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"We Were Shifting To Inhale Air"

**Account of the Survivor Yousef Ibrahim al-Bakkor after
Seven-years Detention in Syrian Apparatus Prisons**

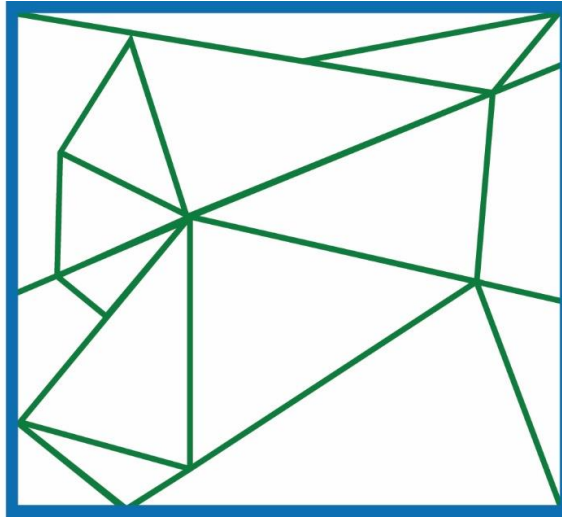
About Syrians for Truth and Justice

[Syrians for Truth and Justice \(STJ\)](#) is an independent, non-governmental and non-profit organization whose members include Syrian human rights defenders, advocates and academics of different backgrounds and nationalities. It also includes members of other nationalities.

The initiative strives for SYRIA, where all Syrian citizens (males and females) have dignity, equality, justice and equal human rights.

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Syrians
For Truth
& Justice





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Introduction

Prolonged years of service for the Criminal Security Department in Aleppo province did not recommend from the risk of being held by Syrian security apparatus in 2011. He never thought that fetching little bread for people of his home city of [Kafr Zita](#) might expose him to seven bitter and cruel years of detention, which he summarized to STJ in this testimony in an interview conducted late March 2018, he began by saying,

"I was not released except after paying a bribe of SYP10, 000, 000 to the judge, forcing me to sell everything of my property in order to breathe freedom and be finally discharged on March 16, 2018."

First: A Glimpse of the Life of the Survivor Yousef Ibrahim al-Bakkor

Yousef Ibrahim al-Bakkor was born in 1976 in Kafr Zita city located in the north countryside of Hama. He has volunteered in the Criminal Security Department in Aleppo since 1995 until the onset of the protests nationwide Syria in 2011. Despite being an element of the criminal security affiliated to the Syrian regular forces, he was one of the first who participated in the demonstrations that prevailed his hometown of Kafr Zita at the time.

Prices of food supplies, particularly bread soared at the beginning of the outbreak of peaceful movement in Hama province, prompting Yousef to bring some bread from Aleppo to several poor families in Kafr Zita. In this regard, Yousef said to STJ,

"at the beginning of the conflict, I was used to do my work as an element who serves his country in one of the departments of the criminal security in Aleppo, and I was visiting my family who lived in Kafr Zita whenever I had the chance. I was using the chance of my presence at Kafr Zita to participate in the peaceful demonstration. However, after bread ran out from the city and the difficulty of bringing it from other areas, some of the locals asked me to bring them bread during my repeated visits to Kafr Zia, since bread was well available in Aleppo.

On Tuesday, November 29, 2011, while I was coming back from Kafr Zita to my workplace in Aleppo, a state security-operated checkpoint halted me and asked me to show them my identity card. Without any prior warning, a group of the elements arrested me and



handcuffed me with iron shackles and then took me to a military vehicle. They did not explain reason of the arrest although I told them repeatedly that I was an element of the criminal security and that I was heading to my job in Aleppo. But they refused to listen to me and they drove me to the State Security Department in Aleppo. There, an element got me off the car while I was handcuffed and blindfolded and placed me in a comunicado where I stayed until the next day. At the time, I did not realize what was actually going on; although I had worked for two decades, I did not know that an element was able to hold any citizen without informing him of the reason or handing him an official paper showing signature of the arrest warrant."

Second: Course of Interrogation in the State Security Department in Aleppo

Wednesday morning, November 30, 2011, Yousef was taken to interrogation room where the interrogator received him with bad languages and beatings over many parts of his body. After that, he started accusing Yousef of setting up a terrorist cell in order to assassinate Heads of the security branches and of destabilizing the country in addition to financing terrorism. The interrogator ordered him to confess under severe beat. In this regard, Yousef said,

"I tried so hard to convince him that all those were unfounded accusation and that I was just an element of the Criminal Security Department, but I confessed a solo thing that I did not know would constitute a starting point to open another speech with the interrogator; I told him literally that I was sometimes taking bread from Aleppo's bakeries to some of my relatives in Kafr Zita. At that time he stopped a little then asked? Who else from your colleagues work with you to finance terrorism? I was astonished because of his question but I replied firmly: I had no one with me, I was working on my own with the help of no one. He began beating me and repeating the same question again and again but after he could not take any information, he asked one of the elements to take me back to the comunicado, at that time, the element pulled me on the ground without showing any mercy until we got to the comunicado where I stayed for a month.



The same scenario of fierce torture and psychological insults was being repeated every single day in an attempt to make me confess of supporting and financing what they called as terrorist gangs, but that did not work. But once I was cracking up while I was inside the interrogation room so I decided to deceive the interrogator and I told him that there were a number of my fellow elements in the Criminal Security Department who helped me bring bread from Aleppo's bakeries and I mentioned names of some of elements, about ten as I remember, and I intended to choose some officers from his same sect- the Alawites- aiming to uncover his malicious intentions that he has within his heart against everyone who is not the same sect as him or as his president."

As soon as the interrogator heard the names of these officers, his physiognomy changed and accused Yousef of lies and deception, but the insistence of Yousef on reticence caused him to be beaten and tortured relentlessly. He was exposed to Shabah position while being blindfolded for two consecutive days until he would lost his consciousness during the interrogation. When Yousef reached a dead end and saw that the interrogator would not stop beating him unless he admitted, Yousef decided to risk the last hazard that might be the savior for him from this inferno. He told the interrogator that he would confess names of all his elements and officers colleagues involved with him, and did gave a long list of officers and elements names including his close friends but this time, Yousef mentioned names of different sects as well, the majority of them were from the north countryside of Hama. Upon finishing the names, features of satisfaction started to show on the interrogator's face, as Yousef expressed, then he added,

"In less than a week, I learned that they had held all the people whom I mentioned and that hurt me so much because it was of me and I was not pleased for doing so but I was forced under the sever torture being practiced over me during the days of my detention. My friends had a share of torture and oppression the same exactly as I experienced. Let alone the poor sanitary and service conditions within the custody in addition to the hunger policy practiced against inmates; food was just half a loaf of bread along with half an egg or even less, which the prisoner got to fill his hunger after being denied from food for 24 hours.

Few days later, I, along with 29 other inmates, were transformed to a double ceiling, a prison affiliated to the State Security Department, which was just a room of only 2*2 m. Few



minutes following my presence in that place that looked like a tomb as it was very narrow and gloomy, I felt as if I was breathing my last breaths. The place was too small comparing with the number of people detained. We were rotating on sitting down in order to save a little space; a group of 15 inmates would sit the squat position and the second group would remain stand still until it was their turn to sit half an hour later. We asked the warden to open the window a little bit in order to make some air in but he came in and headed towards the window, then lit his lighter close to the window and said, "the room has already got air, it is moving the fire of the lighter as you can see". After the warden mocked us, we started to rotate to inhale air from the hole of the door for 30 seconds."

Third: Journey of Agony and Moving among Custodies and Security Branches

Yousef spent about a whole month in the State Security Department in Aleppo province, then he was transferred along with some other detainees to the Military Police Department in Damascus province where he stayed for several days and was exposed to torture. After that, he was transferred to al-Balona Prison in Homs province to be transferred again to Aleppo province specifically to the headquarter of the military police for final trial. In this regard, he said,

"Head of the Prosecutory in the Military Court of Aleppo was Yazn al-Homsy, a man known among the incarcerated for his cruelty and toughness and who lacks the characteristics of a fair judge. He was sending any detainee whom he does not like to the Air Intelligence Branch prison located in Damascus, which is known throughout Syria that it is one of the prisons that has no mercy or pity. After that, I was transformed to the Civil Prison in Aleppo and I stayed there until July 17, 2015, where I have painful memories because some of my detainee friends died there under torture, I remember Abderrazaq Mohammed from al-Hasakah



province, Mahmoud ash-Shama'a from Abu Kamal and Moayad ash-Shimali from Ma'arat al-Nu'man. After that, I was transferred to Hama's Central Prison where I stayed for just one night to be transferred with some other detainees in the morning to Adra Central Prison located in the countryside of Damascus."

Yusef breathed a sigh of relief when he was transferred to Adra Central Prison in the countryside of Damascus, he believed it would be less severe than other detention facilities in comparison with the fierce torture process in which he was exposed to. On July 18, 2015, Yusef went into Adra Prison where physiognomy of the detainees were summarizing the suffering stories they had endured its woes because of poor services and scarcity of nutrition and medication in the security branches. In this regard he says,

"Several months I have spent in Adra Prison and I carry with me very much painful memories in this prison as well as scenes that are still stuck in my mind. We were being detained in one small room with more than 30 beds; we shared food and we shifted sleep and rest times. The most important is that the director of the prison identified as Nabeel al-Ghjari from al-Sweida was monopolizing the food supplies dedicated for prisoners, taking all of them and selling them to the prisoners ten times more than its real price. He sold the bundle of bread for more than SYP 1500, and the lucky one of us was that who could get a loaf of bread. It didn't end that far, but it went much further. Some of the prisoners, including me, were receiving little sums of money from their families in order to be able to buy their stuff, but once the sums reach the administration of the prison and the director took a large part of it, sometimes the half. In one occasion, I remember that one of my relatives sent me SYP 100, 000 but the director took SYP 40, 000 out of it on the pretext of conversion expenses."



Fourth: Breathe of Freedom

Ten months after Yousef's detention at Adra Central Prison located in Damascus countryside, he was transferred along with other 15 detainees to a prison in al-Sweida province on January 6, 2016 and remained there until March 16, 2016. According to what he reported, the prison at al-Sweida was not better than other detention facilities and security branches he was transferred among in provinces of Aleppo, Homs and Damascus. In al-Sweida Prison he was exposed to psychological insults, let alone the poor conditions within the prison at all levels, being the denial of food and drink or the medical supplies that the prisoners desperately needed them since they had got lots of illnesses. He added,

"Despite the expiration of the period of my trial, I was not released. Therefore, I informed the leadership of the prison and I was referred to the court once again by a lawyer close to the judge. The judge asked me to pay SYP 10, 000, 000 as a bribe in order to release me. Actually, I am from a simple family and I have not got such an amount of money. So I asked the judge to allow me contact my family, and indeed I told my family about the matter and I asked them to sell all of my property in order I can secure the money. Days later, I gave the money required to the lawyer who alternatively gave it to the judge as a bribe, and the judge signed for my release from detention on March 14, 2016. After confirmation for my release, I stayed for two days waiting the date of my discharge until it finally came on March 16, 2016."



An image shows an order for the release of the survivor Yusef al-Bakkor from al-Sweida Central Prison.

Photo credit: the witness Yusef Ibrahim al-Bakkor.

Yusuf was discharged from detention but suffering from several illnesses, forcing him to perform two surgical operations in the heart area, which costs approximately \$1000. Because of the intensity of the shelling Kafr Zita town carried out by Syrian regular forces, he was forced to go to Hizano town in Idlib countryside and married there, but he has yet to recover from the illnesses that he had during the prolonged years behind bars.