



Words Against Silence

Report
Joumana Seif
Wejdan Nassif

Dedication

To the detainees who remain imprisoned in the dungeons of the tyrant Syrian regime and also to the detainees who are kept captive by any other tyrant around the globe.

To the courageous women and men who testified for this report.

To the soul of our friend, Akram Safadi, who died shortly after submitting his testimony.

To all those who survived the injustice and oppression of detention, especially those who have been silent because of the patriarchal and social pressure, and finally to those who are still waiting for an opportunity to speak out.

Joumana & Wejdan

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Preface

One of the most important objectives of this report is to allow the women who have faced detention, violence, and torture by the Syrian regime to speak out and make themselves heard. We consider these women's affirmations a real resistance to the "Shut Up" approach enforced by the Assad regime for decades. This report describes the experiences of courageous women who have fearlessly resisted all kinds of oppression during the different ructious times in the history of Syria. It is a pursue of documenting these painful experiences that carry along a lot of despair, frustration and injustice feelings, yet a hopeful dream of a secure and promising future, determination of rising up again and continuing the resistance despite the brutal authority and cruel society. It can be declared that over the long decades of tyranny, there have been always "Don Quixotes" who refused to surrender because of their belief in the importance of accumulating and sustaining the struggles from one generation to another, despite the price that has been paid along the way until today.

Although many years have passed since the witnesses' horrific experiences, we could still feel their pain, spot the tears in their eyes and sense the soreness of their throats as they spoke. That wasn't easy for us to absorb, it was a clear confirmation of how deeply these memories are engraved in the women's minds!

Some of the women who were detained between the 1980s and 1990s have declared that this was the first time they have ever spoken openly about their experiences, for they feel ashamed as they compare their own stories with those of the women who were detained during the years of the revolution; whom have stated in their turn that even though it wasn't really their first time in opening up about their sufferings, the pain has never decreased. It should be noted that while writing this report we documented a lot of testimonies about sexual violence crimes, which were ultimately annulled as per our witnesses' requests. We naturally took into consideration the rationale of these requests and acted accordingly, for some of them still suffer the impact of the traumas that were never treated, since they have never undergone any psychological therapy. The main motives remain the prevailing circumstances and political climate that have never changed since the time of their detention and this obviously have diminished their hopes in holding the criminals accountable one day. As the conflict goes on, and with the failure to find a political solution based on justice, accountability and reparation, the fears and anguish of the detainees who suffered from the violence and the brutality of the detention centers of the tyrant regime arise. This should prompt to action human rights organizations that are working on documenting crimes of violence against women and on justice and accountability causes.

Finally, and until the date of preparing this report, thousands of women remain imprisoned in the regime's prisons and detention centers, suffering from inhuman conditions with¹ obscure future. Thousands of survivors are left on their own to face the community's rejection and violence without having the opportunity to recover, obliged to suffer in silence while withdrawing from being active again. Therefore, although this report is a call for the survivors of detention to raise their voices against silence, it is also a call for the release of thousands of female detainees and an urge upon the women's organizations for developing centers and programs providing psychological support for post-detention survivors, taking into account the shock and horror they have faced and still facing till now. It is also an invitation to all segments of the Syrian society to rehabilitate, solidify and support the survivors in order to achieve their demands for justice, accountability and reparation.

The good news is that we already agreed with our witnesses at the end of our meetings that speaking out is an essential means in resisting submissiveness and marginalization and to stand up for a better future. Most importantly, it is an opportunity to say: we are still here.

Introduction

In prison, “You” don’t exist as a person, you mean nothing and you are nothing; consequently, all sorts of mistreatment can happen: insult, torture, humiliation, rape. (Nada)

Rape has a profound psychological effect...during my long detention years, only two women had the courage to come forward and tell me that they had been raped, I kept it to myself...This awful kind of imprisonment leaves a wound that is almost impossible to heal for years to come... (Lama)

Nada, who was captured during the revolution and Lama, who was arrested in the 1980’s, are only two examples of what imprisoned women have faced and still are. Their testimonies don’t only convey their sufferings, they also illustrate the experiences of all the women we interviewed.

This report includes quotes that we have chosen from the testimonies of women who have experienced the ordeal of detention from 1980 to 2017, and have had the strength to resist. The report provides the opportunity to get acquainted with their stories, despite their harshness and cruelty.

The first section of the report reviews the methods and duration of detention. It also tackles the conditions experienced by the detainees, and how the security services responded to their special needs as women.

The second part of the report highlights the forms of violence and torture they were submitted to, that varied from excruciation to sexual and psychological violence and stigma.

The third part focuses on how their communities in general, and their families in particular dealt with their situation. This part relates about their experiences and their physical and psychological effects, including their ability to overcome and move on, continue the struggle against all forms of tyranny and abuse, fight for achieving justice and hold the perpetrators accountable.

The purpose of this report is not to prove that the regime has been using all forms of systematic violence against women boundlessly, including sexual violence since 2011: many reports have been issued in the last eight years (for instance by the Human Rights Council², or Impartial international commission of inquiry³), and the reports of Syrian⁴ and international human rights organizations⁵ have demonstrated this. We rather intend here to reveal that detaining women and practicing violence against them has been a long-standing practice for the Syrian dictatorship. Since the 1980s, the Assad regime has followed brutal methods to break any opposition, discipline the Syrian society, and repress it politically.

Methodology

This report focuses on the violence against Syrian women detained in State security centers, from the 1980s till 2017. It is based mainly on the testimonies of twenty-three women and four men who have experienced the oppression of detention at different stages of time. This report tries to analyze these testimonies in order to give a clear understanding of the nature of violence perpetrated against them, its causes and purposes; thus, it analyses its psychological, social and political consequences on the Syrian society in general and on women in particular.

Interviews have been made between mid of July and end of October 2018, either face to face or through Skype. They took place in Turkey, Sweden, Germany and France. All testimonies were recorded with the interviewees' consent.

The interviews lasted between half an hour and three hours and were structured by a grid of key questions. Most importantly the witnesses were allowed to recount their experiences at their own pace without causing them any further distress.

All the recordings were saved and transcribed.

The report is built on testimonies from fifteen detainees before the revolution, and twelve during the revolution. It took into account cultural and regional diversity in the selection of the witnesses and the diversity of their political backgrounds. Some of the detainees were imprisoned for their political affiliations to the Revolutionary Workers' Party, the Communist Labor Party and other Leftist groups, or the Muslim Brotherhood.

Two of our witnesses were arrested between 2007 and 2010 on the basis of their political activity. The reasons for the arrest of the revolutionary detainees varied between political activities, participation in demonstrations, sit-ins, medical and aid support activities.

The detention period for some of our witnesses before the revolution varied between two and sixteen years. Some of them were detained during the father's reign, and again under Assad's son before the revolution took place, and then during the revolution years.

The detention period for some of our witnesses during the revolution period varied between fifteen days to two years, taking into account that many of them were detained more than once, and also considering the different detention locations: several branches of security and civilian prisons, Sednayah and Palmyra prison.

Finally, our report is based mainly on the testimonies of women, but we found an added value in the statements of four men who had witnessed the violence against female co-detainees or family members. Some of them have reported being threatened of having their female members harmed to give up information, or just for the sake of humiliation.

All preliminary information about the witnesses was saved under aliases that were mostly chosen by them. Some asked us to choose the names for them, and others chose to keep their given names. We were careful not to give detailed accounts when presenting each of our witnesses so as to preserve their anonymity.

Historical Background

Since 1970 when Hafez Al-Assad seized power by a military coup⁶, he got rid of his comrades⁷ and resorted to the detaining of his opponents⁸ in order to consolidate his authority and ensure its sustainability, notably making use of the state of emergency⁹ that was declared in the wake of military coup by the “Baath Party” when they took control on March 8, 1963. The state of emergency along with other repressive decrees¹⁰ provided an umbrella for the various security services¹¹, which expanded and intensified during the three decades of the Assad Father rule. They carried out arbitrary arrests and forced disappearances that lasted for many years along with brutal torture, humiliation and deprivation of the detainees of all legal rights and health care, in addition to ongoing prosecution after their release and often stripping them of their civil rights¹².

As the regime became stable, it practiced maximum oppression in order to discipline the Syrian society and its institutions, to prevent the potential of any organized opposition¹³, and to deny the Syrians the opportunity to participate in the political life and public affairs¹⁴. The regime intensified oppression, detention and collective punishment when they thought that the level of threat was alarming as what happened during the infamous cold-blooded massacre in Palmyra Detention Center¹⁵ in June 1980 which claimed the lives of hundreds of unarmed prisoners¹⁶. The worst illustration was what was later known as “the massacre of Hama”¹⁷ in February 1982, where the regime not only bombed and destroyed entire neighborhoods¹⁸ and leveled them to the ground, but killed, tortured and detained thousands of young men from several parts of the city¹⁹ and abused, humiliated and even raped²⁰ women and girls. Afterwards, the country descended into a long period of oppression and tyranny.

Not only did the security services under Hafez al-Assad rule detain and humiliate women who dared to oppose the regime²¹, but they also exploited the social patriarchal mentality that condemned women and held them accountable should they dare to become active in the “prohibited” sectors, i.e. participating in public affairs. In general, the Syrian society is regarded as conservative and the role of the women is marginal. Women who are active in public affairs face many challenges, beyond the repression targeting both men and women, they face the outdated traditions and customs that strongly prevail in the society²², in addition to the discriminatory laws²³ of the constitution especially the personal status Law.

Through their ongoing struggle Syrian women secured some rights such as the right to vote²⁴, but unfortunately it didn't help much in changing the demeaning perception towards them, where the virginity of the woman remains a symbol of her honor and the honor of her family, and any violation to this honor outside marriage may be paid by the woman for the rest of her life²⁵. The authorities exploited this perception, devoted their repressive efforts to undermine women as the weakest part of the Syrian society²⁶ and used them to discipline and silence the whole society.

In 1977, as Assad's father rule became more stable over the years, the regime started clamping down on members of the Communist Action League for their criticism of repression and corruption and their rejection of the military intervention in Lebanon²⁷, including twelve women, mostly university student²⁸.

In the early 1980s, dozens of women, including pregnant and minors, were detained and tortured on charges of relations to the Muslim Brotherhood or for their affiliation to the Iraqi Baath Party.

As soon as the regime won its war against the Muslim Brotherhood movement²⁹ in the early 1980s, it focused its oppression on its opponents³⁰ from leftist, secular, intellectual elite and civil society movements. It didn't matter whether they were young, elderly, students, women or men, all have suffered.

The arrest campaign in 1987 remains the most significant one, where more than one hundred women were detained because of their affiliation and links with the Communist Labor Party. Dozens of these women remained in detention for several years without trials.

In his swearing-in speech after his father's death in 2000, Bashar Al-Assad promised the Syrians democracy and respect of diversity³¹. Syrians took that positively. Although still under the state of emergency, opposition figures were encouraged to launch political forums, debates and initiatives³² in what was known as the "Damascus Spring"³³. This movement was quickly put down³⁴, its leaders were arrested and sentenced to five to ten years in prison and all men and women who participated and supported the "Damascus Spring" movement were under the threat of being detained.

The arrests continued in subsequent years to include every protesting voice, human rights and democracy advocates, even bloggers³⁵ and civil society activists³⁶.

The strategy of brutality, arrests, and systematic intimidation did not prevent the Syrian people from rebelling and rejecting their existing reality. In 2011, the Syrian revolution³⁷ broke demanding democracy, justice, freedom and dignity, and was met by the ruthless regime with live bullets, arbitrary arrests and forced absenteeism. The violent arrests happened in front of all Syrians and were documented and transmitted by the Syrians to the whole world via the activists' smart phones³⁸, including the arrests of tens of thousands of Syrian women³⁹, who participated in the revolution, or who belonged to the rebellious regions and/or families⁴⁰.

To circumnavigate what could be considered as an international rejection of the decades-old state of emergency, Bashar al-Assad has lifted it and suspended the transfer of political crimes to the State Security Court⁴¹, only to replace with a worse measure which is an extraordinary court called the "Terrorism Court" that was backed by the anti-terrorism act No. 19 of 2012⁴². This provided him with a legislative framework to legally get rid of tens of thousands of his opponents, whom he branded as terrorists⁴³, and who were executed in the courtyards of the military courts and inside the prisons built for this purpose⁴⁴.

Despite the high level and increasing rates of atrocities, displacement, destruction of cities and infrastructure⁴⁵, use of all internationally prohibited weapons⁴⁶, such as chemical weapons⁴⁷, persistent arbitrary arrests and forced disappearances, the Syrian people were adamant to continue their uprising. Torture and murder of detainees by the various Syrian security agencies, which amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes⁴⁸, were documented. Pictures leaked by Ceasar⁴⁹ show how thousands perished under torture, sickness, neglect or starvation since 2011 till present⁵⁰.

Part one

Political Detention

Political detention in Syria can be only considered arbitrary detention⁵¹ and enforced disappearance⁵², as the detainees spend months or even years, without knowing their location or the reason for their detention. Their families are banned from visiting them and knowing their fate. Detainees' confessions are extracted by means of torture and ill-treatment, in addition for keeping them isolated and deprived of all legal rights and fair trials along with minimum health and human⁵³ conditions.

All of our witnesses were detained because of their political activities, or as hostages instead of their active relatives. They were subjected to massive violations from the moment they were detained. During investigations, their fates and whereabouts remained unknown to their families, and they remained in detention for several years without trials or fixed release dates. Our witnesses, who were trialed through exceptional courts⁵⁴ that lacked all justice requirements and procedures, remained in prison for years even after their sentences were served.

1. Detention Methods & Duration

The moment of detention will always be engraved in the minds of the detainees as the moment that separates between two periods of time. It marks the departure from their lives as they knew it into a dark tunnel with no light at the end. It is a moment when their humanity was ripped off them and they became vulnerable to all kinds of dangers including forced disappearance and death and disappearance. Most of them started their testimony from the specific painful moment of their arrest, describing the horror that accompanied it, as the security services deliberately exercise brutality and harshness during arrests not only to break down the detained before the investigations start, but also as a lesson for anyone who even dares to "cross the line" and participate in the political affairs.

"They surrounded my school with tanks, I still remember I was sitting for an exam in the subject of "Nationalism". I was only fifteen years and four months when they brought me to field court" (Lama)

Lama⁵⁵ was arrested from her high school in Aleppo in 1981 before turning sixteen and remained in detention for nine years. When asked about the nature of charges against her, she answered that until this day she "doesn't know".

"They arrested me from the street; I ran, they followed me, I hid behind passers-by... When they said "We are security," everyone fled. People are afraid of them, most of them are even terrified to watch the arrest from a distance. In 1984 they broke into my house and arrested me for the second time along with my guests... who remained in detention for several weeks before being released." (Sara)

When Sara⁵⁶ was arrested in 1982, the military security officers dragged her in a humiliating manner down a street in Damascus. In 1984, she was arrested along with her visitors from her house.

Mohammad says "They surrounded the neighborhood with a large number of vehicles... More than 40 armed men raided our house... They started beating me up at the building's entrance with no consideration for the feelings of my family and neighbors... I was only 17 years old, they told my mom their usual line: Five minutes and we'll bring him back" (Mohammad)

Mohammad⁵⁷'s family and neighbors were terrified when he was detained in 1980. He was only 17 years old and he remained in detention for thirteen years.

"I was in class when they came to arrest me... The school principle sent for me, I asked them what they wanted, they answered arrogantly: "you will know when we get to the security branch". They confiscated all my papers, including a list of the students' names participating in the trip... They weren't mean to me in front of the Principal, but when I got into their car, squeezed between two of them, it all changed." (Sawsan)

At the time of her arrest, Sawsan⁵⁸ was a class teacher at an elementary school in Latakia. She remembers the moment when the security officers arrived and she noticed them from the window of her class. She tried not to worry her young pupils and continued the lesson, but soon she was called to the principal's office.

At the beginning of the revolution in 2011, the arbitrary detentions and the enforced disappearances of the activists and of any person suspected of supporting the uprising became one of the most important repressive tools used in breaking and suppressing the revolution. Brutal methods were used by the security services in detention centers, not only for other Syrians to watch but the whole world.

Layal⁵⁹ describes the scene of her arrest as if it was happening right now:

"On the President's Bridge in Damascus, two security men stopped me and one of them asked for my ID... They started beating me on the street... The traffic was very heavy, they dragged me to the "Al-Barakiya" which was meters away, they didn't stop beating me... An old woman passing by... cried at the scene..."

"When I arrived at the "Al-Barakiya"⁶⁰ one of them said: it's good that you are here, it's been a while since we last touched our women... they placed a young detainee (man) with me in the same room... one of them came every now and then to spit on us..."

Layal expresses her disappointment from the passivity of the people who witnessed her arrest, for they didn't speak out as she was humiliated. That shows the extreme terror the people are living in, and the painful consequences that cross their minds in case they thought of supporting her or any other detainee. She also describes her fear upon hearing the security officers expressing how happy they were to have her to compensate for their wives, in a clear threat of rape.

Yara⁶¹ talks about her fourth arrest that happened in 2016 when her family house was raided:

"They pulled down the house's door and entered... they were 15 heavily armed men... I was in my room when they broke in, ignoring my father's plea to give me some time to wear some decent clothes... they searched the house with deliberate vandalism... they even ruined the windows' shades"

By the early 1980 s the regime became more aggressive and the security services were no longer detaining opposition for short periods, but rather they resorted to a more painful punishment: leaving detainees for years on end without letting them know when/if would ever be released.

"I spent 8 years of my life in detention, without trial and without knowing when I would be released. The officer in charge of the investigation said to me "you're going to rot in jail"...!" (Sara)

Sara was detained in June 1982 and was released in March 1983, then was detained again in March 1984 to remain in prison until the end of 1991.

"In 1980, many politicians were arrested. I got out of prison after four years, many remained imprisoned for years long after my release, and some remain in prison till now... Before Hafez al-Assad, political detention didn't scare us... my brother and many of my friends were arrested before me, they stayed for a short period and were released... Hafez Al-Assad not only arrested his opponents but he stole their lives" (Akram⁶²)

Aziza⁶³ was held hostage for 11 years instead of her husband without sitting for trial or knowing her release date.

"I stayed in prison for 11 years without being charged or tried... I was held hostage instead of my husband... but my husband died and they knew that... My children grew up while I was imprisoned... I grew older and the best years of my life were wasted in detention... Every day I said I would be released tomorrow... Certainly had I known the length of my sentence it would have been easier for me and my children."

Rehab⁶⁴ was detained along with a group of teenagers, including two members of her family because of a scribbling demand on walls of their town: they were charged with several counts including "threatening the security of the State and destabilizing the regime." This is how Rehab summarized the charges claimed with every round of torture in the branch where she was kept.

Rehab says: "I stayed in a cell at Palestine Branch for six months, then I was transferred to a civil prison where a series of trials started... I anticipated my release every single day... two years passed while I waited... The judge released me for not being guilty... while the youngsters were sentenced to two years in prison for defamation."

Hafez Al-Assad passed away on June 10, 2000, after he paved the way for his son and heir, who, just like him, used political detention as an effective mean against his opponents and critics which included: human rights activists, intellectuals, and students.

Ayat⁶⁵ did not imagine that she would be arrested, tortured, and kept in detention for nine months for distributing leaflets which she claims were not political. She and a group of her colleagues only wanted to protest some the injustice around them.

"Nine months later when my dad came to sign a pledge for my release... the officer told him: Be grateful that she is out... only the lucky ones get out of here alive."

After the revolution started in 2011, the Syrian regime began to deal with the activists with systematic repression. Hundreds of thousands of women, men and even children were detained, thousands died under torture, and tens of thousands remain forcibly absent⁶⁶ until the date of writing this report, approximately 8,000 of which are women.

2. Increased Suffering

Suffering from the prison's harsh conditions in addition to being detached from their families, the detainees' sense of time becomes dreadful, especially on the mothers who miss their children.

In her first detention in 1997, Aziza was pregnant with her third baby. Although the investigators and executioners knew about her condition, this didn't stop them from torturing her:

"They placed me in a "Wheel" and took turns in beating me... they beat me for 12 hours straight... then they electrified my toes until I passed out... by the end of every round of torture someone would come and say: "So far you haven't seen anything of what's ahead of you!"... I wondered what could happen more! I wished for anything to stop the torture... I wished for abortion... imagine when you reach a point wishing your own baby dead so that they would stop torturing you..."

Aziza was arrested in 1980 for the second time, along with her three children. The son she had after her first detention was still an infant, so they kept him with her. Like the Muslim Brotherhood women, she wasn't subjected to any trial. She was detained twice as a hostage instead of her husband, and was waiting anxiously for her release. She said that as a mother, the presence of her baby relieved her anxiety while at the same time making her feel guilty towards him.

I stayed in Aleppo Central Prison for seven years and my youngest child stayed with me, since he was still an infant at the time of the second detention... By the time he reached four years old I decided to give him to my mother, this was a very hard decision to take, for my baby was my companion and made the days pass a little bit faster, but keeping him with me would have been a crime against him. The day when my mother took him was the hardest day on me throughout detention... for a whole month I wasn't able to speak..."

In the 1987 arrest campaigns dozens of young men and women from the Communist Labor Party were captured, including some couples whose children remained with their relatives in the hope that one of the parents might be released. For those, detention was a double penalty. Some mothers were denied visiting rights and were banned for years from seeing their children. If the visits ever occurred, they would be permitted once a month only, for a very short time, and under close surveillance. These short visits only left scars in the memory of their kids.

Lina⁶⁷, who was also held hostage instead of for her husband, a leader of the Communist Labor Party in 1987, said:

"I could see my daughter in my dreams with sloppy hair, and untidy clothes... One time at the end of my daughter's and my mother's visit, and while they were walking towards the exit door, my daughter cried "Mama". As the warden was leading me by the arm, I turned around to answer her, I wanted to tell her that I will come back soon, so she would calm down, but the warden commanded me not to turn around. I think the experience she had from our absence still lives in her memory until today... I went back to my cell, full with oppression and anger... After all these years I still feel guilty towards her"

It is apprehensible that most of the detainees who were mothers before their detention occurred, confirm that they have decided not to resume their political work after their release, because they can't hold the burden of letting their children pay the highest price for their actions.

Lina adds to this subject "my daughter was only one year and a half old one when her father and I were detained, because of this she lived with our relatives, moving from one house to another till the day I was out. We waited eight years for her father's release... Since my discharge, I never resumed any kind of political activity... it was only after we left Syria and I was sure that I was far from any detention danger, that I returned to being politically active... I never wanted to repeat that agonizing experience for my daughter"

After the revolution's break out, many women including pregnant ones were detained. Mothers were taken along with their sons and daughters. At detention people were no longer treated as human beings. At the security branches and prisons, they were labeled with numbers and treated as such. When talking about their detention experiences, they said this period of their lives was the hardest and most cruel one, letting extremely serious psychological effects on them and their children.

Yara says in her testimony: "The warden told me that when someone asks about my name, I answer "it's 1000"... In the hospital's room 601, I met the detainee 995, we were whispering, when she told me her name was "Alma"... she muttered that she didn't commit anything to get detained, she didn't even participate in any demonstration... She mentioned that when they detained her a year and a half ago, she was breastfeeding, she was complaining from the pain in her breasts and while begging the investigator to leave her so she can breastfeed her baby... instead he would hit her even harder focusing on her breasts and repeatedly saying to her "so you say you want to breastfeed your baby?!"

Before and after the revolution, there were mothers who gave birth in prison. If there were relatives available, the babies would be handed to them when they reached one year old. In case there was no one available, the baby would stay with his mother until she is released.

"There were pregnant detainees with me when I was transferred from the branch to Adra prison... one of them gave birth to a baby girl whom she named Hanin... the baby suffered from jaundice when she was born... the prisoner's director refused to give milk and medicine to the baby, consequently she died six days after being born..." (Hala⁶⁸)

3. Hostages and Means of Revenge

The security services have systematically used women as hostages since the 1980s. Some of our witnesses have stated that the detained women, whom they have met during their periods of detention and who were charged for their affiliation to the Muslim Brotherhood movement,, were mostly held hostages instead of their male relatives. Some of them stated that women were not really active members of the Muslim Brotherhood organization, since in these conservative environments women often have no say and rarely have any information about any political or military activities.

Waad⁶⁹ talks about a woman she met in the dormitories of political detainees in Douma prison, when she was transferred there in 1988:

“In prison I met a woman who was from Aleppo’s countryside, she was in her sixties... she was illiterate and had no clue about politics... she was diabetic and the disease was slowly beginning to disturb her eyesight... she was a hostage instead of her husband who fled to Iraq; when I met her she had been detained for five years already.

Luna was detained as a hostage instead of her sister, who was wanted by the security services in 1987.

“They were asking me about my sister’s location the whole time, demanding information that would lead them to her... I remained in prison a whole year... they repeatedly said to me that I deserved this punishment and that they were going to keep me until my sister shows up”

With the beginning of the revolution, the regime was not satisfied by only detaining women as hostages, but also used them as means of revenge against the revolution’s incubator environment. Large numbers of women were detained at checkpoints, due to their residence or to the family names that appeared on their identity cards, and as a way to avenge against the rebellious regions and cities or from the families whose majority of their members revolted against the regime. Human Rights organizations have documented that the Syrian regime has forced detainees⁷⁰ (including girls under eighteen years old)⁷¹ to appear on television and admit that they have practiced “Jihad Al Nikah⁷²” at the request of their parents with the Free Syrian Army for the purpose of revenge and defamation.

Most of our detained women witnesses told us that during the years of the revolution they met women in the security branches and prisons, who had not been engaged in any political work or demonstrations.

Rania⁷³, who was detained for participating in a peaceful sit-in to stop the killings of civilians, says: “In Palestine branch, there was a young pregnant detainee among us... every time the jailer called her for interrogation she used to collapse from the intensity of fear... most of the time they beat her on her belly... the detective used a cable when hitting her... they detained her as a revenge from her ex-husband who joined the FSA, although she was married and pregnant from another man at that time.

Mary⁷⁴ was detained during the revolution for her civil and relief activities, she moved between many branches before ending up in Adra prison. Inside the prison Mary worked on the detainee’s psychological support, especially for mothers and minors. She says in her testimony: “More than 80% of the women I have met in detention had nothing to do with the revolution, and had not been engaged in any political activity... they were only detained because they were from the uprising areas or because men from their families were linked to FSA... I met three women in Daraya’s branch from section 227 who were only detained for this reason... and so they detained women coming from Douma, Al Yarmouk camp and other areas that were outside their control... they detained women they held on checkpoints... the name of the residence place on the identity card was sufficient enough for detention...”

The regime has not only detained the women as a means for punishing the revolution’s fostering environment, but it also deliberately abused the detainees’ sisters, wives and mothers as a way to avenge and humiliate them.

Munir⁷⁴ says that during his imprisonment, they were spreading rumors about his wife being a whore and that it is what was most painful to him in detention.

"In section 215 I was asked for investigation by the officer, another two were present whom I couldn't see because I was blind folded... the officer began his talk by telling me "I pity your situation, if I were you I would have killed her!" I replied "what happened?", he said "your wife is practicing prostitution"... they have spread this rumor among the branch's detainees... one of the detainees passed it to me while apologizing... during the investigations that's what hurt me the most."

Munir further describes how the elements of the security services deal with the detainees on every occasion, even if the occasion is only transferring them to court.

"On our way from the detention branch to the court and as we arrived to the overcrowded bus, the agents began torturing and scolding us starting with the young men first and asking each one: "Are you married?" if the answer was "No", then they would ask for his sister's phone number while beating and tormenting him, saying: "we will call her... we want to have some fun with her" ...

Munir, who was detained in 2012, remained in Sednaya detention for two years upon his participation in the revolution, said: "When my turn came I told him I was married, so he started beating me up with the end of his rifle while asking me for my wife's phone number... he told me "it's been a while since she got laid, I will call her to do so on your behalf"... this humiliation, scolding, beating continued while we were inside the court."

4. Women's Special Needs in Detention

The testimonies of women who were detained during the Assad Father's rule revealed that little consideration was given to the special needs of women in detention centers; the level of carelessness with respect to this issue varied from one branch to another. The special needs of women such as: the sanitary pads, medicines, anti-inflammatory drugs, clothing, were often the responsibility of the relatives, who had to bring them during their visit or would deposit cash on behalf of the detainee and to the prison's administration for this purpose. This issue was often conditioned by the official's mood. Testimonies indicated that during any detainee's initial investigation period, those needs were often unavailable. Women detainees have collectively agreed that it took a lot of courage from them when asking for sanitary pads, as it was a real embarrassment followed with humiliation and insults.

Lina who was detained by Palestine branch in 1987, says: "asking for sanitary pads was a big burden and a problem by itself... we had to knock on the door and ask loudly; the jailer often answered us out loud with very bad cynical and verbal insults, so all the men in the other dormitories could hear him"

In the Brotherhood's women detention centers, especially during the early years, none of the women's special needs or medical care were taken into account. In 1982 Palmyra prison witnessed the birth of a baby girl, whose natal rope was cut off with a metal canister. The mother who suffered a very bad health and psychological conditions, gave birth without any medical care, according to our witnesses who might have met the mother in a later time in Douma's prison for women. Additionally, the women who were detained for long periods of time recounted the difficulties in bathing and problems of lice and scabies among female prisoners, where the branch's administration did not respond to their requests for changing the blankets or obtaining treatment medications. It should be noted that women are often ashamed to mention gynecological infections to the branch's doctor or management for it will be an opportunity for humiliation and sexual harassment.

At Aleppo Central prison in 1981, women were held in one dormitory. Some of them continued to be held for many years as a deposit by the political and military security forces of the city. According to witnesses, the women's dormitories were separated from the passageway with bars and were exposed to men's dormitories. The women detainees put on a cloth curtain to get some privacy but the prison's management removed it at the first opportunity:

Aziza: "the men detainees protested for the ill-treatments and demanded an improvement in their situation, as a result they came and beat a lot of them... we were the only female dormitory among the dormitories of men, we had placed a curtain on the rails that separated us from them to ensure some privacy... that day, they took the curtain off and drowned us

with profanity and insults... for them we should be exposed since we were not entitled to any privacy.”

Oussama⁷⁶ also describes this part of Aleppo’s Central Prison in his testimony: “There were nine dormitories for men, and one for women... women were not allowed to go out of the dormitory to have some fresh air with us... the women’s dormitory was exposed to the other dormitories via an iron grille... the women had placed a curtain for some privacy... there were officers who treated them rudely to our ears, even though most of them had finished the interrogation period.”

Aziza, who was detained in this prison, confirms Oussama’s testimony: “In the Central Prison we were not allowed to leave our dormitory for some fresh air, there was a small window from which we could breathe... I remained there for seven years... I lost all my nails due to calcium deficiency, in addition to other problems I have encountered”

Despite Aleppo Central Prison being a civil prison, apparently its conditions were not better than those of the security branches, especially for women: detainees were placed in underground cellars, denied sun light and fresh air. However it was mentioned in many testimonies that being transferred from the security branch to a Civil prison, even if it was a sign of a long stay, was in general considered an improvement in the conditions of the female detainees, for at least they are relieved from the pressure of being called every now and then for investigations, they could communicate freely with their prison colleagues, they could be entitled for relatives visits, in addition to living on healthier and better terms relatively to those of the security branches.

“It was a great joy for me to arrive to Douma’s Prison after spending six months in the branch’s cellars. When I got exposed to the sun, washed with warm water, drank hot tea from a glass cup; ordinary things; but only those who are deprived of them know their value.” (Waad)

Leila talks about what she missed while she was in the security branch; she missed the feeling of being a human being before anything else.

“It’s so hard to be cut off from life... to change from a person with a free will to someone deprived from the minimum human rights of humanity... you know that a new day has started when you hear the rattling and banging of whips on the iron doors instead of the normal morning sounds... from the water spills and the screaming of jailers cursing everything... from requesting detainees for investigations... this is how you just realize it’s a new morning.” (Leila)⁷⁷

Women detainees have often relied on primitive remedies for cases like Lice or gynecological infections, using alternatives for the sanitary pads that are often unavailable. The presence of female doctors was a possibility for them to alleviate these problems.

In Kfar Sousa branch, Lama says she met with Islamist, Leftists, Right-wing Baathists female detainees and others. Lama was detained in 1981 by the State Security in Aleppo, then transferred a week later to the branch of Kfar Sousa in Damascus where she remained until 1986, after which she was transferred to the civil prison in Qatana:

“In the dormitory of Kfar Sousa there were two doctors... a doctor related to the Brotherhood organization and another related to the Communist party... we were about 22 women in a small dormitory... we slept on one side, because there was no room for movement... there were no windows in the dormitory, there was only a “Choke”, with a very loud engine that worked continuously, since if it stopped we could die from suffocation... we had a tap at the toilet... we used it for bathing, drinking, washing food utensils, and for everything else... we asked them for sanitary pads but they didn’t give us... we’d rip off our underwear, use them, and then wash them to use them again... this situation lasted for five years... every few days we asked them to open the cell’s door so

that the air inside can change, and they would only do so under our extreme insistence, but only for few minutes... in all cases the Choke's (engine with ventilation fan) noise was a blessing for us, because it diminished the sounds of torture, otherwise we would have collapsed"

Twenty-six years after Lama's arrival to the State Security branch of Kfar Sousa, Dr. Fidaa⁷⁸ was detained for forty days in the same branch described by Lama above, and she also spoke about the poor conditions of the detainees, mentioning the same "Choke."

"I begged the branch officer to turn off the "Choke" for five minutes only, in order to be relieved from its annoying noise, he replied: "in the next room there are fifty men all of whom will die of suffocation if we turn it off for five minutes."

Twenty-six years later, the circumstances of the branch didn't seem to improve; it even got worse. There was no appropriate medical care or good food given to the detainees; and as for the women's needs, Fidaa says: "Because of the connections of one of my relatives, my family managed to pass me a suitcase of clothes, that included some bed sheets. We ripped one of them, and made sanitary towels out of the shredded pieces. There were women who had never changed their clothes for one whole year."

When the pre-revolution female detainees talked about the detention conditions and its journals, we often noticed that they had a sense of shame, especially when the conditions of the female revolution detainees were addressed. Since the beginning of 2011, the security branches and the regime prisons have been crowded with male and female detainees. The detention's conditions have aggravated; especially with the increasing number of detainees, and the spread of chaos and expansion of powers; as it became possible for any officer to become an investigator, executioner and judge at the same time, especially in the absence of accountability and insured impunity.

Abir⁷⁹ says: "At branch 215, when we asked them for sanitary pads, they gave us but in small quantities... my friends who were detained in the air force – Al Mazzeh Military Airport – mentioned that during their menstrual period they had to sit on one blanket until their menstruation ended."

Loyal recounts how the jailers in branch 215 dealt with detainees asking to go to the toilet. "For some of the women prisoners I was strong and heroic because I had the courage to knock on the door asking for permission to visit the toilet; since I was suffering from diarrhea I couldn't wait for another twelve hours to be permitted to visit the toilet... imagine how silly this request is... for some women detainees I was risking my life by knocking on the door."

In Yara's testimony in dealing with the special needs of women in the Air Security Branch of Damascus, she says: "On my fourth detention they transferred me to Al-Mazzeh Military Airport... I got my period out of terror... I told them: excuse me I got my period and I need some stuff to keep myself clean... he looked at me and said: Oops you got your period, oh yes it's true that you have a menstrual cycle... ok now I will show you how can I stop it for you to destroy your filthy breed, then he got the " Al Akhdar Al Ebrahmi " and he used it while beating me violently at the bottom of my abdomen until I fell on the ground, then he started kicking me and repeating: this is for your filthy breed."

5. Discriminations and special Considerations

It can be said that once the male/female detainee enters the detention branch, he/she loses all his/her identity and privileges. All the officers inside the detention centers will deal with him/her as an enemy or a threatening project against the authority. He/she will be subjected to curses, insults and torture. However, some testimonies have indicated a kind of discriminations in dealing with some of the detainees due to some special considerations.

In this section of the report and relying on the testimonies that we got, we try to identify the considerations that the security services take into account when dealing with women detainees, especially those of the revolution, as it was noticed in many cases that the ethnic ground is taken into account. They are also discriminated on the basis of their physical appearances, their social, educational and even economical levels, or according to the support they receive from outside the prison, whether from organizations, regions, or their families. However, the situation in security centers varies as they are often governed by the mood and power of the officers and chiefs.

First, witnesses have collectively agreed that the torture against the male detainees is more severe than the torture against the women detainees since the 1980s to the present day. In the same way the witnesses, men and women detainees of the 1980s, have collectively agreed that the torture and humiliation, even the sexual violence against women belonging to the Islamic Brotherhood, was more severe and violent than that experienced by the leftist women detainees, such as the Communist Labor Party and others. It can be said that most of our witnesses from the 1980s detentions, even those who were severely tortured, have declared that they are ashamed to talk about their experience: "It cannot be compared to the cruelty and violence of what women detainees have been subjected to since the beginning of the revolution until now."

Sawsan recounts how they distinguished her as a women detainee from the male detainees. She talks about a scene that is engraved in her memory when the security officers were transporting the men detainees from the military security branch in Latkia to Palestine branch in Damascus in 1987:

"I was the first to get on the bus to transport us from Latkia to Damascus... I was the only woman... they placed me at the back then they started dragging the guys up to the bus... I saw them... they were handcuffed and blindfolded... I could smell the clotted blood rising from their wounds..."

It was stated, in some of the testimonies of the leftists detainees of the 1980s, that the regime did not discriminate between the detainees neither on their ethnic or social background, but according to their political views. However according to some testimonies, the security services in some cases took into account the social status of the detainee, especially regarding the conditions of detention.

Waad says: "they didn't use violence while detaining me, even the officer in the military investigation branch of our area refused to transfer me in the Palestine branch's car with the officers coming from Damascus. He told them that the area is small and everybody knows everybody. I went in a regular car with an officer and two security elements... of course I was lucky because the trip in the other military car wouldn't have been easy at all... perhaps my father's job status at that time was the reason why the officer treated me in this way... or perhaps he took into account our social environment, since my family is well known in our small town."

During detention years ethnic discriminations happened transparently. Testimonies mentioned a lot of deliberate ethnic discriminations, taking into account the minority identity of the detainee, versus the religious identity that the regime has linked to the revolution since its beginning where eventually and at the revolution's last years it was stigmatized by Islamism then terrorism.

Mary says in her testimony "I was dressed elegantly by chance at the moment of my detention... My name that reveals my religious identity made him speak to me gently... When the director of the prison led me to the dormitory he said to the other detainees: Christians are the supreme people... they are not like you... there was a person holding a thick stick who always stood in the corridor that led to the bathrooms, every time the women went out to use the toilets he started beating them, I was the only one excluded from the beatings."

Nibal⁸¹, who is from a minority ethnic ground, was detained in 2013 for supporting besieged areas of Damascus countryside through the smuggling of relief aid. She mentions in her testimony: "They didn't use on me the torture methods they used on the other women... they used a machine that pressed on their fingers leaving their hands swollen and bleeding, and they hit them on their thighs with a cable that left marks of torture. I felt pain every time I saw this... they didn't torture me... officers told me "you are one of us"..."

Although most testimonies have mentioned that the security services took into account their minority identity when dealing with women detainees, for some this didn't play a positive role: on the contrary, they suffered a double punishment because of their ethnic background.

Hala says: "During my detention years, I met a young girl who belonged to the Alawite religious community... this girl had been tortured the most among us..." Hala adds: When I met her, she already had spent five months in the branch... every now and then a jailer would insult her with the rudest words, because he claimed "she had disbanded them."

Ethnic and regional discriminations weren't the only kind of discrimination, and testimonies referred to some individual cases where social and class discriminations occurred. Mary talks about a rich woman whom she met in detention: they took into account that she was wealthy and released her after they financially abused her.

"A rich woman, whose husband belonged to the FAS, was about to escape along with her children when they were caught and transferred to the branch. A lot of money and fake passports were in their possessions... they bargained on everything they had and then released them."

It can be said that this had repeatedly happened in the security centers during the revolution, where rich people were able to pay for their freedom, unlike the poor ones who remained detained for long years, even though they were not accused with terrorism or any other charges.

The analysis of the testimonies shows that there are special considerations that security services take into account, but these are often subjected to the officers' and investigators' moods. Testimonies have stated that security officers favored the women detainees who can expose them later in the media after their release, as well as those who have important connections and contacts outside the prison.

Abeer says that the campaign that had been launched by her friends which supported her release might be the reason why she hadn't been physically tortured. She adds: "I was fortunate that I had been wearing an elegant outfit upon my arrival at the branch... he hit my colleague that was standing next to me, then he turned and asked for my phone number, saying that he was going to help me..." She added that they took into consideration her educational level and that they admired her knowledge for the English language: "One time an investigator chatted with me for three hours, trying to convince me with the cosmic conspiracy. He showed admiration for me, my work and the trips that I have made to USA and Europe... he tried his best to appear as an educated man by using the English language every now and then throughout the conversation."

Some testimonies suggested that during the revolution the treatment of the detainees varied from one branch to another, even from one year to another. With time the situation got worse, as some of the women detainees who were imprisoned on 2011 then got detained again in later years claim.

Nada⁸², who was detained more than once and by different branches between 2011 and 2015, says that, during her first detention in the State Security branch in Damascus, they took into account that she came from a prominent Damascene family, but a year later when her friend who also descends from a prominent family was detained at the same branch this element had no weight.

"...On my first detention they took into consideration that I belonged to a prominent Damascene family and didn't torture me... but my Damascene friend who was later detained after me told me that she did get tortured."

She adds that in her last detention in 2015, while she was in Adra prison, which supposedly was relatively better than other security branches, she was shocked by the humiliating ways in which they treated the women detainees there.

“When we used to leave our dormitories, we were asked to put our hands behind our backs and bend our heads towards the ground . . . we were supposed to show respect to the prison’s director.”

Nada believes that the security men are afraid of being accountable for their actions. When taking advantage of the detainees, they bet on their fear and helplessness. If they can they will definitely abuse them financially and sexually. They try to stay away from strong women who can expose them. Security men deal with their own internal conditions inside the branch, they fear each other and they compete in showing their loyalty to their masters. Based on her own personal experience, Nada explains why she believes this, she adds (the investigator had seen a naked photo of her while he was flipping in the saved albums on her seized computer). I got very furious when the investigator saw my naked photo, I asked him sharply without taking into account his reaction, “why do you have these pictures”, “You don’t have the right to see them” . . . he replied that I shouldn’t worry about it and that the photos are in safe hands . . . I raised my voice angrily telling him “you don’t have the right to see them” . . . when he sensed my insistence, he tried to calm me down and changed the subject.

Nada further adds that she considered this an insult and violation of her privacy:

“At my third detention in another branch, I recognized that they had the same photos in their possession . . . I recognized them from their colors . . . as if they were transferring them from one branch to another, I thought that in case they blacked mailed me I would expose them . . .”

She adds: “...In all of my detentions there had been no violation of my body, but this was a violation of my privacy and it has conquered me so much . . .”

Doctor Fidaa recounts a similar incident that occurred with her in Kfar Souusa branch only a few days after she was detained in 2007:

“Days after I arrived, they sent for me to start the investigation. Before asking any question, the investigator started cursing me. I sat down when he told me to and I said, “Please talk to me with respect as I do”. After hearing this sentence, his behavior and his tone changed radically and he started asking me about my political position, which led to an actual dialogue.”

Fidaa later talks about the mixed feelings she had towards the security men in the branch:

“I pitied them at times and at other times I hated them. If the situation in our country was different these men would have been living a normal life as workers or students, after all they are the children of this country. Indeed, inside detention centers we get confused with our feelings that are mixed at one times and contradictory at others . . . that’s what tyranny and oppression does to us.”

The security services assimilate with the society in its gendered discrimination against women, and often go along with it in a very ridiculous way. Luna recounted that on the day of her arrest in 1987, they didn’t wait for her mother to arrive home before they detained her, they didn’t even leave her a message about her daughter’s whereabouts. On the other hand, when they released her a year later, they transferred her from the Palestine Branch to the military security branch in Aleppo, where they made her wait several days until her mother came and picked her up.

"I stayed for a week in Aleppo branch waiting for any of my family members, who happened to be outside Aleppo at that time, to pick me up. The same officers who took me from my home a year ago and didn't wait for my mother's arrival, who kept me for one whole year without informing my mother about me, kept me at Aleppo branch until she came and picked me up, as if they wanted to prove to her and to the society their strong concern for me."

Regarding the patriarchal dissociative mentality on which the security services relied to deal with the women detainees, Nada said that in Adra prison, unlike men, women weren't allowed to use the library.

"Even in prison there was a distinction between men and women, for example, once I tried to borrow a book from the library, they didn't allow me, because they said that the book might contain an immoral content that might spoil my morals as a woman."

Part two

The Torture

Torture is the act of inflicting excruciating pain, as a punishment or revenge, or as means of getting a confession or information, or for sheer cruelty . Torture is considered internationally proscribed under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights issued in 1948 and the Universal Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ratified by Syria on April 21, 1969 , as well as the Convention against torture , which obliges the Member States to take the necessary measures to prevent Torture within its borders. It is worth noting that during Bashar Al Assad era -in August 2004 -, Syria ratified this agreement and submitted its reports to the Committee against Torture, which is in charge of controlling the signatory States on this agreement , while torture remained the most prominent method for extracting information from detainees and humiliating them along with their communities, even if this led to their mutilation or murder. There have been a lot of evidences that have documented pictures and names of thousands of detainees who have died under torture since the beginning of the revolution and this is not new in the history of the ruling family. Hundreds of Islamists and Leftists have died under torture during the Assad Father time, and it should be noted that until the date of writing this report, the detention campaigns in Syria continue and the dungeons in the security branches are packed with detainees who are deprived from the minimum requirements of human life and health care, threatened to die every moment .

In this part of this report we try to look into the manifestations of this violence, how it is being practiced on political detainees as well as its physical and psychological impact on them. We do this through the testimonies of our witnesses who have been detained at different periods of time during both the Assad Father's and son's eras and by different security branches.

1. Torture in Syrian Security Branches

The torture methods that were used against the political detainees during the Assad Father's time and were adopted⁹³ later by his son, are considered universal. Some date back to the Middle Ages and others to Nazi's prisons such as the "German chair"⁹⁴. Although many repressive regimes still share the same types and methods of torture, the Syrian regime has proven during the recent years its creativity⁹⁵ and slyness in using these methods and that's what distinguished its exceptional and brutal mentality, that appeared clearly in the last few years. As torture continues throughout detention periods⁹⁶, the number of detainees increased, and overcrowding became a new method of mass torture⁹⁷ intended for humiliation, where there is no space to sit or sleep comfortably. Banning detainees of sympathy among themselves, depriving them of healthy food and sunlight, and preventing them from cleanliness are all torturing methods that could last for years.

Most of our women witnesses have been cruelly tortured by several different methods, leading them at some point to wish they were dead so that the torture would stop. Even though their bodies have resisted the extreme suffering and abhorrence, physical effects remain visible on the bodies of some women; as for the psychological wounds, they are very deep and still vivid, even for those who have been detained decades ago.

When speaking and remembering the tortured detainees who spent nearly fifty years under the Assad's tyrannical regime, a harsh question emerges: how much torture have the detainees suffered, to cause them to die?

"I didn't talk to anyone about it... or actually no one really asked me..!"(Sara)

"In my first detention they tortured me by the quadruple, electricity, and the cupboard⁹⁸, but in my second detention the torture was more severe... maybe because I didn't learn my lesson and I resumed my political activity as soon as I was released on the first time... they tortured me continuously for one whole week... they didn't allow me to sleep... the torture parties were mostly violent during the night" (Sara)

Sara recalls that her arrival at the security branch on her first detention in 1983 was the

hardest moment, she was tortured with electric cables to extract information. At her second detention in 1984 the torture was even worse; they would shower her with cold water so her clothes would stick to her skin then they would start beating her up with the cable then electrify her fingers. Sleep deprivation after the torture rounds was the hardest and the most painful:

“When the investigation round ended, the officer ordered them to remove the blankets from my cell and flood it with water. Luckily, the floor was tilted a bit, therefore there was a dry corner where I would sit all night, I couldn’t sleep for a whole week . . . after all these years I still feel that I’m freezing every time I remember this . . .” She adds: “I didn’t tell anyone about this . . . actually no one asked me . . . but as soon as I arrived in the country of asylum I had the courage to open up and speak . . .”

Mohammad, who has witnessed a horrible crime of torture in Palmyra prison and at the Security State Branch in Aleppo in 1980, says:

“Torture begins at the moment you arrive to the branch, at the door . . . in the State Security Branch in Aleppo they used to iron the detainees’ chests and electrify the detainees’ chests and backs using a high voltage electrical coil . . . women were severely tortured . . . we didn’t see them, we just heard their screams during the night . . . when they were about to torture a woman, they used to knock on our dormitory’s door to get her spare pants . . . later, they stopped bothering..”

Our witnesses from the Communist Labor Party have declared that during investigations they were subjected to a similar treatment to the one men were exposed to, for extraction of information that might lead them to the party members. They all agreed that they were prepared psychologically for detention: all those who are politically active against the regime know ahead of time that sooner or later this is going to happen.

On the same idea, Salam⁹⁹ spoke: “when they detained me from home, they didn’t beat me, on the other hand as soon as I arrived to the branch and even before the investigation started, they started assaulting and slapping me . . . I wasn’t scared for I was prepared psychologically that this will happen . . . I had a perception of what might happen, we were young and full of energy and hope, we wanted to change the world and that required sacrifice that we were ready to pay.”

Some of the women detainees and according to their testimonies had prepared themselves to the idea of being tortured, for them it was predictable, unlike Lama who was only fifteen when she got detained, she didn’t understand what she did to deserve this.

Maya says: “I was most insulted by the fact that they didn’t know why I was tormented . . . they never told me . . . they used to electrify my fingers and ears . . . I remained nine years in detention, and till today I still don’t know what I did to deserve all this . . . even now, after decades I avoid getting close to electricity or plugging any device...”

“Who gave him the right to torture me?”

Under Assad’s son rule, the picture of detention centers and brutal tortures didn’t change in the minds of the Syrians, since he inherited the same repressive practices from his father. Most Syrians still have a firm perception that approaching politics is considered a big risk that requires a great courage.

Abir, who was detained in 2012 and was a peaceful activist in the revolution, says:

“I had an idea of what could happen in detention . . . I wasn’t scared . . . I was expecting the results . . . that could start with torture, humiliation, to rape . . . so I have prepared myself, I cut my hair and dyed it in white, and let my body hair grow . . . so in case they raped me, it wouldn’t be fun for them . . . and it would remain part of the torture . . . this might sound ridiculous but that is actually what I have done . . .”

The years of the revolution have witnessed many crimes and different torture methods against the detainees. Although most of our witnesses have been subjected to different kind of tortures, most of them repeated Jana¹⁰⁰'s line "relatively to others, they didn't hurt me much!" It seems that they use this line as a way to deceive the harsh psychological condition that precedes the torture, which becomes a reality as soon as it starts, so assessing the severity of torture, or lack of it, becomes a survival method of what is worse i.e. rape or death.

Jana says: "they burned my legs "so I don't return to demonstrations" as they claimed... they burned them using iron spits and electricity... the scars will never disappear from my legs... even though they didn't hurt me much relatively to others, I was physically and psychologically mutilated when I was released from detention."

A question was brought forward by some of our witnesses as they told us about the memories of the torture they had been subjected to: "who gave him the right to torture me?" When confronting their executioners with this question, they answered sarcastically that they didn't consider those who opposed their regime to be a human being worthy of life, while few others answered that they were just doing what they were ordered to do. Certain testimonies have showed that some of the security elements especially those who were compulsory recruited couldn't tolerate to watch the torture parties, but with time they got used to watching and participating in them, and after that the pain of the tortured people became ridicule topic.

Sahar¹⁰¹ talks bitterly about the sarcasm of the security officers who witnessed her torture: "As soon as I entered the director's branch office, they took off my shoes and socks and placed me in the cupboard, they pushed it so hard that my face hit the ground, then they started beating me up... with every question the pace of beating got stronger... when the torture was over, I started jumping out of pain... they were laughing sarcastically at me... what hurt me the most is that they were almost my kids age."

Ayat was detained because she was distributing leaflets at the university during the transitional period between the end of Al-Assad father time and the beginning of the revolution. Ayat says in her testimony that what hurt her the most during the torture was the presence of her mother as a way to amplify her pain, and also a way to torture the mother who was watching helplessly.

"I will never forget this memory, when I was handcuffed in the back and blindfolded, I was on my knees when the executioner grabbed me from the hood and pushed me with all his strength to hit the ground, then he placed his shoes on my head and pushed me back to the ground... That's when I heard my mother scream... they brought her to watch!... this scene will always be stuck in my head."

The security centers were almost empty from political detainees when Dr. Fidaa was detained in 2007, but she states in her testimony that they were full with judicial prisoners and that she was shocked by the amount of torture they were subjected to:

Fidaa says: "I used to assume that only political detainees in the political branches were tortured for extraction of information, and that those who were arrested for criminal reasons were interrogated by well-known legal means and methods, only to find out through the State Security Branch and Douma prison that I had a wrong perception, and that was not the case, especially for the poor and the oppressed."

Fidaa adds that the judicial prisoners who had arrived to Douma prison from the security and criminal branches were subjected to torture, humiliation and sometimes stripping and rape: "During my time in prison, I have met a lot of women prisoners coming from the criminal security, they were severely beaten, unable to walk and were subjected to a lot of harassment, stripping and humiliation"

2. Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is considered one of the most serious crimes because of its devastating physical, psychological, social and economical effects on the victims themselves, as well on their families and relatives and even on the entire social fabric¹⁰².

Sexual violence is prohibited under Human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law¹⁰³. The past twenty years have witnessed a significant development in the International Criminal¹⁰⁴ Law that criminalizes forms of sexual violence globally.

Sexual violence is not limited to the actual penetration of the human body¹⁰⁵, and some acts doesn't even include physical contact; case law and legal writings have provided a number of examples of sexual violence such as sexual mutilation, sexual exploitation, forced stripping and virginity tests.

The concept of sexual violence is therefore broader than the crime of rape i.e. it involves rape with a broader significance. The International Courts defines it as:

"any act of a sexual nature which is committed on a person under circumstances which are coercive"¹⁰⁶

A sexual act has a very broad connotation, ranging from penetration to the pronunciation of words with sexual overtones. The International Courts have indicated that "coercion" must be broadly understood and that it is not limited to the use of physical force, but also includes threats, intimidation, extortion and all other forms of coercion that exploit the feelings of fear and despair.

".. Thirty years, and I've been training myself to forget about this." (Salam)

Most of our detained witnesses that were under both the Father & Son ruling times have stated in their testimonies that they had been threatened with rape, abused with verbal violence, and were intimidated and extorted to extract information from them:

Rehab who spent two years in prison and was finally acquitted says:

"During the investigations they used to insult me with degrading words such as "Slut" ... they threatened me throughout the investigation that they will strip and rape me, they used dirty words that I can't remember... disgusting talk..."

Lama doubts that a raped woman can easily talk about her experience, she will barely whisper it to reliable people and under specific time and spatial conditions. During her long-time imprisonment, Lama met only one lady who was brave and did not hesitate to repeat what happened with her to other detainees and on the ears of the officers too.

Lama says: "An unmarried woman in her forties, who was linked to the Brotherhood, was telling her story which happened at the State Security Branch in Aleppo. She was repeating in front of us and in front of the officers how they stripped her in front of her brother and how they tortured her by electrifying different parts of her body, and how they cut pieces of her tongue with a nail cutter.

She adds: "Rape has a profound psychological and social impact that cannot be ignored. The woman who has been raped doesn't mention it except in specific cases or to a specialist like a psychiatrist or someone who's very close and reliable."

In the testimonies that we got from our Communist and Islamist detainees witnesses, about the detentions that occurred in the early 80s where a lot of tortures and rapes had been committed, we noticed that the "Aleppo Central Prison" was mentioned frequently. It seems that this prison had witnessed a lot of crimes against the detainees in the early 80s.

Mohammad mentions in his testimony one of the detainees who died under torture:

"...they didn't hesitate to bring his wife and three daughters in front of him so that he would confess... they raped his wife and daughter in front of him... after that he told them that he would speak if they untied him first; after they did, he started beating them up, so they bet him to death. His wife resisted them, so they raped her violently and she bled to death. His daughters fate remained unknown."

Ussama¹⁰⁷ spent ten years out of his sixteen years of detention in Aleppo Central Prison, during which he met women and men detained for their affiliation to Islamic Brotherhood or

as hostages instead of their relatives who were connected to the Islamic Brotherhood as well. "In the women's dormitory, there was a woman in her forties with her two minor daughters... they had raped her sixteen years old daughter when she was at the military security branch of Aleppo, where she became pregnant and gave birth. Later when they transferred them to the prison where I was, the baby who got disabled because of the harsh prison conditions, stayed with her mother."

Oussama says that rape was carried out against the Muslim Brotherhood wives in order to pressure the husbands into giving information. During his detention period and although it was very difficult to talk about these experiences publicly, he heard a woman screaming loudly about how they raped and humiliated her and kept her in prison for years even though she had served her sentence.

"...One of the woman detainees asked to see the person in charge of the Integrated Security Detachment, when he asked her what did she want she started shouting loudly: "my years of judgment have ended, I have been tortured, persecuted, raped... why are you still keeping me?" I think she deliberately raised her voice so that everyone in the men dormitories would hear her and so that if one of the detainees was released, he/she can speak out on her behalf and expose them." (Oussama)

The memory of rape and sexual violence with all its kinds is a very complex memory to destroy. Many women live in a long struggle with this memory especially when there is no adequate environment for treatment, which pushes the rape survivors to seek recovery on their own. They try to forget the details of the experience as a self-defense mechanism against the profound psychological impact of the experience. However, it seems that this attempt only produces more pain that overwhelm them on the first occasion this subject is brought up.

"...What hurts me and offends me the most is the memory of them trying to strip me... for years I've been practicing to forget the details... that's why I was avoiding this meeting because it will only bring back the painful scenes... yes... thirty years later I still feel humiliated and overwhelmed when I remember this..." (Salam)

Some circumstances contribute to the confusion of the detainees memories who have been raped or subjected to violence or sexual harassment in detention. Sometimes it can be because of the officers in charge who deliberately confuse the detainees about the incident, especially when they confront the victim or when they are held accountable. Perhaps what happened with Ayat is an example of this conflict so maybe she could forget the hurtful details and before being stigmatized after they told her father that she was raped by mistake. She says she doesn't know how and when this happened.

"When I went out of the cellar, I lost consciousness so they took me to the hospital, as they told me later... when I woke up my clothes were stained with blood, I didn't understand, I thought it was the result of their beatings... I wondered what could be the reason: was it "Bisat Al Reeh" (Flying Carpet)¹⁰⁸ or psychological stress... until now I don't know... maybe it happened at the hospital... when they talked about it at the prison, the head of Palestine branch was guessing where the incident might have happened and was repeating the word "maybe", but he was sure that "the branch had nothing to do with the rape incident...!" (Ayat)

The security services often try to clear themselves from the accusation of rape. If it happened in the branch and got exposed, then it would be an individual act that happened by mistake. In Ayat's example the director of the branch who is supposedly the master of the place and knows and controls everything, suddenly was not sure any more about anything, and started using the word "maybe", confirming that if the rape happened in the hospital then the branch surely was not responsible, and denying that the detainee was his responsibility whether was in the branch or the hospital.

Layal says: "At branch 215 in Damascus, the officer brought me into his room and started interrogating me. He tied my hands to the back, opened the door then started beating me, later he closed the door and approached me to stick his body on mine, then he opened the door and started hitting my feet using a cable, to go back and close the door again, after that he turned my face to the wall and raped me from the back... finally he opened the door, sat behind his desk and called the officer to return me to my cellar. I didn't understand!... if he

wanted this why would he hit me?... and since he hit me did, he?... (Layal)

This was not the only time Layal had been raped and sexually harassed; she mentioned that after she was transferred to Homs on New Year's Eve she was raped orally by the jailer.

"In Homs' branch and at New Year's Eve two officers interrogated me in a room behind the torture chamber, they felt disgusted when they knew I had my period, so they tied me up on an iron bed where one of them raped me orally, while the other officer stood by the door..."

Since 2011, the security services have become increasingly savage, where the elements, "shabiha¹⁰⁹", and soldiers, have been given the green light to do whatever they wish with whomever the authorities consider terrorists and enemies of the State. Sexual crimes against men were reported in many Human Rights reports. Among one of our witnesses is a witness on a sexual violence committed against her boyfriend by using a sharp instrument.

Yara says: knowing that she would be punished if she looked or showed any reaction, she couldn't help but scream when she saw through her cellar's window her boyfriend being raped, and confirmed that her screaming saved his life. He was about to die when the executioner stopped torturing him; he had heard Yara's cries.

"On the morning of Eid al-Adha, I heard screams that were not even close to human screams, but rather of a dying monster. My friend was totally naked and they were sticking in his butt a thick iron skewer... he almost died out of pain... a terrible scene... at his side was his friend who was trembling in fear, waiting for his turn... a scene that I will never forget this for as long as I live..." (Yara)

She adds: "To be a witness of the torture of your friends or relatives is a sight that is hard to forget, and it is difficult to deal with the feelings of terror as they rise upon remembering this scene."

Regarding nudity and the purpose behind it, Munir¹¹⁰ says that it's a systematic and deliberate act aimed at humiliating and breaking the detainee's will: "The purpose of nudity is to break the detainee's will and sense of humanity. It is a way to tell the detainee that he/she is in a place where his/her humanity has no value, nudity here is not only stripping of clothes but stripping of one's dignity."

In his testimony he adds that they sexually abused the mother, sister, and wife as a way to inject the detainee with a large amount of anger that cannot explode, and with shameful memories that he cannot erase, thus suffocating and turning him into a silent and broken monster or to a really humiliated person, as it becomes part of his routine.

According to Munir's testimony, in the mindset of the security services, not only the mothers of the detainees are "whores" but all the women detainees who were involved in the revolution are "whores" and "sluts" or have practiced "Jihad Al Nikah" or "prostitution with the FAS army."

Abir says: "They've always called me a "Slut", they threatened to strip me in the hallway, but they said that they will "not rape" me... they said that I was not a virgin and that I was practicing "Jihad Al Nikah with FAS, and to prove it a doctor would check my virginity... but with every threat they would confirm that they would not rape me since they are a "government institution', as they mentioned.

Almost no detainee has escaped the insults and humiliation. All the detainees who stayed in section 215 have mentioned that they named the officer who was responsible for searching them upon their arrival to the detention as "Gargamel", the monster.

Layal says: "Gargamel led me to the security room to submit my stuff, the room was full of Qurans and computers, he asked me to take off my clothes, but I refused, he repeated: "take off your clothes", I refused once more, so he hit me and called the officers to forcibly remove my clothes. I said "No... I will do it myself", for I thought that stripping in front of

one old man is better than stripping in front of five or six men... so eventually I gave up and took off all my clothes."

Gargamel's mission does not stop at forced striping and threatening of the women detainees, but rather extends to touching and harassing them and sometimes even inserting his fingers in their genital parts:

Abir says: "After I took off my shirt and bra, he approached me, claiming that I might have hidden something in my chest, he started touching my breasts..."

Hala says "Gargamel strips you completely of your clothes... and as an excuse that you might be hiding a mobile chip or anything else, he extends his hand and fingers everywhere... everywhere... everywhere... of course... he touched my breasts and every part of me..."

Mary recalled that she met a beautiful detainee in Section 227, coming from a conservative family. She told her that whenever they called her for investigation, they warned her to remove her pants and only wear the "abaya", "they threatened her that if she didn't, they will throw her in the dormitories of the punished soldiers so that they would rape her." " Scared from their threats, every time she did exactly what they asked her, although she knew that it would be an opportunity for them to harass her"... Mary adds that she used to advise her not to submit to their threats and to defy them, because she believed it was only a threat; hence Mary convinced her to not submit to their threats, but when she went up for investigation without taking her pants off they executed their threat"... they placed her in the dormitory of the punished soldiers and gave them the orders to harass her" (Mary)

3. Psychological Violence

**"Almost any woman who might enter detention has assumptions about rape, and this causes a severe psychological violence that accompanies the woman before even entering"
(Doctor Jalal Nawfal)**

As the physical violence tends to hurt and damage the body, similarly the psychological violence upsets and offends the soul. In our conservative societies the honor issue is at the top of the priority ladder; thus it becomes very easy for such a brutal system to abuse this idea and use it to break and insult the spirit of the humansbeings.

The Syrian detentions have witnessed some male detainees undergoing serious threats of honor violations which were key to weaken and break their will. Stripping their wives and/or daughters and raping them in front of their eyes was a guarantee for their psychological break down. However, for the women, this issue of sexual violence is much more complex and sensitive. Growing up in a society where honor and sexual chastity issues are the focus in any woman's life, this plays a main role in shaping any woman's personality, and makes it very hard to face the society if any violation of this nature has occurred. The Syrian security services has taken advantage of this weakness to humiliate the women and to distort their role in the opposed political activity and weaken their chances in participating in the public affairs.

We referred in a previous paragraph to some of the psychological violence that women detainees are subjected to (especially the mothers, the pregnant, and the hostages), in addition to the harsh conditions of the detention centers along with the brutal treatments and discriminations, finally arriving to the physical abuse practiced against women. We found that it's very important to focus on the psychological violence to which the women detainees are subjected in an independent section, because we noticed that this kind of violence is rarely observed and is rarely given importance in Human Rights reports. This kind of violence has a profound effect on women as it weakens them in front of the security services and society, and eventually prompts them to hesitate to participate in any political or public activity that might lead to detention.

Investing the discriminatory male mentality that prevails in the society is one of the main means used by the security services to blame, degrade, humiliate the women rather than the perpetrator, thus reinforcing and spreading the stories of rape and sexual harassment as

being the inevitable destiny for all the women detainees. Consequently, this offends the militant struggling women and push for their rejection from society.

Most of our post-revolution witnesses have mentioned that their biggest fear when they had been detained was "rape." They mentioned that the security services had a very bad reputation when it came to the subject of treating the woman detainees. Some of the witnesses have declared that: "the real experience of rape at the detention centers was much worse than what they heard."

Waad said: "It wasn't only me who had this perception of the security services' bad reputation when it comes to bad manners, including rape, but even the simple illiterate people. In 1988, while I was detained in Palestine Branch, a simple illiterate woman came into our dormitory who was accused of collaborating with "Arafat Group"... she was beaten and humiliated and they didn't believe her... A month later they allowed her son to visit her as a way for them to know if she was lying. He told me that his father, who is her ex-husband wander around the village telling people that she was at the Intelligence services and that they were raping her... the husband had written a vexatious report that was meant to destroy her reputation and to take revenge on her, knowing the seriousness of the accusation of collaborating with "Arafat group" at that time and taking advantage of the security services bad reputation."

Layal says: "Before my detention I heard a lot about the rapes and the assaults against detainees... we always heard that this woman was assaulted... that woman was raped... yes I was so scared of detention... I always hoped that it would never happen to me..."

Doctor Jalal Nawfal¹¹¹ confirmed what he previously stated: "We cannot in any way compare the psychological violence against men detainees to that perpetuated against the women. The psychological violence for the detained women is much greater and harsher." He adds: "Although many men were subjected to rape mostly using different tools, on a psychological level they didn't worry about this issue before entering the detention, unlike women who have an advance assumption that they will definitely be raped. Women are obsessed with this danger before they even get detained, this causes them a severe psychological pressure."

The Psychological violence by the security services is manifested in concrete and repeated manners to affect the detained women's vulnerabilities and weaknesses, whether by threat of rape, stigmatization, damaging the reputation, or even by invasion of the intimate space, etc. aiming to take the highest psychological and social toll on women.

Threat of Rape

The threat of rape is considered as the most extreme psychological violence against detained women. Majority of our witnesses have mentioned that they had been threatened with rape during their detention which caused them deep anxiety and stress.

Rania says: "he looked scary... he was in his pajamas wearing a golden chain around his neck, it was at night, he was interrogating us while smoking hubbly bubbly... from the moment you enter into his office, you could tell from the way he looks and from his wicked eyes that he was the kind of man who could easily rape you... his rude words, how he searched us, his threats and harassments... When he kept repeating "you will see what will I do with you, and what will happen to you when you enter the extremists' dormitory" ... yes I was horrified."

Abir explains: the threat of rape keeps the woman detainee in an obsessive and alert state, waiting for the execution moment. The detainee feels helpless and alone but she must nevertheless find a way to deal with this threat and mitigate its consequences so she does not collapse. "The threat does not stop... threat of further torture, threat of the ghost beating¹¹² ... threat of nudity... I thought to myself: I wish he stops his threats... I almost wished he would execute them all so it would end...!"

Stigma

Most of our witnesses have mentioned that as soon as they were detained, they started to be called “Whores” to stigmatize and humiliate them.

Stigma is defined as a mark of disgrace or infamy, a stain or reproach on one’s reputation in order to define and influence the individual. It is based on the tendency of the social majority to stigmatize what they see as socially deviant, where it includes moral and physical issues. Stigma can result in severe mental disorders and risks of losing the social identity of the individual.

Doctor Jala says: “Stigma is the most severe form of psychological violence experienced by a woman detainee. The stigma’s impact on a woman is much deeper than on men.”

Nibal remembers the way in which the executioner talked with the detainees, mentioning that he would definitely leave a deep and a long-time impact on them in case they didn’t manage to forget him:

“The investigators always talked to us with profanity, all the phrases that they had used included offensive words such as “whore” for the intention of degrading and humiliating us. This will definitely leave a harmful effect on us if we don’t manage to forget it, it will remain with us for the rest of our lives.”

The regime has used stigmatization in a systematic way against its opponents whom they described as snitches, cheaters and terrorists. In detention, the security services have used stigma against women detainees as a revenge against their families or husbands, and accused them of practicing “Jihad Al Nikah”, which they considered a form of prostitution under a religious umbrella. This served two purposes: the accusation or moral decay and the accusation of extremism and terrorism.

Mary says: “I was in section 227 where there were dozens of women who were taken as hostages instead of their husbands or relatives. They were charged with prostitution and Jihad Al Nikah and they had been treated accordingly, thus humiliated and degraded at all times... the investigator would ask several questions that would lead to stigmatize all the family members with moral disintegration or incestuous practices.

The Threat of Reputational Abuse

Another form of psychological violence practiced only against the women detainees is the threat of reputational abuse within the social sphere of the detainee. Cooperating members of the security services carry out this task for the purpose of shaming the detainees’ families, pushing for the women’s reject.

Rihab says: “They told me that they would make people spit on me... and that’s what happened when I was detained in the military security and Palestine branch... They said by the time you get out your reputation will have been destroyed... when I was released I remembered their words... I still remember them... I remember how my people in my environment have treated me when I was released... I wished I didn’t get out of detention... that’s what they anticipated for me”

Ayat recounts that after demands of her release appeared in the media, an officer asked her to appear on TV and repeat what they wanted her to say; when she refused he beat and threatened her: “If you are not going to die here, you will die outside...” he meant to intimidate me with my father’s punishment after they told him that “I have lost my virginity”... people are going to despise you, they will point fingers at you, then you will wish to have stayed in prison...” then he put out his cigarette on my hand.”

Violation of the Physical and Psychological Intimate space

Doctor Jalal says about the psychological violence that women are subjected to in detention: "Each person has his/her own private physical and psychological intimate area, it differs from one to another, but it is well known that this area is much narrower for women than for men. For the detained women, the private intimate area is violated at the moment of detention, through stigma, cursing, sexual language, searches, harassments. Menstrual cycles are an additional burden for women in prison: in normal situations it can cause heavy stress, so when it comes to detainees the stress is multiplied along with the attendant problems that are related to hygiene, the exploitation of knowledge of the matter by the executioners and investigators, all of which are psychological violence and discrimination against detained women."

Then he explains how the intimate space varies from one woman to another. For example, in case of a woman who wears the "hijab", removing her headscarf is an act of psychological and physical violence, yet to another touching her only might be considered psychological violence that she might not easily forget. Being a married or a single woman detainee also will have a different effect when it comes to psychological violence.

Sahar mentioned in her testimony: "They used awful and horrific words to threaten us: "take her to the men's dormitory"... "you are beautiful...you are sexy. etc... they will have a good time with you"... among us were young university girls who used to get terrified just by listening to these words... only touching them is a threat for their future and family reputation."

Ayat says: "During my detention period I met a woman in her 50s wearing the hijab and a long cloak "abaya" with pants underneath. When they made her sit on "Bisat Al Reeh" ("flying carpet" torture cross) they ordered her to take off her hijab and all of her clothes... I can still remember her cries, begging the officer to cover her up instead of begging him to stop torturing her!"

Of course, there are women, although few, who view sexual and honor issues from a political perspective, as part of their struggle against their enemies, which cuts the way for the executioners to abuse this weakness. For example Leila says in her testimony that what hurt her the most during the investigation period were not the sexual assaults and profanity, that she considers part of the torture process aiming at breaking the opponents, but rather the personal humiliation she was subjected to when, as when her executioner placed his shoe in her mouth.

"Mathhar Fares was the supervisor of my torture rounds... every time he used to be creative in his brutality... one time and by the end of an electrifying session, I fell on the ground and he started walking on my body and rubbing his shoes against my thighs, saying obscene words that satisfied his deviant and sadistic character... I considered this insult as part of the torture process coming from my enemy, but the moment he placed his shoes in my mouth and started laughing hysterically I took it as a direct, intentional, and personal insult and I felt really offended... I kept seeing him in my nightmares... I still feel oppressed whenever I remember this..."

In many cases the security services have used their power to bring relatives of detainees and force them to watch their daughters and sons who were often blindfolded and unaware of their presence in the interrogation room, being tortured or making confessions.

"The officer called for my dad's presence and told him: "Your daughter is involved with a Christian man and she used to sleep with him... My dad is a Muslim religious man, they told him that all women detainees in the center were whores and I am one of them... their goal was to justify my detention to him, since I am an engineer with a strong personality, they couldn't tell him that I work in politics so they used the reputational abuse as an alibi." (Nahed)¹¹³

Part three

Getting out of Detention

As long as the Syrian tyrant regime still prevails, ruling the people with so much injustice and discrimination, as long as the security system that has conquered the Syrian society for five decades still governs the country with terror, as long as we haven't seen any victory for the values of freedom, justice and equality that the detainees have sacrificed for, and we yet haven't achieved the minimum level of fairness and reparation, as long as the security tightness on the released detainees often continues throughout their lives, thus affecting their career, social, and political paths as well as their healing processes, as long as there are still hundreds of thousands of men and women who are locked in the cellars of security branches and in their extensions of military and civil jails, with uncertain fates, as long as we didn't reach the end of injustice, discrimination and tyranny... then we cannot consider that the detainees release is an end to the ordeal and sufferings.

In this part we will focus on the challenges that faced the women detainees after their release and we will highlight on the detention's psychological and social effects by presenting some extracts of our detainees' testimonies. At the end of the report we will leave a space for some questions such as "What scares them today? What are the physical and psychological effects the experience of detention left on them? Were they able to heal and forget? And to what extent does the detention's experience play part in the course of their daily lives?" Then we will include what they mentioned about the possibilities of continuing their political activity and their participation in the revolution and in the public affairs in general.

Continued Security Tightening

"...everything is possible, just as they locked you up in jail for nine years, they can bring you back at any moment" Lama

As soon as the released detainees take their first steps towards the outside world, they will find themselves facing a lot of challenges that will keep them from returning to the normal course of life. The most important of these challenges are the security tightening and continuous prosecution, meaning they are often banned from traveling, denied from some of their civil rights, and prevented from sharing their terrifying experiences with others and even testifying. The security services keep the dismissed detainees' files as a means to exclude them from being politically and socially active, taking any chance for intimidating them and stealing what is left of their dreams.

Lama recounts her experience of security tightening that lasted from the moment she was released in 1990 to 2010, where she had to check in the military security branch in Aleppo on a specific date of each month. She bitterly recalls how the monthly appointment caused her a violent psychological pressure: "it is pure humiliation, two days prior to the appointment you feel sick in your guts, when you arrive they strip you of anything you are carrying, then you sit alone for one or two hours, while unwillingly recalling all the painful scenes in your mind. You get scared, so scared, everything is possible, for as they locked you up in detention for nine years, they can bring you back at any moment."

Aziza talks about her fixed monthly appointment at the military security branch that lasted for years after she was released, where she had to submit a report of all her activities.

"... after nine years in detention, I had to pass by the branch every month to submit a report of all my monthly movements and activities."

Waad points to the fake concept of freedom that the detainees gain upon their release. She states that it's the same as leaving from a small prison to a bigger one, where the security services will be monitoring all the detainees movements and will be busy competing in filling

out the monthly report for each one of them: “The first time I was called upon by the security services was one week after my release from detention... my family and neighbors got terrified when they saw the security service’s vehicle parking in front of our house... every time I was there I remembered the detention memories that I wanted to forget, there was nothing new to ask, sometimes I just sat near the officer while he worked for hours without uttering a word to me,... I was called by all the security branches in the area, clearly the officers don’t share information and they needed to fill out my file in every branch... I wished I had stayed in jail, because of the tremendous feeling of worry and because of the psychological stress of my parents that increased my sense of guilt towards them.”

Sara, who was released from detention after seven years, reveals in her testimony other dimensions behind the continued security restrictions of the security services for the released detainees which often aim at intimidating their families and their social environment. “They used to visit my brother every now and then at his work, and send me verbal warnings through him to “behave”, they also asked about my neighbors, guests and actions... My boss at work monitored my movements and the books that I read... this has continued since I was released in 1991 until I got out of Syria.”

Doctor Fidaa says that the security tightening along with the stalking forced her to quit her work and leave the city of Hama: “When I got detained, the security services expelled my husband from Syria only because he was Palestinian, they threw him handcuffed on the Jordanian border and that was their punishment. When I got out of detention I had to stand by my family... but the security men stalked me everywhere... one of them told me once, “we’re tired of you... I advise you to travel...” I had to leave the city of Hama, but I couldn’t get out of Syria because I had travel restrictions.”

According to the testimonies of our witnesses who were detained during the revolution, the case of security tightening and stalking wasn’t so different but it even got worse. As for those who remained in the areas which continued to be under the regime’s control, in addition to their continuous fear of getting re-detained, they were threatened by their own confessions, signed blind folded and under threats, which included serious charges that could send them to field courts or longtime imprisonment. For those people, if their release happened through a personage or paying money or exchange transactions, they would prefer to leave straight away from the regime’s control areas to a place where they cannot be reached or stalked by the security services.

Hala says: “In Al Khatib branch, I was blind folded when they obliged me to sign nine papers... When I stood before the judge he listed several serious accusations: he told me that I had confessed that I practiced “Jihad Al Nikah”, lured officers into ambushes, cooperated with foreign parties, supported terrorism and harmed the State security...! After he released me for a large sum of money, I fled straight away outside Syria. A month and a half later, I was informed that the judge had sentenced me to fifteen years in prison.”

Fear of being re-detained

“...they can show up at any moment and say: “Come with us!”, they can snatch me from my life at any moment...this will be exactly as death for me, even worse than death” (Nada)

When asked about what scares them today, our witnesses who still live in regime-controlled areas replied that fear has become an essential part of their lives: the moment the detention ordeal ends, the fear of being re-detained starts. This terror is the result of the terrible experiences the detainees have passed through with the security services that know no limits in their ordeal practices, in the absence of deterrent that prevents them from detaining them at any time and for any reason. Just because their names are in the files of the security services this means a permanent risk of detention.

"I am scared almost all the time... fear became the norm of my life... I judge things accordingly. I am scared of the security services, for they can show up at any moment and say: "come with us", they can snatch me from my life at any moment and this will be exactly as death for me, even worse... I believe that death is a final salvation and comfort, but detention is a misery. For me it is a real moral death, it is the beginning of a hell series."
(Nada)

When our witnesses who now live outside Syria were asked what scares them today, most of them mentioned that they still get terrified at the mere sight of a police or security man, even though they live now in a democratic country governed by laws and cannot be harmed by the Syrian security services.

"Even though I live in Austria now, I still get intimidated when I see police or a security man... To me detention is like a black hole inside my soul that has narrowed over time, we need to forget it in order to close this hole in our souls."

Rania says: "When I remember the detention, I feel humiliated and stressed... I used to be afraid, because I knew that they can detain me at any moment. I feel bad whenever I remember the men who used to degrade us, and I wonder how could they have done that? From where did they get the courage to debase people in this way?" Nibal

Social Restrictions & Isolations

"...The man comes out of detention as a hero, while the woman comes out full of shame and disgrace. As soon as the single woman detainee is being released her family will quickly try to arrange her marriage where the groom is described as the gentleman who is making a sacrifice." (Sahar)

Sahar summarized in her testimony the gender discrimination between men detainees and women detainees and how society treats them differently. The society unfortunately doesn't care about the suffering of the detained woman; on the contrary the woman is held responsible for her detention and its consequences. Silence remains her only solution in the face of this culture which will not tolerate hearing any of the humiliating details of her detention story.

Social restrictions are aggravating the security restrictions, they trigger a loss of confidence in the cause, multiply psychological and moral harm of women, and compel them in many cases to isolation and retreat.

Some of our pre-revolution witnesses find the society's reaction comprehensible, as a typical situation in a male dominant society, and a natural result of the intimidation exerted by the authorities on the society in general and women in particular. Moreover, a large part of the social fabric has no mercy on the women who participate in political affairs; while they know the horrible price they would pay if they got detained, they consider such participation as a sin that must be punished.

Rehab is an example of a detained woman who suffered community persecution after her release. She had no choice but to escape from her small town to a bigger area where no one knew anything about her detention history. Even decades after her experience, one question remains unanswered in her head: "What did I do to deserve all this?"

"...Detention was hard... but my social suffering when I got out was even harder, people outside are as mean as the people inside detention, they possess the same oppressive mentality... "you were detained... then you are dangerous..." no one gets near you... you hear them whispering the word "raped"... very few were the ones who greeted and interacted with me... I was totally rejected and isolated... the solution was to leave and move on..." (Rehab)

The social injustice inflicted on the detainees may seem acceptable when practiced by the oppressed and silent groups, but it is highly unexpected coming from the social groups that revolted against the regime. For some of our witnesses, this behavior coming from those revolting groups cannot be accepted; they should rather show sympathy, solidarity and be supportive of these women.

Yara dreamt of the day she would hug her mom and dad and sleep in her bed again, but unfortunately all her dreams were shattered the day she was released by an exchange deal, where she was deported directly from the branch to the city of Idleb. A different kind of isolation by a new environment was imposed on Yara, which demoted her because first she was a single woman detainee, and second, she belonged to a minority group.

"They deported me to a new environment different than the one I knew. I was twenty seven years old at that time and no matter how much intellectual, mature, and believer you are in your cause, they can make you reach a point where you would say: "I wish I didn't get out of prison", "the life out of detention was a new phase of ordeal"... when I arrived to Istanbul and while I was trying to find a job, I encountered a lot of harassments from men who were and still are affiliated with the comrades of the revolution." (Yara)

Generally speaking, it can be said that the society's interaction with the detained women during the revolution years didn't change substantially compared to the years prior to the revolution; yet some differences still prevail relative to the nature of the society, as it differs between a closed and open communities, and between rural and urban areas. For instance, closed and rural communities in general isolate and restrict the detained women and even isolate them from their family sometimes. There are also differences relative to the women's family's social and functional status.

Luna who was living in Aleppo, believes that the reason why she wasn't subjected to any kind of isolation or social abuse when she got out of detention in 1988, was because the city of Aleppo had witnessed the detention of dozens of women especially in the early 1980s and during the events of the Muslim Brotherhood. She also believes that by the time she was freed, Aleppo's community was aware of the regime's reality and could distinguish between criminals and victims, another important reason being that members of her own family had preceded her in the detention's experiment.

"Aleppo's people have experienced detentions since the 1980s, deep down they sympathize with the detainees regardless of their ideology, they do not believe the regime's stories in justifying the detentions... they only considered us as people from the opposition." (Luna)

The Bitter Question

"...I bled from my nose and mouth, blood covered my whole body, why don't you ask me about my other wounds as well?" (Yara)

Sara says no one asked her about what happened in detention, she believes that they were too scared to ask about the reality of the torture she was subjected to, they wanted to remain in denial so they wouldn't sympathize with her.

"Everyone knows the amount of torture and injustice we were subjected to in detention, but the question that comes to their minds is: have I been raped? They say it using other words like "Did they do something to you?" A question that shows their reluctance to refer directly to the crime and the perpetrator, and which emphasizes your position as a victim ... as for the torture, they have never asked me about it, because during the 1990s they were too terrified of the authorities." (Sara)

The majority of our witnesses, who were detained at different historical stages, said that they have been all subjected to this question: "Did they harm you in any way?", an indirect question for "rape" specifically. Most of them stated that this question caused them a lot of harm and anger, they considered it to convey blame and intentionally harm them. On the other hand, no one asked them about the details of the other kinds of torture they were subjected to.

Salam says: "When anyone knows that you were detained, even if they didn't ask, they take it for granted that you were raped... of course I was asked this question a lot."

Yara expresses her anger and rage about the "rape" question, she believes that even if she was raped, no one has the right to ask about it, and whoever wants to ask about rape has to ask about all the other details such as the torture, humiliation, living in dungeons, and the death she has witnessed. What makes her more furious is describing her as a "survivor" which she believes is not an accurate term at all, for no one is a survivor and no one is safe. "I almost get insane whenever they call me "survivor"... no one really survived... people asked me: Did they rape you? Did you lose your virginity? every time I wanted to scream in their faces: is this your only concern?! I bled from my nose and mouth, blood covered my whole body, why don't you ask me about those wounds as well? After a while they were no longer interested in me." (Yara)

Family, a prison or a support?

The most difficult situation a woman detainee may encounter after her release is finding an unsupportive family who is as stigmatizing as society to them. We can clearly witness that the women, whose families were unable to embrace and support them and were ashamed of them, have struggled alone for a long time and couldn't move forward easily, compared to the ones who have found supportive and loving families after their release, who embraced and helped them to heal and move forward, so they can continue their lives with a relatively normal path.

Lama explains how her father was a real support for her, he didn't allow people to approach her and embarrass her with questions. On the contrary, he expressed his pride and respect for her courage. He made sure that she was never isolated and did not allow her to give up, but rather he hastened her to take the exams to obtain a high school diploma in order to compensate for the lost years of her life, and join back her generation.

"In the first days after my release people would come to see me... maybe they were curious to see the girl who was arrested as a child and got out after nine years, they used to ask me a lot of questions... after fifteen days of my release my dad stopped receiving visitors and told me that I have to study for my baccalaureate certificate... this is what happened... I succeeded with distinctions thanks to my father's support, then I studied Law and got my degree." (Lama)

At the opposite Ayat talks of her first shock after her release, when her father said to her: "you're such a disgrace", then she explains painfully how he treated her:

"My father did not support me and he never helped me to move from my bad emotional state, on the contrary when I got out of detention he did not allow me to move forward with my life; within a few weeks he made me marry a man who also practiced all forms of violence on me, he locked me up at home, assaulted me physically and psychologically... when I got divorced I found society against me... detained, divorced and many other accusations and unfair conclusions..."

Ayat concludes at the end of her interview: "they all form a collar of oppression around your neck, starting with the regime to the opposition, in between come the family, relatives and friends... they are all the products of each other."

Sahar says: "When I got out of the detention I heard my uncle telling my mother: why is she coming in and going out...? he meant I should stay locked up at home... then he added: she needs a bullet in her head... even my husband who didn't divorce me while I was in detention, repeatedly said: I should have divorced you while you were in detention."

After the beginning of the revolution, a lot of stories, testimonies and videos were published by the regime, who was instrumentalizing and reinforcing the patriarchal mentality. This further increased social injustice for women detainees and unfair treatment within their families.

Abir says that she encountered in prison two sisters from Homs, whom were forced under threat and torture to appear on television and say that they have practiced "Jihad Al Nikah" with the FSA. Obviously, they were brutally tortured, for when they arrived to Adra prison the marks of violence were visible on them.

When their father visited them for the first time in detention, he told them: "you are no longer my daughters, for me you don't exist anymore... and when you get out of here forget that you even have a family" (Abir)

About her relationships with men, Lama says:

"During my nine years in prison, the man for me was the investigator, the warden and the officer, the man became the symbol of torture and oppression. With time my relationship with men became complicated even with the closest ones. I didn't tolerate a simple touch or even a word from my brothers. My father died only a few months after my release and before he could help me in overcoming this complex. As a result, I didn't want to get married, I focused on myself and my career instead. Unfortunately, the only man that I ever loved was married and got detained at the beginning of the revolution... his fate remains unknown till now."

Ayat adds: "I couldn't live with any man... I got married twice, the first time I was forced... after a few weeks of my release, my dad obliged me to marry which only added more pain in my life, and in the second time this is happened."

The feeling of guilt

The detainee's relationship with her family is often affected by her deep sense of guilt towards them, caused by her detention. She feels responsible for what they suffered whether from the security services or the community, and the anxiety and horror they experienced in her absence. This feeling often remains with her throughout her detention years.

During the torture in her early days of detention, Sara was not really affected by the beatings and the torture she was subjected to, most of her thinking was preoccupied with her mother's concern for her absence: "My biggest concern was how the news of my detention would reach my mother, it was only few days to Mother's Day, and if this day had come and I wasn't home she would be sure that something serious had happened to me." (Sara)

Nahed says: "... I still remember the sight of my mother and father falling on the sofa when they came to arrest me... that day I couldn't convince my mother to calm down, seeing all these security men coming for me wouldn't have convinced her that it is a simple matter, that day I left my parents paralyzed from the shock... this scene remained in my head throughout the detention years, and I still remember it painfully as of today."

Mary speaks about her sense of guilt towards her son: "When I got detained they told my little boy that I was traveling, but he always wondered why didn't I call him... he was convinced that had I died and that they were lying to him so he wouldn't feel bad... he lived the grief experience over the death of the mother... when I got out of detention my biggest hope was to make him forget!"

The psychological effects of detention on women

“What hurts me the most?.. everything”

This is how Layal answered when we asked her what hurts her the most when she remembers detention. She added: “I can’t forget... During the day I pretend that I am fine in front of my children and husband... but when the night comes, I sit alone, remember and cry.”

Although many years have passed for the women who lived this experience during the 80s and 90s, they have spoken with a lot of distress, and sadness about the loss of the happiest years of their lives and the injustice that was inflicted upon them.

Aziza: “... I try all the time to act normally, but there is a big gap in my memory... a gap of eleven years and I can’t forgive those who caused it... there are endless moral and psychological effects... when I got out of detention I found that everything had changed... it’s not easy to accept people and to be accepted by them... it’s not even easy to be accepted by your own kids.”

Ayat considers that the period of detention was a milestone in her life, a breakpoint where she couldn’t connect neither with her past nor with her future: “Isn’t it enough that I haven’t lived a normal life afterwards... before the detention I had other plans, I lost my normal life, my friends, my university studies. They obliged me to get married and now I am a lonely mother of two children... I have a missing part in my memory... we might forget the torture and beatings but there are traces that can never be forgotten...” (Ayat)

When we asked what is left in their memories from detention, we received very sad answers from the detainees of the revolution, that makes clear to us that their wounds are not healed yet, and that although most of them live outside Syria, where they are safe, their nightmares are still full of horrifying images from the detention.

“For me and for all the detainees, it’s a pain that we won’t be able to forget and a wound that won’t heal... often I sit alone and cry, not only for myself but for them too, I start thinking that at this moment there is a new detainee arriving at the branch, then I start to remember all the process she will pass through, from entering into Gargamel’s chamber of inspection, to the torture, humiliation, threat...” (Hala)

Jana speaks about her feelings when she remembers the detention:

“I have a confused feeling... mixture of anger, sorrow, shame and pain... a deep internal soreness. When my back aches I wonder for a moment what caused this pain, and then I remember that it’s the result of the brutal beatings I was subjected to, I then feel furious and get overwhelmed by a very bad feeling, I start crying, and I feel worse when I see the burn marks on my legs... I feel extremely sad... sometimes I feel too embarrassed by my legs and I think to myself: what did I do to deserve all this...” (Jana)

Despite everything, “we” continue

... “Yes, I still fight, I fight against my fears...” (Nada)

The majority of our witnesses have stated that detention has created a pivotal shift in their lives. Although much of their talk was about the tragic conditions of their situation, they told us also a lot about their psychological and social sufferings after their release, the painful memories that often come in the form of nightmares, and the deep physical and psychological wounds that are not discharged yet. Despite that, many have mentioned that the detention’s experience has strengthened them and changed their personalities, their life choices and the ideas and issues in which they have invested later. Lama, who was detained when she was a teenager, grew up with the sounds of torture and got used to humiliation and oppression. She mentioned that throughout her long detention years she was lucky to have met some educated women with a lot of life and political experiences, which meant a lot for her. This interaction was reflected on her understanding and own life experiences. She said that despite the ideological differences between the women, their solidarity was much stronger and that made life a little bit easier in detention.

"I was so lucky to have met women with intellectual, political and social backgrounds. Generally speaking, people are affected by whom they spend their most time with, so how about if you spend long years with the same people, in the same room. I was very young at that time and I spent years with these women, sharing the same cell, so definitely I got influenced by them. Until now I still remember them and they occupy a big place in my heart." (Lama)

Since the beginning of the revolution Lama has been active again, she says that she was proudly identified as the "former detainee."

"Nothing intimidates me, I have no worries or regrets, and I have peace inside my heart. As the Syrian revolution started, I decided to take part in the demonstrations because I believed that the bad situation that prevailed in the country before 2011 was the result of the people's silence that lasted for decades, when they should have revolted instead. Unfortunately, when we got out of detention during the 1990s, many were still supporting the tyrant... At the syndicate (Aleppo Bar Association) I raised the flag of the revolution with so much confidence, I wasn't afraid of being detained or anything else." (Lama)

The political life was so depressing and was almost non-existent by the time most of our witnesses were released during the 1990s. In spite of this, they didn't quit on their causes and beliefs, and they weren't de-motivated, on the contrary they were ready to engage in any political opportunity if they had a chance. Most of them stated that the revolution was a dream coming true, it was a hopeful time that encouraged them to take part and participate without any hesitation.

"I resumed my political activities the next day after my release in 1983 and nothing could have stopped me, but when I got out of detention for the second time in 1991, access to the political life was completely forbidden. As the revolution started our hopes were regenerated and the dream of change seemed to become reality, so I immediately returned to my political activity and until now I did not stop, most of my companions from detention returned to be active as well." (Sara)

Aziza considers herself to be one of the women whose political awareness was formed during her detention years, as a result of the injustice she had encountered or witnessed:

"In detention I had a determination that this regime cannot stay, that I should never be silent and that I will continue to fight against it and against any kind of injustice... individuals are not entitled to judge, that should be the role of the judicial system."

Nahed said that she never stopped her political activity, as she became active at the beginning of the Damascus Spring through forums. In 2006 she began having an interest in the feminist work and formed with some friends the "Women for Democracy" group, which many of her detention comrades joined; but soon this group was aborted by the security services who interrogated her and some of her friends, and some of them were suspended from their work and banned from traveling. She was re-detained at the beginning of the revolution and since then she hasn't stopped her political activities.

"Although I have been summoned and detained more than once since 1991, I haven't stopped the political work, not even for a moment, since I was released from detention until today, and I will never stop, because I believe in the importance of the political participation and the need to change this regime." (Nahed)

When Lina returned home from detention, she had to play her role as a mother and wife of a detainee. She mentioned that discriminations were practiced against the detainees' wives based on their gender. Although Lina stated that the memory of her detention, as well as her husband's memory of detention, are overwhelming and oppressing to this day, she did not engage in any political work until the revolution started, where she was hopeful that her old dream of change would come true:

"After I was released from detention while my husband stayed for another eight years, I had to play both roles, the mother and the father, for my daughter . . . I feel oppressed every time I remember . . . I was trying to play a perfect role as a mother and wife of a detainee . . . when the revolution started, I returned to peruse politics, when I got out of Syria, I became strongly active, and I will never stop." (Lina)

Waad talks about her experience: "Inside detention we supported each other . . . when I was out of detention I felt alone, I had no support and that made me retreat for years, until the revolution started and ignited back all the old dormant hopes and dreams . . . I have been active in the civil and political work since the first months and I have not stopped yet."

Ayat says: "Detention with all its effects will not be an obstacle towards moving forward, I am sure of that . . . I met several women who were arrested more than once, and every time they came out more determined."

Ayat explains that the experiences she has faced in her first detention contributed in shaping her political awareness. After her release she had to face a lot of social and family pressure that obliged her to retreat. With the beginning of the revolution, Ayat resumed her political activities and plans and contacted several activists until she was detained again. When we asked her whether the women detainees whom she met during her second detention have resumed their activities after their release, Ayat distinguished between political detainees who were active and committed to the cause, and the ones who were detained for no reason. In both cases, the experience of detention despite its cruelty puts the human being in a place where he/she sees things more clearly and oblige him/her to take strict positions on oppression and tyranny, so many of them leave prison with a new mentality and vision.

Layal is a model of the women who were detained for their contribution to humanitarian and relief work. Her political awareness was formed during her detention, so when she was released, she had a strong determination to change and overthrow the regime.

Layal: "I have nothing to do with politics . . . I don't even know the name of the president who ruled before Hafez Al Assad, that's what I told the investigator and I wasn't lying . . . I participated in the revolution to help people who were mistreated . . . that's what I did and that's what I was punished for . . ." She adds: "Today I want this regime to collapse, I have no regrets, on the contrary I wish that I could have done even more."

In detention Abir helped the rest of the detainees by providing them with psychological support: "I met in prison young women and mothers who had nothing to do with politics. I felt responsible for them. I worked with some of my detainees' friends to support them psychologically. We would sit down with them and try to strengthen their will, tell them about the revolution and what caused it."

On solidarity among women Abir says:

"I carry a beautiful memory despite everything that happened in that period . . . I remember how we used to sing, and when they ordered us to shut up and threatened to beat us, we would start singing and laughing silently, I used to sing for them until they fell asleep."

On continuing the struggle, Abir said:

"I am going to keep on fighting to hold all the criminals accountable, today this is my cause."

Mary, who is an expert in the field of Communication skills, helped other women during her detention years through conducting awareness and communication workshops. She

formed, with the help of some of her friends, dialogue groups with women who had trouble communicating with their children or husbands. Although she became depressed when she got out of detention, she later picked up the pieces and soon returned to her community and political activity.

"When I got out of detention and despite all the security harassments I didn't stop, on the contrary I became even more active, the more they enclosed me the more I found a way to continue and evade them. . . after my release I stayed two years and a half in Syria and I never wanted to leave. . . finally I couldn't take it anymore, so I ran away along with my family, but today as a refugee I am doing what I can to support my cause." (Mary)

On continuing the struggle for change, Fidaa says:

"At the end, this regime cannot continue, injustice, corruption, and criminality cannot continue. I continue my fight for democracy and "change", neither I nor the millions of Syrians who have rebelled against this regime will ever be stopped from pursuing this goal."

Nada believes that she has started coping with her painful reality, but every day she must defy and challenge her fears:

"I try every time not to be afraid, because fear will only hold back my dreams and will make me accept the bad reality which is imposed on us. . . Yes I still fight, I fight against my fear first, that's the worst thing that ever happened to us."

Nada, who chose to remain in Syria and continue her efforts under very difficult conditions, ended her testimony by mentioning ways to combat fear and to defy detention and its effects.

"Fear from detention pushes people out of the country, pushes them out of the arena of action and activity, and it makes us circulate in a vicious circle all the time. I am working today to get out of this vicious circle, to restore my fear to its real size and to find ways to deal with it, by modifying its symbolic impact, and by placing the detention experience to its logical size. As long as repression continues and as long as detention remains the fate for many, then theoretically speaking we must deal with the detention experience as an experiment and work on finding evidences that will help the detainees in their struggles inside detentions. We must focus our thinking on what might mitigate the negative consequences on the detainees, what techniques they might use to avoid death under torture, or minimize the torture's effects on them, how to deal with the executioner, and how to be able to deal with detention and confinement and many more, all this could help us to continue our civil or political fight against the dictatorship." (Nada)

Conclusion

We hope that through this report we have revealed some aspects of the reality of the violence practiced by the repressive Syrian security services against the detainees in general, and the women detainees in particular, and how violence, repression, torture, abuse and abhorrence of people's dignity were and are still used as weapons against all those who oppose the regime and its tyranny, the same reasons that led the Syrians to revolt against the regime in 2011.

Our aim of course was not to introduce our witnesses only as heroines or as victims, as we continue to fight against this stereotyping in the same manner we continue to fight against the forms of stigma that we have mentioned in this report. We only wanted to pass our witnesses stories with much reliability, as they described them, and as a way to celebrate their own human and individual qualities as reflected through their solidarity and strength in moving forward, their ability to speak out and their persistence in continuing the struggle for democratic change, fighting all forms of tyranny and holding all perpetrators accountable. During their detention experience they have managed to get out of the ordeal and gain a lot of determination. Today, some of them have changed the course of their lives, they are active politically, some are working on the issue of justice and accountability, and some are improving their capabilities and skills because they dream to return to a "Free Syria", to participate in the reconstruction of the country and society. Some remained in Syria, fighting their own fears, and using the injustice and abuse they witnessed as a means for motivation to move forward and become effective again. They all belong to the noble and afflicted Syrian people, who despite the severity of what they have been through during the past years, in terms of violations, destruction and extermination, rise again and become more determined and aware of change and more protective of the principals of freedom, dignity, justice and equality for which so many have sacrificed.

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- ³⁶ Human Rights Watch Report - The Lost Decade - The human rights situation in Syria during the first ten years of Bashar al-Assad's rule - 16/6/2010 <https://www.hrw.org/ar/report/2010/07/16/256102>
- ³⁷ Al Jazeera Encyclopedia -The Syrian Revolution – Seen 27 /10/2019 <https://bit.ly/2VjLOGr> (www.aljazeera.net)
- ³⁸ YouTube - Al Jazeera - A documentary that monitors the milestones in the course of the Syrian revolution and the evolution of the international situation <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJK1djCRvu8>
- ³⁹ The Syrian Network for Human Rights estimates that at least 1.2 million Syrians have gone through the ordeal of detention from 2011 to March 2019 and that 127,916 people remain in detention and enforced disappearances, including 7,721 women as of March 2019. <http://sn4hr.org/arabic/2019/03/11/10925/>
- ⁴⁰ TRT – Stories of Survivors of detention in Syria -Sonia Al Ali – 27/8/2019 <https://bit.ly/2w5MBjS> (www.trtarabi.com)
- ⁴¹ Human Rights Watch - Far from Justice - Syria's Supreme State Security Court - 24 February 2009 <https://www.hrw.org/ar/report/2009/02/24/255871>
- ⁴² Anti-Terrorism Act - Law No. 19 of 2012 https://menarights.org/sites/default/files/2016-11/SYR_CounterTerrorism3laws_2012_AR.pdf
- ⁴³ Violations Documentation Center, Syria's Terrorism Court – War crimes enforcement tools – April 2015 <http://www.vdc-sy.info/pdf/reports/1430186775-Arabic.pdf>
- ⁴⁴ Amnesty International's Report - Syria Human Slaughterhouse: Mass hangings and systematic exterminations atSaydnaya prison - 7 February 2017 <https://www.amnesty.org/ar/documents/mde24/5415/2017/ar/>
- ⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch Report -A Barrage of Barrel bombs - 30 June 2014 <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2014/07/30/254714>
- ⁴⁶ BBC -How Assad used chemical weapons to achieve military victories 17/10/2018 <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-45878914>

- ⁴⁷ Violations Documentation Center - Special report on Al-Assad's use of chemical weapons in Damascus countryside 22/8/2013 <http://vdc-sy.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/chemical-weapons-east-ghouta-22-august-2013.pdf>
- ⁴⁸ The New York Times Report - Inside Syria's Secret Torture Prisons: How Bashar al-Assad Crushed Dissent - 22/7/2019 <https://www.nytimes.com/ar/2019/07/22/world/middleeast/syria-torture-prisons.html>
- ⁴⁹ Al Hayat – 27,000 new torture images from Caesar the Syrian to the German judiciary date 22/9/2017 <http://www.aayat.com/21/article/888086/الأممان-إلى-القضاء-السوري-من-قيصر-جديدة-من-صورة-تعذيب-جديدة-من-قيصر-السوري-إلى-القضاء-الأممان>
- ⁵⁰ Syrian Network for Human Rights Report - Documenting 72 torture methods that the Syrian regime continues to practice in its detention centers and military hospitals- 21 October 2019 <http://sn4hr.org/arabic/2019/10/21/11639/>
- ⁵¹ Definition of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention - When detention is considered arbitrary, page 6 <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/FactSheet26ar.pdf>
- ⁵² Amnesty International - Enforced Disappearance Overview - The Problem. Syria: 82,000 people have been exposed to enforced disappearance since 2011 <https://www.amnesty.org/ar/what-we-do/disappearances/>
- ⁵³ Amnesty International – Fair Trial Manual – Second edition 2014 <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/8000/pol300022014ar.pdf>
- ⁵⁴ Geiron website :The Exceptional Court : An article by Habib Issa 26/11/2016 <https://geiron.net/archives/71699>
Human Rights Watch –Far From Justice - Syria's Supreme State Security Court - 24 February 2009 <https://www.hrw.org/ar/report/2009/02/24/255871>
- ⁵⁵ Lama: Born in Aleppo in 1965. She was high a school student when she was detained in 1981. She appeared before the Field Court and was sentenced to five years then were reduced to four years since she was a minor. She remained in detention for nine years until her release in 1990.
- ⁵⁶ Sara: Born in Damascus. She was detained twice by the Military Security Branch in Damascus on the charges of belonging to the Communist Labor Party. The first time was in 1982 then was released in 1983, and re-detained in 1984 and remained in detention until 1991 without any hearing.
- ⁵⁷ Mohamad: Born in Aleppo in 1963. He was detained from his home on May 1, 1980, by state security of Aleppo, on charges of belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood. Sentenced to death by the Field Court of the Military Investigation Branch in Homs. The sentence was not carried out because he was a minor. He was transferred to Palmyra prison for eight years, then to Sednayah prison to complete 13 years in detention then was released in 1993.
- ⁵⁸ Sawzan: Detained in 1987 by military security on charges of belonging to the Communist Labor Party and transferred to the Palestine Branch in Damascus and remained in detention until her release in 1991
- ⁵⁹ Laya: Born in Homs in 1993 and was detained in Damascus in 2012, she spent 63 days between branch 215 and the military intelligence branch in Homs, during which she was subjected to various forms of torture as well as sexual violence.
- ⁶⁰ A temporary room built alongside the military barrier, within cities or between neighborhoods and areas for the elements, but often turned into a temporary prison for women and men, and in many cases used as rooms of torture, rape, humiliation, humiliation, bargaining, and as warehouses of materials burgled from passers-by for various reasons.
- ⁶¹ Yara: Born in 1990, she was detained more than once during the revolution for her relief activity and the transfer of medical aid to besieged areas in Damascus countryside. Her last detention was by the State Security Branch in Damascus in July 2016 and she was released six months later through an exchange deal and was deported to Idlib.
- ⁶² Akram: Born in As Suwayda in 1954, he was a student at the Faculty of Architecture when he was detained from Aleppo city in April 1980, because of his affiliation with the Revolutionary Workers' Party, then he was transferred to the State Security Branch in Damascus to serve for four years, later he was returned back to Aleppo to be released in 1994.
- ⁶³ Aziza: Born in Aleppo, she was detained twice, first in 1979 when she was pregnant, and the second time in 1980. She remained for seven years in Aleppo Central Prison waiting to be released, then she was transferred to Damascus where she spent two years in Douma prison, then returned back to the military security branch in Aleppo in 1990 to be released in 1991.
- ⁶⁴ Rehab: She was detained in 1988. She spent six months inside a cell in Palestine branch, then she was transferred to a Civil prison awaiting her release, she was acquitted when she completed two years in detention, then was released in 1990.
- ⁶⁵ Ayat: She was detained in 2009 by the political security branch in Al Mazzeh on charges of distributing leaflets at the university, where she stayed for a month and got tortured, then she was transferred to the Branch of Al-Faihaa and later to the Palestine branch where she remained in detention for about nine months. She was detained again in 2012.
- ⁶⁶ The report of the Syrian Network for Human Rights "Forced Disappearance is the most brutal and painful weapon of the Syrian regime" - 7852 women (an adult female) are still in detention or enforced disappearance on August 30, 2019 http://sn4hr.org/public_html/wp-content/pdf/arabic/At_least_98000_have_been_forcibly_disappeared_in_Syria_since_March_2011.pdf
- ⁶⁷ Lina: Born in Homs in 1959, she was detained in August 1987 by the Palestine Branch for pursuing her husband who was a leader of the Communist Labor Party. She spent all her time in detention at the branch, when she released in September 1990

- ⁶⁸ Hala: Born in Damascus in 1967. She was detained in 2013 at the Abbasid checkpoint to be taken to al-Khatib branch, where she remained for three days, then transferred to branch 215, where she stayed for about a month, later she was transferred to Adra prison and spent eight months there, to be released after paying large sums of money.
- ⁶⁹ Waad: Born in 1966, she was arrested in 1987 by the Palestine Branch for belonging to the Communist Labor Party, where she remained in the Palestine branch for five months to be transferred to Douma prison, where she remained until her release in 1991.
- ⁷⁰ Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network Report - The Detention of Women in Syria is a weapon of war and terror - 1/5/2015 https://euromedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/EMHRN_Womenindetention_AR-FINAL.pdf
- ⁷¹ Zaman Al Wasl - Rawan Kaddah's mother tells the story of her daughter's detention - 31 August 2014 <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/52999>
- ⁷² Jihad Al Nikah: alleged practice in which women voluntarily offer themselves as brides to jihadist fighters, in order to give them sexual comfort and boost their morale.
- ⁷³ Rania was born in As Swaida in 1990, she was detained at the end of 2012 by Palestine Branch, along with a group of her friends, because of a peaceful sit-in, calling for an end to the violence in Damascus, where she spent 50 days in detention.
- ⁷⁴ Mary was detained on April 16, 2013 by the Immigration and Passports Branch, transferred to the 227th district branch, then to The Palestine Branch, later to Adra prison. She was released two and a half months after her arrest when her husband paid a large sum in return.
- ⁷⁵ Munir was detained in 2012 at the Lebanese-Syrian border and handed over to Branch 215 for his activities in the coordination, then he was transferred to the field court and later to Sednayah prison, where he spent about two years
- ⁷⁶ Oussama was Born in Aleppo in 1960. He was detained when he was a student at Aleppo University in 1982 for belonging to the Communist Labor Party and released in 1998, and then arrested several times later, most recently in 2013 for being activist in the revolution.
- ⁷⁷ Layla was Born in Al Sliya in 1987. she was detained by the Palestine Branch in Damascus for belonging to the Communist Labor Party, where she was severely tortured and then transferred to Douma prison until her release in 1991.
- ⁷⁸ Fidaa was born in Hama. She was detained by the State Security Branch for being elected president of the National Council for Damascus Declaration at the end of 2007 and remained in detention until her release in 2010
- ⁷⁹ Abir was born in Damascus in 1987, she was arrested in Damascus at the end of 2012 and taken to branch 215 because of her participation in a youth civil activity where she remained for 33 days.
- ⁸⁰ Al Akhdar Al Ebrahimi: Green plastic rod used to beat detainees.
- ⁸¹ Nibal was born in As Suwayda. She was detained in 2013 by political security in Damascus and released in 2014 in exchange for nuns
- ⁸² Nada was born in Damascus in 1986. She was detained four times between 2011 and 2015 for participating in numerous activities and sit-ins.
- ⁸³ Luna was Born in Aleppo in 1966, she was detained by the Military Security Branch in Aleppo and then transferred to the Palestine Branch, where she spent a whole year as a hostage instead of her sister.
- ⁸⁴ Amnesty International organization <https://www.amnesty.org/ar/what-we-do/torture/>
- ⁸⁵ Article five of the Universal Declaration https://www.un.org/ar/udhrbook/pdf/UNH_AR_TXT.pdf
- ⁸⁶ Article seven of the International Covenant <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/arab/b003.html>
- ⁸⁷ Convention against torture and other cruel or inhuman treatment or punishment- adopted by the General Assembly and opened for signature, ratification and accession in Resolution 39/46 of 10 December 1984 - effective date: 26 June <https://www.ohchr.org/AR/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CAT.aspx>
- ⁸⁸ United Nation Treaty Body Database established under human rights treaties <https://bit.ly/2TbzPrP> (<https://tbinternet.ohchr.org>)
- ⁸⁹ Committee against Torture - Forty-fourth session - 26 April - 14 May 2010 Consideration of reports submitted by State parties under article 19 of the convention https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CAT%2fC%2fSYR%2fCO%2f1&Lang=ar
- ⁹⁰ Zamaan Al Wsl Website – The full story of the 11,000 Syrians who were killed under torture in Al-Assad's prisons <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/48706>
- ⁹¹ Syrian Human Rights Committee on Amnesty International Report- torture, despair and dehumanization- 13/9/2001 <https://bit.ly/32qdGKy> (www.safmcd.com)
- ⁹² Syrian Network for Human Rights Report - At least 98,000 enforced disappearances in Syria since March 2011 - Enforced disappearance is the Syrian regime's most painful and brutal weapon- Date 30/8/2019 http://sn4hr.org/public_html/wp-content/pdf/arabic/At_least_98000_have_been_forcibly_disappeared_in_Syria_since_March_2011.pdf

- ⁹³ Amnesty International Report - Put an end to terror and torture in Syria's prisons <https://www.amnesty.org/ar/latest/campaigns/2016/08/syria-torture-prisons/>
- ⁹⁴ German Chair: Metal chair, in which legs and arms are secured to the metal seat while the back of the chair is pulled back and down toward the ground.
- ⁹⁵ The New York Times - Inside Syria's Secret Torture Prisons - How Bashar al-Assad Crushed His Opponents - 22/7/2019 <https://www.nytimes.com/ar/2019/07/22/world/middleeast/syria-torture-prisons.html>
- ⁹⁶ Human Rights Watch - If The Dead Could Speak - Mass Deaths and Torture in Syria's Detention Facilities - 16/12/2015 <https://www.hrw.org/ar/report/2015/12/16/284536>
- ⁹⁷ Syrian Network for Human Rights Report - Documenting 72 torture cases the Syrian regime continues to practice in its detention centers and military hospitals - 21/10/2019 http://sn4hr.org/public_html/wp-content/pdf/arabic/Documentation_of_72_Torture_Methods_the_Syrian_Regime_Continues_to_Practice_in_Its_Detention_Centers_and_Military_Hospitals.pdf
- ⁹⁸ Cupboard (Dolab): Iron cabinet, tall enough to enclose a human being.
- ⁹⁹ Salam was born in Homs in 1965. She was detained in 1987 by the Military Security Branch in Aleppo for Membership in the Communist Workers Party and transferred to the Palestine Branch in Damascus and then to Women's Prison in Douma until her release in 1991.
- ¹⁰⁰ Jana Born in Damascus in 1997. She was detained in June 2014 by branch number 40 when she was only 17 years old and was severely tortured.
- ¹⁰¹ Detained in March 2012 at a roadblock and transferred to the Air Force Security Branch in Harasta, where she stated that she was the first woman to be detained in this branch. Later she was punished inside the dungeon with around 65 other detainees for seven months, until her release in October 2012
- ¹⁰² Nazra Organization for Women's Studies - Psychological and Social Impacts on Survivors of Sexual Assault and Rape - Research Paper by Dr. Alfat Allam <https://bit.ly/2STMZe1> (www.nazra.org)
- ¹⁰³ Article 27 of the Fourth Geneva Convention on the Protection of Civilians - expressly prohibiting rape and coercion for prostitution and any violation of women's freedom <https://www.icrc.org/ar/doc/resources/documents/misc/5ns1a8.htm>
Gloria Gaggioli's article: Sexual violence in armed conflict/ violation of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law. <https://www.icrc.org/ar/international-review/article/sexual-violence-armed-conflicts-violation-international-humanitarian>
- ¹⁰⁴ Statue of the International Criminal Court Rwanda Article 3 (Z) <http://www.un.org/arabic/documents/basic/rwanda.pdf>
Statue of the International Criminal Court, Former Yugoslavia Article 5 (Z) http://legal.un.org/avl/pdf/ha/icty/icty_a.pdf
The ICC statute criminalizes rape, sexual elimination, coercion to prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization or any other serious form of sexual violence. <https://www.icrc.org/ar/doc/resources/documents/misc/6e7ec5.htm>
- ¹⁰⁵ International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict Situations - P.18 - Forms of Sexual Violence https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/598335/International_Protocol_2017_2nd_Edition.pdf
- ¹⁰⁶ Gloria Gaggioli Article <https://www.icrc.org/ar/international-review/article/sexual-violence-armed-conflicts-violation-international-humanitarian>
- ¹⁰⁷ International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, Prosecutor v. Jean-Paul Kyesu, Case No. 4-96-ICTR (Trial Chamber, September 2, 1998, para. 688) <http://unictr.irmct.org/sites/unictr.org/files/case-documents/ict96-4/trial-judgements/en/980902.pdf>
International Criminal Court of Rwanda Prosecutor v. Alfred Musima Case No. 13-96-ICTR (Trial Chamber) 27 January 2000, paragraph 965 <http://unictr.irmct.org/en/cases>
- ¹⁰⁸ Oussama was born in Aleppo in 1960. He was detained when he was a student at Aleppo University in 1982 for his membership in the Communist Worker's Party and was released in 1998. He was later detained for several times, most recently in 2013 in connection with his revolutionary activism.
- ¹⁰⁹ Bisat Al Reeh: Victims are tied to a folded wooden board and bent forward and backward, which causes sever spinal damage.
- ¹¹⁰ Shabiha: Syrian state sponsored militias.
Munir was detained in 2012 at the Lebanese-Syrian border and handed over to Branch 215 for being active in coordination, then transferred to the Field Court and then transferred to Sednayah prison, where he spent about two years.
- ¹¹¹ Jalal Nawfal is a specialist psychiatrist who worked for years in providing psychological support for detainees. He experienced the ordeal of detention several times during the rule of Al-Assad Father and during the revolution/
- ¹¹² Ghost Beatings (Shabah): The warden hangs the prisoner from his hands for a period of time that may stretch into days. The prisoner often loses his ability to move his hands and has his joints dislocated. Furthermore, this practice can cause damage to his brachial plexus resulting in permanent disability.
- ¹¹³ Nahed born in Damascus in 1958. She was detained in September 1987 by the Palestine Branch on charges of membership in Communist Workers Party and released in 1991 and in 2005 for being involved in Al Atassi Forum management, and later on March 16, 2011 for participating in Damascus Interior's sit-in where she stayed for two weeks.

