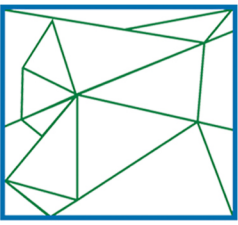


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& Justice



June 2017

A Special Report About “Hamida al-Taher” Detention Facility in Daraa

Survivors Tell Terrifying Stories of Egregious Violations inside the Cellars of the Facility

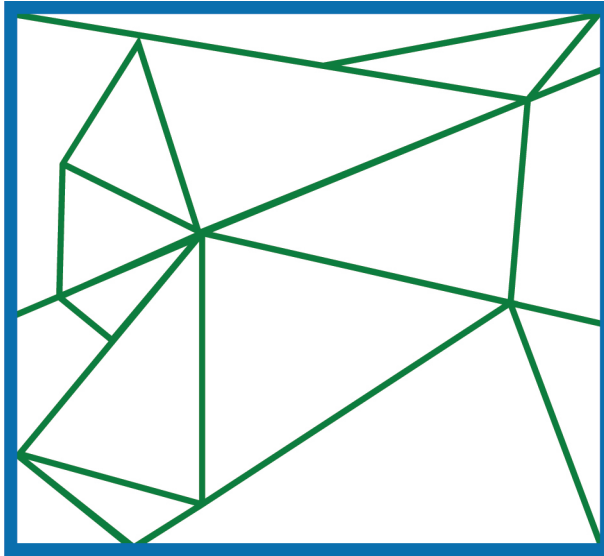
About STJ

"Syrians for Truth and Justice" (STJ) is an independent, non-governmental non-profit Syrian organization. It involves a number of Syrian human rights defenders, both men and women, from different backgrounds and affiliations. The founding team also includes academics from different nationalities.

STJ works for Syria where all citizens, males and females, enjoy dignity, justice and equal human rights.

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Preface:

Daraa, as well as most other Syrian provinces, is full of secret and public detention facilities, where tens of thousands of persons are arbitrarily detained and/or forcibly disappeared. Let alone thousands who died resulting from torture and ill-treatment and/or who have died as a result of health neglect and many widespread diseases, especially the skin diseases. Although the Syrian regular army controls a relatively small area, geographically speaking, of Daraa province, nevertheless, the area they control is characterized by an intense presence of security and military checkpoints compared to the numbers in other provinces. The Syrian government forces in Daraa control the entire international Highway that links **Damascus**, with Daraa. In addition, they seize most villages and towns on both sides of this Highway, starting from Jabab in the north towards the south, to Daraa al-Balad located in the center of Daraa. The regular army along with the security apparatus desired to «secure» this route militarily as it was the only supply route from Damascus. The Syrian government installed many security checkpoints on the road and created dozens of security centers and temporary detention facilities in the areas it controls. The field researcher of **Syrians for truth and Justice/ STJ**, through a thorough survey, could recognize a number of these centers, they include:

1. The Military Security Branch in al-Sanamayn, affiliated to the main branch in Daraa.
2. The Military Security Branch in Izraa, affiliated to the main branch in Daraa.
3. The State Security Branch in Izraa, affiliated to the main branch in Daraa.
4. The Political Security Branch in Izraa, affiliated to the main branch in Daraa.
5. The Military Security Branch in Daraa.
6. The Political Security Branch in Daraa.
7. The Air Force Intelligence Branch in Daraa.
8. The State Security Branch in Daraa.
9. Al-Shar'e checkpoint, also known as Maghsalat al-Shar'e checkpoint, located in **Khirbet Ghazaleh**, 11 km towards Daraa. It is established on the entrance to Daraa from the side of the international Highway (Damascus-Daraa Highway). Activists from the area believe it is one of the first checkpoints installed since the start of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, on the first day, second or the third day. At first, only elements of the Syrian regular army were stationed around the checkpoint, but after the Syrian regular army re-controlled Khirbet Ghazaleh on May 12, 2013, other elements of the security branches stationed there, such as the Military Security among others. The checkpoint contained the «wanted» lists by these branches, and it was responsible for thousands of arrests, including for children under 18.
10. Al-Khirbeh checkpoint, also known as the Khirbet Ghazaleh checkpoint, installed by the Syrian regular army in 2011. However, as in several other checkpoints, it expanded to include elements of other security branches as well as elements of the regular army after the re-capture of Khirbet Ghazaleh by the army on May 12, 2013. This checkpoint is considered the gateway to the eastern countryside, which is under the control of the Syrian armed op-position factions, and it usually transfers the detainees to Izraa or to Daraa.

11. The Panorama Stadium in Daraa was considered one of the most important places of detention and torture during the previous years. It is known nationwide not only in Daraa, as it arrested tens of thousands of citizens. However, it was transferred to a security center in 2011. The activists spoke of a large Syrian regular army headquarter in the stadium, as well as it is a place to assemble foreign militias that fight with the regular army such as Hezbollah the Lebanese militia forces, and Iranian and Iraqi militias among others.

12. Hamida al-Taher checkpoint is a detention center established in December 2011, and administratively affiliated to the Military Security Branch in Daraa. It is located in an important strategic place for the Syrian regular army. We will talk about this checkpoint in some detail in this report.

13. The archaeological castle in al-Masmiyah village, the Syrian security apparatus transformed it to a detention facility. Administratively, it follows the Military Security Branch in Daraa.

14. The State Security checkpoint is one km after «al-Share checkpoint» and near the Engineering Institute and al-Barmawi Driving School, and it is affiliated to the State Security Branch, whose patrol stands from 8:00 am to 1:00 pm and arrests people based on the lists it has.

Methodology of the Report:

The report adopted in its methodology on the narrative of seven detailed stories and testimonies of survivors from "Hamida al Taher" detention center at different intervals. The report-based team also analyzed many videos and photos; especially those linked to the site of detention itself or to persons work there, for example, the STJ could get a video tape, dates back to November 2015, showing many elements on the checkpoint. The faces of the elements that appeared in the video were linked to the testimonies of the survivors; ultimately, a number of elements from Hamida al-Taher checkpoint were identified.

In addition, the report interviewed activists and people from the region and the province, who added important contributions, especially those related to explaining the mechanism of the checkpoint's work and the overall context of the region.

Challenges and Difficulties:

The fear of giving a testimony by former detainees and survivors from Hamida al-Taher center was one of the most significant challenges that the report-based working group faced. The fear prompted many witnesses to ask not to disclose their identity. In addition, over the course of several months STJ tried to obtain testimonies from elements "defectors" of the checkpoint but in vain. It was very difficult to persuade the families of the missing victims to testify or report on their missing children and to disclose their names because of the fear of being settled inside the detention.

First: Hamida al-Taher Checkpoint:

Hamida al-Taher checkpoint is a security checkpoint named after the park next to it, **Hamida al-Taher Park**, located in the center of Daraa in **Al-Saharah** neighborhood. Moreover, the name of this garden belongs to a Syrian girl identified as Hamida al-Taher, born in Raqqa, 1968, who was a suicide bomber detonated herself in southern Lebanon in the 1980s, and killed more than 50 Israeli army troops, according to reports released on the incident at the time.

This park was transformed in late 2011 from a place for hiking and for children to play into a purely security center, spreading terror in the hearts of Daraa inhabitants and civilians coming to it from other villages, towns, and provinces. Shortly after the construction of that checkpoint, it was expanded to include other surrounding buildings, such as the Afaq Educational Institute that turned to be the main building in the checkpoint. In addition to the majority of the residential buildings surroundings as a building belongs to Musa family, a building belongs to al-Mahdi family, and other buildings including a house of the former chief of the Political Security Branch in Daraa. The checkpoint contains more than 100 security elements, including elements of the Syrian regular army, such as the Special Forces and other security elements affiliated to the Syrian security apparatus.

Elements from the checkpoint were deployed near al-Nitaqayn school, and sand berms were erected and equipped with short-range artilleries and "howitzers/mortar shells" to target nearby areas such as Daraa al-Balad, the Dam road and the Syrian opposition-held eastern villages.

Hamida al-Taher checkpoint is not like other military and security checkpoints given it turned from a security checkpoint to be a huge security detention facility with secret rooms underground in the basement of Afaq Educational Institute, which became a place to exercise the most gruesome kinds of torture according to people interviewed by STJ.

The following image, taken from a [video tape](#) posted by Daraa Media Union on June 30, 2013, shows a targeted building of Hamida al-Taher checkpoint in al-Saharah neighborhood.



Another **video tape**, posted by Daraa Coordination on September 12, 2013, shows closely and for the first time a building from Hamida al-Taher checkpoint in al-Saharah neighborhood, Daraa. To upload the video or to watch it on STJ special You Tube, please **click on this link**.

The Citizen (Ahmad. M ¹), a resident from al-Saharah, who declined to disclose his identity because of the security risks, told STJ that danger of the checkpoint and its violations against citizens increased after the agencies had brought large human reinforcements estimated of dozens of people, some of whom are residents of the region given they have the ability to discriminate the regime opponents from the loyalists.

Ahmed added:

“Patrols of this checkpoint, whose number of elements exceeds 100, always go out, raid and storm the city’s neighborhoods without warning, accompanied by attacks on civilian property, either plundering or vandalizing, as well as the arrest of youths and women on various charges. The checkpoints elements sealed a number of civilian houses known for their opposition to the regime, such as Jabr al-Massalmeh’s house, Anwar al-Massalmeh’s house and Amin al-Massalmeh’s house. Because of this checkpoint, the population could leave and return to the neighborhood through only one entrance that also has another checkpoint. The latter checkpoint keeps the information of all residents of the neighborhood and prevents them from going out after 9:00 pm until 6:00 am, as well as prohibits them from entering any food, agricultural, industrial or electronic items except with a security consent.”

Al-Saharah neighborhood in Daraa became like a large detention, where the security apparatus “numbered” the residents instead of their names, so the person is known for his number instead of the explicit name on the identity card.

¹ The second interview was accomplished in November 2016 by the field researcher of STJ in Daraa.



Satellite image shows the location of Hamida al-Taher Park that contains the checkpoint in al-Saharah, neighborhood, Daraa, in addition to the surrounding buildings, which the Syrian regular army has transformed into secret detention facilities.

Second: Testimonies of Former Detainees by Elements of Hamida al-Taher Checkpoint:

STJ was able to reach many eyewitnesses and survivors of elements from Hamida al-Taher checkpoint. The young man M. Al-'asmi, from Dae'l located in Daraa, described the moments before his arrest by the elements of this checkpoint:

"On January 15, 2013, al-Shohadaa Market ² (the Martyrs Market) was overcrowded as usual, and at about 1:00 am people began to run in panic. Soon, we heard the sound of gunfire from elements driving approximately 15 military and civilian vehicles. They blocked the roads leading from, to the market, besides a large number of elements got off and began to beat the pedestrians randomly. They gathered dozens of young people in the market square; I was one of them, put us in a big car dedicated for transporting vegetables and took us to Hamida al-Taher checkpoint. We were over a hundred young men.

We were taken to Hamida al-Taher Park, specifically to the Afaq Educational Institute. As soon as we entered, they forced us to undress so we stayed in the underwear, and we were thoroughly searched even the sensitive areas of our body. Then, they distributed us in solitary confinements, which were classrooms, but changed to resemble other cells and prisons. At that moment, I remembered pictures of other detention facilities where I was arrested previously by security apparatus affiliated to the Military Security and the Political Security. However, the situation is quite different here, as the place of science and knowledge has been transformed into a detention facility to commit crimes. After that, they put us in a tight space, a single cell was 5 x 5 m and the number of detainees in it was about 60. We could only sleep in a sitting position and keep each other standing for two hours in order to let another prisoner sleep in one's place, and shifted every two hours. Moreover, we breathe hard given the great pressure generated by the huge number of prisoners in that room."

Concerning what he witnessed in the checkpoint, and the torture other detainees were subjected to, al-Asmi said:

"Inside this checkpoint are a number of interrogators who are officers on the top floor and have nothing to do with the judiciary. Every day, one of the elements used to come in and called the name of one of the detainees, and after two hours or more, this detainee came back after being beaten and his blood spilled, with a change of his skin color because of the brutality and cruelty of torture. The elements prevented us from asking him or inquiring about the course of the investigation but sometimes we were talking with low voices to know the nature of the interrogation and the kind of questions they asked.

² A name of a folk market in the neighborhood.

One of the cases was a young man identified as Muhammad Aba zed, who spoke to me and said that they exposed him to Shabah position for several hours as well as subjected him to electric shocks on the background of his participation in a demonstration. In addition to the arrests of young people, there were also arrests of women whom we heard their voices from one of the distant rooms of the Institute. In the facility, I also met a young man identified as Khaled al-Massalmeh from Daraa, who said that he had witnessed the killing of two young men by elements of the checkpoint near the electricity building, tens of meters away from the checkpoint. There was a person, as well, who had been arrested for almost six months and had aconuresis because he had been tortured on the German Chair several times."

Al-'Asmi speaks about the investigation and the methods of torture inflicted on him:

On the seventh day of my detention, one of the elements opened the door of the cell and said, "hey al-'Asmi, come here and put the blindfold" then he took me upstairs, and halted me for more than half an hour in a place where I heard only the sound of beatings and the voice of the tortured detainees during the interrogation process. Moreover, every element who passed every few minutes hit me, until the order came to put me in the interrogation room, I stood up handcuffed behind my back. They started asking me about my personal information and the nature of my work, and then asked about my relationship with the rebels and my support for them. Through the investigation, I knew there were two rebels who sneaked from Daraa camp, for the Palestinian refugee, or from the Dam road and assassinated a high-ranking officer of the regime army. The interrogator asked me about the names of those rebels, where they came from, what was my relationship with them, and what facilities I offered them to conduct the assassinate.

I denied the all questions, and after each denial, I received a beating with sticks on my abdomen and my back by the elements standing there. Because of the severe beatings, I fell on the floor, and one of the elements hit me on the head from the back but the interrogator told him not to hit me in the head as they needed my memory, and he said to me:

«Since you are educated, you must be subjected to further torture so that future generations can learn the meaning of Hamida al-Taher checkpoint.» He asked me to confess everything so I would not die there. Indeed, I confessed under beatings and torture that I took part in the funeral of a martyr a year ago until the two elements stopped beating me almost an hour and a half after the investigation, and then I was sent back to the cell.

During my detention, I knew the name of the officer in charge of the administering the checkpoint, he was called Ayman Ayosh, from Al-Qusayr in Homs province. After the investigation, I stayed at the checkpoint for 35 days, and every night the warden in charge of us entered the cell and started insulting our reputation on the pretext of making a sound from inside our cell. He used to cornered all of us in the corner of the room and beat us with electric cables on the heads.

On the ninth day of my detention in the checkpoint, it was striking when we learned of a "Presidential Amnesty" of detainees who had not been stained with blood. Nevertheless, nobody went out of the cell at all, and we were originally denied access to a lawyer to help us get out of that place. After that, they released me directly but without any trial or without giving me an official document that explained the reason for the arrest or proving it. "

Testimony of the Survivor Identified as (Russell) about the Detention Center at Hamida al-Tahir Checkpoint

Russell, a pseudonym for a girl detained in the same place ³, from Daraa and one of the first activists in this city, worked in the media secretly until it was discovered and arrested by elements of the Hamida al-Taher checkpoint in 2015. After her release, she continued her media work but outside the city after she displaced.

Russell says in this regard:

«On January 11, 2015, after a rainy midnight, I heard sounds of military vehicles outside our house, where I live with my family and only a few moments the door of our was house removed, , soon 30 elements in their camouflage uniforms stormed the house and started hitting my father and my brothers with the butts of guns. Then they handcuffed our hands after taking the identity cards, and when the officer knew my name, he started hitting only me without the rest of my siblings saying bad words and indecent insults. He dragged me and beat me with his fists on my face until I fell on the floor, then he started hitting me with kicks on my body in front of my parents who could do nothing to rescue me from this situation, all of us experienced the same position that we were unable to speak. The rest of the elements searched the house, broke its contents, vandalized all the furniture and plundered the whole money as well.

After that, they put me in the back of one of their cars (boot). Half an hour later, when they let me down, I saw the Afaq Educational Institute, and realized I am in the notorious Hamida al-Taher checkpoint, which has always frightened us from the beginning of the events (uprising).

We feared approaching it at a distance of tens of meters.

³ The STJ field researcher made the interview December 2016, in Daraa.

In the first three days, I was placed in comunicado, which was a bathroom of 1 × 1 meter, designated for classrooms, but an iron door was placed for it to be a very dark place. During the first few days, no one opened the door nor anybody brought in a morsel of bread or any food, but I could drink water from the tap inside this bathroom. However, after the third day they only gave me a loaf of bread.”

About the Practices and Torture against Women and Men in that Center, Russell Added

« There were other women in the solitary confinements. I was able to distinguish it by hearing the voice while giving them food or taking them to the investigation. Whenever the elements opened the door or closed it, they told words of insults against those women and against all women everywhere. They practiced terrible psychological war against us by bringing young men and torturing them in front of the confinement’s door, I could distinguish the voice of one of them, he was a man appeared to be very old, they continued torturing him until his voice disappeared altogether, and three elements rotated in his torture. There was another young man; they seemed to have begun to put pieces of embers on his body until his voice finally abated. Another time, I heard an elements saying: «Throw him out with the bodies» after they had tortured a person in front of the solitary confinement where I stayed.»

Russell Talks About her Views in Hamida al-Taher Check-point

“Seven days later I was kicked out of the confinement and tortured by beating me by one of the elements with his gun-butt all over my body, he said to me: “Here every day we kill one person and you may now be the next.”

Then, they placed me in a small room 3 × 2 meters for two days with another girl arrested several days before me on the pretext that she was a media activist. During these two days, two elements used to enter and beat us with fists, kicks and whips, and telling bad languages to us, both elements were hitting the sensitive areas of our body deliberately.

On the tenth day, they moved us to another room of 5 × 5 meters, it was completely dark, we could not distinguish the night from the day, and it contained other 18 women from several neighborhoods of the city as well as from other cities. I reserve to disclose their identity fearful for their safety, all of them were already tortured. “



Russell Met Other Women during her Detention in that Checkpoint, She Said:

«A woman, in her forty from Daraa, drew my attention; she told me that she had spent four months in comunicado. She was behaving strangely as if she was mad (psychopath). She used to speak to herself, the lice and skin disease had inflicted her whole body, given shower is completely forbidden inside this center and she was not allowed to have a bath all this time. When I asked her for the reason of her arrest, she replied that she did not know and that they did not charge her of anything. Two days after I met her, they moved her from the room and most likely, transferred her to the Military Security Branch.

Um Ahmad, another elderly woman from Izraa, told me that she had been detained for more than five months and subjected to torture. She suffered from many illnesses, including diabetes and heart disease. Despite her bad health conditions, the elements refused to give her medication nor brought her a physician to inspect her. Once she asked the warden to open the door of the cell in order to go to the bathroom, but he refused, so she had to pee in her clothes. It is noteworthy that we were allowed to go to the bathroom twice in 24 hours, with one of the elements accompanied us during these moments. It was something that embarrassed us as well as terrified us, as we had to finish in a few seconds besides filling some bottles of water from the same bathroom to quench our thirst inside the cell later. We asked for many personal needs, but they were denied.

Arbitrary Detention without Legal Justification. In Terms of the Charges Against the Female Detainees, Russell Said:

“Most of the women were not charged of any accusations, we asked the warden to tell the official whose name was Abdullah Merhej that we wanted to be brought before a court and released, but he refused saying: «We will leave you inside this building, bombard it and accuse the opposition forces of this.” Our demand to be brought before a court had a negative reaction to us, as torture became almost daily in the morning or after midnight. They shifted on beating us, they took us to the basement and severely beat us with electric cables for an hour or more and then they returned us in an almost-total fainting. One night after a prisoner, from Daraa countryside, returned from the basement where she was tortured, she told us that the elements attempted to rape her but she had succeeded in preventing them from doing that. While we were taken downstairs to the basement, we used to hear voices of the men inside the cells, they were estimated about dozens, their torture rooms were close to ours so we heard their screams during the interrogation.”



In Terms of the Interrogation with her, Russell Said

«On the 20th day, after midnight, I was summoned to the investigation. I stood still in front of the interrogator handcuffed, and he started asking me about my name, date of birth, the place of residence, my education level and everything about my family. He ordered me to confess my» terrorist «activities, but I denied this charge, so the elements started beating me with their fists and kicked me. Meantime, the interrogator was writing on the papers in front of him answers to the questions that he asked me with regard to “terrorist gangs and communicating with tendentious channels”, according to his expression, he was asking and answering himself and writing what he wanted to write.

The interrogator started rape threats to increase my suffering more and more. After a while, I was shocked when they brought one of our neighbors and put him in front of me. The investigator started asking him questions about me and to explain what were the activities I was doing that oppose the regime, but he did not answer because he was originally unaware of these activities, and then the elements beat him with electric batons until he fainted. It led horror to bear in myself. After that, he was taken out of the investigation room and to this day, his family does not know his whereabouts inside the regime’s detention facilities. Finally, after the interrogation session, they took me back to the dungeon.

The next day at 2:00 pm, they transferred me to the Military Security Branch in Daraa. Ten days after staying there and following my pledge not to conduct any “terrorist” acts, finally, I was released.

Arbitrary Arrest, Followed by Forcible Displacement of Russell’s Family

The survivor Russell reported to STJ that after she got out of the prison she was traumatized that the Military Security Branch had threatened her family ordering them to evacuate and leave, otherwise Russell will be arrested again. According to Russell, they were later forced to leave to the opposition- controlled areas in Daraa countryside, where she completed her media and relief activities in most areas of Daraa that were not controlled by the regime. She added that her arrest incident had a significant psychological impact, which still accompanies her up to now.

The Testimony of the Survivor Ahmad. A. About his Detention by Elements of Hamida al-Taheer Checkpoint

Ahmed, 27, a young man from Daraa, who declined to disclose his identity for security purposes, and preferred to use the code-name Ahmad. A⁴ was among the first who participated in the peaceful movement that pervaded most of the Syrian provinces. However, he was arrested by elements of Hamida al-Taheer checkpoint on October 15, 2014. The elements took him from his house in al-Kashef neighborhood in Daraa. He narrated his arrest story to STJ and said:

“At 2:00 am, we got surprised when the security elements surrounded the entire neighborhood of al-Kashef; they stormed and searched most of the houses. They came to my house, asked for my identity card, and checked my personal information. One of the elements asked to use my mobile phone, meanwhile he wanted me to bring him a glass of water, after they finished searching my house, they went up to my neighbor’s house, and they asked him to use his cell phone as well, then they went out of the building. My neighbor and I thought that they tied our phones to a network or geolocate them so they could find us if we wanted to escape.”

About one hour later, Ahmed was shocked to see a security element knocking his door, calling his name and asking him to bring his identity card and his personal documents, and immediately to get on the car that is parked under the building. Ahmad could do nothing but to obey the element’s orders. He got shocked to see his neighbor, as well taken from his home.

4 The interview was online during May 2017.

Ahmed said:

«Panic controlled us as we did not know where they would take us, until we arrived. Later we learned that we were in Hamida al-Taher detention facility, which was basically Hamida al-Taher park and two large houses in addition to the three-storey building of Afaq Educational Institute. They drove my neighbor and me to Afaq building and placed us in a classroom on the first floor, and later we knew that the second floor was reserved for women. The first floor was the worst place for the detainees given Hamida al-Taher elements stay there, drank alcohol, abused drugs such as “Tramadol and Captagon pills” at mid- night, and then created methods to torture us. One time, they hanged me in Shabah position for several days until I almost fainted. They used to whip me 60 times during only 60 seconds, as well as using electric shocks, and putting fuel diesel in food then forcing us to eat it.»



Image of Afaq Educational building that the Syrian regular army transformed it into a secret detention center in al-Saharah neighborhood located in Daraa. Taken on March 17, 2017.

Photo credit: STJ



A visual evidence analysis of the previous image, which shows the location of Afaq Educational building in al-Saharah, Daraa.



During his six-month detention in Hamida Taher detention center, Ahmed affirmed to STJ, that he witnessed several cases of killing and torture of detainees there, he said:

«We were 15 detainees in one room including children, I remember well how once they took a 12-year-old child, I decline to disclose his name, and put him in a bathtub, and then suffocated him until he died. Of course, we learned this by the elements who boasted killing him. Through the voices that we could hear, I concluded that Hamida al-Taheer elements were the bloodiest people I had ever met. One day, they took a young man, also I decline to disclose his name, to a classroom of the Afaq building, accused him of helping the rebels in digging tunnels, they asked him to lie on his back, then brought a graver and a hammer and started hitting on the side of his heart. They were telling him: «We will dig a tunnel into your heart as you helped the gunmen to dig tunnels». I still remember the young man's screams, which filled the place, until it gradually, disappeared; he died after making a hole in his heart.»

Ahmed referred to poisoning the drinking water by elements of Hamida Taher, with a view to end the lives of some detainees. He said

«In a classroom of the Afaq Educational building, there were some detainees who were denied access to water for two full days, and on the third day one of the elements brought them some water, and suddenly the young men's screams filled the whole place as a result of severe pains. Again, from the elements boast about what they had done, we learned that they poisoned the water and threatened to poison our water as well in order to spread horror in ourselves. On the same day, we eavesdropped through a small hole on the door, and saw some elements pulling the bodies of those young men.»

Cases of Sexual Abuse of Detainees, Carried out by Elements of the Hamida al-Tahir Checkpoint, the Survivor Ahmed Said:

«Several elements were responsible for our torture, one of them identified as Iyad⁵, and Khaled, who spoke in a Lebanese accent, and I think that he was one of the Lebanese Hezbollah elements who ran the checkpoint with other elements of the Syrian regular army. As well as another jailer identified as Karim, who frequently committed sexual assaults to many detainees, especially the very young ones. We could hear voices of the elements saying to Karim, the jailer: «look at what we have brought to you... We get you a kitten» and then we start to hear the sounds of sexual assault».

In turn, Ahmed estimated the number of detainees, during his six-month detention period, at about 600-700 detainees, male and female. Every day elements of Hamida al-Tahir fill the classrooms of Afaq Educational building with new detainees. Ahmed believed that 90% of the incarcerated were transferred to Sednaya prison, while⁶ the rest were transferred to an Anti-Terrorist Court.

Ahmed Narrates the Story of Some Children During his Detention

«Among the detainees, whose images stuck in my memory, three children between 13 and 14 years old, I reserve to mention their names. They were sleeping beside me in the room, one of them died given the horror and the torture he was subjected to, the other disappeared and we no longer knew anything about him, whereas the third one was transferred to Palestine Branch and we learned later that he died there. Apart from the children and women who were in a room designated to exchange detainees at Afaq Educational building, this room contained up to 250 detainees who were relatives of armed opposition elements. The exchange was with Syrian army officers captivated by opposition factions. There were also people who spent many years in that room, and sometimes elements of Hamida al-Taher elements used them to dig tunnels for the favor of the regular army in Daraa city.»

5 STJ have reserve to publish the full information, obtained through interviews with witnesses, about the identities of the elements and the provinces they live in until a full investigation of the atrocities committed in this checkpoint is conducted.

6 According to the witness himself, "the forced labors" told the other detainees about their colleagues. The forced labors, who provide food for detainees, usually contact with both the elements and jailers.

On November 15, 2014, Ahmed was transferred to the Military Security Branch in Daraa, and five days later, he was transferred to the branch 291 affiliated to the Military Intelligence Department in Damascus, where the conditions of detention were less severe than in Hamida al-Taher detention center according to him. On January 15, 2015, they transferred him to Adra Prison where he spent two years. He was released on April 20, 2017, following many attempts trying to convince the judge that he should join the military service and "return to his homeland", finally, he could fled during his military service in Homs.

In a confirmed testimony, Talal M ⁷, one of the former detainees at Hamida al-Taher checkpoint, emphasized that elements of the Lebanese Hezbollah were practicing the worst forms of torture alongside elements of the Syrian regular army, and he narrated the circumstances of his detention to STJ

"Within November 2014, I was arrested from work in a neighborhood held by the Syrian regular army as a result of a malicious report informed against me by someone. At the beginning, they took me to the Municipal Stadium in Daraa, Where they beat me and put me in a cage similar to dog's cage for two hours. Then they transferred me to Hamida detention facility specifically to Afaq Educational building where they received me with severe beatings on the ground floor. Immediately they handcuffed me and hanged me in Shabah position for 14 days, during which I was allowed only five minutes a day to take food and one minute to go to the toilet, until I got in a deplorable situation. They accused me of funding terrorism and assisting the terrorists. After that, they took me to the basement where they created methods of tortured as I was subjected to electric shock, whipping and beating by hard water pipes known as "al-Akhdar al-Ibrahimi". They deliberately struck the sensitive parts of my body, without any medical care. A few days later, they placed me in a room with other 33 detainees.

⁷ It is a pseudonym of a detainee in Hamida al-Taher checkpoint, he declined to disclose his name for security purposes, and he was interviewed online in May 2017



A satellite image, shows the location of the Municipal Stadium in Daraa, where the survivor T. m was taken to. It shows as well the location of Hamida al-Taher detention center, where he was transferred to later.

Talal, the survivor told STJ about women and children abuses in Hamida al-Taher detention facility. He said:

Hamida al-Taher detention center is as bad as Sednaya Military Prison and sometimes even worse. Elements of the checkpoint did not differentiate in torture between the young or the old; they tortured a 10-year-old kid just like an adult, and even women, we could hear their screams while being tortured in the second floor. I still remember until this moment a 12- year old child identified as Muhiyeeden, from Deir az-Zor, who was still under 12. They accused him of poisoning the food of an officer so he was transferred to the Palestine Branch. News of him never came.»

In February 2015, Talal was transferred to the Military Security Branch in Daraa, where the conditions were relatively better than in Hamida al-Taher detention center. In March 2015, he was transferred to the Palestine Branch in Damascus where he stayed for 52 days. In this regard, he said to STJ:

“As soon as I arrived at “the death branch”, they greeted me with severe beatings without any reasons. At the spot, they charged me with affiliation to al-Nusra Front given my long beard and hair and put me in a dormitory with approximately 100-120 detainees in a very narrow space; each detainee had only a single slab area. In terms of torture, they practiced torture with all techniques and deliberately aimed to be deadly to the extent that it killed daily on average between (2-3) detainees in the branch.”

In May 2015, Talal was transferred to the Military Police department in Qaboun neighborhood located in Damascus, then one week later he was sent to Adra prison in Damascus. In October 2015, he was released after he managed to bribe a judge with a very large amount of money, in US dollars (\$) as he said.

Testimony of Hamid, the Survivor about Hamida al-Taher Detention Centre

In August 2014, Hamid. R⁸, 29, a survivor from Daraa, and a university student was arrested at Menkat al-Hatab checkpoint operated by the Syrian regular army, it is located on Daraa Highway. He was initially transferred to Sweida, and in September 2014, he was transferred to the Hamida al-Taher detention center.

The survivor Hamid describes to STJ the period of his arrest in Hamida al-Tahir, saying:

«First of all, I reserved to mention many details of the torture inflicted on me in Hamida al-Taher; it is hard for me to disclose all of them. As soon as I arrived at the ground floor of Afaq Educational building, the elements tied both my hands and feet tightly, and then put me in a small bathroom «toilet», and peed on me whenever they opened the door.»

⁸ The witness's identity is withheld for security purposes, and the interview was online in May 2017.

"I stayed in this state for seven days, as a result, my skin swelled up and my health condition became too bad. After that, they took me down to the basement where I spent 24 days. I was completely alone until they brought a young man and put him in the same room with me, and I stayed with him for a month and half. During this time, we were subjected to the most egregious psychological and physical torture. It was winter and the weather was extremely cold, we were naked and they switched on the fans in order not to feel warm. After that, they took us to another room, where the number of detainees was increasing day by day, until the number exceeded 70 detainees. They accused me of «funding terrorism and the gunmen,» although it was an unfounded accusation. Many of my friends who were incarcerated in Hamida al-Taher were killed in front of my eyes, I will reserve from mentioning their names. I still remember well how they abraded our hands and legs, and how they forced us to drink bottles full of urine. The elements of this center did not care about the death of any detainee. Whenever we knew that someone died, the guards kept telling us that there was no recorders for detainees in Hamida al-Taher as it was a secret detention center, and no one knew what was happening inside it. I would point out here that the time I spent there was countless just like the case with the other detainees. The date of arrest was recorded from the date of our transferring to the Military Security Branch in Daraa".

Hamid Asserted in his Testimony to STJ that Entire Families were Being Taken to Hamida al-Taher Detention Facility

"A man and his wife were one of the families incarcerated in Hamida Taher, the man, a former employee in Daraa Health Directorate, was transferred from Hamida al-Taher to the Palestine Branch, we heard later that he died there. Whereas his wife was still kept in Hamida al-Taher but we no longer knew anything about her. I also still remember two children who one of the jailers identified as Iyad pulled them out of the room and forced them to confess that they were armed, at once they were transferred to Sednaya Prison and we didn't hear anything about them."

After four-month detention in Hamida al-Taher facility, Hamid denied the charges against him, so they transferred him in January 2015 to the Military Security Branch in Daraa. Then in late January 2015, he was transferred to the Palestine Branch located in Damascus.

In March 2015, Hamid was transferred to the Military Police located in Qaboun neighborhood, Damascus. Only three days later, he was transferred to Adra Prison in Damascus, where he spent two years. In March 2017, he was released after he paid a large amount of money to a judge.

The Testimony of the Survivor Muhannad Faisal al-Saeed About Hamida Taher Detention Center

Muhannad Faisal Al-Saeed⁹, born in 1976 in Dara al-Balad, a father of four children, he and his brothers were among the first participants in the peaceful movement in 2011. On Saturday, October 24, 2014, he was arrested from his house located in the Security Box controlled by the Syrian regular army. The Security Box includes Daraa al-Mahata, Al-Kashef neighborhood, al-Saharah, Shamal al-Khat area and al-Assad suburb. Muhannad narrated to STJ the moments of his arrest:

“They arrested me because of a malicious report informed by one of my neighbors. Two men, in civilian uniforms, stopped me; one of them identified as Abu Jawhar, an element of the Military Security Branch under the command of Colonel Wafiq al-Nasser, and asked to show them my identity card and to get on the car. They drove me to the Municipal Stadium in Daraa, then we went into a house, they put a black blindfold on my eyes, and placed me in a little cage of approximately 1 × 1 meter. Three hours later, several persons came, pulled me out of the cage and dragged me into the car; I was in a deplorable condition. They put me in the boot, I tried to focus to find out where they would take me, but it was in vain.”

Muhannad Faisal Al-Saeed, Went on Narrating What Happened to him As Soon As He Arrived at Hamida Taher Detention Center

“Ten minutes later we got to an anonymous location, and here the series of torture began, they greeted me with severe beatings and insults for more than an hour, and then put me in a place like a corridor, and everyone passed used to beat me. I stayed in the corridor for two full days, after that, they unlocked “the chains” off my hands, untied the blindfold off my eyes and drove me to a place like a solitary confinement. Later, I learned that it was inside Afaq Educational building operated by the notorious detention center Hamida al-Tahir.

⁹ The meeting was conducted via Whats App in May 2017.

Muhannad Faisal al-Saeed spent about a week in the (solo), he was listening to the cries of the detainees being men or women. Some elements handcuffed him with thin iron wires, just like the other detainees, almost one of those prisoners was about to lose his hands because of wires. However, the elements agreed to give him antibiotic injection otherwise he would have lost it actually. When al-Saeed was transferred to Adra Prison in Damascus on December 24, 2014, he was suffering from amnesia given the severe beatings especially on the head by elements in Hamida al-Taher.” He described to STJ what he saw there:

“The Afaq Educational Institute was merely an exile; their elements spoke the coastal accent, and suffered from mental illnesses. The jailors tied our hands back tightly, and then left us in the room. Every 15 minutes one of the elements came to whip, kick, or insult us. The food was a loaf of bread and a little lentils or rice, for me I stayed a week without food, because I was really in a bad state. On October 31, 2014, they gathered about seven or eight individuals from the solidarity prison, and took us down to a basement on the ground floor. The basement consisted of many rooms with school desks, they put us in a very small tight room with more than 20 persons, including two children who were arrested with their school bags, and they were students in the eighth or ninth grades. One of them identified as Ali Loay al-Jahmahani, arrested on charges attributed to his father who helped the gunmen, whereas the second child was called Muhammad Farzat Aba Zed who was charged of transferring information to the gunmen from the Security Box, controlled by the regular army, to Daraa al-Balad controlled by the opposition. Lately, the child Muhammad was transferred to Sednaya Prison, then to Adra Prison, where I met him again there. I went out of prison but Muhammad remained there, he was sentenced of 12 years. There were few detainees remained in Hamida al-Taher center for seven or eight months, others disappeared altogether, like Suleiman Aba Zed whom I knew well, in addition to detainees who died in that detention.”

On the other side, al-Saeed stressed that most of the detainees in the Hamida al-Taher detention center were generally transferred to the Military Security Branch in Daraa where they stayed for about a week, until they were officially documented, and then transferred to the notorious Security Branches in Damascus, he added:

“On November 22, 2014, I was transferred to the Military Security Branch in Daraa, where I stayed for approximately 22 days and on December 14, 2014, I was deported to Damascus with other 12 detainees. They took us to Damascus by bus; we thought we were going to be transferred to the Palestine Branch. On the way, we felt great imaginable horror, but the surprise was when they got off only six persons in Palestine Branch. However, the other six including me were transferred to 291 Branch, located in Kafr Soussa district, where they undressed us and put us, the six, together in a cold and wet solidarity, half meter by half meter. It was merely a refrigerator. Of course, they beat us and hanged us in Shabah position again, because the interrogator ignored Daraa’s court-record and opened a new one in Damascus.”

Eight days later, al-Saeed with two other young persons identified as Abdul Karim Assi al-Mutlaq, and Issam al-Hourani were taken to the Military Court in al- Mezzeh area. The military judge transferred them to the Anti-Terrorist Court in Damascus, and then they were taken to the Military Police in Qaboun, Damascus. On December 24, 2014, they were transferred to Adra Prison. In this regard, Muhannad Faisal al-Saeed tells STJ:

In Adra prison, the reception was bad and terrifying; they put us into a dormitory with approximately 9700 detainees. People, who work in distributing food to prisoners, informed us of this numbers. While the dormitory in Adra had space for only 40 persons, nevertheless, we were more than 115 per dormitory. On January 26, 2015, I was appeared to the judge of Terrorism Court; he investigated and incarcerated me without any proof or evidence. In June 2015, they transferred me to the Terrorism Criminal Court. I could get out of the prison only on a bail, on December 14, 2016.”

Third: The Most Prominent Security Leaders inside Hamida al-Tahir Checkpoint:

According to some survivors' testimonies to STJ, several elements of the checkpoint were identified, including Colonel Ayman Ayosh, an officer from al-Qusayr who administrated the checkpoint, at the time. He was reported to be killed in an ongoing battle in Syria at the beginning of November 2015.



Image of the Colonel Ayman Ayosh. Photo credit: Activists from the Daraa.

It was mentioned that elements of the Lebanese Hezbollah also existed. STJ obtained a video tape showing a number of elements of the checkpoint, especially those affiliated to the Syrian regular army, in addition to a number of high-rank commanders of the checkpoint. We will reserve all the names until they are handed to international and judicial authorities.

Fourth: the Annexes, Victims of Hamida al- Taher Checkpoint

STJ could document a number of identities ¹⁰, who have been arrested or killed by Hamida al-Taher checkpoint, including:

1. Wasim Ali Faloji, his family received his body several days after his detention on March 15, 2013. He was executed extrajudicially by two shots in the chest and in the head.
2. Fadi al-Hasbani was arrested at the checkpoint and killed several days later in 2014.
3. Musleh Ayyash was executed extrajudicially in a break-into carried out by elements of the checkpoint in 2013.
4. Zaher al-Sheikh Qasim was executed extrajudicially in a break-into carried out by elements the checkpoint in 2012.
5. Nayef al-Sheikh Qasim was executed extrajudicially in a break-into carried out by elements of the checkpoint in 2012.
6. Jalal al-Sheikh Qasim was arrested by elements of the checkpoint in 2012 and he is yet released, he is forcibly disappeared.
7. Wasim al-Sheikh Qasim was arrested in 2012 by elements of the checkpoint and he is yet released, he is forcibly disappeared.
8. Rita Jamal al-Jahmahani was executed extrajudicially on August 17, 2013, according to an eyewitness from the elements.
9. Ayaat Jamal al-Jahmahani was executed extrajudicially On August 17, 2013, according to eyewitnesses of the elements.
10. Zakiya Ferhan al-Shuha was executed extrajudicially on August 17, 2013, according to eyewitnesses of the elements.
11. Walid al-Sari Aba Zed died as a result of torture, and his body was transferred to the National Hospital on March 10, 2013.
12. Rabee ' al-Kaquuni was killed because of torture, and his body was transferred to the National Hospital on March 10, 2013.
13. Nassar Abu Nabout, who died because of torture and his body was transferred to the National Hospital on March 10, 2013.
14. On April 15, 2013, elements of the checkpoint exploded a bus full of detainees, it was on the way to the Municipal Stadium and everyone died, one of them was Muhammad al-Jahmahani from al-Sabil neighborhood.
15. Anwar al-Dughem, from al-Kashef neighborhood, elements of the checkpoint executed extrajudicially.
16. [Dr. Kazim Aba Zed](#) was executed extrajudicially on February 14, 2013.
17. Mohammed Abu Houbi and Ibrahim Abdullatif al-Saeed were [executed](#) extrajudicially on 13 February 2013, by elements of Hamida al-Taher checkpoint, near Aisha al-Zo'ebi Pharmacy in Daraa al- Mahata.

¹⁰ Many families of Hamida al-Taher checkpoint detainees refused to disclose the names of their children for fear of being settled by the checkpoint elements or other security forces in case they are transported or transferred to other security branches