rent me his “Ma’zba” (the place between two beds), with a width of 90m and a length of 180m for 500 Syrian pounds per week, which was a fair price at that time.”

“Renting beds was something common where the old prisoners rent their beds for newcomers if they were elderly, sick, or wealthy. Rates were usually 500 Syrian pounds for Ma’zba, 700 for a top bunk, and about 1200 for a ground bed.”

“The prison administration called the prisoner who gave me his bed and threatened to transfer him and take his place because of what he did. This happened to anyone tried to communicate with us or help us. Another guy gave his bed to my friend Faez Sara and, for that, he was interrogated, transferred, and had his bed taken away from him.”

“There is a Kurdish political prisoner in Adra who was accused of spreading false rumors. He said that he slept on the ground for months as the prison administration didn’t give him a mattress or a bed. He said that he resorted to renting a bed from other prisoners. This was confirmed by Faez Sara and others.”

“The prison has a special system that organizes the renting process for newcomers despite article 90 of the Syrian Prison System which states that every prisoner should have a metal bed, cotton mattress, pillow, and

cotton blanket in summer and one additional winter blanket made of wool. Also, article 92 binds prisons to secure heating, lighting, and health services.”

Torture in prison

The Syrian regime joined the **Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment** in 2004 while preserving article 20. Furthermore, article 28 of the **Syrian Constitution** states:

“No one may be tortured or treated in a humiliating manner, and the law shall define the punishment for those who do so”.

Moreover, article 319 of the **Syrian Penal Code** states:

“Anyone who subjects a person to unlawful forms of cruelty with the hopes of confessing to a crime or extracting information shall be punished by a term of imprisonment of three months to three years and by imprisonment for life and hard labor if he committed murder in accordance with article 534 in case the criminal resorted to torture or virulence against persons”.

Further, article 30 of the **Syrian Prison System** states:

“All personnel and guards shall not use brutality against detainees, call them degrading names, talk to them in a foul manner, or insult them”.

However, most Syrian prisoners are subjected to torture by guards. In addition, many political prisoners are subjected to solitary confinement, placed in very narrow cells not larger than 1m x 2m. This narrow area makes breathing almost impossible. Additionally, the Syrian regime does not control the temperature of those cells, and prohibits those prisoners from going out into the yards, which has induced various lung diseases for those prisoners, including tuberculosis, asthma, and shortness of breath, in addition to infectious skin diseases including leprosy - in spite of the fact Article 87 of the **Minimum Standard Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners** states:

“Adequate bathing and shower installations shall be provided so that every prisoner may be enabled and required to have a bath or shower, at a temperature suitable to the climate, as frequently as necessary for general hygiene according to season and geographical region, but at least once a week in a temperate climate”.

while Article 88 of the same document states:

“In order that prisoners may maintain a good appearance compatible with their self-respect, facilities shall be provided for the proper care of the hair and beard, and men shall be enabled to shave regularly”.

Notable incidents

The first revolt

On January 25, 2007, in response to the miserable conditions, prisoners started a revolt to take over the prison, using knives, iron bars, chains, and gas tanks. Three policemen were

held hostages, locks were broken, the prison was ransacked, and the association money was looted. Security forces and the fourth squad managed to enclose the prison and then it was raided after issuing a warning that they will shoot anyone resisting. The general prosecutor was there and he threatened to shoot himself through the prison microphones.

The authorities managed to regain control after a whole day without any victims aside from fainting and cases caused by the heavy use of gas canisters. The prison administrators imposed punishments that are still ongoing to this day, even against prisoners who had no relation to the revolt and weren't even present at the time. The prison administration also confiscated everything sharp, in addition to glasses, spoons, forks, radios.

After the revolt, around 500 prisoners were detained and subjected to extremely brutal torture. They were also isolated in very narrow cells for six months. Afterwards, they were transferred to a court and accused of revolt. A number of the revolt leaders were transferred to other prisons.

During that time, many political prisoners were interrogated over rumors that some prisoners had leaked news about the revolt to the outside world. These prisoners were also threatened with brutal and extreme torture practices.

Hunger strike

On October 10, 2014, members of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) started an open hunger strike to protest against the ill treatment they had received in prison.

According to the PYD: “a group of the party members started an open hunger strike until the prison administration responds to their demands, which included allowing visits, communicating with the outside world, improving their living conditions, ending the solitary confinements in order for them to be able to communicate with each other, and providing them with communication devices such as radios and televisions, like the other criminal prisoners. Further to these demands, they called for a fair trial and the ending of the emergency state and martial laws, and revocation of the rulings of the emergency state security courts”.

Strike in Adra Prison

As an attempt to protest against the Arab monitors' delegation not visiting the prison, the prisoners started a hunger strike in Adra prison. These same prisoners, who were mostly political prisoners and prisoners of conscience, carried out a similar protest in July, four months after the beginning of the Syrian revolution. Yasser An-Najjer, member of the Syrian National Council and the High Council of the Syrian revolution, said that the protest started after the Arab monitor visited the prison and met other prisoners, in addition to people who came from outside and chanted for Bashar al-Assad.

Diseases

Many prisoners suffer from digestive diseases because of the poor quality of the food, despite Article 20 of the **Minimum Standard Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners**⁶. Many prisoners suffer from rheumatic and joint diseases - such as the lawyer Anwar Al-Bunni, who was sentenced to a five years by the First Criminal Court in Damascus over accusations of spreading false rumors that would undermine the prestige of the nation.

According to a previous political prisoner:

“The vast majority of the prison wings are infected with bedbugs, lice, and leprosy. Winter is very tough because of the complete lack of heating which is only available in the administrative wing. Meanwhile, summer is suffocating because of the nasty smells due to overcrowding, the ventilation service is nothing more than mall hoods that were installed on the windows in narrow rooms. The medical service is extremely poor if any, and is limited to first-aid kits and pain killers. Although there is actually a hospital, it is only for special cases and privileged prisoners.”

“Adra prison has a small hospital which is more of a health center. The periodic medical checks, which are once a week for every wing, are very rudimentary and only provide pain killers or prescriptions, which are provided at the prisoner’s expense of course.”

“If one of the prisoners had an emergency case that requires hospitalization, the transfer would take a long time, which can cause further complications or, in many cases, death - especially in urgent cases, such as a heart attack. For example, the prisoner Mohammad Saeed Al-Omar had a stroke on Friday April 24, 2009 and at 7:00 AM and wasn’t transferred until three hours later.”

Adra Central Women’s Prison

Adra Women’s Prison is located in the Damascus countryside, and is to the southeast of the men’s prison. Recently, the prison witnessed rapid developments the most recent of whom was the open hunger strike which was a protest demanding the living conditions inside the prison to be improved and quicker appearance before the court.

Adra women’s prison consists of:

Criminal section: for criminal prisoners.

Political section, which is divided into two wings:

Holding wing: contains all the prisoners who were transferred from another security branches. It has around 140 prisoners depending on the number of female prisoners transferred to and from the prison.

Detainee’s wing: contains more than 40 female prisoners, all of whom have appeared before a court. The number is likely increasing as more and more female prisoners are appearing before courts of the various security branches.

⁶ “Every detention facility shall ensure suitably prepared food presented at normal mealtimes and of a quality and quantity to meet dietary, hygienic and health standards and, as far as possible. Clean drinking water is to be available at any time”

However, the criminal section does contain some political prisoners, as one lawyer confirmed that he encountered ten cases of female prisoners who had been arrested over participating in revolutionary activities, or for other political reasons, and who were then placed in the criminal section, before being charged with ordinary criminal charges including prostitution, theft, and drug abuse.

All former prisoners agree that Adra Women's Prison is not really different from a security branch prison. Many prisoners have said that it has been fully converted into a security branch prison. Notably, the holding section warden, Faisal Al-Aqla of Der ez-Zor, banned all privileges usually allowed in civil prisons, including televisions, radios, refrigerators, the purchasing of vegetables and meat, and even halted the creation of craftworks, such as the manufacture of beads and felt. Phone calls were strictly prohibited and families were prohibited from bringing books or any kind of food to the prisoners. Invasive screenings and inspections were often conducted for no reason, with many prisoners accused of prostitution inspected. These procedures took effect in August 2012.

Female prisoners have also been subjected to various punishments such as prolonged solitary confinements, and beatings.

According to one former female prisoner:

“One time, guards entered the dormitory and started beating more than 20 prisoners using sticks. One of them had her *hijab* stripped off, and was pulled by her hair to the torture room, where she was beaten brutally on her feet (*Falqa*). Afterwards she was not able to walk properly for three days. This happened in May 2013.”

“Another time we were being searched while a prisoner was reciting Qur'an. They entered the room forcibly and argued with her intensely. Then, they beat her and stepped on the Qur'an. This happened in July 2013 a few days before Ramadan.”

One of the prisoners described how sick prisoners are treated in Adra prison as a “slow death”:

“There are no specialized doctors, despite the presence of pregnant women, small children, elderly women, and women with chronic diseases. The prison administration justifies this by saying that the road to the hospital is dangerous due to the clashes, and that a telegram must be sent to a department (they didn't mention its name) for its approval. The prison had many deaths, the last of which was a woman who was very sick and had something like a heart attack or shortness in breath which resulted in her immediate death.”

Government forces are still arbitrarily arresting on a large scale. Usually, they arrest anyone older than 15-year-old. These arrests are increasingly made by entities that do not have the necessary authority to make arrests. The number of prisoners in Adra prison is unknown, and the nature of violations is also unclear due to the presence of security which prevents any international organizations from accessing the prison.

Military prisons:

Sidnaya Central Prison

Sidnaya military prison is located 30 km to the southwest of Damascus. The prison was established in 1987. Since its establishment it has been used to detain political prisoners, regardless of their affiliations and views, in addition to hosting a section for military-judicial prisoners.

The prison building has a shape similar to the Mercedes logo. It consists of three floors, each divided into a right wing and a left wing. Each wing has ten dormitories. At the end of the two wings is a room which opens onto a corridor, called dormitory 11. The dormitories take the shape of the letter U.

The prison is surrounded by three walls. It is guarded from the outside by a military garrison and armored vehicles, while from the inside it is guarded by the military police.

Each dormitory has an area of 6m x 8m in addition to dedicated space for the kitchen and the bathroom. The dormitory has a capacity of 20 prisoners. The solitary confinement cells are two floor below the dormitories.

Regulations of the prison

The prison is not subject to the regulations of the **Syrian Prison System** and is unaffiliated with the Ministry of Interior, unlike civil prisons. And it is not subject to any form of oversight or monitoring. It is regulated by undisclosed rules and is a part of the emergency system that has determined the state of human rights in Syria since 1963, and has been especially prominent since the end of the 1970's.

Sidnaya is under the Ministry of Defense, and contains the prisoners interrogated by the following security services: Military Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence, and State Security. This is in addition to the prisoners who have been referred to the state security court and the marshal courts, who spend their terms in Sidnaya prison.

Until the nineties, the prison contained socialist prisoners (the Workers' Party, the Arabic Socialist Movement, etc.), prisoners from Democratic Socialist Ba'ath Party, prisoners from the Muslim Brotherhood, Palestinians of various affiliations, Lebanese prisoners, and various Islamic sects and groups (At-Tahrir, Salfis, etc.).

Services

The structure of the prison is relatively good in terms of ventilation and lighting, and it has a better reputation than the infamous Tadmour prison. The treatments of the prisoners is at the minimum level of acceptability for most prisons. However, the Islamic prisoners are subject to negative discrimination. In the nineties, the food quality was extremely poor. The prisoners relied mainly on the commissary and what their families brought for them during visits. This created an additional strain on the families. However, according to

a former prisoner, the food is now better and it is almost acceptable. However there is still a shortage of water.

The prison before the Syrian revolution

The number of prisoners is estimated to be 1500-200 prisoners, of the following backgrounds:

Those accused of being affiliated with the banned Muslim Brotherhood movement, many of whom had been living in exile in Iraq but had been forced to leave following the occupation of Iraq in the wake of the Second Gulf War (approximately 50 prisoners).

Accused of being affiliated to At-Tahrir party (approximately 40 prisoners).

Kurdish prisoners from PYD and PKK (approximately 50 prisoners).

Arrested due to their pro-democratic activities (approximately 20 prisoners).

The remainder of the prisoners are prisoners holding extreme Salafi beliefs.

According to the Syrian Human Rights Committee in London, torture has increased in Sidnaya military prison and especially among Islamic prisoners.

Method of torture include beatings using cables and sticks, *Doulab* method, and prolonged nudity. Solitary confinement is an additional punishment. Furthermore, prisoners who were arrested for religious reasons are discriminated against, and are subjected to degrading treatments, while receiving smaller shares of food and less medical attention.

In light of the prohibition of visits and discrimination against Islamic prisoners, the first conflict between prisoners and the prison administration began in March 2008. On March 27, 2008, while a prison administrator was inspecting the cells, he entered into a verbal dispute with some Islamic prisoners, which resulted in a number of these prisoners attacking the administrator. The administrator fled to the lower floors, leaving the door open.

The prisoners in that wing opened the doors to the other wings, and the prisoners managed to take over the second and third floors, leaving only the first floor under the control of the prison administration.

On the following day, an officer from the military police came to talk with the prisoners and listen to their complaints. Afterwards, he promised them that conditions would be improved, and that no one would be punished for what had happened, on condition that everything went back to the way things had been before the incident. For the following few months, the living conditions improved.

However, on July 5, 2008, the military police launched a dawn raid on the prison, and a large numbers of soldiers entered the prison wings carrying sticks.

Some of the wings were not inspected. However, there were problems in the prison wings holding the Islamist - Salafi - detainees. In these cells, the military police opened the door of the dormitory and began inspecting chaotically, strewing around the personal affects of the prisoners, and confiscating items.

When the other prisoners heard what had happened, they tried to get out of their rooms and started to attack the military police. The prisoners managed to hold some officers hostage, while the remainder fled.

The revolt continued and the prisoners managed to take over all of the floors and hold more of the military policemen hostages. The military police tried to end the revolt by opening fire but were unable to regain control.

Some of the prisoners climbed onto the roof and began burning blankets to attract attention to the events ongoing in the prison. Meanwhile gas cannisters were thrown into the prison from outside, forcing more prisoners onto the roof.

Towards the end of the day, the prison administration attempted to negotiate with the prisoners, and both parties agreed to exchange hostages.

The rioting prisoners managed to hold the prison. They took equipment from the basement and storerooms up to the upper floors, including supplies, and mobile phones which they used to call their families and elements of the non-local media during the first hours of the uprising, until the authorities cut off the signal in the area.

One prisoner called BBC Arabic, and told them that roughly 150-200 soldiers had raided every cell in the prison on Saturday at around 6:00 AM, and had handcuffed prisoners. There were 12 person in every cell. They stripped them of their clothes, took their money and insulted the Qur'an and stepped on it.

The negotiations continued between the administration and the prisoners, with the prisoners releasing all the detained soldiers, while the administration providing them with a small amount of food and water. However, at the same time the prison was completely surrounded by armored vehicles. Meanwhile, the military police continued to shoot, and the road leading to the prison was blocked for three days.

The revolt lasted from July to December, and over this time living conditions rapidly deteriorated. On occasions, the military police deployed water cannon against the prisoners, but the prisoners then gathered the water in buckets. When the administration realized this, they began to use sulfur water instead.

The supplies started running out and there was no gas, forcing prisoners to burn plastic and other materials as fuel for cooking. The fumes caused by these fires, along with the lack of medication available affected the health of many prisoners.

The prison was stormed on December 13, 2008, with eye witnesses observing gunfire, and blazes breaking out inside the prison. This ended the prison revolt as it had begun: with many dead and wounded.

Over the next few months, the prison largely repaired. Most of the prisoners were returned to their cells, though those prisoners who were deemed to have led or taken part in the incident had their sentences extended.

According to various testimonies, between 26 and 60 were killed in the prison during the revolt (with the majority of testimonies estimating that over 40 had died).

All the testimonies said that some of the extremist prisoners executed six prisoners after they were accused of spying for the authorities. There was no information about the number of soldiers killed, aside from one unconfirmed report.

One year after the revolt, monthly visits were finally permitted on July 21, 2009, for most of the prisoners. However, dozen have been kept confined or rearrested despite completing their full sentence.

The prison during the Syrian revolution

Number of prisoners

The number of prisoners has been increasing since the beginning of the Syrian revolution in March 2011. Estimations suggest that there are 14,000 detainees in the prison. Most of those prisoners' sentences were determined by summary trials by marshal courts, which have issued arbitrary rulings including executions and prison terms of 15 years.

It should be noted that there are roughly 8,000 female prisoners and juveniles, who are held in a building that is called "the Red Prison". A new building, called "the White Prison", holds approximately 6,000 prisoners.

Conditions inside the prison

The prisoners are subjected to inhumane practices as soon as they enter the prison. These practices include beating with sticks and rods, in addition to insults and curses. New prisoners are usually put in solitary confinement for at least a month in order to break them, according to a defected officer.

After the new prisoners leave solitary confinement, they are transferred to the Red Prison dormitories, where they experience a new kind of suffering and physical and mental torture as a result of the overcrowding and diseases.

The White Prison is much the same. The prison administration forces the prisoners to wear their uniforms back to front, and force them to sit in painful and degrading positions.

Torture

Prisoners are subject to torture and insults from the guards. Methods of torture in Sidnaya prison include:

Whipping.

Dulab (the victim is forced to bend at the waist and has his head, neck, legs and sometimes arms, placed into the inside of a car tire, so that the victim is totally immobilized and cannot protect him or herself from beatings).

Beatings with plastic sticks.

Electrocution.

Deprivation of sleep, food, and water, for prolonged periods of time.

Basat al-reeh, or “flying carpet” (tying the victim down to a flat board, the head suspended in the air so that the victim cannot defend himself. One variation of this torture involves stretching the limbs while the victim lies on the board (as on a rack).

Burning, using cigarettes and acids.

Executions

Since 2012, due to the huge number of death sentences issued against activists by the special military courts, the prison administration carries out executions every Monday and Tuesday night. The bodies are then transferred to undisclosed places. Also, the prison administration doesn't inform the victims' families of the fates of their loved ones, and does not return their dead bodies to them.

According to a defected officer, 40 prisoners were executed every week on Mondays and Tuesdays. The executions were under the direct supervision of the prison administrator, the military Attorney General, and frequently the Mufti of Damascus.

Medical care

The medical system has completely collapsed. However, many infectious diseases are widely spread among prisoners, including tuberculosis and typhoid fever, in addition to a number of skin diseases and infections caused by torture - such as infected wounds and gangrene.

The food consists of one daily meal of a crusty half loaf of bread (which is usually rotten) and some jam. In many cases, the prisoners would only eat once every two days. Furthermore, the prison administration used to cut off the water in the dormitories for periods of ten consecutive days as a form of punishment to further enhance the prisoners' daily suffering.⁷

⁷ Damascus Center for Theoretical and Civil Rights Studies (DCTCRS), Sydnaya prison massacre, the bloody July (December 2009), available in Arabic at: <http://hem.bredband.net/cdpps/dcc.reps1.htm>

Security prisons

Palestine branch

Location and Construction

Palestine branch, or branch 235 (affiliated to the military intelligence), is located in southern Damascus, in the Al-Qazzaz area. The branch was originally established during the rule of the late president Hafez Al-Assad, in the 1970's, in order to detain Israeli spies, Arabs, and Palestinians, who are being interrogated on the accusation of spying for Israel.

Over time, the prison has become the most brutal prison for Syrians, and for other Arabs and foreign prisoners. Many of the prisoners confess to crimes which they have not committed so as to avoid further torture.

A Kurdish writer, after spending three months in Palestine branch in 2007, said:

“This is Hell, I am sure this Hell is far worse than God's Hell”

The prison building consists of seven floors and basements. Every floor is for different cases, for instance, the first floor is for political cases, the fourth floor is for Islamic prisoners (the names of this floor's director is Munir and he has since been captured by the Free Syrian Army). There are also sections for investigating cases of fraud, weapons smuggling, along with one section for investigating members of Palestinian organizations.

The branch is divided into cells and dormitories. One released prisoner told us that the branch has 38 cells, each cell has an area of 2m x 1.5m. The cell is called a solitary. In addition, it has 19 dormitories, each with an area of 10 m x 5.5 m. Every dormitory contains more than 60 prisoners.

Additionally, the branch has six bathrooms and three toilets, which may only be used at specific hours. The prisoners are responsible for cleaning the dormitories and cells they reside in.

The Syrian regime forces use the branch, along with others as an unlawful detention center to hold and torture Syrians. This branch is known for the most brutal and horrible methods of torture including sexual abuse, rape, electrocution, and deprivation of sleep for periods of more than three days.

Al-Mazze military airport branch

Al-Mazze Military Airport is a crucial facility for the Syrian regime in Damascus and its western suburbs. It contains various military, security, and intelligence groups, including

Air Force Intelligence, Air Defense, and the Air Force Intelligence's special task force. Al-Mezze military airport is 5 km away from the center of Damascus. Hafez Al-Assad prohibited the construction of any tall buildings near the airport, and so the nearest high-rise building is more than 2 km away.

Location and function

The airport is a focal point from which Al-Assad forces launches attacks on the surrounding areas (Dariyya, Mu'damyat Ash-Sham, and Al-Mazze). Some units from the fourth squadron station at the airport have installed artillery and rockets, which are used to shell Dariyya and the southern neighborhoods of Damascus. The airport is also used as a detention center for interrogation and torture. Some of the released prisoners describe the airport as "completely inhumane, you can smell the blood in it" Al-Mazze military airport is surrounded by Dariyya city, Masaken As-Sumariya, Mu'damyat Ash-Sham, and Al-Mazze orchards. The land on which the airport is built is owned by Dariyya and Mu'damyat Ash-Sham residents. Air Force Intelligence also uses the airport. The airport was designed specifically for helicopters, but there are also MiG and Sukhoi warplanes based there. All of the airport's internal buildings are depots containing weapons, airplane equipment, and helicopter equipment. The airport also contains a vehicle garage, an airplane hanger a training center, an air defense battalion, a detention center, a building for administration and interrogation, a barracks, and buildings for military aviation engineering and training.

Al-Mezza military airport houses advanced radars. It is separated from Mu'damyat Ash-Sham by the Alawite eastern neighborhood and from Dariyya by an area called Al-Khalij, which the Syrian regime completely destroyed in order to separate itself from Dariyya. The Syrian regime dug a deep trench with a depth of more than 7 m so as to separate the airport from Al-Mezza, and destroyed all the fields and grove orchards to protect the airport. Next to the other entrance to the base is Masaken As-Sumiriya, which is inhabited by officers and Alawite militia men. On Al-Arba'ien highway, near the main entrance, is a Syrian regime checkpoint. Checkpoints surround the airport at regular intervals. At present, the Syrian regime is only using the western point, which is next to Masaken As-Sumariya, to launch warplanes, for fear of FSA forces based in Dariyya.

The officers who administer Al-Mazze military airport

Brigadier-general Abdusslam Fajr Mahmoud, "head of the interrogation section at Air Force Intelligence" from Idlib – Al-Fou'a village. He was previously the chief of Major-General Mohammad Al-Khouli's staff.

Brigadier-General Ghassan Ibrahim.

Hassan Ba'rini, "officer at Air Force Intelligence".

Nadim Mubarak, "Air Force Intelligence".

Warrant Officer First Class, Ali Habib.

Warrant Officer First Class, Nasr Isbar.

According to a former prisoner's testimony after spending six months in Al-Mazze military airport and the Fourth Squadron's headquarter in Al-Mu'damiya mountains, a large portion of Dariyya prisoners were transferred at first to the airport, into two big halls, each hall containing around 200 prisoners. Every prisoner had to pass through this hall before being transferred to the interrogation section in the airport.

There is an "old branch" and a "new interrogation branch" that was established after the beginning of the Syrian revolution in 2011. Each branch contains a large number of cells, each cells holds a minimum of 15 prisoners, with a capacity of 20 prisoners.

The new interrogation branch consists of several floors in addition to a basement and some cells for women. There is another building called "the studies" and a hall known as "hall 400", as it is a large hall that holds 400-450 prisoners, and was originally built with a capacity of 1000 prisoners.

Other characteristics, according to the former prisoner, include:

"The lighting in the room was on at all times, the disturbing thing, however, was sleeping in such a crowded room so we had to sleep on our sides and stick to each other. That was in April and I stayed there till August when the weather was really hot, the ventilation was bad and we were sweating and suffering the dirt and skin diseases like: mange, lice and ulceration. I had some 60 to 70 sores oozing pus constantly and medicine was rarely available".

"Whoever fell ill did not get the medicine until it was too late, and then they gave him an antibiotic pill. Before taking the medicine, the patients were sometimes beaten by the nurse or even by the doctor himself who rarely came, as he used to come weekly then monthly then every two or three months".

"The severity of torture increased gradually during detention, and sometimes it increased suddenly as the regime 'lost on the ground' according to the guards who blamed us for the war between the regime and rebels".

The cell description: "The cell (225 x 135 cm², with 220 cm in height) is designed for one detainee; however, there were 5 or 6 detainees in it. The ceiling is a metal cage, 60 cm under a cement roof".

"All the cells were in the cellar and shared the same ceiling which was full of rats. There was a fan; the ventilation was bad though. The lightening was so bad that we barely could see each other during daytime and nighttime".

The food

The former prisoner said:

"The food in the Management Branch is worse than that in the Information Branch and the Investigations Branch, especially in terms of quantity; in the morning, we had a loaf of bread, a spoonful of jam, and an egg. The second meal was two loaves and three cups of water. Both meals were inadequate. One prisoner died because of the deprivation of food and water, which was itself used as a form of torture."

“One of the horrible things that Ala'a Zahra, a jailor, used to do - and he was the only one who did this - is forcing the detainee, who had diarrhea because of the rotten food and who had already been prevented from going to the toilet, to eat his own feces as a punishment. Some detainees, also, peed in the drinking cups and he forced them to drink their own urine and wash their cups after that”.⁸

Raid branch (215)

Location and construction

Raid branch (215) is also a subsidiary division of the Military Intelligence or the Military Security, and is opposite the Ministry of Electricity, on The 6th of May Street.

The officer in charge of the facility is Brigadier-General Shafiq.

Testimonies

Young architect (A.B) known as Fajer Al Shami, 23-years- old from Damascus. Date of arrest September 22, 2012, during a demonstration in Al-Mowasat Square in the middle of Damascus where hundreds of demonstrators protested. Incredibly, when the security forces dispersed the demonstrators, they allegedly failed to arrest the 'required number', so they arrested 22 citizens passing by the area, who had been attending a memorial service for a deceased person (natural death) in the neighborhood.

Fajer says:

“After I got arrested, the security guards put me in a small security car and continued searching for more of those who had participated in the demonstration, especially girls. During that time, they were beating me with backs of their guns.

They took us to the branch, only minutes away from Al Mowasat Square. I was surprised to find 42 detainees, 22 of whom had nothing to do with the demonstration; they just happened to be in a memorial service in the area.

In the Branch 215, they put us in some big 'gym hall' on the first floor, where we waited for three hours. They took us down to some vault near the hall where they put me along with some 90 detainees in a 2.5m x 4m cell called 'Khashab 1' (the wooden 1). It was very hot and moist due to the lack of ventilation. Each two new detainees had a space of 40cm x 45cm, in which they shifted rest hours (the first stands up, the second squats and vice versa). The old detainees, however, had three times more space than the two new ones.

We witnessed one or two 'hallucination cases' every day due to the psychological pressure, and moist and hot conditions; the detainee would start to say and do very strange and meaningless things. Going to bath room should be done in seconds and those who couldn't 'finish' in the bath room, in many cases 'did it' involuntarily in the cell.

⁸ A Videotaped Testimony with (Sameer Ajeeneh), Former Detainee in the Air Force Branch: They Cannot be Human!, Violation Documentation Center in Syria, November 2013, available at <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/reports/1384715670#.VFzd8PmsVSI>

I had been there for seven days when they called my name and took me to the 'interrogation room' on the seventh floor in the next building. They put me in the 'Dutch Chair' which is similar to a dentist's chair. They fixed me to it and started bending my back reversely till I confessed that I participated in the demonstration. The next day, they hung me 50cm above the floor for three hours which caused a severe pain in the shoulders. After four days of beating and torturing, they took my fingerprint on 12 empty pages; the ones that were supposed to be filled with my statement.

I was tortured by an agent who spoke with the coastal dialect (about 38 years old, 165cm tall, 80kg in weight, short hair, black moustache, light beard, big belly) in addition to two agents who spoke the dialect of Der ez-Zor Governorate.

After the interrogation, they took me to a new cell called Hadid 1 (the Iron 1) where I stayed for 25 days. The cell was 3m x 5 m. At this time we were about 150 detainees. During those days, I witnessed more than 20 cases of hallucination and there were more than 30 detainees suffering from skin ulcerations all over their bodies, especially on their legs.

Most of them were so bad that the bones of the legs were showing. Most of the detainees suffered from skin rash as they were almost naked except for their 'underwear'. They also had long hair and long beards. When a detainee's condition got very bad out of ulcerations and hallucination, he was left in the 'corridor'.

Every day about 20 detainees were thrown in the corridor to meet their 'destiny' - a slow death. The cases range between the detainees who were about to die because of severe torture, hallucinations, or a high temperature, and those who looked like skeletons from their acute ulcerations. They urinated in the same place, which was full of pus and blood..

Thirty five days later, on October 27, 2012, they transferred me to the 'Military Police' in Qaboun where I stayed for 3 days with more than 90 other detainees before transferring to the Judicial Court, where we were released pursuant to a presidential amnesty.

The above prisoners and testimonies are only examples. The aforementioned HRW's report mentions many more prisoners and cases. This is merely a snapshot of the reality of Syrian prisons. Thus far, no group has been able to fully document the extent of abuses, as the Syrian regime prohibits all organizations from accessing Syria's prisons and talking to prisoners.

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