

سوريون
من أجل
الحقيقة
والعدالة
Syrians
For Truth
& Justice



Jalal Nofal

**“NOTHING ELSE BUT
NONVIOLENCE”**

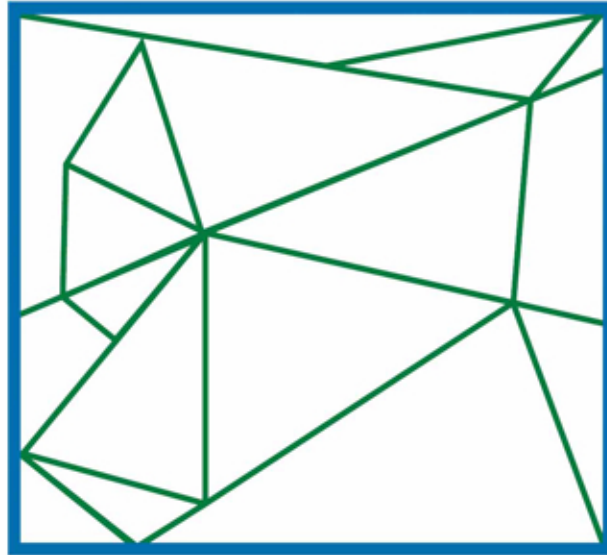
About the organization

“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 a Syria where all citizens, males and females, enjoy dignity, justice and equal human rights

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Executive Summary

When you sit down with Jalal, you get impressed immediately with the power of the youth in a man who is over fifty years old. As you listen to him talking, you'll soon admire his zeal mixed with his pure thoughts. It is "Jalal Nofal", who graduated as a physician and specialized as a psychiatrist after having previously spent 8.5 years in different prisons under Hafez al-Assad's period. He has also survived four detentions for his activism in the Syrian revolution and defending its peaceful components.

Jalal started his intellectual life reading communist literature. Soon enough, he devoted most of his time to work within its parties and with their active members. He got arrested in his twenties following his activities with "the Communist Labour Party" and his belief in its ideology and revolutionary principles. However, his long years in prison gave his ideological consciousness deeper dimensions. His personal insights and direct observations led him into looking for successful methods of revolutionary action. After the "first uprising of the people", he believed that violence cannot lead to change. Thus, he studied different cultures and experiences that fostered his commitment to peaceful methods and to the "nonviolence" culture as means for safe change.

With the outbreak of revolution in Syria and its first calls for freedom and dignity, Jalal was present through his work, carrying with him those innovative ideas to maintain the peaceful forms of expressing the "second uprising of the Syrian people". He was arrested by the "State Security Branch" along with the banner he was holding up during the peaceful demonstration in "Arnous" Neighborhood, showing no resistance to security personnel. He didn't try to run away because he believed that the slogan of "No for sectarianism. Yes for democracy" was no crime. So he did not have to run away from its consequences.

Jalal didn't forget his job as a doctor. He participated in establishing "Damascus Doctors Coordination" to treat the wounded during peaceful demonstrations. This was the reason behind his second arrest by the "Air force Intelligence." In this detention, he witnessed three deaths resulting from direct physical torture.

Although he was himself subject to severe torture, this didn't make him give up his faith in the importance of continuing to advocate for peaceful expression as part of the revolution by the people. After being released, he worked in coordination with "Syrian Revolutionary Youth Assembly" on reviving the civil peaceful movement in Damascus by having speakers chant the first slogans and songs of the revolutions in several spots in the city. That was the reason behind his longest and most dreadful detention during which he saw death face to face while in Branch 215 operated by Military Intelligence, where he was detained and witnessed numerous incidents of torture and murder as well as observed the ordeals most detainees experience there.

Jalal came out of the worst and most invulnerable security branch in one piece only to get detained, a month later, for the fourth time by "State Security Branch." This time, however, it was a "coincidence." After that, he decided to leave the country heading to one of the refuge countries. However, his soul refused to stay away from the reality and agony of Syrians, so he headed back to Turkey – specifically to the city with the largest number of Syrians – to continue his career as a psychiatrist.

Overview of Jalal Nofal's Life before Detention

Jalal introduces himself as "the son of Yarmouk Camp". His life, back then, teemed with politics and struggle against authority in its various versions, including Palestinian and Syrian forms. Born in 1963, he grew up and lived his youth days inside the camp except for some summer vacations that he spent in Suwayda, the hometown of his parents. His father played a great role in shaping Jalal's revolutionary and rebellious personality against dominant attitudes. His father, who was the head of Tourism Workers Syndicate in Damascus at the time, was known for his passion to defend just causes, and his zeal to defend the most marginalized groups. He was aggressive and sharp whenever anyone abused the working class or their rights. Jalal recalls an incident where he was impressed by his father, who was quarreling with the manager of "Meridian Hotel" and hit him because he mistreated one of its workers.

The memory Jalal has of this father which had the greatest impact occurred days before his father's death. A friend came with official documents to be signed by him. Jalal describes how his father's mood changed; a smile appeared on his pale face. After the guest left, Jalal asked his father about the secret behind this apparent comfort. His father answered that after this, he can rest in peace because a worker has gotten his due rights and won a lawsuit against his boss after being arbitrary dismissed from work. Moreover, the court decided the boss must pay all the worker's payables in addition to costs of trial. His father passed away two weeks later as a result of a chronic disease. He left behind a huge library from which Jalal learned about Marxism, the publications of the communist party, and its struggle. He also learned about the splits that happened inside it as well as its issues with other political parties. This was the central element that shaped Jalal's intellectual life and activity.

As for Jalal's mother, he inherited her persistence and constant vigor as he had watched her during his early childhood trying hard to change her personal reality. The mother used to be illiterate, but her fondness of knowledge made her educate herself and get interested in literary subjects. Jalal says that he got to know the novels of "Victor Hugo" and gained his passion for reading literature because of his mother who used to narrate those wonderful stories for him and his brother during their early childhood in a very creative way once she finished reading them.

Jalal Nofal acquired his political and party awareness from his family and the continual discussions with his friends in his school in Yarmouk Camp. He also benefitted from his intermingling and hanging out with university students and some older guys who were zealous for change. However, this awareness didn't crystalize until after he joined the "Democratic Youth Union" Party in 1979, when he was 16 years old. That was a fertile stage, as Jalal sees it, especially in terms of political movements and divisions that occurred inside the Syrian Communist Party at the time.

"I was quite in the middle of that atmosphere and that helped me to dig deeper in the ideologies of the parties existed in Syria then". Jalal says, "There were signs of an uprising and we began to hear about diverse activities such as "the intellectuals declaration" among other things. Indeed, the first signs of rebellion in Syria began when I was studying for my high school certificate. I began to read several statements made by political parties and I met many figures from the Baath Democratic Party, Revolutionary Workers Party and Communist Labor Association. I read their literature with which I identified on one hand, and that met my "sense of opposition" on the other. Later on, I joined the "Communist Labor Party" after having disagreements with my old friends. I was so aware of the consequences of such step and I knew it might lead into getting arrested."

Jalal adds about what happened in the eighties

"It was a public uprising against oppression and the beginning of liberation from tyranny." However, certain sides wanted it to die before it was born, and they succeeded in doing so. It was the 1980s in Syria. Both the authority and the Muslim Brotherhood Movement twisted this first uprising and turned it into a conflict between them leaving behind mass destruction in people and property. Today, it is a wide public revolution to which the same destiny is being schemed. I was present at that time with my rebellious spirit and revolutionary activities against all dominating sorts of injustice and aspects of persecution, just like I am today. I witnessed death outside and inside detention places of the regime in two periods, different in time but identical in content. Inside the dungeons of Assad the father and Assad the son, I've lived conditions of detention and forms of torture similar in kind but different in severity and scope."

He adds

"In February 1982, after it had destroyed the city of Hama, the Syrian regime forces opened" the road into the city. I immediately paid a visit to the city the next day. Destruction was horrible, blood spots resulting from the summary executions stained its walls and ground. It wasn't a city anymore; it was nothing but rubble. It became a gloomy city, which made me refrain from going back to it until 2013. That day, I made up my mind and said to myself we should overthrow this tyrannical regime, especially after I understood its goal from all the destruction and its message to all Syrians, "whoever dares to face us will face the same fate."

First Detention in Jalal Nofal's Life

In 1983, I started to deliver the mail of the "Communist Labor Party" to other governorates like Aleppo and Latakia by means of public transport. Once, I was carrying urgent mail from Damascus to Aleppo. Among my stuff, the driver's assistant spotted the "ar-Raya al-Hamra" [Red Banner] newspaper (the Communist Labor Party newspaper). When I tried to escape, he caught me with the help of some of the people there. They handed me to the "Political Security Branch" in Damascus. It was in July 1983. This division was called at that time "City Division" or "Maisat Division" located near Umayya Hospital.

I was 20 years old, a second year medical student in Damascus University. When the security personnel got me, they thought they got an invaluable treasure. A postman must know a lot of information about the party and those in relation with the party. Their methods of torture and pressure weren't different from those I would see later in "Bashar al-Assad's" prisons (like beating with canes, using the "tyre" method or making me stand for several hours on one foot as a punishment, among others). The way of surrounding the detainees' circles wasn't different either. After storming my house, they arrested all my friends, the close ones to the party and the far ones. They brought all those with whom I had personal and memorial photos. Most of them had nothing to do with the party's activities, but they were subject to the same torture and they were detained for the same time as me.

I spent 37 days in this branch and then I got transported to "Karakon al-Sheikh Hasan", a small prison with 100 detainees in two dormitories and 24 cells in a cemetery called "Bab el Saghir ", one of the oldest cemeteries in Damascus near "Bab Musalla" in the direction of "Bab El-Jabia". I stayed there for two years. The symbolic nature of that place, being inside a cemetery and thus we, detainees, were like the dead, was hard enough for me.



Satellite image for the location of Karakon al-Sheikh Hasan inside Bab el Saghir Cemetery, according to eye witnesses and locals. The location is identified in red

In 1985, after the central prison of Adra was established, we carried out a hunger strike in "Karakon al-Sheikh Hasan" demanding to be transported to Adra prison. Indeed, we got that demand at the end of May of that year, but without any trial. We remained in detention under martial law that was being enforced at the time. We had no idea when we may get released or for how long will we be held in prison. Moreover, we were not allowed to complete our university studies while in Arda prison. We had our famous saying, **"Work for prison as if you were imprisoned forever and work for you freedom as if you were going to be released tomorrow"**. That phrase was the rule of our lives inside Adra. Nevertheless, the situation in Adra was relatively good compared to former circumstances I went through, especially with regard to regular visits. I can even say that an essential positive aspect emerged in my life during my stay in Adra, because the library that I used to visit inside the prison allowed me to get in touch with cultures broader than the communist one that I was brought up to and got to know new literature different from the ones I learned during my work with the "Democratic Youth Union," "Syrian Communist Party," and followed by "Communist Labor Party". Moreover, my direct observation to the situation of prisoners, their reactions and that of their families', to detention conditions and their psychological agony and pain caused by it, helped me create deeper insights into the importance of individual and personal space that was absent in the strong presence of the favoring of public interest over them. These long contemplations helped me change my cultural models and led me into believing in nonviolence as a way for change, which gave me new energy that allowed me to build better capacities that weren't available before.

I was released late 1991, in December to be more specific, under a presidential general pardon, which included three thousand detainees in Syria including members of many parties and political movements. As soon as I got out of prison, I registered again in the university to complete my medical studies after a long halt, despite the inner conflict I had about going back to this field of studies or moving to another.

In-prison Contemplations Lead to New Orientation

In the 1990s, political action declined in Syria as a whole. However, democracy was no longer a marginal issue. This made the party to which Jalal belonged, the Communist Labor Party, raise the slogan of "1990s: struggle years for democracy and years for attaining democracy". Activists interested in this area began thinking about the potentials for action. This was translated by activities that Jalal and other students did on regular basis such as "cultural weeks" in Damascus University. According to Jalal, they were crucial for the exchange of thoughts and opinions about the country's issues, in addition to cinema clubs of the universities. These activities were the only outlet for activists like Jalal and others to work or to get in touch with the public in Syria. Some of them tried to establish "Committees for Defending Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights." However, the regime arrested them. This was to prevent any attempt to put together civil and political activism. Through all activities during all those years, Jalal's principle of "nonviolence" had developed. In this regard, Jalal says.

Before detention, I used to foresee the manifestations of revolution through armed struggle" and violent revolt. My views have changed throughout the years due to several factors that intertwined to form a new orientation for me. At that time, we were a group of activists with a pivotal question: "Are we still with revolutionary violence? Can violence in Syria be revolutionary?" One of the lessons learned from the "first uprising against Hafez al-Assad" during the eighties was that **"A revolutionary violence can easily be turned into non-revolutionary violence, i.e. to sectarian or civil violence"**. Hence, we began thinking of instilling the idea of democratic action by peaceful non-violent means. When violence is inevitable, rebels should mitigate its potential risks and decrease its cost by making it limited to the most minimal period and the least possible number of casualties. Certainly, as a group, it wasn't up to us to decide whether the revolution of the people would have certain violent aspects or not, but we have the duty to make sure we are prepared to de-escalate violence therein

I had read many publications on nonviolence in that period, and other texts about facing violence. I got to know Mr. "Jawdat Said" closely who is one of the most prominent theorists of nonviolence in the Islamic mentality, so I dug deeper in understanding the mechanisms of non-violence.



Jawdat Said – ©Suwar Magazine

We were afraid that the bad "political elite", whether the Islamic or the authoritarian, might use the sectarian factor. It was well-known and apparent in that time that political elites, who fail to work within the framework of common political methods, begin to resort to bad methods of sectarian polarization, whereas the democratic means is something different as it involves discussions, dialogues, programs, elections, persuasion and other means of democratic practices which were not available at the time.

Jalal specialized in psychiatry and travelled in 2002 to Saudi Arabia to work in this field. Five years later, he returned to Syria to work in "Ibn Sina Hospital". That hospital needed the mentality of a human rights defender as much as it needed the mentality of a doctor who treats patients because of the blatant violations of their rights in that place. He decided with many doctors to establish a group for improving the miserable conditions of the patients and turning this place from a storage place of patients into a developed hospital, but they came under massive pressure from security apparatuses to undermine their project.

First Detention during the Revolution

In 8 May, 2011, I took to the street in a peaceful demonstration in Arnous area in the center of Damascus. Prior to that, I went through crucial discussions with some leftists and communists about joining the demonstrations emerging from mosques. We all decided that we should join them, but not with the slogans of the mosques, rather with slogans of democracy which hold the true values of freedom and dignity. These discussions continued for a while, and then staging demonstrations in squares was suggested. My role was to coordinate between different revolutionary forces in Damascus. At that time, we decided to prepare for a demonstration that would start from Arnous area as a neutral area that has no religious symbolism. We prepared signs and banners and told our friends that the demonstration would be staged in Arnous square.

This demonstration wasn't just an invitation. It was rather a test for those who refused to go out from mosques. As for the demonstration itself, it was a surprise even for the regime, as the sit-in began by chanting national songs such as "Mawtini (my home land)" and "I have chosen you, my homeland". They seemed astonished especially that we were near one of the many "idols" [statue of Hafez al-Assad] spread in Damascus. When the number of protesters increased we raised the banners and started marching towards the People's Assembly with banners showing slogans such as "no for sectarianism", "yes for democracy" and "lift the siege on Daraa". Confusion of security personnel was apparent, then suddenly we could hear through their radios orders to arrest us and "arrest the banners with us.

Nothing Else but Nonviolence

A friend who was arrested with me was surprised that I didn't try to resist security personnel. He asked me why I didn't resist, after we got stacked in a room inside al-Khatib Branch (State Security). "I am no longer a supporter of revolutionary violence" I answered, "I am here because I am in a war of no violence, and we must impose our existence without any violence." The answer of my friend was: "I don't understand your nonviolence approach."

Jalal adopted this approach throughout his activism defending peacefulness of the Syrian revolution and the importance of its continuity without resorting to violence. This was evident throughout the way he dealt with the public dynamic in Syria.

Second Detention, April 2012

After he was released the first time, Dr. Jalal signed on the statement of "Damascus Doctors Coordination Committee" (DDC) with a numbers of other doctors, including Dr. Ibrahim Othman. The problem of wounded protesters became phenomenal during the revolution, so it was necessary to find a mechanism to regulate the way of dealing with the wounded who are receiving injuries by live bullets, excessive beating, or physical harm. The statement was translated into real action by establishing makeshift clinics, medical sites and coordinating medical work in Damascus up to the north reaching Homs Governorate. Jalal says in this regard.

The experience of DDC was a very important one. It has been subject to great pressure" and prosecution by the security apparatuses, and several doctors were detained. Because of the too many ambushes made to get Dr. Ibrahim by the security, some people resorted to publishing videos claiming his death, in an attempt to alleviate the pressure exerted on Ibrahim and to protect his family from any harm that could be practiced against them by authorities. Later on, we renewed the work of the DDC with a lot of new doctors after it had stopped for a while because of the pressure, shortcomings in the medical work, and the numerous sides working in the same field. Indeed, we managed to revive the activities of DDC, which was the direct reason behind me getting arrested for the second time during the revolution in April 2012.

Air Force Intelligence detained the core group in DDC. Some of my friends and me were identified by them. I moved between the "Air Force Headquarters" in Umawiyyin Square in Damascus, and the Military Airport of al-Mazzeah. The main reason of my detention was that the mobile phone of our colleague, Muhannad, had been put under surveillance during one mission to Qatana in the Damascus countryside where he was arrested and detained in the Fourth Armored Division of the regular Syrian army. He was later returned, after receiving severe and brutal torture because he was the direct contact person with doctors.

It was a large-scale arrest campaign that included all of us in addition to the people in relation with us, although they were not part of the DCC. They wanted to know the major sources of medical supplies, sources of surgical tools, and funds to buy medical supplies. However, they couldn't get much information because we had agreed to divide the workload and responsibilities. However, they managed to storm one of the medical centers run by one of our colleagues, who had left Syria, so they arrested everyone they found in that place, 23 people, who were released later.

We, the involved individuals, stayed in detention for three months. The counter-terrorism court hadn't been formed yet, so we were referred to the "ordinary judiciary". The judge asked us about the nature of our work and other details that has to do with treating armed rebels. He released us after we denied everything only later to learn that our case was referred to the counter-terrorism court upon its creation .



Satellite image illustrates the detention place belonging to the air force intelligence, where Jalal was detained for the first time, which is the "Air Force Headquarters" in Damascus. Then he was transferred to the Air Force Intelligence in al-Mezzeh Military Airport

Shabeh is the Daily Bread for the Executioner... Means to Extract Information

When I was first arrested and as I learned that I was transferred to the Air Force Intelligence, I knew what to expect about the level of torture ahead of us. Indeed, I underwent severe torture using different methods, including "beating, electric shocks, whipping with green [plastic] water pipes", in addition to other methods that have left wounds and long-term infections. It was an utterly awful experience. I was subject to kinds of torture that I have never experienced before, such as strong electric shocks. Moreover, it was the first time I get to know the "Shabeh" method; I had heard of it, but this was the first time I experience it firsthand. Electric shocks, the tyre, whipping and stepping on the face by shoes, were torture methods I had experienced before. But when it comes to Shabeh, it became like daily bread for detainees, it was necessary as a means of pressure to extract information. I still remember when the guard put me down the suspending rope, I looked at my hands to check whether they were still there or not, because I couldn't feel my hands for hours because of numbness.

In numbers, I witnessed three deaths of people who were killed under severe torture; they were subject to horrible torture methods in that place. Some detainees experienced Shabeh for eight days in a row without any food or medical care.



Shabeh", a common torture method used during interrogations in Syrian Security apparatus. In this" method, detainees are suspended by the wrists for several hours, with their feet barely touching the floor, and some other times the feet are left hanging above floor level

Before the Executioner, All Syrians are Equal... in Torture

During my detention at the Air Force Intelligence, both in the Air Force Headquarters and in al-MazzeH Military Airport, all detainees received the same torture methods, with its brutality and savageness, throughout the interrogations. There was no "discrimination" between a healthy detainee and a sick one, or between young and old. The same torture methods were applied to doctors and engineers as well as workers. The same pressure was put on the intellectuals and the illiterate. Equality is only found during interrogation before the executioner. Even those who were arrested without any connection to the revolution got the same share of torture. For example, I recall the story of Abu Jaafar form Rastan city in Homs. He once interrupted my whispering discussion with some of my friends to say that we, "freedom folks", were the reason behind his detention with us. I was surprised to hear that from him, so I answered that he should blame the authority for arresting him instead of blaming us, who haven't done anything to him. We did nothing but demanding our freedom. He replied that if we hadn't protested, he wouldn't be far from his beloved parents and kids. He said that he was neither pro-regime nor pro-opposition. He just wanted to avoid any problems. I answered him that the authority that arrested him without doing anything against it is such a horrible authority. That individual was subject to severe torture and had been detained for 9 months.

Less Worse" Guards, and the Worst Ones"

In regards to the treatment of prison guards with us as detainees in that place, I observed two ways of dealing with our situation, in the Air Force Headquarters. There were two categories of guards; the first was not as bad as the second one, which was the worst. The first used to give us a little more time during bath times and used to fulfill some of our simple needs. These guards didn't use the same style as the second category of guards who was the worst in treating detainees in all detention places. These guards used to give the detainees the worst kinds of beating, harm, humiliation for no reason but being detainees.

Here, I recall two differences between them. One day a detainee had an epilepsy seizure. As a doctor, I told the chief guards, who was from the first category, about this case's symptoms and appropriate medication, so he brought the necessary medicine. On the other hand, I witnessed very savage incident at the hands of the second category of guards. Guards beat one of the newcomers severely and the detainee couldn't tolerate beating anymore, so he asked them to stop beating. He said he was ready to tell them whatever they wanted. One of the guards answered that he didn't want him to do anything but shut up and they kept beating him until he was brought to us covered with blood.

In Mezzeh Military Airport, there is no difference between the two categories of guards. They were all very bad, except a handful, and even those would turn into fierce beasts when interrogation sessions began.



Dulab” an Arabic word meaning “Tyre”, one of the torture methods used widely in Syrian security” dungeons. This position involves the detainee being forced into a vehicle tyre, then interrogation starts with a shower of curses and beating all over the body using different things like whips, sticks and electric shocks. When detainees are forced into this position, they cannot make any move

Third Detention during the Revolution. The Most Brutal and Dreadful

It was at the beginning of 2014, after we had tried to revive the peaceful civil movement in Damascus in 2013 by distributing speakers (radio-like devices, usually put in different corners and containers, playing revolution's chants and slogans) in more than 30 areas inside Damascus that I was again detained. Speakers played the revolution's first chants and slogans as in protest to the developments that put the revolution off track deviating it from its peaceful nature, calling for freedom and dignity, into meeting different interests. To implement the idea of this project, we cooperated with a group of activists involved with of the peaceful movement in Damascus. During the preparations, tests, and experiments of the project, a group of the "Syrian Revolutionary Youth Assembly" got arrested. They were nine of them, three of whom were killed immediately under torture in Branch 215. One of them couldn't withstand torture, so he told the security personnel about our activity, which was distributing speakers in Damascus's neighborhoods. Thus, they brought us in. First they arrested my friend, a girl known in Damascus by the pseudonym "Sham", along with her fiancé, and then they arrested me.

I was brought to Branch 215 operated by Military Intelligence. During the long interrogation, we didn't wish to deny our activities, especially after we heard about the death of our colleagues in "Syrian Revolutionary Youth Assembly". My friend and I talked explicitly about distribution of speakers and our wish to revive the spirit of peaceful movement through slogans that reject Islamization of the revolution and narrowing its prospects by giving it another feature other than the one with which it began. We told the interrogator that we supported a democratic state ruled by law. We didn't deny our coordination with Syrian Revolutionary Youth and other people, using their pseudonym. We also revealed the place where speakers are kept, after I was sure they wouldn't find anyone in there. The guy who was hiding these speakers travelled abroad right after the assembly members got arrested. In fact, the information we provided was identical with the information they got from the "Syrian Revolutionary Youth". That factor decreased the level of torture we underwent. Additionally, the fact that we didn't deny anything was against their expectations as they imagined that we would deny, but we were giving all information easily.

I wasn't subject to the same horrible torture that other detainees had in Branch 215, but I witnessed unimaginable horrors. Detention conditions were literally horrible, where I witnessed many deaths. The first time I felt that I won't survive was inside that Branch.

Wood and Iron

I don't know the origin of the names, but any detainee in Branch 215 would get acquainted with one of these group detention cells: "Wooden rooms" and "Iron Rooms". The cells of this detention place were divided into rooms with less death and rooms with gradually increasing death up to the level of "isolation room" or death room. I was lucky that I was put in the Wooden ones as the iron ones were worse, where epidemic diseases spread, including hepatitis and respiratory diseases, mostly tuberculosis. In these rooms, death rates were the highest and I saw living skeletons before their death. There were numerous are the cases of inmates begging guards or cell chiefs (Shaweesh) not to be transferred into the iron rooms

One of the detainees kissed the foot of a guard begging not to move him there saying: "I don't want to die, I have children who need me." It is well-known that if you survived torture during interrogation, you might not survive the bad living conditions and diseases spread in that place. The number of deaths resulting from them might be even more than those resulting from direct torture.

Shaweeshes" Distribute Life and Death"

A shaweesh is the head of the group cell, an inmate just like others but appointed by the guards to supervise food distribution and manage the room and daily life affairs of detainees. However, his authority in Branch 215 exceeds this to include, in some cases, supervising the distribution of death and life. Some of them would practice torture themselves and sometimes they might execute killing orders. Shaweesh is a detainee who cooperates with the authorities in exchange of special privileges in running the affairs of the cell, especially the privilege that security personnel rarely come into the cells. I have never seen any officer in the cell during my whole stay. Even the guards only came in once in three or four days to check up on things. One of the most important privileges is that Shaweesh and his assistants occupy almost half the room's space to feel comfortable, cramping all other detainees – probably more than 70 inmates –in the other half of the cell.

Centimeters of Life

In such inhumane and abnormal conditions of daily life, detainees would mostly have reactions I find normal, especially for those who were detained on basis of their areas of origin, rather than their participation in revolution. The reaction involves fights among detainees over acquiring a few centimeters to sit down in. In such extreme crowdedness, when this tiny personal area is invaded, some inmates might show aggressive reactions towards each other in order to get a piece of bread or an olive. These are inhuman reactions to inhumane conditions and circumstances that make detainees react to violence they undergo with alternative violence by which they try to survive.

Food for Bath

Upon my arrival in the group cell, I met one of the detainees who had been there for about a year. He was one of the peaceful movement guys in Daraa and he knew about my activities. He soon recognized me soon and he asked if he could provide me with any services in that dirty place. In fact, I hadn't had a bath for a long time, so I asked him if he could provide me with an opportunity to have a bath. He asked the Shaweesh to allow me take a bath. Water wasn't warm, but I managed to wash my body with cold water and a tiny piece of soap. For a new detainee to have a bath in Branch 215, it was a great accomplishment. If someone wants to have a bath, he must exchange his food for a bath, but most of inmates wouldn't do it because they needed food to avoid collapsing during interrogation. The price was 5 loaves of bread – two days' supply –to get a chance to have a bath, with cold water of course. The chance may not be attained even if the food was paid to the "Shaweesh in charge of baths.

Electric Shocks with High Voltage.. The Most Dangerous and Most Common Torture Method

Some detainees were tortured by high voltage (220 v) electric shocks. It was applied through a chair or directly to the detainee's body. Of course this would be followed with loud screams of pain. We used to be present in the same "hall of torture". When the interrogation ends, guards would leave torture tools behind. One of the tools was a chair frame used to fold the body of the detainee (the German Chair method). When a detainee returned from the torture "party", he would walk on his hands and legs – like a crawling child – because of pain. Sometime this metal chair would be plugged to electricity causing electric burns that might cause immediate or later death. In a dirty and unsanitary environment like that of Branch 215, those who survive such tortures die because of the wounds that get contaminated and infected.



Illustration depicting the "German Chair" torture method. Although there are different testimonies on the position of the chair, all testimonies confirmed that the purpose of this method is bending detainee backward (head towards foot sole) causing awful pain, in addition to severe physical damage, sometimes causing fracture in vertebrae

The Isolation Room. Dying Room

During an interrogation session with one of the detainees, suddenly, his screaming stopped completely. The interrogator asked the guard what was going on; he said the detainee was not talking!! The interrogator told the guard to put the detainee back to the Shabeh position, and interrogate him again. The guard explained that the detainee is "not talking" because he died!! The interrogator ordered him then to throw this one in the isolation room and get the next detainee.

The isolation room is the room where dead bodies and dying detainees are put in. When I was in that prison, I tried to get out every day for one week to count the number of corpses transferred from this room, every time the vehicle that would take them came in the morning. The least number I counted was 11 and the highest was 15. When I told one of the detainees, who had been there for a long time, he said we were in a good time. He told me that last year the least number of daily deaths was 15 daily and it sometimes reached 25. He added that at the end of 2013, a wave of severe diarrhea spread in the prison leading to the death of 2000 detainees; excrement was everywhere, and I should know, as a doctor, that excrement transmits infection.

Hallucinations Leading to Death

During my stay in the room that I was sent into for 35 days, 12 detainees died before my eyes, 5 of which died by direct torture. The rest died by diseases that began as pyoderma which turned into tissue inflammations, then blood inflammation accompanied with hallucinations that indicate septicemia.

One of the detainees who suffered from schizophrenia, a 36-year-old guy from Darayya, didn't sleep at all. He always talked to himself as if he was talking into a mobile phone. He used to talk to one his family members and blame him, asking him to come and take him immediately. Some people used to mock him while others beat him. During the early interrogation, he was beaten hard on his head and on the rest of his body. When he came back, he told me that his head hurt and that they had beaten him on the head severely; he died later in the evening that same day. In another case, there was a man suffering from mental retardation, the interrogator said to him "You are a liar and playing mad, we will torture you to remember next time not to do this". He ordered boiling water to be poured on his back burning his skin. When the detainee came back to the cell, and because of the dirty environment and pus spread on the ground, his flayed back was infected rapidly and he died the next day.

Not Confession, Rather Dictated Confession

Many of those who were arrested while I was there had nothing to do with the revolution. They were arrested on checkpoints or on roads because of the place of origin that was shown on their IDs, during storming campaigns in hot areas they live in or for some other unknown reasons. In general, those people couldn't stand torture like someone who had dedicated his life for revolutionary activism. They had little endurance under torture, so they said anything that could spare them violent torture. I often heard them say, "Give me a white piece of paper to sign on it and write anything you want". Most importantly, those who get arrested with no reason would most of the time have no information about anything, so they would invent a story that didn't really happen in their area and put themselves as involved in it just to avoid torture. In fact, this cannot be called confession; it is rather acknowledgment of what the interrogator wants to hear.

I remember a skinny weak old man who weighs no more than 45 KG. He was too weak to hold a weapon and was barely holding himself together. He was 74 years old and had undergone such severe torture that his bones became visible under his skin because of Shabeh. He told me he had confessed everything they wanted him to confess. He told them that he held weapons and killed people. He couldn't survive the deep injuries he had and passed away within a few days.

Not Even "Pro-regime" Inmates are Spared

One of the detainees, an agricultural engineer who was a member of the well-known "Reconciliation Committee" in Damascus, was subject to severe torture that almost killed him. Another one had his hand disabled under torture although he was a member of the pro-regime "National Defense". He was tortured despite showing his National Defense ID to the interrogator.

I Was That Close to Death.. But Survived

Drinking water was contaminated and scabies was widely spread in that branch. This disease caused wide-spread infections leading to deep inflammations. Dozens of detainees died because of these inflammations. The detainees had a strange way of treating them, but it worked sometimes. They used to scrap it off by a piece of sharp iron. Each week, a group of detainees scrap their scabies wounds this horrible way so that they would turn from inflammations into regular wounds, after pouring "iodine" or other sterilizers occasionally available in the branch. I was subject to this process a week before I was transferred to Adra Central Prison.

Life was so fragile in Branch 215, and death was a daily routine to the extent that dealing with dead bodies became a normal, and sometimes miserable, thing. Anyone could easily die because of the bad conditions. I remained in that branch for 35 days, then I was transferred to Adra Central Prison and remained there for five months until I was released under a general pardon that followed the presidential election.

Forth Detention during the Syrian revolution“Better a Coincidence than a Thousand Appointment” [Syrian proverb]

A month after my release from the branch 215, I got detained again by the "State Security". This time, it was just like other incidents of accidental arrests at military checkpoints inside Damascus. While I was heading to visit a friend, the taxi driver went by mistake in the opposite direction of traffic near al-Jisr al-Abyad Neighborhood in the middle of Damascus. It was about Iftar time in Ramadan [sunset time]. As we passed near the checkpoint of Branch 40, we were immediately stopped. One of the members of this checkpoint asked us why we took a wrong direction and then he took our IDs and apprehended us immediately. Later on, they transferred us to "al-Khatib Branch" (State Security). The interrogator surprised me by saying, "Your feet brought you here". When I asked what he meant by this, the officer said that I was funding terrorism, and that I have given a sum of money to one university professor at Damascus University. I said that our friend took the money from my wife KhawlahDunya, who works in Najda Now relief organization, when they met at my clinic.

I was later transferred to Qaboun and later to Adra to be tried before the counter-terrorism court. Before the judge, I categorically denied the charges, so the judge released me, provided that I would be prosecuted without being held in custody. In fact, I got released one month and a half later. Despite being released, I felt constrained and unable to do anything due to security pressures, so I decided to travel outside Syria. I went to Turkey with the help of a smuggler and then to Germany where I lived for nine months. I decided then to move back to Turkey because of the tremendous needs of Syrians there. Currently, I am trying to provide all I can offer for Syrians in Turkey through working in a psychological health center where I work as a psychiatrist and a trainer of psychosocial support.

Bird Chirping Never Leaves my Throat

Today, as I a survivor of various detentions, I remember people and recall incidents that left deep carvings in my memory. In fact, I can't distinguish between violence practiced against detainees in the current revolution or in the first uprising previously. In the 1980s, I have seen and heard about weird incidents, but the brutality of violence practiced today, is more horrific and broader. The different methods of torture have been practiced against all detainees and against wide categories of people, regardless of their involvement in the revolution.

For example, I remember Farhan Nerabiyeh who got arrested in 1976 due to his involvement with the Communist Party in "the Land Day". I met him on my first detention experience. Whenever I touched his knees he would scream loudly in pain. The skin had been totally scraped and the muscles under them appeared due to repeated beating on them. I remember people who ate using their elbows, instead of their hands, because of the severe Shabeh torture which prevented them from using their hands for months.

However, the most painful incident that I can never forget is the story of the boy who had to swallow a live little bird. The boy was from Latakia and he was arrested during an arrest campaign on Sulaiba Neighborhood along with 15 other children. They were detained for 10 years. A few months before release, he was brought to Adra civil prison where I met him. He was a young man in his twenties at the time. He was hyperactive, moving a lot and playing all the time. I wondered about his situation and asked him whether or not he get bored from doing it. He answered that he cannot take a rest at all and he could never know the meaning of being quiet. I asked him why, so he narrated his sad story to me.

After I was arrested as a young boy, I was taken to Palmyra Prison. One cold day, they put us out in the yard to stand there as punishment. A small bird fell on the ground, unable to move its wings or fly. I stared at it with the tenderness of a child, but one of the guards saw me and asked whether I liked it. I remained silent because I was afraid to answer. So he asked me again, but this time in an aggressive and loud voice. I hesitantly answered that it was a nice bird. He ordered me to go and get it. As I held it, the bird was chirping in my little hands. For a short while, I thought that this guard didn't lose all of his humanity or maybe he is here against his will. I hadn't completed the thought when I heard him asking me to swallow this bird. I didn't understand. I asked "How do I swallow it alive?" He shouted at me and ordered me to swallow it, and so I did. This incident happened years ago, but up till this moment, I hear its chirping coming from my throat, especially in moments of silence. I hate to remember that incident, and this is why I don't like to stay calm.

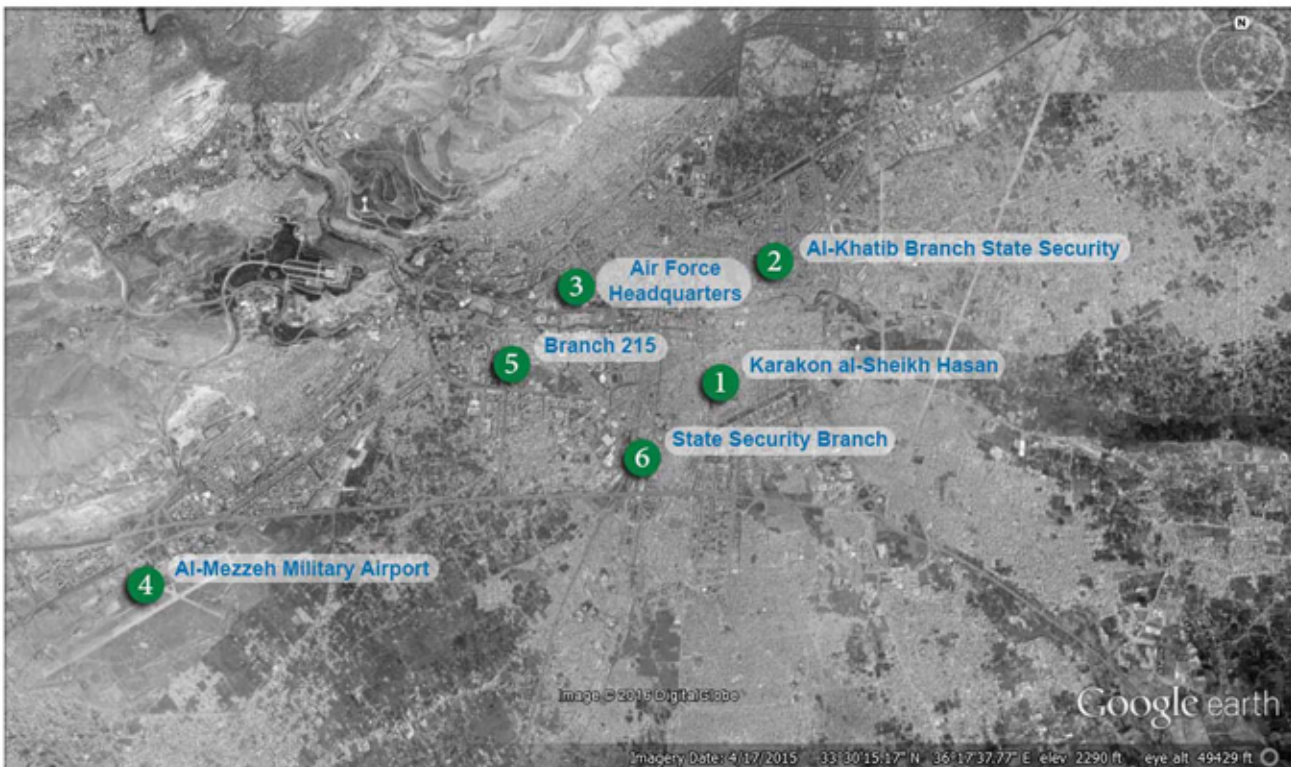
Detainee's "Spring" is His Life Ring

With his expert medical language, Jalal Nofal concludes the story of his repeated detentions and observations. He said that human beings have levels of psychological resilience that differ from one person to another. It is like a spring; some people have a strong and solid psychological spring that can endure, while others are fragile and can't withstand strong shocks. For those people, you have to offer all sorts of support, inside detention, where those with higher psychological immunity should help their colleagues, or outside, by enhancing the network of psychosocial support for survivors from detention. Initial assessment should be conducted on all survivors from detention in order to estimate the level of damage and provide the necessary medical intervention according to the level of psychological and physical harm, provided that no pressure should be exerted until the survivor accepts his new existence in life. The issue of detainees of the revolution is a crucial humanitarian issue. It deserves the attention and action by all of us.

Interviewed in April, 2016



Jalal Nofal



Satellite image illustrates the detention places Jalal visited