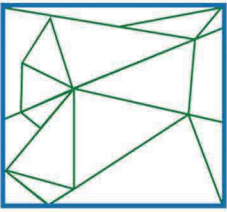


سوريون
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Syrians
For Truth
& Justice



Hani Zeitani

**“A testimony of a former
detainee”**

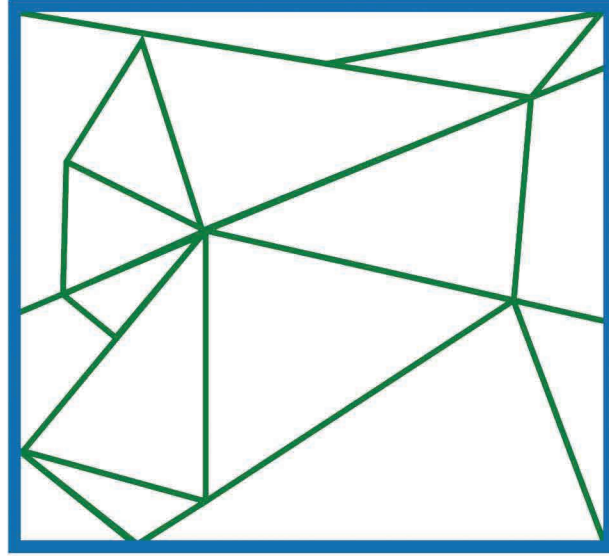
**Account of a Survivor of Detention
Hani Zeitani**

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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Introduction

Entering Damascus University, Department of Sociology, was the first step for establishing a new phase in Hani's life. Through his studies, he gained awareness of social issues, an understanding into the idea of political states, and forms of governmental power. And this political understanding came against a backdrop of witnessing, along with all Syrians, on television the “swift mechanism” that changed some provisions of the constitution to facilitate the transition of presidential power from “father” to the “son”

At such a moment, within his general education, the phrase “civil society” that Hani had read about in sociology research would have a great impact for his later professional choices. He became a member of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (CMFE), where he conducted two field studies on the performance of the Syrian press during the legislative elections (elections of the members of people's assembly in Syria) as well as the presidential referendum in 2007. These projects marked the real beginning of his practical and professional life as a human rights defender focused on the freedom of speech and expression. These very same studies, however, caused him trouble with the security authorities who summoned him several times in order to interrogate him

On 16 February, 2012, the office of the CMFE, which is located in the capital city of Damascus, was stormed the Interrogation Department in the Military Airport of al-Mezzeh, a patrol affiliated with the Air Force Intelligence. A group of armed personnel in civilian clothes stormed the office in a manner that was not familiar to Hani and his colleagues. The patrol also closed down all the roads leading to the office with their vehicles. This was the beginning of Hani's detention journey that lasted for three and a half years. During which time, he was transferred to several security branches and other secret detention places, such as the Air Force Intelligence, the Punishments' Temporary Jail in the Fourth Armored Division in Damascus, the Military Police, Adra prison, al-Suwaida Prison, and the State Security Branch/The General Intelligence Directorate

Then on 15 July 2015, at exactly midnight, Hani heard a voice outside the room saying: "Hani al-Zeitani. Released." Hani describes this moment as follows

I didn't believe it at first, but when I got out I found one of the prison police guards standing at the door of the room. He asked me about my name, then he opened the door and told me to get out to receive my ID and my other stuff. He also told me to sign a piece of paper testifying my attendance at a hearing before the “Counter-Terrorism Court” which was set to take place on 30 August 2015. After three and a half years, and after more than twenty hearings, I became free, I was outside the walls of this prison



The complete story of Hani Zeitani Who is Hani Zeitani and how does he describes his own life in general and his professional activity before being detained

At the educational level, my life was somewhat similar to the lives of anyone who studied in Syrian public schools. I was born in a Damascene environment. I studied at the same schools that were “loaded” with the ideology of the ruling party and with the activities of its organizations, starting with “al-Baath Vanguard,” then “the Revolution Youth,” and then the “Students Union

Entering university at the age of twenty was the first step in establishing a new phase in my life in regards to awareness of issues related to society, the formation of nation states, as well as forms of governance and political authority. All of that education was occurring against the backdrop of witnessing what every other Syrian witnessed on TV: the swift mechanism of changing some provisions of the Constitution to facilitate the transition of power to insure Assad’s son would succeed him

This incident was a driving factor, among other factors, that pushed me to choose sociology for my academic path. My interest in the problems stemming from the Syrian society started to be my special focus. At first, I started to read philosophy and social theories related to the “social contract” as well as the forms of relations that exist between the ruler and the ruled. Within the reality of Syria, my observations led me to the belief that our society is a rich site for research and study. So in my student life, I focused on acquiring the necessary technical tools to do such work. For instance, I studied statistics as an important tool for designing and conducting field studies. I also paid special attention to numerous research methodologies and approaches

On the professional level, the term of “civil society” that I have read about in the literature of sociology had a great influence for my later choices. Early in 2007, I met the human rights activist Mazen Darwish who was running one of the then very few civil society organizations inside Syria. Civil activism wasn't authorized at that point by the Syrian authority. However, driven by the urge to create an active role in the social sphere and my feeling that it is important to associate my theoretical knowledge with an applied framework, I became a member with the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (CMFE). From there, I conducted my first two field studies on the performance of the Syrian Media during the legislative elections (elections of the members of the people's assembly in Syria) and the presidential referendum in 2007. This marked the actual start of my practical and professional life as a human rights defender for the freedom of speech and expression

My work at the center lasted until early 2012, more specifically until 16 February that was the day I got arrested. Before that date, my colleagues and I underwent some harassment, such as several summons to security branches and repeated interrogations about the nature of our work and the studies that we published. We were sometimes also banned from conducting some activities. Then the authorities decided to shut down our office by the end of 2009, of which the municipality of al-Mezzeh undertook the task. I then went to do the compulsory military service, which put me away from any civil activity until the end of 2011. After that, I went back to my professional life and developed with CMFE a number of studies and reports on the violations perpetrated against media professionals and outlets after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution

Your journey with detention practically started with storming the office of CMFE. How was it stormed? And what impressions did that incident leave with you

On 16 February 2012, the Damascus-based main office of CMFE was stormed by a patrol from the Air Force Intelligence Branch, the Investigation Department of al-Mezzeh Military Airport. A group of armed personnel in civilian clothes stormed the office in a way that hasn't been familiar to me. They blocked all the roads leading to the office with their vehicles before getting into the office. I used to hear about such storming operations, but never witnessed one myself. They caused panic among the staff in the office when they raided the office, as they didn't identify themselves in the beginning, and the weapons they pointed at our heads were a barrier to do so. It was as if they were storming a terrorist cell. The head of the patrol was somewhat surprised when he saw a group of young men and women in the office sitting at their desks and working on computers. The security personnel asked about the work we do and other similar questions which showed that they seemed unaware of the place they stormed or the people they expect to find there

The personnel stayed at the office for about two hours until they acquired an arrest warrant. They brought a big bus to transport us to the security branch. At that point, they told us that they want to ask us further questions to learn more about the activity of CMFE and that it won't take more than half an hour. It would be “a conversation over a cup of coffee,” as they expressed it

Hani al-Zeitani was put in a bus to transport him to the Air Force Intelligence Branch in al-Mezzeh Military Airport Would you please tell us how you were received there and the conditions that accompanied the interrogations

We arrived to the security branch and we were left in the bus for about thirty minutes. Then an armed security member came and told the males to leave the bus one after another and to put our personal stuff in a place called "deposits." Once you are out of the room of deposits, which is full of shelves and looks like a storehouse, another security member would blindfold you with a cloth called "Tamasheh" and tie your hands behind your back with handcuffs called "Kalabsha." Then you would be taken to a cell called the "group room." It seems that those who are in charge of the prison had emptied it specifically for us in order to isolate and forbid us from contacting with other detainees. At the entrance of this cell, before getting inside, a third member would strip us of all our clothes and search us thoroughly, including our bodies. Searching our bodies was done by ordering us to squat twice to make sure that we don't hide any drugs or prohibited material in sensitive places. Squatting was a move that we always had to do wherever we went to a new detention place in Syria

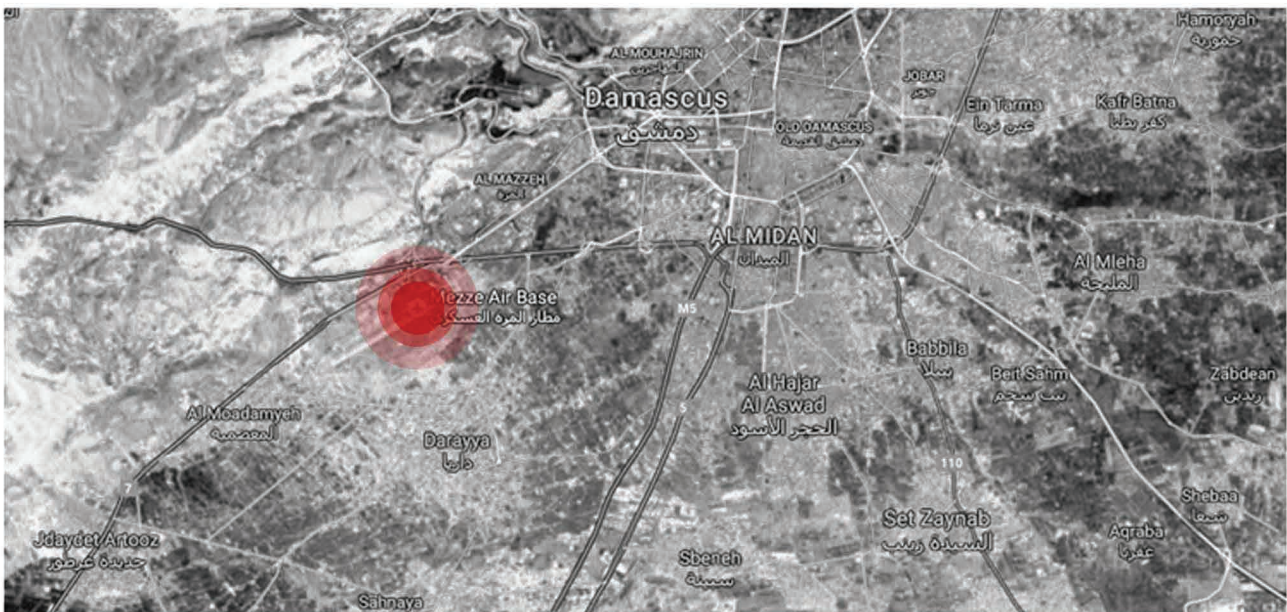
We were nine people and from the moment we entered the room, we were unable to know any piece of information about our female colleagues who were arrested with us. However, we learned, after nine months, that they were released safely

On the second day we were summoned for interrogation. I didn't undergo any ill-treatment or torture on that day, given that it is typical to use such methods during interrogation to extract information from detainees or to force them confess doing things they may have not been involved in directly, or pushing them to implicate their family members or friends or even accuse them with some charges. I had the belief that what I had been doing was not a punishable crime, so I wouldn't be ashamed and wouldn't hide my civil activism as a defender of human rights and freedom of expression. That drove me to be explicit about my activities and the nature of my work at the center. The initial interrogation lasted for over an hour. The officer interrogating me asked a lot of questions in regards to my work and my opinions about the revolution and the civil dynamic, then he ordered one of the guards to take me back to the group cell

On the next day one of the guards came to the cell and took the president of CMFE and one other individual, who happened to be visiting us at the time when the office was stormed. They both never came back. I learned later that the visitor was released but they chained the president of CMFE, blindfolded him, and put him in the corridor, and left him there for two months, which was the complete period he spent in the security branch before he was transferred to another place. Two or more hours later, all seven of us who were left in the cell were called again for interrogation. This time I was blindfolded and my hands were tied behind my back. The guard took me to an office different from the one I was interrogated in the first time. The interrogator was also a new one and probably of a higher rank. His office was outside the interrogation block. Interrogation didn't last longer than ten minutes. The interrogator wanted to complete some details about my work at the center. When I asked him how long we would stay there he answered that he had doubts about our work and that the interrogation procedures are still going on. I was taken back to the cell where we spent another three days before the seven of us were transferred to a smaller and tighter room called the "double lodger confinement"

This cell was about two meters long and 1.5 meters wide

We had to take turns to sleep during our entire stay there. Every time the prison guard wanted to talk to us or to bring us food, we were told to stand up facing the wall. (Some guards, however, were more flexible than others and would not require us to do so). We used to go out twice a day to the toilets. We were forced to go out the cell fast, one after another, and wearing only the underwear. Sometimes we were not given more than ten seconds to use the toilet. We spent about a month like this. None of us was called for interrogation again. Anytime we would ask or inquire about anything we would receive no answer.



.The Investigation Department of al-Mezzeh Military Airport, a satellite image

Hunger strike

On the twenty eighth day in the security branch, my colleagues and I went on a hunger strike in protest of the enforced detention we were undergoing. We demanded through the strike our immediate release or to refer us to the correct court to consider our case. In the beginning the idea of the strike was met with censure by the security personnel as if they were not familiar with this kind of protest. One of them sarcastically said: "Where do you think you are? In Adra prison! When you are transferred there you may go on strike, but here no one will hear about you". Another security member took the water we had and told us sarcastically to go on thirst strike as well so that we can spare them taking us out to the toilets. However, he later brought the water back and advised us to end our strike to avoid unnecessary consequences.

On the second day of our strike, the officer in charge of the prison asked us to wait until the remand (which is 60 days) is over. We refused to wait and continued our strike. On the third day we were told that the interrogator would consider our demands. Indeed, on the evening of the sixth day of our strike, our names were called, except for one of our colleagues. We were taken out of the cell, blindfolded and handcuffed, then we were taken to another temporary jail that was known as the "punishment temporary jail" which is administratively affiliated to the Air Force Intelligence, but was located in the barracks of the Fourth Armored Division of the Army. That was the place in which I was left for eight months before being transferred to a civil prison.

In the "punishment temporary jail" within the Fourth Armored Division, were you subject to any torture or ill-treatment? Would you describe the punishments that the forcibly disappeared persons are subject to there

I still remember that date and the way we were received by the personnel of the Investigation Department at Air Force Intelligence. I used to count the days I spent in the cell by the posters on the bread packs. I used to tell the time of the day by the times of the meals served to us inside. Following each breakfast meal, I would shape the posters of the bread packs in the shape of a number that represents the number of days that had past while I'm here, then I would post it on the wall. However, after the night of 19 March 2012, I lost ability to count the days any more as they became so similar, in terms of both psychological pressure and the physical torture.

Take those educated people and give them what they deserve

I can never forget this phrase. One of the security members said it when he handed us over to the new security personnel. Indeed, everything became different after that. It was a long and horrible "reception party." Security personnel practiced all kinds of ill-treatment and torture, starting with curses, dirty language and verbal abuses, to stripping us of our clothes and kicking us, beating us with batons, electrifying all parts of our bodies with stun guns. There was no purpose to these acts but humiliation and torture. The interrogation procedures were finished. Instead of referring us to the judiciary, however, they put us in a secret prison that lacked any healthy conditions.

After our personal data was registered, we were put in custody in a temporary jail, which is a room underground with an area of less than forty square meters. I spent about eight months there. It was a bare room, full of detainees whose number sometimes exceeded a hundred. There was long stairs that lead to this room. I didn't need to walk down the stairs, because a security member kicked me and sent me down the stairs within seconds

I couldn't recognize my feelings. There were in a real mess because of the gravity of these moments and the astonishment I was in. I was still naked and blindfolded. After the security members closed the door and went out, I stood mesmerized in front of a group of detainees who showed a lot of sympathy and tried to calm us down. A detainee lifted the blindfold off my eyes and told me that I will be fine now. I asked him, "Where was I?" Instead of answering me, he and other inmates started asking a lot of questions about what is happening outside these walls. They asked me about the news of the country and the latest news we have about the outside world. It seemed as if they have been here for ages. Their tattered clothes, dirty hair and long beards indicated that they had been there for several long months. Indeed, I learned that this place is like a place for the forgotten, as only by mere chance would people ever leave this place

Breaking the strike and Oranges

About two hours after being put in this cell, one of the security members came and called on the head of the cell, the chief of the inmates called "al-Shaweesh," and gave him a small box of oranges and ordered him to give it to us. He also told him to teach us the instructions of this place that we should abide by to survive. At that point, we were still on the hunger strike, however. Following the experience we went through, we found out that our strike will not yield any benefits and that the only possible result of continuing on our strike is death. So, we ate. Then the al-Shaweesh gave us some instructions about how to act whose only aim was further humiliation and insult

We were told that every time the security personnel would enter the cell, we ought to hurry to the furthest corner in the cell, scramble to an area of no more than eight square meters, kneeling on our knee and facing the wall, after putting the blindfold back on our eyes. We would stay in that position until they left the cell. We were completely forbidden to look at the guards and that we ought to keep the blindfold on our eyes all the time (However, we would take it off when the guards were not around.) We would know that they are coming from the static noise made by the stun guns, which they would use while they were on the way to the cell as an early warning. It was really painful. Indeed, our response to these circumstances became something similar to the conditioned response that Pavlov concluded in his experiment. Sometimes the guards would produce that noise from their offices without coming down to the cell, but of course, every time we would hear that noise we had no choice but to take that position that could last for hours, fearing their sudden visit

The daily life in this place was so tedious in terms of torture and beating. It was rare to spend a single day without receiving some kind of torture, especially when they brought us our meals. At such moments inmates are not chosen by the guards specifically for torture; rather kicking and beating with batons, sticks and electric shocks was at random, to whoever comes under their reach, especially those who are at the outside lines in our collective position. Yet, that doesn't mean that there were not "special torture parties" for specific individuals

What do you mean by "special torture parties"? Have you been through any of them

Usually the prison guard doesn't know the victim he is torturing. He lives with a fixed idea that all detainees are dangerous people and may constitute a threat to his very existence within the group he belongs to. That's why the guard would torture a specific category of detainees to scare others and drive them to yield to force. However, if the guards targeted a specific individual, the life of that individual will turn to hell in detention

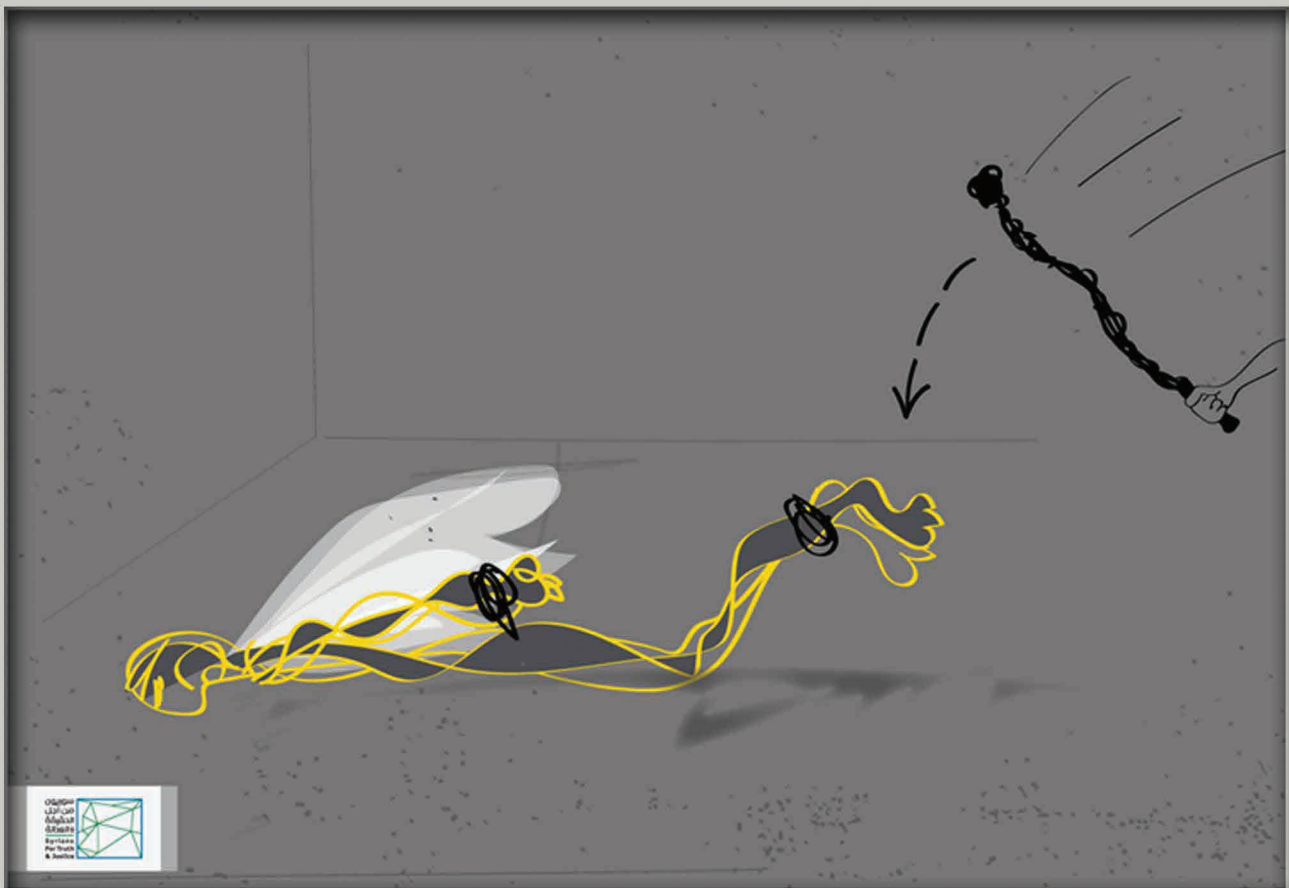
Getting into this place, dubbed as "educated," had negative impact. For two weeks in a row, we were specifically subject to different kinds of torture. The guards, once they are down with the collective torture session, would order us, the new comers, to stand away from the rest in order to apply more insults, beating, and torture upon us

The one who received extra amount of torture was Dr. Ayham Ghazzoul, solely for being a doctor. We never managed to see the guards because we were always blindfolded, but I still remember that hoarse voice of the guard who used to call on Ayham before using all his creativity in torturing him. He used to stand behind us, and sarcastically call him in long syllable, "Doctooooor.....Doctooooor....Where are you doctooooor?" Then he would electrify him with the stun gun

I also recall one of the worst days of torture, when I almost died, if the inmates hadn't took care of me and my health. It was the day I learned the real meaning of an "informant," a word widely used in Syria. In the Syrian context, an individual may be cautious outside detention from expressing his own beliefs lest they get detained. But what would a detainee fear once he is in detention already

It was normal to believe, then, that the detention was the "safest" place to discuss some public affairs and issues, as long as there is a common denominator among all of us in detention. But that wasn't the case. One day, the guards called on an inmate who was with us in the cell. He had told us that he was detained because he defected from the regime army and joined the free Syrian army. He used to sit with us and listen to our conversations. It seemed that the story he told wasn't true. After he was called, he never came back. Instead, the guard came back alone with a list of names (my name along with three of my colleagues). He read the names and told us to get out, showering us with bundles of verbal insults. I immediately guessed that a disaster lied ahead. And indeed, it happened as expected and even worse, especially when I refused to submit to his orders. All I remember is that a group of people started beating me outside the cell and I was stripped of my clothes. I don't remember their numbers but I remember that they held my body to the ground with their feet and I remember me screaming in pain as they were beating me with batons and electrifying all parts of my body. It was especially painful when it hit the area around my earlobe. I fainted after a few minutes. The next thing I remember is that I was carried by my cellmates into the cell. One of the inmates hurried to wash my body with cold water, as most of my body has changed color to black and dark purple. My back was bleeding from some wounds. These wounds became infected, later causing an internal fever that made me feel as if I was in the other world for a couple of days

That was one of the hardest and most painful days. I think I survived it miraculously. The bitter irony was when a few days later one of the guards, who seemingly was not present on that day, asked me about the wounds that I have on my body when he saw them by chance. Actually I didn't dare to tell him that they were because of the guards lest I get worse vengeance



This method is sometimes called "bsat al-reeh", but is different from the usual "bsat al-reeh" method by which the detainee would be tied down to two movable pieces of wood before being beaten up in a way locally known as "Falanga". Detainees, in the illustrated way, are not only beaten on the soles of their feet. Rather, several security personnel usually get involved in the process, randomly beating detainees all over their bodies

I apologize for making you recall all of these painful events, but can you elaborate more on the daily life of the enforced disappeared persons in that place? For example, how did you eat and sleep? How did you use to spend your time

The best words to describe the reasons that would drive anybody to search for all the means that will help to stay alive inside such a place is "Survival instinct". To decrease the hot temperature in summer, we would use our clothes as an alternative to fans to create a current of air. To do that a group of people will take shifts to wave pieces of clothes to cool the cell off. In the very cold days of winter, we would usually gather close to each other in groups at the corners of the cell to make use of the heat generated by our own bodies

We sometimes ate egg shells and orange rinds to get some of the useful elements for our bodies. Some of us also used to replace the already few kinds of food with some other type to compensate for the shortage in calories that our bodies needed. Others would fast every other day, so the fasting person would donate his morning breakfast to the person who would fast the next day in return, given that he would do the same. That was a way to make the breakfast big enough to help individuals survive the systematic starvation practiced against them in this place

There wasn't enough room to allow everyone to sleep, so we had to sleep in turns. Two individuals would sleep in turns; one sleeps while the other stands to generate air to the sleeping partner, who sleeps curled up within the space he had, which is measured by number of tiles. The partner should do the same when he wakes up. The space available for each one to sleep on was no more than one tile width (around 20 square centimeters). We used to stand up and sit down in turns to get the temporary rest we need to survive

Wednesday was our unlucky day of every week, because it was the cleaning day, as defined by the guards. They would put us all in a corner of around six square meters and would torture us collectively until the room is clean. As days passed, our clothes became ragged. The only piece that survived was the underwear that we struggled to keep in good shape. Lice were an all-time companion. Every morning we had to search for lice eggs in our bodies and clothes to prevent them from reproducing in our cell causing unnecessary skin diseases. We were allowed to bath once a week only, most times with cold water and insufficient body-cleaning materials. To go to toilet we needed to take a queue number from al-Shaweesh to get to the open toilet that had no cover. Every evening some of us should be subject to punishments that depend on the whims of the personnel who want to entertain themselves. Al-Shaweesh would be ordered to bring a number of inmates to get disciplined for making noise during the day and disturbing the guards

Every moment passed during those days held a dark idea about the unknown awaiting destiny that lay ahead in the coming days. Nevertheless we managed, whenever possible, to find a way to discharge the psychological pressure we were under, usually through education or entertainment. For instance I still remember the funny way that I used to make a board and a pen to teach the illiterate how to read and write. One day the meals we had contained pieces of chicken. I found a piece of bone in the meal, so I sharpened the tip of the bone on the rough wall shaping it as a pen. I also swamped a piece of dark clothes with dirt off the wall, and then I folded it to draw letters and words on it. Thus I managed to create a primitive educational material. We also made from the remnants of soaps an entertaining game like checkers. We drew a board like the chess board on a cloth with soap and we used orange rinds and olive pits as the game pieces. We always looked for ways for education or entertainment even if we were running some potential risk by doing so

Life was going the same until one morning a guard called my name along with the names of my colleagues Mansour al-Omary and Abdul Rahman Hamada. These were the two who accompanied me all over the period of prison after my other colleagues Ayham Ghazzoul, Juan Farso and Bassam al-Ahmad were released earlier. Of course they all had their share of this agony. That day was 14 November 2012. It was the date when my colleague and I were transferred to the Military Police Headquarters in Qaboun Neighborhood in Damascus. There we met with two other colleagues; Mazen Darwish and Hussein Ghreir who went through a similar journey in detention

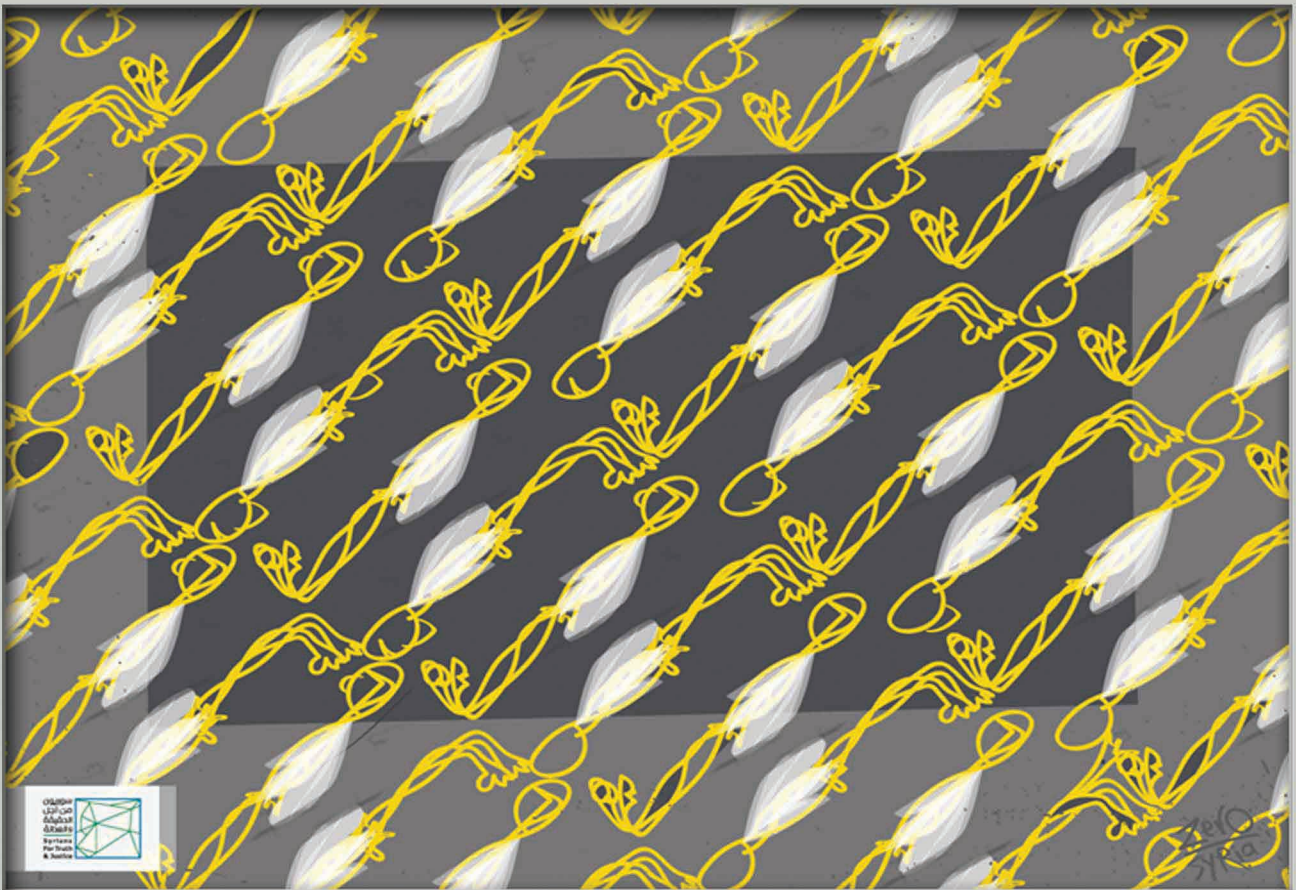
So you arrived to the Military Police headquarters in Qaboun. Can we say that you became in a safer and better place in terms of detention conditions

Usually jailing detainees in the Military Police headquarters is considered a transitional period that would be followed by transferring detainees to either the military judiciary or to another "civil" prison like Adra Central Prison, or a "military" prison like Saydnaya Prison. In most cases detainees don't stay there more than two days. However, we were kept there for 12 days

Of course the place lacks the minimum sanitary requirements, especially in terms of crowdedness. The way we used to sleep or sit down is indescribable. We were around 70 people in the room - the number would decrease a little or increase depending on the numbers of people transferred out or brought in. The room was about 30 square meters and, in our last two days, the number of inmates exceeded one hundred. It was impossible to sleep or even to have everyone seated. The ceiling of the room was so low and there were no windows for ventilation, so we were sweating all the time and the sweat vaporized, condensed on the ceiling then fell back like rain

On 26 November 2012, our names were called, all five of us. We were handcuffed with brass handcuffs called "al-jamia," along with a large group of inmates, and they connected all these handcuffs with one long chain. We were put in a truck that is called the "refrigerated truck". It looks exactly like the ordinary refrigerated trucks in which meat is transported. When we get off the truck, after the ride, we found ourselves in Adra Central Prison, or the Meridian of Syrian prisons, as some detainees like to call it

Of course the Military Police jail lacked all the regulations for prisons. Detainees there could be subject to different kinds of abuses including beating. At least, however, I was relieved from the psychological pressure that I was under when I was in the security branch, which was linked to an unknown fate. I also got rid of the blindfold (al-Tamasheh) that blinded me and the exhausting noise of the stun gun



An illustration depicting sleeping positions that detainees usually take, due to crowdedness of detention facilities in Syria

You were held in custody in Adra Central Prison for about three years without a judicial verdict. How did you spend this long period of arbitrary detention? How were the judicial procedures taken against you

On the morning of 26 November, 2012, I entered **Adra central prison** in a miserable state, which is the normal state for any detainee who spent several months in the security dungeons; long beard and long hair wearing what remains of the torn clothes that are full of lice. I was incapable of holding myself together because of prolonged period of sitting down for months without movement. I smelled terribly, but I didn't know that I smell so badly before getting the chance to breathe fresh air. I also only felt the high sensitivity on my skin after cleaning up and seeing the sun. The first phrase I heard from one of the police guards, "Thank God for your safety guys that you made it here safely". Hearing that sentence felt weird, especially that in other detention places I would only hear abusive language and accusations of treachery

My first day in Adra was long and exhausting. I didn't reach the dormitory I was allocated before midnight because of the large numbers of the inmates coming to Adra prison from the different security branches. In addition, we went through a long process of registering our personal data, and the cleaning procedures which included bathing, having our hair cut and receiving the prison uniform. I went to dormitory number 303, not knowing yet what lied ahead of me before the judiciary. The capacity of each dormitory was 32 inmates according to the number of beds available. However, the numbers exceeded that capacity threefold at points. It is well known that Adra prison is a civil prison where prisoners find some of the prisoner rights, especially the right to call one's family through the telephone and to be allowed to receive periodic visits. Usually detainees would be eager to know their families' news and reassure them about their safety after a long journey of disappearance and struggling with an unknown destiny around them from both sides. My first meeting with my family raised a sentiment that wiped off a lot of the pains I underwent, especially when I recognized the comfort on their faces when they were sure that I was still alive

I also had the right to assign an attorney to undertake the legal procedures on my behalf. Only then I learned that I'm here in the capacity of being "held in custody for the counter-terrorism court." I learned that this capacity is illegal for keeping me in prison, as long as no judicial arrest warrant has been issued against me. I haven't heard of this court as it was created months after my detention. Nor did I hear of the anti-terrorism law whose provisions would apply if I am sentenced. The pattern followed was that the prisoner in custody for this court shall wait his turn to come before one of the investigative judges at that court. Such waiting may last for several months due to the large numbers of detainees referred thereto. I waited until 5 February 2013, the date of my case before the first investigative judge in the counter-terrorism court. The norm was that all detainees referred to this court get released on the basis of insufficient evidence after the detainee denies all charges before the judge on the basis that his confessions have been extracted under torture. That was the norm in the past. Later, the court refused releasing most of detainees referred to it despite the claim they made about innocence and despite the lack of substantial evidence to the alleged charges. The judge considered my work in monitoring the Syrian press, monitoring the violations against media professionals, documenting the physical harm suffered by the released detainees, then developing statistics and studies in this regard and publishing them on the website of CMFE, an act that could potentially further ignite the internal problems and drive some organizations to reach indictment decisions against Syria at international circles. That was the charge the judge has concluded in the referral decision later, considering it as promotion for terrorist acts

Indeed, the investigative judge immediately issued an arrest warrant against me and my two colleagues Mazen Darwish and Hussein Ghreir. He released two other colleagues: Mansour al-Omary and Abdul Rahman Hamada, given that they must attend the hearings without being in custody. Twenty days after the legal arrest of the three of us, we were referred to the criminal judge of the counter-terrorism court with the same charge "promoting terrorist acts in accordance with article 8 of anti-terrorism law". The first hearing was set to take place on 10 March 2013

Spending months inside Adra prison, my hope of getting out gradually grew smaller and smaller, especially with the delays and long intervals between the hearings. In addition to the unfair rulings issued against many of the detainees in custody of this court and the tiny proportion of those who were released, I had to create a life that matched my new reality behind the walls of this prison. I had to be able to live according to the requirements of this place in order not to lose the remaining hope within me. So I struggled to organize my life according to a well-known proverb in Adra that says: "Work for your release as if you will be released tomorrow and work for your prison as if you will stay here forever." So I created for myself some kind of acceptance that is appropriate for the hard conditions of this place. So I started teaching philosophy and social sciences for the students who were studying in the prison school. I also established a private library to encourage the interested prisoners to read and I established some sort of social relationships that allowed me to make acquaintances and go through interactive dialogues of social and psychological nature, in addition to my interest in cooking and doing sports

Several months before your release we heard that you were transferred to another prison, then you were taken again to one of the security branches, what were the reasons behind that, and were you subjected to torture again

Adra prison is no more the place for punishing or correcting individuals charged with criminal acts, whose proportion has become so little in comparison with the high percentage of those arrested within the backdrop of what is happening in Syria. The inmates included poets, artists, doctors, teachers, and people from all walks of life with whom I made a kind of acceptable and sometimes fruitful relations. It was not easy at all to be taken away from those people and get transferred to a new place where I may need several months to build a new life. This is what happened. On the night of 4 February 2015, an officer came into the dorm, called my name and told me to hurry out of the dorm. I immediately knew that I will be transferred to a branch prison. Of course that wasn't specifically against me, but inmates were randomly transferred to different prisons, possibly to decrease the massive number of detainees in this prison or for other reasons pertaining to the management of the prison. That was one of the hardest periods for all prisoners, as no one wanted to change his place and the people with whom he created relations that are almost familial, unless of course that change came in the form of being released from prison and going back to one's family and loved ones

Branch prisons are supposed to be civil prisons where prisoners enjoy all of their rights and to be dealt with in a manner that goes in line with the internationally recognized standards. But what actually happened with me was that on the morning of that day after I was transferred to **al-Suwaida central prison**, we got beaten and humiliated by the officers and guards of that prison from the moment we arrived there. Then our belongings were searched and some of them were confiscated, especially bed sheets and our diaries. One of the guards sarcastically told us not to consider this prison a civil one. Indeed that prison, during the short period I spent there, seemed more like a private property of the prison officers in regards to administrative corruption and financial extortion. So if a prisoner wanted to get some of his rights or to avoid the expected consequences, he should always pay money to the officers, which is a kind of “protection tax

The worst thing that could face a prisoner who got used to the life of civil prisons is to be sent back again to security branches. For he would think dreadful thoughts, especially in terms of his own feeling there being a direct threat to his life. Every day, detainees would hope to hear their names called for release, but it is hard for them to expect that they would be called on to be handcuffed, blindfolded and taken to an unknown place

In the last couple of months of my detention, I had been transferred several times. Two months following my transfer to al-Suwaida prison, I was summoned to attend a hearing in Damascus. In such cases we get jailed in a room just outside Adra prison until we stand before the judge. The conditions of this room were relatively difficult because it was crowded and there were no daily breaks outside the room. I stayed there for prolonged periods because of the repeated postponements of my hearing. On 6 May 2015, a guard came to the room and told me and my colleague Mazen Darwish to get ready to go to the court. We immediately knew that something will happen, because this date was an official holiday in Syria, and no public institutions, including courts, work on such a day. Indeed, once we got out the room we were handed over to a patrol from the General Intelligence Directorate and the patrol took us, with another colleague called Hussein Ghreir, to the headquarters, handcuffed and blindfolded

Upon our arrival we were put in a dark solitary confinement, about 120 cm long and 1 meter wide. We used to sleep by either sitting down or leaning against the wall. We couldn't figure out the reason for being sent there. There were no interrogations with the purpose of extracting new information. It was rather a phony session in which the interrogator wanted to convince us that we made a mistake and that we must pay for our mistakes, as he perceives them. We stayed like that for 45 days in which we were subject to different physical punishments, including beating with sticks and electric cables on our feet (the tire), and staying for two complete days standing against the wall naked and deprived of food and water, with all the accompanying insults and practices of humiliation. Practices that included our sleeping and waking up routine, which depended on the decision of the guards, as well as our going out to bathrooms and using toilets, which were also dependent on the guards' mood. In addition to that, the psychological pressure was immense in regards to the fate of our hearings. This was especially the case when one of the guards told us after about two weeks that the judge has sentenced us to thirteen years of imprisonment, most of which will be spent here. However, we discovered later that this wasn't true

I can say that these were the most difficult days, although the three of us tried to deal with this experience with some wisdom. When these days and all the experience incurred along it were over, another patrol from the same apparatus transported us back to Adra Central Prison, where we were taken from earlier. A week later I was sent back to al-Suwaida, without attending any session of my trial or any judicial verdict

On 15 July 2015, after midnight, I heard a voice from outside the room calling my name and saying "Hani al-Zeitani. . Released". I didn't believe it in the beginning, but when I went out I found a police guard at the door of the room who asked me my name. He then opened the door and told me to go with him to receive my ID and my other stuff. I had to sign a form stating I would attend a hearing that was decided to be held on 30 August, 2015. After three and a half years in detention, and over twenty hearings, I finally found myself free outside the walls of prison

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