

SYRIA: VOICES IN CRISIS

A MONTHLY INSIGHT INTO THE HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS IN SYRIA.



“FORGET YOUR NAME AND DON’T TALK TO ANYONE.”

SHIYAR KHALIL, A SYRIAN JOURNALIST, DESCRIBES HIS EXPERIENCE OF BEING DETAINED BY THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT TO AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL.

I was arrested on 23 April 2013 in the al-Sarouja neighbourhood of Damascus by members of the Palestine Branch, a detention centre run by the Military Intelligence. I was in a café with 17 of my friends. They came to arrest another journalist who was also there, but then arrested all of us. We were pushed into a van while being hit. As we were leaving we noticed the whole area was surrounded by security agents, as if

they were arresting a group of terrorists.

From our group only one person is still in prison.

They initially just wanted two of my colleagues; they began hitting them in front of us. Then they took us one by one to a separate room for questioning. When they saw that I had a travel ban (the Political Security imposed this ban on

An ID card from 'Adra Prison © Private

me at the start of the revolution because of my work as a journalist), they started hitting me.

One of my friends “confessed” that I worked with the wanted journalist, so they kept asking me if I also worked with Orient TV [an opposition-operated TV channel]. They kept hitting me until I confessed that I worked with Sky News, and that I was an activist and part of a group called Syria for All.

Some of my colleagues “confessed” under torture; their confessions were what hurt me the most, as they were used against me. For instance, I used to work with Lakhdar Brahimi [former UN and Arab League Special Envoy to Syria] when he used to visit Syria. I used to give him information about government abuses. The interrogator said, “Lakhdar Brahimi is here in the branch with us.” I was a little shocked then realized that he meant a 2m long green plastic pipe (in Arabic “Lakhdar” literally means “the green one”), which he then used to beat me for about three hours, during which I lost consciousness. The interrogation on the first day began at around 4pm and finished at around 6am.

At around 6am they released some and kept about eight others, including me. They then took us to different cells, each of which was severely overcrowded. They gave each of us a number. This was their attempt at taking our humanity away from us; we were no longer people, just numbers. I was number 101. They told me, “This is your number, forget your name and don’t talk to anyone.”

The cells smelled of blood; people were cramped to the point of sleeping on top of each other. There were many diseases, from gangrene to scabies. The guard would cover his nose with a piece of cloth whenever he opened the cell door because the smell was so bad.

Every day around five of the men in my cell died: they were removed and new prisoners brought in. The causes of death varied, many due to torture, others from disease. We had no access to any real medical care. There was one doctor who would only come into the cell in the most severe circumstances, but he was a butcher, just like the guards. One time he was called about a man whose legs were badly infected and the infection was spreading. Instead of helping him, the doctor beat his legs with a stick.

After two weeks, they began the second round of interrogations. The interrogator showed me videos they found on my laptop. He asked me, “In Qamishly you taped the FSA [Free Syrian Army, a coalition of armed opposition groups], didn’t you?” I told him that at the time I was in Qamishly, there was no FSA there and that I only recorded peaceful demonstrations; he called me a liar and beat me with the “Lakhdar Brahimi” stick. I still have the scars on my face.

During this interrogation I “confessed” to some things I had done but also others that I had not. However, they continued the interrogation by putting me in the *shabeh* position [a stress position in which the victim is suspended by their manacled wrists or feet] three times, each time for 15 minutes in total]. They wanted me to confess that I worked with Orient TV, which I did not. I was tortured a lot during this interrogation. One time he told me to lie down on my front, and he began hitting my legs, saying “you are a stubborn Kurd, why don’t you just confess.” I kept on telling him I was a nationalist, I think of myself as Syrian and not Kurdish. He would reply, “You are Kurdish and you only care about creating your Kurdistan.”

This kind of interrogation continued over the next two months and 10 days.

After this the same interrogator called my name and said “We apologize Mr Shiyar, we are trying to protect the country, you will understand”. I felt like I was dying at this point; I had lost weight, my health was in a very bad situation. They then took me back to the cell downstairs for another month. They then took us to a military court, which transferred us to the Military Police, and from there we were taken to ‘Adra Prison.

After one month in ‘Adra Prison, they released the journalist for whom they had initially conducted the raid. We later spoke about her experience in detention. Twice during my time in the Palestine Branch I saw glimpses of women dancing when I wasn’t blindfolded on the way to interrogation. I asked her about this. She said that there were 250 women in the Palestine Branch. At night the prison guards would get drunk and take two or three girls out of the cell and make them dance for them. There were also reports of cases of rape.

After two months in ‘Adra Prison, I was taken before a judge at the Anti-Terrorism Court. He asked me if I worked with Lakhdar Brahimi; I lied and said no. He asked if I worked with Sky News, I said no. And so on. I denied everything. I was then taken back to ‘Adra and kept there for seven additional months.

During this time, security forces personnel raided the house of my friend, the other journalist. There they found a hard drive that belonged to me and contained information about my activities in the liberated areas in Syria, including photos and videos. Then a statement came from the head of the Ministry of Interior that a group of terrorists had “confessed” that I worked with them. I was taken to a Criminal Security branch where I was “welcomed” with beatings and being put in the *shabeh* position.

After two months of torture and interrogation, I

was told that I would have to go on Syrian state TV and “confess” that I was a terrorist and involved in terrorist activities. I kept on refusing this. The interrogator burned my hands and back with cigarettes and then brought in a girl I knew and began harassing her sexually. He said, “If you don’t agree we will rape her and it would be your responsibility because you are refusing to do this.” I felt I had no choice but to agree.

Three days later they brought me new clothes. They kept my beard long so that I looked “more like a terrorist”. Two officials came from the Department of Media of the Ministry of Interior and we recorded a 55 minute programme. They put a blackboard in front of me and wrote down what they wanted me to say. I confessed to everything they wanted. I told them that the protests were all a lie, that we used to tape foreigners and pretend they were Syrian, that much of the footage was fabricated.

Around two months afterwards they came back and said that they needed me to record another tape, because there was a joint statement by a number of international human rights NGOs alleging that I was being tortured in prison and that I was subjected to a forced confession. They wanted to do another recording to reply to this. Two days later they came back and said that there was too much pressure from the media and that they would not redo the recording after all.

I was returned to ‘Adra Prison. After two months there, they took me to the Anti-Terrorism Court again. Two well-known human rights lawyers were appointed as my lawyers. Eventually the charges were dropped, I think because Lakhdar Brahimi had been advocating for my release.

I was released on 28 May 2015 and went straight to Turkey.

CASE FOCUS: FA'EQ AL-MIR (FA'EQ ALI ASA'D)

“HE WAS ALWAYS THERE FOR US”



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Fa'eq al-Mir, who is also known as Fa'eq Ali Asa'd, aged 61, is a long-term peaceful political activist. Prior to his arrest he worked as an assistant engineer.

His son, Ali Asa'd, told Amnesty International:

“Three words describe my father: optimistic, determined and energetic. He was always there for us, giving us hope in desperate times. He was very close to me and my sister - our relationships are like a friendship more than anything else.”

As a young man, Fa'eq joined the Communist Party Political Bureau, an unauthorized political party which called for democracy and free elections in Syria. As a result, at the age of 25 he was arrested by Syrian Military Intelligence for the first time and held for a month.

Thousands of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience were held during the presidency of Hafez al-Assad, the father of the current President Bashar al-Assad, many of them after grossly unfair trials. These included members and suspected members of the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as of the Communist Party Political Bureau and the Communist Workers Party. Torture and other ill-treatment of detainees was rife.

In 1983, Fa'eq was discharged from his employment, which he later discovered was on the order of the security authorities. After a raid on his home by Political Security

agents, he spent almost two years in hiding, but was eventually arrested again by Military Intelligence in Damascus. In 1989 he was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment by the Supreme State Security Court on charges including “membership in a secret organization aimed at overthrowing the political and social system of the state”. Proceedings before the Court were grossly unfair.

Ali continues:

“The long and repeated detention periods took their toll on my father, both psychological and physical. He told us that he was tortured during his detention, specifically during the first three years he spent in the security branch. The torture and other ill-treatment left permanent injuries and pain in his neck and his spine, weak kidneys and hearing problems. “He was not able to see his children grow up; he was deprived of being able to celebrate the most important moments in his family's life, including the birth of his first grandchild.”

Fa'eq al-Mir was released from Saydnaya Military Prison in 1999 but was arrested again in 2006 by State Security forces. He was detained in 'Adra Prison for 18 months for “circulating false or exaggerated news which would weaken the morale of the nation”. He went into hiding again in 2010 and was sentenced in his absence to 15 years' imprisonment for “weakening national sentiments”, a charge often used against peaceful government critics.

He eluded arrest for the following three years. However, on 7 October 2013 Fa'eq al-Mir left his home in Damascus in an area under the control of the government. He never returned but shortly afterwards a group of armed men in civilian clothing believed to be members of the security forces raided his house, intimidated his family and confiscated electronic equipment and other items.

His family have made two official inquiries, but have not received any answers. Amnesty International calls for the immediate and unconditional release of Fa'eq al-Mir. At a minimum, the authorities must inform his family of his whereabouts and provide him with immediate access to his family, lawyers and medical care.

CAMPAIGNING

For information about campaigning on this case, please visit:

<http://bit.ly/1BGYaKf>

For further information, please visit:

<http://free-syrian-voices.org/faeq-ali-asad-also-known-as-faeq-al-mir/>

MORE INFORMATION