

**Tadmur**  
**Witnessed & Observed**

**Muhammad Saleem Hammad**  
*Translated by the Syrian Human Rights Committee*



## Contents

Contents .....	3
Years of My Youth.....	9
A Way of Life.....	10
The Special Camp.....	11
Bitter Suffering .....	12
The ‘Artillery Academy’ Incident.....	12
To Damascus.....	13
Between <i>Al-Talee’a</i> and the Brotherhood.....	14
Correspondence .....	15
Abul Faraj.....	16
The Keys of the Organization.....	17
Life of the Martyr.....	18
The Arrest .....	18
Face to Face.....	19
In the Cell.....	20
Interrogation.....	20
The Torture Party.....	22
Mere Numbers .....	23
A Miracle.....	24
“The Magic Carpet”.....	25
The Alligators’ Tears .....	26
Confessions .....	27
The Sordid Feast .....	28
A Struggle Against Myself.....	31
The Procession of Numbers .....	32
Sleeping in Sequence.....	33
Lice and Rats .....	34
To the Barber.....	35
God, Save Me .....	36
Salem’s Confessions .....	37
A New Trap.....	37
The Spite of the Sectarians .....	39
The German Chair .....	39
Back to Solitary Confinement.....	41
A New Door .....	42
Abu Jahil .....	43
Bookings .....	45
“The Mark” .....	46
The Penalty.....	47
Hall 26 .....	48
Awaiting the Unknown .....	50

Laborers .....	50
Breakfast by Force .....	52
Roll Call .....	54
Eating & Sleeping.....	55
To the Barber Again.....	57
The Blood Bath.....	58
God's Mercy .....	60
Wounds and Infections.....	61
The Ka'ba of the Torturers.....	62
The Savagery of Torture.....	63
With the Book of God .....	64
Cholera.....	65
The Women's Hall.....	66
Execution.....	67
Questions and Explanations .....	68
Winter.....	69
The 'Court Trial' .....	70
Welcoming the Meeting with God.....	71
A Martyr's Swing .....	72
Solace .....	73
With the Book of God .....	74
Conspiracy.....	75
The Predestined Day .....	75
The Incident of Hama .....	77
Cautionary Procedures .....	78
The Defector .....	79
A Surprise .....	80
Scabies .....	81
From the List of Victims .....	82
<i>Suhoor</i> .....	84
A Noble Tradition .....	84
The Murderous Doctor .....	85
Orders of Indecency.....	87
Solitary Detention.....	89
The Roster of Criminals.....	90
Intense Surveillance .....	92
Quarrels.....	93
Separating the Youth .....	93
A Bit of Yogurt .....	93
We Will Not Submit.....	95
Bidding Brothers Farewell.....	96
Impudence .....	96
Abu 'Awadh .....	98
The Hall of Privileged Prisoners .....	99
Forced Brotherhood .....	100

The Snake's Tail.....	101
Final Breaths .....	102
Imaginary Kingdom.....	103
Forgiveness .....	104
Regional Divisions.....	105
Tuberculosis .....	107
A Dosage of Torture .....	109
Heart Attack.....	110
Hysteria .....	110
Ibn Malik's <i>Alfiyyat</i> .....	111
"The Martyr of Tadmur" .....	112
Departing You .....	113
"I'm A Ba'thist" .....	113
Spoiled Communists .....	115
Trapping the Vanguard.....	116
Where is the Discrepancy?.....	117
Collective Executions .....	119
The New Warden.....	119
Discipline .....	121
God's Justice with Abu 'Awadh.....	122
The Court .....	123
Abu Sulayman's Cow.....	126
Awaiting Death.....	127
Limiting Food .....	128
Jaundice.....	128
Forbidding Fasting.....	129
Suffocation.....	130
Transfers .....	131
Departures ... and Arrivals.....	132
Even in Our Dreams .....	133
Forced Divorce.....	134
The Mouse.....	135
To the Dumpster .....	136
Collapse.....	137
350 Lashes.....	138
Mini-Ratib .....	139
Additional Information .....	141
The Death of Zahi 'Abbadi.....	142
A Witness of the Massacre of Tadmur.....	142
The Final Newcomers .....	143
"Yes!" to the Leader.....	144
Glad Tidings.....	145
Surprises.....	147
The Exit.....	148
A Tear of Thanks.....	149

Tadmur: witnessed & Observed

A New Page.....	150
Final Words .....	152
Afterword.....	156
An Account of the Great Massacre of Tadmur Given by its Executors.....	156
Statement of Sergeant Issa Ibrahim Fayyad .....	157
Statement of Corporal Akram ‘Ali Jameel Beeshani .....	162
Statement of Taha Muhammad al-Khalidi .....	166
From the Roster of Martyrs.....	167

It was a cold morning in the last days of the year 1991 and life in the desert city of Tadmur<sup>1</sup> was carrying on normally. Early in the morning the children walked toward their schools. Their mothers, after having sent their men off to work and cleared the house of any disturbances, were at home engaged in conversation with their neighbors. The *dakakeen*<sup>2</sup> in the city welcomed its wide array of visitors, greeting a blend of women and men, civilians and soldiers. The streets opened their paths for those walking and those on animals and in cars.

Each passerby possessed his own worries: one soldier late for duty was trying to catch up to his unit, yet sat frustrated in the back of a cab as the driver, hopeful to catch another customer, refused to drive; a store owner was bothered by a customer who insistently bargained the price of her items, stripping him of the few *liras*<sup>3</sup> of profit he was entitled to; and even an agonized donkey was perturbed, for his master had given him a load of oranges too heavy for him to carry at his advanced age. He stood defiantly in the middle of the road, blocking traffic and bringing him and his owner a steady flow of curses and swears.

On this path, approaching from the south of the city from where cars were en route to Homs<sup>4</sup>, was a red Toyota bus that squeezed its way through traffic. It drew no special attention from those around as it meant nothing to anyone— except its passengers.

Dressed in khaki-colored military uniforms, we sat on the stiff, uncomfortable chairs with our hats in our laps, engulfed by silence. We were like babies who had just entered the world from the womb of our mothers, or like visitors from another planet in their first experience on Earth. The silence was interrupted by swearing from the imprudent driver who directed his language at the donkey blocking traffic. The passengers and I simply stared, gazing at the people and the world around us. Quickly

---

<sup>1</sup> Palmyra is a desert city in the middle of Syria known in Arabic as Tadmur

<sup>2</sup> Small shops along the side of the road

<sup>3</sup> Syrian currency

<sup>4</sup> City in the middle of Syria

though, we lowered our heads and fixated our eyes on the ground beneath us, afraid that everything around would prove imaginary and disappear. But the bus continued north toward Damascus<sup>5</sup> and I found myself once again in a state of apprehension and doubt.

Exploding within me were the words that had been echoing in my mind for the past three days: “His Excellency the President has declared his decision to pardon you; it will only be a few days before you are with your family again.”

I found myself feeling bitter, and without warning a voice leapt from the depths of my soul choking at my throat out of fear of being heard. *Twelve years... Who should I trust? Why should I believe what they say? But what if it is true? What future do I have and what life can I begin now? Where will my place be between those I left in their youth and are now fathers and men of stature and prominence? And what about the brothers I left behind without even bidding farewell?*

My silent conversation was disrupted by the jovial laughs of another passenger. I observed him from the corner of my eye: with his medium-cut hair, grown out mustache, and tan complexion, it was as if he were another species. It was truly from the strangest sights – for me and the nearly thirty-five brothers on the bus with me – to see a man of normal appearance, healthy and strong, laughing aloud without hesitation or fear. This was expected of course, after having spent over ten years in the desert Prison of Tadmur<sup>6</sup>, where we only saw the faces of thin, pale fellow prisoners with heads scrappily shaven and minds enraged at the subjugation we faced. We endured all types of torture with no right to utter a breath of objection. This, however, would be the end of the horrifying nightmare, and my emotions were a mix of elation and solemnity. As for the beginning, my journey through this episode of life began many years ago...

---

<sup>5</sup> Capital of Syria

<sup>6</sup> The title of this book, Tadmur, is given its name after the Tadmur Prison situated in the desert area of central Syria. It is a military prison notorious for its severe methods of torture and commonly housed military and political prisoners. It was established as a military base by the French colonizers in the 1930s or '40s and was later transformed to a military disciplinary camp. When the Ba'ath party took power in the 1960s, they used the prison to punish political dissidents.

### Years of My Youth

My name is Muhammad Saleem Hammad. I was born in 1960 in Iraq, although my family is from Palestine. My father, Saleem Hammad, may the mercy of God be upon him<sup>7</sup>, was an inspector with the Ministry of Education in Jordan. At the time of my birth, he was conducting work in Iraq and had taken the family along with him. Soon after I was born, my family returned to Nablus and then moved to Jarash<sup>8</sup> before settling down in Jordan in the city of al-Zarqa. There, I grew up among my four siblings and remained from the age of nine to nineteen.

My family was not very religious, nor did they belong to a particular political party. My parents prayed like most people of the country, but the degree of their religious observance did not exceed the basics by much. During my middle school years, I began to frequent the mosques and exhibit what some may consider excessive interest in my religion. This brought forth a sense of uneasiness in my household.

When my participation transformed into a deeper commitment coupled with appeal and enthusiasm, the silent objections at home converted from whispered protests to overt admonition. Gratefully though, we were able to move past the resistance that was being projected and develop a clear understanding of what my intentions were. The purpose of my actions was only to enforce that which I learned at the mosque of *‘Uthman bin ‘Affan*, where I had grown accustomed to praying and meeting other youth. With time, I developed a passion for my faith and was eager to show others the light of religion that I had come to know.

I had, at the time, a group of friends with whom I would always race to do charitable acts. I still recall how I would wake up before the *athan*<sup>9</sup> of *fajr*<sup>10</sup> even in the coldest days of winter, leaving the comfort of my bed and the warmth of my home, and walk to these friends' homes, waking them up for prayer. After praying in

---

<sup>7</sup> Prayer said by Muslims when referring to a deceased individual

<sup>8</sup> Nablus is a city in Palestine and Jarash is a city in Jordan

<sup>9</sup> Call to prayer

<sup>10</sup> First of five obligatory prayers for Muslims, approximately an hour before sunrise

congregation at the mosque, we sat in a circle and read *al-Ma'thurat*<sup>11</sup>, a pastime we also carried out in between classes, after school, and following other prayers.

As I progressed through my years in school, I leaned more and more toward religious studies until I found myself engulfed in spiritual thoughts, determined to work harder at learning more and implementing the proper practice of Islam. I came to realize that I would work for this cause no matter what it would cost me. With time, I became a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, which, at the time, governed publicly in Jordan and was not a secret organization. People joined the organization very casually and without persecution. When I entered the secondary level of my education, I was put in charge of the student branch of the Brotherhood at my school.

### A Way of Life

During this time, the Islamic movement in Jordan was at the beginning of a reformation following what is known as Black September of 1970<sup>12</sup>. Our senior brothers in the leadership of the Brotherhood aimed to teach us Islam in its proper sense. We knew that this religion was the means of comfort and contentment for all people, and that it was comprised of an entire guideline directing followers to the path of integrity and righteousness.

The beauty of it lies in that it also encompasses teachings of manners and worship, including a political framework and the moderate solution to all issues of economy and life. It is the religion of God, and as the fulfillment and gratification of people is contingent upon it, it is the responsibility of those who have adopted it to teach others and do our best to apply it based on an organized, political structure.

I remember myself in those days singing sonnets from “The Youth of Islam,” a poem by the martyr Hashim Al-Rifa’i<sup>13</sup>. It symbolized my thoughts and read,

We possessed this world for centuries,  
And ruling it were our righteous forefathers;  
Our history was written on shining pages,

---

<sup>11</sup> Compilation of select verses from the Quran and supplications

<sup>12</sup> A series of battles between the Jordanian government and Palestinian independence organizations

<sup>13</sup> An Egyptian Islamic poet (d. 1959). It is believed that he was assassinated by Communists in Egypt.

That neither we nor time has forgotten.

And then the poet turns to our current state, and I sang instead his following verses:

Times continued to change until,  
Another group took the lead;  
I wonder, will the past return? For I  
Am desperately longing for that past.

And finally, I sang with an unsurpassed degree of zeal, raising my voice so that the entire world can hear:

Leave me from false hopes and thoughts,  
I find these dreams mere speculation;  
Give me instead the light of faith,  
And strengthen my surrounding with conviction;  
Then I'll stretch my arm and move the mountains,  
And build the glory, radiant and firm.

It is truly difficult to describe my feelings at the time, but suffice it to say that if a person adopts such a deep and serious idea, then his every breath and action will be for its cause. He will truly feel capable of shaping the firm-standing mountain for its sake.

### **The Special Camp**

In the year 1977, the International Association for Muslim Youth organized a camp in Jordan. I was able to attend despite the fact that I was in high school and the camp was intended for university students. It was customary to attend one or two camps a year where we were trained to live in the harshness of the outdoors and underwent intense physical workouts.

We also attended workshops comprised of spiritual lectures and educational sessions. At this particular camp, I met for the first time the best of a group of Syrians with the Muslim Brotherhood and was introduced to the predicament that the Muslims in Syria faced from their oppressive government. Little did I know that the information I gained at this setting would have a great effect on my life in the near future.

### **Bitter Suffering**

The organizer of this camp was a Syrian brother named Sabri Ghannam, known as Abu ‘Ammar<sup>14</sup>, who left an undying, encouraging impact on me. I clearly recall the faces of the other brothers and the love that was established between us since that time. When I entered Syria a few years later, I learned that the brothers I had come to know, ‘Isam and ‘Abdullah Qudsi, Jamal ‘Aqeel, Jalal Jalal, and ‘Adnan Shaykhooni, were the leaders of the Syrian Brothers.

At the camp, an uplifting speech was delivered by Sheikh Sa’eed Hawwa<sup>15</sup>, but it was the address given by ‘Adnan Shaykhooni that provided my first insight on the Syrian regime and its tribal, authoritarian system. Through pieces of information I heard at the camp, I learned of the actions of Sheikh Marwan Hadeed<sup>16</sup> at that time. When the situation in Syria exploded two years later, I felt that their cause was close to my heart. Consequently, when I was later approached and asked to help in this regard, I accepted without hesitation, satisfied that I would be offering my share of support and assistance.

### **The ‘Artillery Academy’ Incident**

I completed my secondary studies and my test results granted me acceptance in the College of Sciences at the University of Jordan. Around that time, near the end of June 1979, I learned of the massacre at the Military Artillery Academy in Aleppo. The media blamed the incident on the Muslim Brotherhood, which resulted in a campaign of war against the association. In Jordan, we quickly received news on the details of the massacre. Publications across the Arab world spread differing accounts

---

<sup>14</sup> Arabs are accustomed to referring to each other as ‘Abu –’ (Father of) or ‘Um –’ (Mother of), usually followed by the oldest son’s name

<sup>15</sup> A famous thinker/writer and one of the most prominent figures in the leadership of the Brotherhood

<sup>16</sup> A historical member of the Muslim Brotherhood who adopted a military approach against the Syrian regime. Earlier, he had established an armed resistance movement that was eventually known as “Marwan’s Group.” When he was apprehended and died as a result of the torture inflicted upon him, his group established an independent organization that was responsible for the beginning of the “Incidents” of the late 1970’s.

of the event and who was responsible for its execution, and presented various perspectives on the sectarian and political background in Syria.

At the time, our Islamic sentiments were fueled by the Iranian Revolution as well. The Muslim Brotherhood, however, made it clear that it was not a militarily-oriented organization, but rather an exclusively missionary movement. Despite this, the desire to aid in the battle against the oppression of our faith was lit in some of its members. As a result, there branched a number of sects still under the main association, some dealing with leadership affairs and others leaning toward armed resistance.

With the deteriorating state of affairs in Syria, proponents of armed opposition grew. Bearing this in mind, the assistance that was requested of me earlier and that I agreed to provide granted me a feeling of immense satisfaction. I felt as though I was involved in real, warranted resistance and implementing the Islamic ideas I carried through the past years.

### **To Damascus**

The nature of the help I was involved in was providing assistance to the Syrian brothers who were refugees in Jordan. We aided them in finding houses to rent and situating themselves and their families in this new country. Through meeting these brothers, we were able to attain a clear and accurate picture of the truth behind the happenings in Syria.

We felt the pain and suffering these noble families endured as they were forced to flee their homeland out of fear of persecution and imprisonment, and that of distinguished university students who had to leave their schools to live a life of estrangement and exile. We heard from these people inspiring stories of heroism and of youth who valiantly stood before a dictatorial regime and were not deterred from speaking the truth and fighting for justice. It was through these responsibilities of mine that I met many Syrian youth and leaders.

Amidst all this, I received in the mail a letter from the University of Damascus informing me of my acceptance to its College of Civil Engineering to which I had

applied a short while earlier. At the beginning of 1980, I packed my bags and headed toward Damascus, looking forward to the opportunity of achieving a degree I had long aspired to pursue, and to the possibility of offering more support to the intensifying situation of the Brothers in Syria.

Just as I had been acquainted with much of the Syrian Brotherhood's leadership in Jordan, I was quickly introduced to the directors in Syria. I was immediately given the assignment of a courier, carrying instructions from the headship in Jordan to the leadership in Damascus. Through this work, I came to know a man by the name of Mazen, a driver who frequented the path between the two countries and who subsequently became my partner in these missions.

In Amman<sup>17</sup>, I received most of the directives and memos from Mr. 'Ali Al-Bayanooni<sup>18</sup> (Abu Anas) and Mr. Adeeb Jajah<sup>19</sup> (Abu Taher); I proceeded to deliver these, with Mazen's help, to Salem Al-Hamid (Abul Faraj), Khaled Al-Shami, or other individuals who came from different cities to scheduled appointments, many of whose names, for safety measures, we did not even know.

### **Between *Al-Talee'a* and the Brotherhood**

At this time, there was a reforming of the organizational structure of the Syrian Brotherhood. The leadership that was exiled in Jordan decided to send groups of youth to set up new bases in Damascus. Abul Faraj was appointed the secretary of the Damascus branch, Farooq Abu Tawq was assigned its military commander, and Ghaleb Al-Aloosi was designated its overall chief. My primary task at the time was ensuring that the proper people knew what positions they were appointed, and past delivering those messages, I had very limited knowledge of any other dealings.

I would hear the news of certain military operations being performed like everyone else, but none of us knew much about this other group that was carrying out these acts, nor did we sense, at the time, the emergent discord between the

---

<sup>17</sup> Capital of Jordan

<sup>18</sup> A lawyer who served as the Associate Leader of the Muslim Brotherhood at the time

<sup>19</sup> A prominent figure of the Muslim Brotherhood at the time who later assumed the role of its Leader

Brotherhood leadership in Jordan and those who branched away from the Brotherhood and formed the Syrian Vanguard, known as *Al-Talee'a*<sup>20</sup>. We did, though, learn of one specific source of disagreement, and that was when Farooq Abu Tawq wanted to carry out an operation against the experts of the Russian headquarters in Damascus<sup>21</sup>. Salem, along with the other leaders, refused the idea because the plan would require an amount of explosives sufficient to destroy not only the headquarters, but innocent civilian property surrounding it as well. The controversy continued until Salem requested that Sheikh Sa'eed Hawwa replace Farooq, and his request was granted.

### Correspondence

My life continued regularly: I attended the School of Engineering as usual, and occasionally, I would help convey messages from Jordan to Damascus. One day in March, as I was traveling from Damascus to Jordan, the officials at the Syrian border stopped me and ordered that I exit the car and go with them. It was from the grace of God that on that day, I was not carrying anything that would have caused suspicion. I spent that night at the Military Intelligence's jail in Dar'a<sup>22</sup> without being given any specific accusation.

I will never forget how cold it was in that small cell as the freezing air seeped through to my bones, and how all night I sat awake wondering what was to become of me, until the next morning the officers took me to the headquarters in Damascus. I remember not feeling afraid throughout the two days it took them to realize that I was not the person they wanted. And although they did not treat me too harshly, two days in the underground cells were enough to understand the degree of ruthlessness these people inflicted upon their prisoners.

---

<sup>20</sup> Al-Talee'a was the last reformed unit of Marwan Hadeed's group that believed in military resistance and split from the mainstream Brotherhood in 1977

<sup>21</sup> The Syrian authorities learned military and security tactics from Russian experts and were taught new methods of torture that were then applied in Syria's prisons

<sup>22</sup> Syrian city on the border of Syria and Jordan

The violence was clear in their methods of questioning, their constant foul language, insults, and curses, the beatings and the humiliation, and of course, in the screams and cries of those being tortured. When I was released I continued my trip to Jordan, where I found my family, who had heard of my detainment, very apprehensive. They pleaded with me not to return to Syria. I, however, insisted on going back, and continuing both my education as well as my duties as a messenger between those in Amman and Salem in Damascus.

### **Abul Faraj**

Salem, known as Abul Faraj, may the mercy of God be upon him, was the most active of the leaders in Damascus. He was also the youngest son of Sheikh Muhammad Al-Hamid, God rest his soul, one of the leading scholars in Hama<sup>23</sup>. Perhaps it was this factor that gave him an increased number of responsibilities of the Damascus branch.

I still remember when during our last days of working together, he requested that I deliver all the incoming messages from Jordan to him alone, ensuring that he would deliver the message to correspondents from other cities. I relayed to him my worries that this would both enervate him and, through exposing himself to more individuals, increase his chances of being caught. However, he insisted and told me that those were the orders of Sheikh Sa'eed. Ironically and unfortunately, only a short while afterwards Salem was arrested based on a lead from one of those correspondents who had also been arrested.

Despite the dangers he constantly faced, Salem was never armed, and when we questioned the reasoning behind this once, he answered, "They will not be able to arrest me; I will either die or escape." But circumstances did not permit him that fate, for in August of 1980, the correspondent from Homs was arrested, and his detainment was less than an hour before he was to meet Salem at a designated location. That

---

<sup>23</sup> City toward the Midwest of Syria

brother was exposed to extreme torture and as a result, gave the officers the details of the meeting time and place.

Later, Salem himself told me of how he arrived at the designated bus stop and found a group of Intelligence Agents waiting for him. All at once they came at him, with two of them grabbing his arms out of fear that he may be carrying weapons, and the rest of them beating him mercilessly until he lost consciousness, only to wake up later and find himself in their custody.

### **The Keys of the Organization**

At first, Salem only admitted that he was a regular messenger. But the severe torture that was inflicted upon him for an entire day disabled his ability to maintain his stance. When he was arrested, the officers confiscated a set of keys belonging to a house Salem had converted into his private base in Damascus. They immediately set out to raid the property.

At the time, Salem was hosting a visitor by the name of Tareef Ja'moor. When Tareef sensed an attack in place, he confronted the intruders militarily in a brave opposition that lasted three hours; despite the soldiers' numeric superiority, they were unable to overcome him until they climbed the minaret of the nearby Al-Mansoor Mosque and struck the building with RPGs.

After the brother was martyred and they were able to enter the house, they found a letter addressed to Salem from Abdullah Al-Tantawi<sup>24</sup> in Amman assigning him the job of administrator for the base in Damascus. Through this document, the Military Intelligence discovered his true identity and understood the vast extent of information he possessed. They also came across a copy of false identification cards that were distributed to certain members of the Brotherhood, and the seal that Salem had used to stamp over the pictures helped them identify and arrest a large number of

---

<sup>24</sup> Secretary of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria before the 'Incidents' of the 1980s, and one of the top Syrian Brotherhood leaders in Amman

individuals in the city and at the borders. Among them were some of the seventeen brothers who escaped from the Prison of Kafar Sooseh<sup>25</sup> a few months earlier. The plethora of information attained from the center along with the information forced out of Salem made this one man's arrest extremely detrimental to the pillars of the organization, revealing the keys to many doors of the movement.

### **Life of the Martyr**

In spite of all that was happening, the event that multiplied the dire situation was when "Al-Natheer," a publication issued by members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, was quick to release an article about the life of the 'martyr' Salem Al-Hamid. Perhaps they used his name to inspire people through the mention of Muhammad Al-Hamid, the respected scholar and father of Salem, or to gain people's support for the Muslim Brotherhood by showing that they started to fight the government and have martyrs.

They continuously wrote of his bravery and how he resisted the government's attempt to arrest him for many hours before he was martyred, painting a story of heroism that was baseless and entirely false. After people had learned of Salem's capture, the movement came to a near halt as the many he was associated with feared he would reveal their names. This article, presenting Salem as a martyr – as dead – gave the Brothers a sense of security and assurance that the possibility of having their names exposed no longer existed. Soon thereafter, everyone returned to their regular routine. I, of course, was assigned a new liaison, Yahya Abdul-Kareem Al-Shami, a student from Hama studying pharmacy at the University of Damascus.

### **The Arrest**

Salem was arrested on 23 August 1980, and after initial concerns of him revealing names were quelled by news of his death, I received a different account on the matter. At the beginning of October 1980 during a meeting scheduled with my

---

<sup>25</sup> A Syrian Intelligence prison near Damascus

new contact, Yahya, I was surprised to hear from him that Salem had not been killed, but was rather incarcerated. When I asked him about the source of this information, he replied that Salem's brother, Abdul-Mu'iz, was called for interrogation and then released. He told Yahya that while he was at the Prison, he sensed – based on a number of instances that unfolded – that his brother was there, barely alive.

Yahya went on warning me to be alert and cautious in my activities, but I was not convinced with the accuracy of his story, influenced by the realistic and persuasive articles I had read in “Al-Natheer.” I quickly allowed the issue to leave my mind.

On the very next Thursday of the same month, I was on my way in the afternoon to attend a lecture at school. It didn't surprise me to see increased security personnel armed and equipped standing at the doors of the university, as this had become a regular sight for the past few months. I advanced to enter the school and barely presented my student ID card before a number of soldiers surrounded me, cutting off the mere thought of trying to escape. In a matter of seconds, they blindfolded me and tied my hands, then pushed me inside a car that drove away from the school and toward an unknown destination. I later discovered it was the leading Intelligence branch for the Al-'Adwi district, controlled by Colonel Nizar Al-Hilu.

### **Face to Face**

As I descended the vehicle, my eyes were still covered. I was led toward the basement of the building, immediately greeted with punches and kicks from every angle. In the basement, I was searched and stripped of all my belongings including my watch and belt. I was assigned the number “13” and told that that would be my new identity from now on. Still blindfolded with hands tied, I was pushed into another room filled with prisoners and was able to catch a few glimpses of others like myself being whipped on their backs with a cable held by a prison officer.

It was only a matter of moments before I was snatched again, enduring more kicks and slaps, and taken up a staircase. I was stopped abruptly and the blindfold

was removed. Standing before me was Salem, with outgrown hair and an unkempt beard.

“Is this him?” he was asked.

“Yes,” he replied.

The door opened and in came Saleh Al-Khoja, a doctor from Damascus to whom I had once delivered a message. They asked Salem the same question. Again, he responded in the affirmative and both men were taken away.

### **In the Cell**

I was extremely shocked by what had transpired. A guard led me back to the underground dungeon untouched where I was mentally bombarded by a shell of questions. I wondered about my mother, my father... my family. What kind of pain would I put them through once they learned of my imprisonment? It was over for me; the evidence against me was irrefutable. I thought about my contacts in Syria – were they also in danger? Had they also been caught? Or would I soon be forced to disclose their information? I wondered what type of punishment I would face. I remembered all the horror stories I had heard, of which I received a sample during my brief detainment at the border. Would I be here for long? Or would it be a mere few days before I face the same fate as the martyrs of Tadmur less than one year ago<sup>26</sup>?

### **Interrogation**

Time passed in a rush, drowning my mind and scaring my soul. Before I knew it, the door to the cell opened and the officer yelled to me,

“Number 13, *wala*<sup>27</sup>, let’s go.”

Once again, I was forcefully shoved up the stairs and at the top, the officer leading me pulled off all my clothes and threw me inside the room, naked, with my

---

<sup>26</sup> There was a mass murder of political detainees at the Tadmur Prison on June 27, 1980; hundreds of prisoners were shot and killed

<sup>27</sup> Derogatory Arabic word used to demean another, meaning, “you”

eyes covered and hands still tied. A voice ordered me to sit on the ground and lower my head, warning me against trying to look up for any reason.

“Since when did you know Abul Faraj *wala*?”

The question came to me just like that, with no introduction. The voice came from in front of me, where I sensed that the questioner was sitting.

“A while,” I responded.

I answered not having yet learned the proper manner in which to reply to these people, for the terrifying climate made one lose his ability to concentrate in general, let alone focus on answering questions.

“And what about Dr. Saleh Khoja?”

“I have also known him for a while.”

Indeed, there were many dealings between Dr. Saleh and Salem and it happened that I had delivered a few letters to him in Syria sent by the leadership in Jordan.

Apparently, when Salem was arrested, Dr. Saleh was one of those whom he exposed, and after him seeing me earlier that day and verifying that he knew me, there was no sense in denying any of it.

“Alright Muhammad, tell us now why you know these two individuals.”

The tone in which he spoke was now calm; on the surface, the conversation continued in a regular manner, which succeeded only in making me increasingly nervous in anticipation of what was to come. I responded,

“There was an individual who requested that I deliver letters to them, so I did.”

“And what was in these letters?”

“I don’t know. This individual was a driver between Amman and Damascus; he used to do me a favor and bring me goods sent by my family in Jordan, and would occasionally take some things to them as well. Every now and then, he asked me to deliver notes or money to these two people you ask of, so I would return the favor and help him.”

I knew that on that day, Mazen was traveling to Jordan, and I later discovered that he never returned to Syria after my arrest, *alhamdulillah*<sup>28</sup>. In actuality, he and I had decided upon the story I relayed in case we were ever apprehended, which is why my answers were quick and coherent. The officer asked,

“Did you know about the content of the letters?”

“No.”

“On such and such day, you went to Dr. Saleh and gave him an envelope that contained the “Al-Natheer” publication and other letters from Jordan, and you informed him of a scheduled meeting with Sheikh Sa’eed Hawwa in Amman. Don’t you remember that?”

“That’s correct. I delivered an envelope to him, but it was sealed, and Dr. Saleh is in your custody so you can ask him and confirm that. As for “Al-Natheer,” I have no idea what that is. And regarding the meeting, Mazen told me to inform Dr. Saleh that he and a few others were waiting for him in Jordan on a specific day, so I did so, not knowing they were related to any organization or involved in illegal activities...”

### **The Torture Party**

The interrogator felt no need to allow me the completion of my response and sensed that I wasn’t yet ‘ready’ to talk. All of a sudden, I heard him say to the officer that brought me there,

“Take this \*\*\*\* away, and do (such and such) with his sister; let’s see how he feels about that.”

The officer immediately pulled me up by my arm and led me down the hall to a room next door, still naked with eyes covered and hands tied. I was met by rough hands, aggressively pushing me inside the room, releasing my hands from behind me and instead tying them from the front.

---

<sup>28</sup> Arabic phrase literally meaning “Praise be to God,” and used when expressing thanks or contentment

I was carried from my waist off the ground, and could feel the tightness of ropes being secured around different parts of my body. Suddenly, everyone let go of me and I found myself hanging from the ceiling like a slaughtered animal, kicking through the air with no support beneath me. The “torture party” began.

At the time, I was in my early youth and was quite physically fit, *alhamdulillah*, and before the beatings began, one officer yelled to me sarcastically,

“*Wala*, you lift weights?”

The act of being hung from my wrists from the ceiling was enough to destroy my nerves, shred my skin and render me unconscious after ten minutes. But that was not the worst of the torture I would receive.

Suddenly, countless cables and sticks flew toward me like rods of fire. They were followed by waves of electric currents that were ruthlessly delivered through the most sensitive regions of my body: my nose, my lips, my private, my eyes, my ears... all the most vulnerable areas imaginable.

I exploded with yells and screams from the excruciating pain firing throughout my body. These sounds seemed to give the executioners a high and encouraged them to strike more ferociously. Amidst all the pain, I could hear their yells and laughs, barking like hungry dogs around me. I could not see, but sensed that there were ten of them, all attacking at once, delivering curses and swears against God so blasphemous they were capable of trembling the earth and the skies. After a while, I could no longer cope with the pain and lost consciousness again. I awoke to find myself in solitary confinement, with every inch of my body throbbing in agony.

### **Mere Numbers**

The cell I was in most accurately resembled a locked grave: the walls were so close together I could barely stretch my legs, underneath me was nothing but cold cement, and the ceiling above had a small vent through which seeped dim lighting, only adding to the daunting atmosphere. Any brief moments of silence were quickly interrupted by the sounds of another prisoner being tortured, screaming and pleading for help. His voice seeped through the vent from above and echoed through the hard

walls and iron door, the horror of which made my heart and soul tremble. Each scream made my cuts and bruises throb with a pang of fresh pain.

The hours passed slowly, and it was not long before I lost sense of time, confusing night and day. I did not have a watch to indicate the time, and the dim light above me remained as it was, neither turning off nor getting any brighter. When I remembered my prayers, I had no choice but to perform them without the traditional movements, which is how I found myself carrying out most of my worship for the years to come.

The door opened abruptly and the officer threw half a piece of stale bread at me, hurling with it one of the worst curses I had ever heard. With time, I grew accustomed to hearing these words of profanity every time the door opened. We were allowed one trip to the bathroom every day, the time of which was determined based on the mood of the officers. They would drive a group of prisoners, all blindfolded and hands bound, to the bathroom, and as we waited for our turn, we were constantly exposed to beatings. When one was next in line, the officers would release his hands from behind and fasten them in front of him! We barely entered the bathroom before they began to whip the door with their cables and swear at whoever was inside, ordering them to hurry up. Amidst all these procedures, we were merely numbers being called upon; we had lost the individuality we once possessed and always took for granted.

### **A Miracle**

It was determined that my “torture party,” as they called it, would take place twice a day. I would be escorted to the torture chambers, eyes covered and hands wrapped, stripped naked and hung from my wrists in the middle of the room. The cables and whips would fly toward me, battering my back, chest, and head, while I simultaneously suffered the pain of the electric tweezers all over my body. Despite all this, perhaps the most excruciating pain came from the metal chains that held me up, as they crushed my wrists and tore at my skin, eventually grinding against the bones until the torture ceased.

Very soon thereafter, my wrists became infected and swollen from the abrasive metal; subsequently, my muscles began deteriorating and the bones in my wrist were exposed. Until today, the marks on my wrist serve as a never-ending reminder of the torture I endured.

For the next five months, I could not feel the palm of my hands nor could I carry anything; it was as if they were struck with a temporary paralysis. Later in the years, I was informed by a prisoner who was a doctor by profession that the tendons of that region were permanently impaired. When I asked him what it would require to restore them to their normal state, he replied, “A miracle.”

### **“The Magic Carpet”**

The other form of torture that we faced was known as “the magic carpet.” It was a flat, wooden board that a prisoner was forced to lie on. The officers would pull apart his arms and legs and tie them down with leather straps. The lower half of the body was then raised so that the prisoner’s legs were facing the ceiling, thereby disabling him from any type of movement whatsoever. And then it started – the metal cables would swing toward the feet, lacerating the skin without compassion. And with every lash, the cable left behind small pieces of metal in the open cuts seeping with blood.

When the beating was over, the bits of metal remained mixed with the blood from the gaping cuts, causing horrendous infections and rotting of the skin and muscles. This, of course, multiplied the pain and increased the agony and suffering. And as the torture continued, so did the constant barrage of swears and blasphemy.

The only way I escaped the suffering was when I lost consciousness, awaking to find myself back in my cell unclothed, bleeding, shivering from the extreme cold. I barely had time to catch my breath and gather whatever stamina I had left before it was time for more torture. My body was once again thrashed at with their metal wires and the electric tweezers delivered their shocks in all the most sensitive areas of my body.

Because the officers knew that concealing the private area of the body is of great significance to a devout Muslim, they deliberately humiliated us by meddling with our anatomy during the beatings, or delivering strong electric currents through there. This was from the most difficult pain to bear and I often lost consciousness as a result.

### **The Alligators' Tears**

After a few days of my exposure to this ruthless torture had passed, the officers led me out of my cell unclothed and hung me from the ceiling as usual. Before they even started with the beating, I felt as though all the air in my lungs escaped me and I could no longer breathe. The doctor stationed in the torture chamber<sup>29</sup> saw me in this condition and quickly approached me; after checking my pulse he asked them to release me. He immediately injected me with a needle that paralyzed my ability to speak or move, and gave me a slow and awkward sensation that I was leaving this world. I slipped into a deep sleep.

Upon regaining awareness a short while later, I found myself lying in a hospital bed with an oxygen mask on my face. There was a soldier carrying a Kalashnikov standing at my side. An hour or two later, they led me through the corridors of the hospital to a car that was waiting to take me back to the Prison. When we arrived, I was returned to my cell without a beating. After only about five or six hours had passed, I was dragged toward the torture chambers and received my beating, making up for the earlier session that I had missed.

This would not be the last time that the severity of my beatings literally left me on the verge of life. On a subsequent occasion, the doctor came to my cell and cleaned my bleeding and infected lacerations. He also gave me a glass of milk simply to ensure that I had a minimal degree of energy so that I could receive the beatings without dying.

---

<sup>29</sup> Every torture room hosted its own doctor—not to offer a cure, but to ensure the prisoner did not die so that the punishment could continue

### Confessions

After about one week had passed since my imprisonment, I was taken once again to the interrogation room, hands shackled, blindfolded, and undressed. I sat in the usual, humiliating manner and heard a man's voice addressing me:

“Listen *wala*, we have all the information on you, and from the first day you got here we've known of all the murders you helped these criminals achieve. You're responsible for everyone who has been killed. Now tell us with whom you used to communicate!”

The ‘*Alawi*<sup>30</sup> accent was the only thing in his words (and those of many officers I often heard speaking) that I was clearly able to detect. I knew what they were after. They wanted me to give them the name of my new contact, Yahya, and help them tie together the strings that linked the information they acquired after Salem's detainment with the people presently involved. Despite the intense fear I felt and the scrutinizing nature of the questioning, I was able to make out the voice of a woman coming from another interrogation room, and understood that she, too, was undergoing the process of questioning and accusations. This made me increasingly agitated and tense, but I gathered myself and answered,

“I don't know anyone except for Mazen. He was the one who gave me the letters and asked that I deliver them to Abul Faraj.”

“Wasn't there anyone besides Salem?” he asked.

My heart was beating so hard I felt as though it might leap from my chest. I was afraid that Salem might have admitted additional information about me. I took my chances:

“No, I don't know anyone besides Abul Faraj.”

He continued to ask,

“What about Dr. Saleh *wala*? What was his response when he received the letter?”

“I went to his house, he served me a cup of coffee, and I left. That was it.”

---

<sup>30</sup> Known in Syria as Nusayris, it is a religious sect, many members of which held and still hold government positions including that of the President

“When Dr. Saleh was in Jordan, did you meet him there?”

I replied,

“I am a student in the university here; how could I go meet him there?”

Suddenly another voice took over the questioning,

“Did you bring weapons with you from Jordan?”

I said resolutely,

“Absolutely not.”

“You didn’t bring money?”

“Not a penny.”

“Alright, get out of here,” he said.

The interrogation was over. I returned to my cell that day without a beating, and the next day came and went with no torture session as well. Afterwards, I guess it was about two o’clock in the morning after the second day of no torment when I was called out of my cell for more questioning.

### **The Sordid Feast**

I entered the interrogation room in my usual state of restraint and nakedness, and immediately detected the odor of alcohol. The aroma of food permeated the air. One of them asked me,

“Are you hungry? If you want to eat come here.”

I replied to his sarcastic invitation,

“I’m not hungry.”

The dinner continued as a group of them sat together eating and drinking their alcohol, exchanging vulgar words and stories. I sat there quietly, humiliatingly undressed. This time, however, I was able to catch a glimpse of my surroundings from underneath the blindfold that had slipped from over my eye.

Despite the fear that overcomes a prisoner during his torture and interrogation, and despite the terrifying atmosphere that is perpetually present, I was able to detect – from this quick glance at these men – a hint of fear and nervousness shadowing their faces. It was interesting the way they hid themselves from me, trying

to conceal their faces and personalities, never daring to address me with my eyes uncovered... and I was the captive, they were free.

There was a bed on the side of the room that I gathered was used for sleep when the night-shift interrogators grew weary of their job. Of course they could have left for their homes when their shift was over, but undoubtedly they were too scared to leave the Prison in the middle of the night out of fear of being shot by one of the *mujahideen*<sup>31</sup>. My thoughts were interrupted by a question addressed to me,

“Muhammad, *wala!* Do you know any of the Brothers who have escaped to Jordan?”

“No, I don’t know any of them,” I said.

“Where did you live there?” he asked.

“In al-Zarqaa’ on Farooq Street.”

“Oh? Next to the Islamic Center then?”

I replied in the affirmative, surprised at his knowledge of the city and its streets with such detail.

“And you never saw any of them there?”

“I don’t go to the Center.”

“Don’t you pray?” he asked.

“Yes, but at the Mosque.”

“Okay, at the Mosque, did you ever see any Syrians?”

“Perhaps, but I don’t know any of their names.”

In an instant, his demeanor changed. He yelled for the officer to take me to the torture chamber, and the whips and metal cables were quick to attack my body. I faced the beatings and the electric shocks, and as usual, passed out and woke up in my cell. I found my clothes piled in the corner. Blood was seeping from every cut that had even slightly started to heal. I had hardly regained consciousness when the officer opened the door and returned me to the interrogation room. Salem was in there as well.

---

<sup>31</sup> Armed resistance fighters, in this case against the Syrian government

“When did you first meet Salem *wala*?” I was asked.

“In February of 1980.”

“Where?”

“I think he came with Mazen to my house.”

The words barely left my mouth and I received a kick on my back so hard I felt as though my eyes fell out of their sockets. A voice mocked me,

“He visited you at home or you met him at the Khaled Mosque?!”

“I swear I don’t remember.”

“What do *you* think Abul Faraj?” he asked Salem.

“That’s correct, Sir. I met him at the Khaled Mosque. We prayed *Maghrib*<sup>32</sup> there and that was the beginning of my relationship with Muhammad.”

The interrogator turned to me once again and asked,

“If you are a good man and claim to be innocent, why would you meet him at the Mosque knowing that’s where the criminals meet?”

“I went to the Mosque with Mazen as usual to pray, and there, I happened to meet Salem,” I responded.

He said in a very threatening tone,

“Listen *wala*, either you speak the truth or you’re finished; do you understand?!”

I sensed that Salem had confessed what I was trying to conceal, and that my denials were useless as matters were already exposed. I knew that in order to save myself at this point, I would have to provide any bit of information to leave them contented and protect myself from their evil. I said,

“The truth is that I am innocent of this whole ordeal as I was simply a messenger. With time, though, I came to learn that these people I was dealing with were members of the Muslim Brotherhood and that they were heading different activities, but I had nothing to do with any of it.”

---

<sup>32</sup> The fourth of five obligatory prayers Muslims perform in a day

Without remarking on my words, he must have signaled to a guard who whipped me viciously. He threw me into the torture chamber next door and brutally delivered the most fierce and intense blows at my body. This time, though, I did not faint, and when it was over I returned to my cell bleeding and in agonizing pain. Only two hours later, they returned yet again and took me back to the interrogator, who sternly said,

“Listen *wala*, now you’re going to tell us everything. Tell us everything you know from the minute you were born.”

### **A Struggle Against Myself**

The terror of those moments is simply unimaginable. I sat at the hands of these oppressive villains like a lamb to be slaughtered with nowhere to go. My secrets lay in the open, as exposed as my bare body. I was a mere toy between their hands that they attacked without mercy. From the torture chambers next door, I could hear the screams of a brother in distress. His anguish and pain embroidered his pleas for help.

A voice in my head told me to reveal all that I know or else I would be next, and the subsequent screams would be those coming out of my mouth. In the midst of my thoughts, a tone of reason emerged, and I reminded myself that confessing would not save me from this end, and that divulging anything additional would rather bring me more torture. They would understand that I possessed more information than I was sharing, and consequently lead to severe beatings in their efforts to squeeze any final pieces of information out of me. Anyway, I told myself, my final destiny will be execution, and what will I benefit if I trigger the arrest of others who will face the same torture only to reveal more information? It was a continuous cycle, and then they, too, would be killed. This thought came to me like a flash of lightening and I repeated the same story while projecting the demeanor of a man who stood at the brink of exhaustion and death.

I discovered later that they had questioned both Salem and Dr. Saleh about whether I knew of the contents of the letters I delivered and they both replied that I

did not. This, of course, helped me a great deal, *alhamdulillah*. But the matter was not over. Their thirst for more names and victims sent me yet again to receive more than my share of torture. For three days in a row I was at the mercy of these executioners who tore apart at my body with their brutal beatings, without any sessions of interrogation. After the third day, they tried a final time to obtain even a single name out of me. They were specifically after the names of the messengers. I am grateful that God helped me stand steadfast and I did not disclose any single person's name, insisting that my dealings were only with Salem, in addition to the one meeting I had with Dr. Saleh.

The officers were ordered to inflict upon me a haunting session of unspeakable suffering that made me forget all the torture that had passed. I underwent perhaps five or six hours of constant, uninterrupted battering against my bare, shredded skin. When I awoke later in my cell, I was truly sifting between life and death. I could not feel any limb on my body, every inch of which was erupting with blood and throbbing with pain.

### **The Procession of Numbers**

Soon thereafter, the prison guard returned and called out many numbers demanding that they prepare to leave their cells.

“Number 13! Prepare yourself *wala!*” he said to me.

With the sound of keys rattling and metal doors being pushed open, I could hear the shuffling of feet being led through a line of guards standing in a row and flogging all those who passed. I stood up quickly and put on my pants, shocked to find that they were far too big on me! I realized for the first time that I had lost between ten and fifteen kilograms in the past days. I had not yet recovered from that shock when the door opened and I was jerked out of my cell and thrown into the line, joining the procession of nameless individuals as we walked toward an unknown destination and future.

It was as if the officers knew this was the last time we would meet, and that the joy they experienced at the sound of their whips cracking against our bodies

would soon end. It seemed as though they struck us more powerfully than usual, absorbing the final moments of satisfaction they received from hearing our cries and pleas for help.

On the verge of exhaustion, we were led toward a car, chained and blindfolded, and nearly twenty of us were loaded into the back. I was apprehensive about where we were going and could hear murmurs from others asking: Was this the end? To Tadmur? Or Al-Qal'a<sup>33</sup>? We had no choice but to wait.

It wasn't long before the car stopped and we were ordered to get out, met by the same sticks and whips that had just left us. The officers led us toward a building and down a very long, steep staircase that took us far beneath the world. We had entered the underground military branch of the Syrian Secret Service.

### **Sleeping in Sequence**

I was escorted into a room and the door was shut behind me. My eyes were still covered but my hands were free. I soon heard the murmuring of other men and sensed measured movements from all around me. I recall hearing a voice telling me it was safe to remove my blindfold. I did so slowly and with caution. This was the first time I opened my eyes freely since I was apprehended and found myself in a sleeping quarter the size of a regular room that was crammed with almost a hundred others sharing my predicament. I nodded in salutation to some men around me. A few acknowledged me and responded while others ignored the gesture.

I quickly found Salem standing among the crowd and moved toward him warily. When I tried to speak to him, he whispered,

“Don't come too close as there are likely undercover agents among us.”

With time, though, the level of caution lessened and we conversed more comfortably. I became acquainted with a large number of brothers, and together, we began a new phase of this trial full of unforeseen and inconceivable accounts.

---

<sup>33</sup> An old civilian jail based in the Old Citadel of Damascus that was transformed into a political prison

Our dwelling was in a dire and disastrous condition. It was so crowded that at night, there was not enough room for all of us to lie down and sleep. Our only choice was to take turns sleeping, rotating amongst ourselves the luxury of slumber as the others stood crowded in a corner of the room.

The stink of sweat saturated the air, and mixed with it was the foul odor of our infected, rotting wounds. The room consisted of a bathroom inside of it, which allowed us no opportunity to leave our abode for any reason.

Life continued as such for about three weeks. The only time the door opened was when our food was being delivered. Our meals were barely enough for the number of men that were present. For breakfast, each person received two pieces of old, hard bread accompanied by a few olives and either *labneh*<sup>34</sup> or *halaweh*<sup>35</sup>; lunch was a bit of rice or bulgur wheat covered in a reddish sauce; and dinner was either scraps of a boiled egg, part of a potato, or boiled chickpeas, all served in very small portions.

### **Lice and Rats**

To make poor circumstances even worse, we quickly discovered that despite our constant hunger and insufficient meals, we had to share our food and space with guests of another species—rats. I swear that with no exaggeration, each one of them was at least the size of a cat. They grew so large from feeding on the prisoners' food that the officers prevented us from having and instead threw away. These rats used to travel between our sleeping quarters and those of other prisoners through the ceiling vents.

When they passed over the opening of the fan above, often times one would fall through the gap right in between us or sometimes even on us! The entire room would erupt in hysteria as everyone ran right and left trying to escape the bite of this hideous creature. People pushed and yelled, and eventually the rat would be stomped to death underneath our scurrying feet, but only after it had successfully bit into four or five of us.

---

<sup>34</sup> A spread of strained yogurt with a consistency similar to cream cheese

<sup>35</sup> A sweet spread made of the oil of crushed sesame seeds mixed with sugar

Problems seemed to deteriorate quickly as disease broke out and spread amongst us. With the overcrowded situation we were in, and particularly because some of the prisoners were transferred from areas that were initially unclean, symptoms of tuberculosis emerged and lice spread among us. While the former only affected some of us, the lice left no man behind, infecting our heads, clothes and belongings. I was amongst those most affected by the lice. Every day, it was a routine act for us to take off our clothes and kill the lice we found crawling on us with our fingers. It was the only means we possessed to slow them from spreading.

### **To the Barber**

One day, after many weeks had passed since our imprisonment and our hair and beards had grown monstrously long, we were taken out of our Hall for a trip to the barber. In the middle of a nearby room, one of the officers who worked as the prison barber sat awaiting our arrival. We stood in line and he grabbed our heads one after the other as if we were goats; he ran his machine through our hair and cut it all off, leaving us as bald as a watermelon.

In the meantime, he lost no opportunity to hit us or slap our heads as he pleased, and always addressed us in extremely foul language. It was apparent from his accent that he, too, was from the '*Alawi* sect. After we were all shaven, the officers ridiculously ordered that each person pay five *liras* for the haircut. Some of the brothers had a little bit of money in the belongings that they were imprisoned with, and they paid the ludicrous charges on behalf of the rest of us.

Next it was time for the collective shower, and we were guided by kicks and whips toward an open hall. We entered ten at a time and were ordered to strip naked and bathe together. In the middle of the commotion, I looked up and found the giant rats observing from the water pipes above us waiting for any chance to attack. Back in our cells, I grew accustomed to life in our sleeping hall and befriended these brothers who were sharing my life. I got to know some brothers from different precincts in Syria<sup>1</sup>, including Salem Al-Hamid and Dr. Saleh Khoja. Throughout the

years, most of these individuals I have referred to were killed, many of whose execution I witnessed myself.

### **God, Save Me**

With the grace of God, I did not face any sessions of torture or interrogation during this time. We were able to relax a little bit and found this a chance to learn of each other's stories, sharing how we were arrested and what experiences we had encountered thus far. God is truly merciful as He blessed us so that we were able to organize prayer times and opportunities for supplication as well as religious lectures and study circles for memorizing the Quran<sup>36</sup>.

At this time, I was able to learn a lot from Salem and a number of brothers about what had happened to them and others they knew of. This was also the beginning of my movement toward memorizing the Quran; I studied with a man from Hama by the name of Muhammad Sadeq Al-'Awn who had completed its memorization, and was able to finish more than half of *Surat-ul-Baqara*<sup>37</sup>.

A number of times, we were able to pray in congregation despite the fact that if the officer saw us doing this he would take a number of brothers out of the room and beat them severely. During this phase, our morale was still high out of confidence that we would soon be saved; we anticipated that any day the resistance fighters would come to our rescue and free us.

As for Salem, when things settled and safety measures were taken, we found the chance to sit together and talk. He relayed to me the story of his arrest and also shared the details of the interrogations he faced. He assured me that he had tried to protect me from as much harm as possible and asked for my forgiveness. Salem was not the same person I had known before; the nature of his personality was very polite and gentle – a perfect image of what an educator should be. Being thrown in the middle of this difficult battle of detention was not a test he coped with very well. As a

---

<sup>36</sup> The Quran (Koran) is the holy book of Islam, and it is considered a great mark of distinction to commit it to heart

<sup>37</sup> "The Cow" is the second and longest chapter in the Quran

result, he could never sleep and was full of grief and anguish. He often sat in a corner of the room staring at the brothers around him, many of whom were arrested as a result of his confessions. He knew that these men were moving toward a fatal future, and with that thought, tears of sorrow and regret streamed down his face. He often sang the following words that emerged from the depths of his aching heart: “God save me; my time is too difficult.”

### **Salem’s Confessions**

Salem’s situation was indeed difficult, for he was always guilt-ridden when he thought of all those who were caught or killed after he had revealed their names. Some of them had already faced their death, including our dear brother Ghaleb Aalusi, the organizational leader of Damascus.

Ghaleb’s incarceration followed the arrest of Taher ‘Aref Jeelo, the messenger to Idlib, who had also been arrested through Salem’s confessions. Taher was tortured but refused to provide his captors with information on a meeting scheduled with Ghaleb. The meeting was to take place two or three days after his apprehension, and in order to busy them with the matter, he gave them a false time and place. Taher knew that when they discovered he was deliberately misleading them he would surely be beat to death. And even though he faced excruciating pain from a stomach ulcer at the time, God helped him stand strong and he did not waiver. Salem, who was also in their custody, informed them of the real time and place the meeting was scheduled at.

On that day, the Intelligence Officers took Salem and Taher to the Mansur Mosque, where the meeting was to be held. When the officers saw Ghaleb and confirmed it was the correct person, they tried to arrest him. He resisted the seizure and fought back, as Taher later conveyed to me, injuring one of the officers in his eye before he was killed, may the mercy of God be upon him.

### **A New Trap**

Although the list of names provided by Salem, either directly as a result of torture or indirectly through the acquisition of information from the base, was long

enough, the Authorities sensed that he was hiding more information. This was, of course, a logical assumption given that he was responsible for all the primary transactions of the Brotherhood branch in Syria. These directions were based on the orders he received from the Syrian Brotherhood leaders in Jordan. In order to acquire the full length of his knowledge, the officers devised a trap that Salem fell right into, dragging along with him a new list of fateful victims.

They designated an officer by the name of Wa'el to slowly and deviously befriend Salem and gain his trust. Wa'el began to frequent Salem's cell and give him extra portions of food or a glass of milk, supposedly in secret. With his kind words and compassionate gestures, a relationship was established, and the first phase of the plan was complete.

One day, Wa'el came to Salem's cell and said to him,

“The truth is I'm one of you. I'm only here because I must complete my time as a soldier in the mandatory service<sup>38</sup>. Something needs to be done to save all of you; this is an opportunity for me to help free all of you just like the escape from *Kafar Soosah*.”

It was well known that only a year earlier in 1980, a soldier in the Prison of *Kafar Soosah* aided seventeen incarcerated members of the Brotherhood escape the Prison in an unprecedented break out.

When Salem took the bait and asked Wa'el how he planned to do this, Wa'el requested that he give him the contact information of Brothers who had access to weapons so that they may help him. Naively, Salem gave him the names. Based on this information, in one night, the Authorities arrested nearly twelve new individuals whose names had not previously been exposed<sup>ii</sup>. They finally got what they wanted, and after resting assured that Salem had disclosed all that he knew, they transferred him to the prison we were currently at: the Military Interrogation Branch, where I met him full of pain and anguish.

---

<sup>38</sup> All Syrians, usually after their high school or college years, must serve a temporary mandatory service in the Military

### **The Spite of the Sectarians**

With the passing of days, we were able to become familiar with a number of our torturers and officers. The President of the Military Interrogation Branch was Colonel Mazhar Faris from the ‘*Alawi* sect. The Director of the Prison within the Branch was a man from the Caucasus who was called Abu Nizar. This man had limited influence within his group as did most non-‘*Alawi* officers. Ironically, he even had less power than his assistant, Abu Manhal, who was a spiteful *Nusayri*<sup>39</sup>.

Abu Manhal would enter our hall for no reason, spit curses and swears at us, and then leave. Among the officers were the cold-blooded Ahmad Salem and the ruthless Ahmad Ghanem, also from the ‘*Alawi* sect. There was a Sergeant of the same breed whose name was Malik; he truly had no limit to his maliciousness and cruelty. Never would he come across a prisoner without hitting him, and he never lost an opportunity to torment the detainees in any way fathomable. Even the prisoners who stepped outside the door to bring in the food would receive beatings from him.

### **The German Chair**

With time, we came to learn that at the same Prison was a group of detained sisters, though we never saw or came into contact with them. We also learned that there were halls containing a group of communists belonging to Riyadh Al-Turk’s party, as well as a number of right-winged Ba’thists; there were, however, heavy barriers between us, and their distress was incomparable to the cruelty we constantly faced.

From the painful scenes I witnessed and will never forget during that time was the condition of the brother Hussein Rasheed Uthman (also known as Abu-Rasheed), who was imprisoned at the Intelligence Branch in the Al-‘Adawi neighborhood in Damascus. He was tortured in the “German Chair” so brutally he was struck with a degree of paralysis. The German Chair is comprised of moving parts, and the prisoner is strapped into the chair from his arms and legs. The back of the chair is then pulled

---

<sup>39</sup> Alawite

away from the base thereby pulling with it the prisoner's upper body, while his feet remain fixed on the opposite side. The pressure builds in his chest and spine, and with increased exposure to the abuse, parts of the spine give way and break.

When I met Abu-Rasheed he was in extremely poor condition, not even able to move his back, and his constant pain allowed him no comfort during the day and no sleep at night. He could neither sit nor stand properly, and the pain eventually moved down to his legs increasing his suffering. Nevertheless, he endured his affliction with tolerance and patience, may God rest his soul.

Before his detainment, Abu-Rasheed was a journalist in the Syrian News Agency (SANA) while simultaneously working with the Brotherhood under extreme secrecy. Throughout his twenty years of service with the Agency, he was never uncovered. Eventually, he was assigned responsibility of the media office in Damascus under the leadership of Salem Al-Hamid. When Salem was arrested, Abu-Rasheed's name was of those whom he disclosed. In spite of this, Abu-Rasheed remained steadfast and repeatedly said, "May God forgive them; our struggle is all for the sake of God."

With his kindness and patience, Abu-Rasheed was a perfect example of a resolute, unwavering man to whom God gave strength during a time of adversity. Despite the abundance of information he possessed, he did not tell the Authorities any more than what Salem told them. The Authorities even brought the Head of the Syrian Military Branch, Hikmat Al-Shihaabi, to meet with Abu-Rasheed in prison in an effort to convince him to confess what he knew. Despite their differences in ideology and alliances, Al-Shihaabi and Abu-Rasheed were friends since their youth. They eventually left their hometown toward Damascus together as companions and friends. When Al-Shihaabi visited Abu-Rasheed in his cell, he tried to convince him to reveal his information, and said (as Abu-Rasheed himself later told me),

"Admit what you know Hussein, just speak and I'll take care of your situation after that."

He continued to remind him of his father, who was a noble man in their city and very reputable amongst the townsmen, and how his position could hurt his

father's name. Al-Shihaabi also swore to him that if he helped the Authorities, he would personally ensure that he would be saved. Incredibly, despite enticing promises and pleas, Abu-Rasheed gave them none of what they wanted. After this meeting and through the years until his execution in Tadmur, he received the most severe and relentless punishments, may God rest his soul.

Later, following some internal disputes within the government, the authorities tried to convince Abu-Rasheed to falsely testify against Al-Shihaabi himself, once again promising him assistance if he cooperated in their scheme, the details of which will soon be discussed. Abu-Rasheed, however, refused to do so, even though the price he would eventually pay was his life.

### **Back to Solitary Confinement**

Three weeks passed in the sleeping hall, and one morning, we were surprised by an officer who opened the door and called out a number of brothers by their names. When they returned a short while later we asked them what happened and they informed us that they were ordered to sign some papers. We asked what was in the papers but no one knew. The incident was repeated a number of times until all those who Salem exposed were called to sign the mystery papers.

Two days later, just as we finished our dinner, I received an order along with three or four others to come to the door. Once there, the officers blindfolded us and chained our hands together, leading each of us into solitary confinement. Several hours passed with no new developments. The cold air crept around my body and seeped through my bones. I was given no blanket and it was at this moment that I suddenly missed the blessing of being in a crowded room where I was at least guaranteed greater comfort and warmth. I curled my body trying to stay warm and was stung by the revival of the lice that began to bite into my head.

From a distance, the screams of a brother being tortured ripped through the silence of the night, and I realized that I was near the torture room that I had not experienced for over three weeks. The emotions of fear and panic that had been diluted in the company of my brothers in the sleeping hall revisited my soul. The

night proceeded and I remained alone, deserted and isolated, with no one to talk to or ease my pain.

The passing days reserved me as a hostage of this dreadful cell. Three times a day the officer opened the door and led us to the bathroom, constantly beating us with their cables on the way. When I was awake I dealt with my hunger and pain, and at night, I faced the cold and the nightmares – all of which I had put out of my mind and tried to forget. I knew that at any moment, I could fall victim to the officers' wrath for absolutely no reason or fault, and all I could do was cry and turn to my Lord and Creator and ask Him to ease my suffering.

A few days later, I was taken to the interrogation room and questioned about names and individuals that I truly did not know. They raised the blindfold from my eyes so that I could see these men, but I still did not recognize any of them. I was dismissed. Once, after this was repeated a number of times, they asked me about a prisoner whom, again, I did not know; however, when they asked him if he knew me, he replied yes. I found out later that this brother was also among those who Salem exposed, but I do not know why he said he knew me, as I was sure I had never seen him before. I did not blame him though, for I assumed that he did so under the pressure and pain of torture.

My situation here was one of the most difficult times a prisoner could face: just when you think that the doors of misery, torture and interrogation have been closed, someone comes along and opens a new door, introducing a fresh series of terror as the cycle begins all over again.

### **A New Door**

Indeed, the door of torture was reintroduced: the beatings, the electric shocks, the interrogation. This went on regularly for at least ten days as I faced the same questions over and over again: Where are the bases? Where are the weapons? Where is 'x' and who is 'y'? And because I had no idea of anything they were enquiring about, the unfortunate reality was that with every question I could not answer, I was incessantly flogged and whipped until I could handle no more. The cables ate away at

my skin and the whips poured out my blood until I was on the floor unable to breath from exhaustion. Perhaps they were convinced of my innocence this time and acknowledged that I truly had no information, and so they finally left me alone. I returned to my cell pulling myself and my broken body together, and for the next three or four days, I was not taken for questioning or torture.

One of the following nights, I found them in calling my name amongst a long list of others<sup>iii</sup>. The list of names was read and we were ordered to prepare ourselves for a new destination. To where? Of course nobody told us and receiving even a whisper of a hint was impossible. We were let out of our cells and beat as we made our way toward the office to receive our personal belongings. We were then guided by kicks and punches outside where a military truck—or the meat truck, as we called it—awaited us. They bade us farewell with final thrashes at our bodies. There were over forty men packed into this closed, box-like vehicle, as we made our way toward the unknown.

### **Abu Jahil**

No one had a clue as to where we were being taken, and it was impossible for us to exchange ideas or even whisper to one another. But we were able to deduce from the length of the trip and the steady speed that the car was moving that we were outside the capital moving toward a far place. At that point, we sensed that the much feared Tadmur must be our destination. Hours later, the car stopped and the sound of the engine settled; the metal doors opened and we were ordered to get out.

A nervous chill traveled through my body as I descended the car and was struck by the bitter, icy air of the desert before sunrise. The officers removed our blindfolds and unchained the restraints around our arms and legs and threw them into the back of the truck. Through the darkness of the night, there shone upon us bright lights from the prison and I was able to see military police moving around us as they completed the technicalities of prisoner exchange. I gathered that it was a military prison as well. All the factors combined brought me to the unfortunate certainty that we had, without a doubt, reached Tadmur.

Seconds after coming to this realization, the military police violently kicked the prisoners whose hands and legs were unrestrained with such force that we were sent flying toward the door of the building. Standing by the entrance was another officer who grabbed our stumbling bodies by the arm and delivered yet another kick that sent us through the door. Upon arriving inside, I was met by a fierce slap that drove my face into the wall. The remainder of the brothers arrived this way until we all stood side by side with our faces against the wall. We detected that someone of importance had entered the hallway when one of the officers was given an order and responded in the military style,

“Yes Sir, Sergeant!”

The voice of the Sergeant, who we later learned was Ahmad Keesani – or Abu Jahil<sup>40</sup> as the prisoners called him – emerged from behind us. He started with words of slander and insult about our fathers and grandfathers, and continued to speak vulgarly about our mothers, our honor, and our faith. How ironic it was to hear this criminal refer to us saying,

“You traitors! You Zionist collaborators!”

His filthy words ended abruptly and the officers’ whips fell upon our exposed backs; if anyone yelled or groaned from the pain his punishment would be doubled. This session, which was referred to as the ‘Welcoming Party,’ did not end before we received lessons on the proper etiquette of how to address the Sergeant. Abu Jahil yelled out to one of his officers,

“Bring me that bastard with the jeans!”

At the time of my arrest, I happened to be wearing a pair of jeans, and it was as if Abu Jahil found this an easy mark to help him carry out the lesson he wanted us to learn. I was grabbed by the iron claws of a number of officers and thrown before

---

<sup>40</sup> Abu Jahil was a tribal leader in the Arabian Peninsula during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). He never embraced Islam and was one of the most ruthless and disrespectful characters toward the Prophet. Abu Jahil inflicted much pain, both physical and mental, upon Muhammad (pbuh) and his followers, and persecuted them until many were forced into exile.

the Sergeant. When I raised my head and looked up at him trying to determine what I should do, he roared at me with all his might,

“Close your eyes *wala!*”

The officers ran toward me and pushed my entire body onto the ground kicking and whipping me all over. One of the metal whips struck my eye and I swear I saw sparks coming out of my socket. We were informed that this was just a beginner’s lesson for all of us, and that the rules here in the Prison of Tadmur were different than those of other military prisons in Damascus. In the previous prisons we were at, we were blindfolded in order to prevent us from seeing each other as well as the officers and torturers. Here, we were not allowed the assistance of a cloth to cover our eyes, but were forced to simply keep our eyes shut at all times. Even if we were struck by cables, and even if one of the whips lacerated our bodies, we were commanded to keep our eyes closed or the punishment would intensify.

### **Bookings**

The beating suddenly stopped with a signal from Abu Jahil, and his repulsive voice addressed me,

“Put your head on the ground and close your eyes!”

The foyer was immersed in a dreadful, terrified silence for a few moments, and when he felt that all had gained an adequate understanding of the first lesson, he yelled,

“Say ‘Yes Sir’ *wala!*”

With my head on the ground and my eyes closed, I repeated,

“Yes Sir.”

He asked,

“How many operations did you carry out, you bastard?!”

“None, Sir.”

He responded full of anger as if I had insulted him,

“You’re lying to me you \*\*\*\*?!”

And as the cables and whips fell upon my body once again, I found myself struggling against the hard floor beneath me, trying to find a position to ease the pain, with no way to escape their rage. The brothers stood still facing the wall as my screams and yells, along with the barking of the officers around us, wrenched their nerves and terrified their hearts.

Finally, Abu Jahil signaled for a temporary pause and yelled to all the prisoners,

“One by one you traitors, go outside!”

We were taken toward a large region of the Prison containing the Bookings Office in the middle. This was where all the prisoners were officially registered and their personal belongings taken from them. We were seated in rows of five and entered the room one at a time. The officers walked between the lines and kicked us or punched our faces and heads, yelling between profanity and swears,

“We’re going to give you hell, you traitors! Just wait until you finish here, and see what we’ll do to you! We swear we’ll do (etc, etc) to your mothers and sisters! Death will be your destiny you bastards!”

We knew they were not lying. They had grown accustomed to personally killing individuals and had done so an incalculable number of times. They kept their promises indeed, for eventually, they were responsible for the death of the majority of brothers who had arrived with me that night at the Prison of Tadmur.

### **“The Mark”**

The sun had not yet risen, and the desert cold easily found its way through the light summer clothes we had been arrested in. The cold cement we sat on while awaiting our turn in Bookings chilled our bones. When it reached my turn I had almost frozen, despite the cables that constantly struck my body. I entered the room to face the same questions I had answered numerous times before: my name, my age, my address, etc. I learned through my brief moments in there that the date was the 10<sup>th</sup> of February, 1981.

When they discovered that I was a Jordanian citizen, rage erupted within them and they exploded at me with beatings and the crudest language I had ever heard. This was far from a single incident of fury I would have to endure. We later learned that the individual who was used as the example during the Welcoming Party is ‘marked.’ To be the ‘mark’ means that the guards identify you as such, and that you must ultimately die. God, the Most Merciful, was so kind in this predicament and soon exchanged the guards who were part of our ‘welcoming committee’ with new ones who did not know that I had been the established ‘mark.’ Gratefully, He saved me from beatings that surely would have resulted in death.

### **The Penalty**

Registration of the prisoners was over, and as we were now officially a part of Tadmur Prison, we had to receive the formal ‘welcoming’ from the officers. It turned out that everything that had just happened was not even considered a part of the official ‘welcoming.’ Our pitiful souls gathered outside the Bookings office and standing before us was a gigantic door that looked like the mouth of a monster. Through squinting eyes, I glanced straight ahead at the door, above which I caught a glimpse of the translation of a Quranic verse: “*And there is life for you in (the law of) retaliation, O men of understanding*” (2:179).

Ironically, this was surrounded by the well known motto of the Syrian regime, “One Arab Nation, With an Everlasting Message.”

We entered through the door and bade the world behind us farewell. We found ourselves in a cement courtyard surrounded by many halls, and we were ordered to line up against a wall with our backs exposed to these villains. The officers pulled us out of line randomly one after the other, stripped us of all that we were wearing except our underwear and searched us once again. As some men were being lined up, stripped and beaten, their cries and pleas for help grew louder, but to no avail. Others who were already undressed were being prepared for the next phase of torture.

The officers would push a prisoner so hard that he would lose balance and fall to the ground, only to find ‘the tire’ in front of him. Two officers proceeded to carry

him and place his bottom through the tire so that his body was folded with his chest against his thighs. His legs were in the air, feet facing the sky, thereby disabling him from any movement. But out of fear that the prisoner may find a way to move, his legs were also bound with a metal chain, making it impossible to shift even an inch.

The battering would begin with no limits, and the only sign for these animals to stop beating was when the prisoner's feet tore open and blood soaked his body. As soon as that happened, they would release him and order him to open his hands and receive another 'present.' Thrashing against his palms were the wide leather whips that we later heard were made of the same material used for the fan's belt of a military tank!

They continued hitting until the hands faced the same fate of rips and bleeding as the feet. Then they would order the prisoner to lie on the ground face down. At this point, the poor man would be nearly lifeless as he greeted the ground beneath him, and the beating of sticks and cables would fall against his back and sides... fifty... one hundred... sometimes even two hundred strikes before they stopped.

The 'party' would then enter its final stage as one of the guards would jump onto the back of the victim. When he'd get off, another would turn him over and jump onto his chest. They would stomp on him and kick him, grinding their course military boots into his bare body, breaking his bones and tearing away at any skin that might have been left in tact.

This continued one by one until each new prisoner had his serving and a satisfactory amount of blood was shed. I cannot count the number of detainees who died during this 'welcoming' session that took place each time a new group of inmates arrived, or how many survived but left with broken bones and permanent scars and injuries—all of which only added to the pleasure and conceit of the officers.

## Hall 26

Three or four hours passed before our reception was over. The sun had slowly ascended into the sky and we were afraid to see what had become of us. We looked like birds with plucked feathers and broken wings. Moments passed before one of

them yelled at us to get dressed and follow him. We did as commanded and staggered behind him, our bodies pouring blood and our heads exploding from pain. This did not prevent the cables from flying in our direction. One officer hit us with a stick so big and strong I could swear it was a tree trunk; its hits were so powerful that if it struck your back, it could split you in half, and if it collided with one's head or temple, he would undoubtedly die.

With us was a brother from Idlib by the name of Nadeem Mansoor who was shot in the leg at the time of his detainment; the bullets that were still lodged inside impaired his ability to walk. I approached him along with another brother from Aleppo named Jamal 'Ayyar, and I carried him from beneath his shoulders while Jamal lifted his legs. We ran, and the officers ran behind us, beating us even more intensely. Many times we almost fell, nearly dropping the brother with us. We continued running with no idea where we were headed or when it would end. We entered one court after another and crossed door after door until we finally reached the sixth courtyard of the Prison. We were driven into sleeping hall number 26.

When everyone made it inside, we were ordered once again to line up against the wall and the officers walked behind each of us giving us a final blow to the back with his stick. When they were through, all was silent and nobody moved; into the hall entered the Sergeant Abu Jahil. He initiated his talk with the most revolting swears and blasphemous words toward the Almighty God. He congratulated us on making it to the notorious Prison of Tadmur, where he ensured that we – the traitors, the bastards, the spies – would meet our end.

His speech ended and he left the room. The officers followed him out and locked the door behind them. The silence of a graveyard filled the hall. Within seconds, the prisoners dropped their exhausted bodies to the floor, each wishing that the entire world's wealth was available to him so that he could exchange it for just one hour of no torture.

### **Awaiting the Unknown**

The door shut, and just as we thought that we had received our full share of chastisement for the day, our hopes were evaporated when a voice from above us yelled in an atrocious tone,

“Everyone gather in the corner, *wala!*”

We were shocked to hear this voice as we would never have imagined that above the sleeping hall there were also military police watching us. One prisoner raised his head to locate the source of the voice. The officer swore and yelled,

“You \*\*\*\*! I’ll teach you! I’ve marked you, and whenever I ask for my mark you better come forward!”

Struck by fear, we assembled in a corner of the hall like a terrified herd of sheep and lowered our heads awaiting the unknown. The hall was composed of a big, rectangular room and a bathroom facility with two toilets, a sink and a tub to the left of the main door. At the top of the hall where the walls met the ceiling, there were open windows with metal bars. They were high enough so that we could not reach them and see what was happening on the outside. In the ceiling itself there were two openings, each side measuring about one meter in length. These were covered by thin metal rods. Through these openings, or ‘vents’ as they’re called in prison, the officers that were above us twenty-four hours a day could watch everything that we were doing below.

### **Laborers**

I tended to my wounds quietly as everyone else took care of their own devastated bodies. Moans of pain escaped the lips of a few of us when the aching became unbearable. At least two hours passed with us in this state before the door opened and a new round of prisoners was thrown into our hall. There were more than seventy of them, all men in their early youth at about the high school or college level.

We later learned that they were all from the city of Homs, and that they had received the same torture we did. We didn’t hear their voices though, because the welcome party was conducted in was the first courtyard, which was far from our hall.

However, the guards did not spare us from hearing the impending screams of pain and torture. Soon, one of them opened the hall door as if trying to settle an old desire for revenge and yelled,

“Where’s my mark, *wala*?!”

We knew now just how serious matters were and that there was no way to escape the punishment for that quick glance. The marked prisoner’s name was Saleh Al-Waqaa’, a science teacher from Deir-Ezzor<sup>41</sup>. The poor man presented himself and left the room. The officer punched him and whipped him as his cries rang in our ears and grilled through our hearts. We sat there uselessly, unable to offer him anything but prayer.

This scene was barely over before the door opened once more and an officer screamed,

“Who among you has served in the army?!”

No one answered, and he repeated his question. The room was silent. He asked a third time and a prisoner by the name of Waddah Al-Dan from a village around Aleppo raised his hand.

“I did, Sir.”

“You served *wala*?” he asked.

“Yes Sir.”

The officer responded with a disgusted look on his face,

“Alright, let me see you prepare the line.”

The brother assumed a military stance and said to us,

“Attention! At ease! Prepare!”

We grew nervous, unsure of what to do, and the officer yelled at him,

“Say, ‘At ease! Prepare! The hall is ready to be searched Sergeant!’ Say that *every* time you hear a noise at the door you \*\*\*\*!”

---

<sup>41</sup> A city in Eastern Syria

### **Breakfast by Force**

The Sergeant left the room and we prayed to God in our hearts asking for His mercy and protection. The door opened again so that breakfast could be served, and our brother Waddah jumped up and said in a loud voice, “Attention! At ease! Prepare!” but he stuttered in his speech before pronouncing the hall ready for search, as we did not know how to execute that order. The Sergeant shouted at him,

“The laborers<sup>42</sup>! Where are the laborers, *wala*?!”

We hadn’t even been in the hall long enough to catch a few uninterrupted breaths, let alone assign a worker and think about breakfast. When the Sergeant found that we were not yet organized and that orders had not been carried out, he pulled Waddah out of the room and slapped and kicked him until he fell to the ground. He threw him back into the room and asked a second time,

“Who among you \*\*\*\* has served in the army?!”

This time, Brother Jamal ‘Ayyar answered. Jamal, or Abul-Fadil as we called him, was a stout man of short stature. He was a graduate of the School of Religious Studies in Aleppo and was serving in the mandatory service when he was arrested, may the mercy of God be upon his soul.

“You served in the army?!” the Sergeant asked.

Jamal responded firmly,

“Yes Sir.”

“Then bring in the breakfast, now!” the Sergeant commanded, and informed him that his new position was ‘President of the Hall.’

Jamal entered with a plastic bucket consisting of some cheese and the same dry bread we were accustomed to. Next he brought in a bucket of tea that looked absolutely nauseating. None of us had either the appetite or the ability to eat given the condition we were in. The officer from above yelled through the vent:

“Everyone stand up and face the wall, *wala*!”

---

<sup>42</sup> This term refers to a group of low-ranking soldiers and/or inmates appointed to do work within the prison

We jumped to our feet, this time remembering to close our eyes and keep our heads low.

“President of the Hall, take a piece of cheese and feed these bastards one by one!”

Jamal followed orders and stuffed each bite into our mouths. He was then commanded to go around and have each of us drink tea out of a cup in his hand. When he was finished, we returned to our places silent and stunned.

By this time of morning, the sun’s warm rays seeped through the windows above and soaked the room. Its warmth offered temporary comfort to our bleeding, broken bodies.

A short while later, the door opened again and Jamal jumped up and yelled the appropriate lines. Abu Jahil walked in with a number of officers and said,

“President of the Hall! Gather everyone in a corner!”

We congregated in a far corner of the room. A group of prisoners known as the *baladiya*, who were allowed to work within the Prison, entered with loads of rotten blankets and threw them in a pile in front of the Sergeant. We later learned they were the non-political, military inmates who served part of their sentence doing labor. When they left, Abu Jahil called out to us,

“Everyone in a straight line, *wala!*”

We assembled as ordered with our eyes closed and heads lowered. He was accompanied by guards who distributed one blanket to each prisoner, along with one ‘mat’ for every two to share. The ‘mat,’ as they called it, was basically an old army tent, ragged and worn to shreds, that had collapsed and was covered with old blankets. When each of us received our belongings along with continuous swears and insults, Abu Jahil said,

“Listen you \*\*\*\*, these blankets and mats are a trust being given to you! Each of you is responsible to maintain what you get, *wala!*”

When he was satisfied with the message he delivered, sprinkling every few words with a few curses and swears, they left the room and we heard the door close behind them. We returned to our places taking our valuable new trusts along with us,

and placed them on the floor. Our bodies collapsed on top of them, trying to gather a moment of rest, unsure of what to do or expect.

### **Roll Call**

The time was around two o'clock in the afternoon and the door to our hall opened. Jamal jumped up and assembled the line and the Sergeant entered and yelled at him to organize us in rows of five for the roll call. We tried to move quickly to arrange the lines, but our nervousness and apprehension led us to bump into one another as we tried to avoid the guards. When moments passed and we still weren't in the requested format, the guards ran between us and unleashed their whips and sticks at us.

Jamal, may God rest his soul, struggled to help us organize our rows to the best of his ability. We finally stood properly and the officers counted us. Our number exceeded one hundred. We understood that the roll call was a major part of our daily routine, and that the beatings and swears were a necessary part of the process—as it was of any other event.

The guards left and each of us returned to his mat, head lowered, heart shattered. Our devastated nerves made us jump and stand at attention at every sound we heard in the hall or from above us. And if anyone even thought to lift an eyelid and take a look at what was around him, he remembered the fate of our brother Saleh who glanced upwards during the first announcement, and instead squeezed his eyes shut.

The day passed, followed by many others with the same routine. None of us dared to speak to his closest neighbor, even the one who slept on the same mat as he, nor did we look at one another out of fear of the trouble it would land us in. Our schedule was standard: we awoke at six in the morning, folded our mats and blankets, and sat on top of them in silence. The door soon opened and we all stood at attention. A group of us went outside to bring in our breakfast, and we were forced to eat whatever they provided. Sometimes we hid it in a corner of the bathroom where nobody touched it.

Many times, an individual would go through one, two, or even five meals without tasting a bit of it. We had absolutely no appetite for food, and time and again the President of the Hall was forced to throw the food in the trash out of fear that the officers would find it and beat us all for it.

When breakfast was over, it was time for the count. We stood in our lines and depended on God to help us through the beatings. When that was over, we returned to our places carefully and with caution. Soon afterwards, we were called out for ‘recess,’ where we were driven outside into a yard, eyes closed, heads down, each of us holding on to the waist of the brother before him, following him like a blind man.

With our first breath of fresh air, we were met with cables and sticks that directed us in whatever direction the officers pleased. We were like headless cattle running around the field being beat from every angle. If one of us trips or falls all those behind him lose their balance and tumble on top of him, allowing the officers a great opportunity to increase the hits and multiply the pain. The yells and screams for help would intensify, and the guards met every prisoner’s plea for God with irreverent curses and dirty swears.

When our recess was over, the whips steered us toward our hall, where another group of guards geared with their sticks awaited our return. The fateful prisoners, eyes still closed, endured a final battering as over one hundred men felt their way down the walls of the hall, searching for their only point of sanctuary. Once they found the door, everyone squeezed through at once, often times creating a blockage and causing many to fall and be trampled upon. One by one, with bleeding carcasses and broken bones, the prisoners made their way past the door and hurled themselves through it into temporary safety.

### **Eating & Sleeping**

Inside the hall, we edged toward our mats and sat amongst the upsurge of moans and groans and aches and pain. Only a short while later, we were served lunch, and after that, dinner. If we had the energy, we ate our serving of food that was so small it couldn’t have satisfied the needs of a child: two small, stiff pieces of bread per

day, along with a sip of tea for breakfast with either a few olives or a lick of jam or *halaweh*; a tomato-based saucy substance for lunch that was barely enough to wet the bread we crumbled into it; and for dinner, we received a few morsels of boiled chickpeas or potatoes, or sometimes an egg instead.

When I mention ‘an egg’ being served for dinner, I should explain that this one egg was to be split amongst every six men, and when I refer to the rice, each of us received no more than one teaspoon of it. On rare occasions we were blessed with meat, but if they prepared chicken, for example, the entire hall of over one hundred men had to divide five or six small chickens.

These were our meals, so little that they stirred within us feelings of hunger more than they dispelled it. Eventually, even eating evolved into another type of torture. As we grew hungrier and weaker, it became normal to find us consuming the peel of an orange or a watermelon, or even the shell of an egg. We stopped throwing away any bit of food, savoring even these delicacies that most people discard.

When it was finally six o’clock in the evening, we prepared for bed. It was the type of sleep that forbade a man of any rest or comfort. The light inside the hall was always on, and the officers above us were always watching us keenly. If they sensed a sound or even a whisper, or detected movement below them, they marked the source and called him out for a beating the next morning.

Amidst these circumstances, praying was very risky. Many times the officers called for the President of the Hall and callously beat him, asking him for the names of the prisoners in the hall who were praying. In order to aid him and spare ourselves, we all prayed internally, without the traditional movements of bows and prostration. The blessing that we had in that hall was the bathroom, for there was no vent above it. This enabled us to perform *wudu*<sup>43</sup> at ease, after which we returned to our mats and slipped under our blankets where we prayed in silence and peace.

---

<sup>43</sup> *Wudu*, or ablution, is the series of washing before prayer; traditionally, Muslims wash their hands, mouth, nose, face, arms, and feet, and wipe over their hair and ears.

### To the Barber Again

Approximately one week of living under these conditions passed, and we slowly adapted to this new lifestyle. Some of us gathered the courage to open our eyes and look at one another, or even whisper a few words to our neighbor. Jamal, the Hall President, divided us into small groups to aid in orderliness when performing work. This helped us escape the silence that had enveloped us. It also allowed for the prisoners to meet the few individuals in the immediate circle around them, always maintaining the utmost precautions.

Just as we thought that our daily schedule had stabilized and grew a little more comfortable with the knowledge of what to expect, the guards surprised us one day by calling us outside the hall at a time other than the recess. Eyes closed and with the cables and sticks as our guides, we were directed toward a far corner of the field where we were lined up against a wall. They proceeded to organize us in rows of five, and standing before us were three military prisoners from the *baladiya* who were working for the Prison. They now assumed the role of the prison barbers. Members of the *baladiya* were most likely from the government's party and were serving time in Tadmur's prison. They possessed the same hatred as the other guards.

When we approached the first of the three barbers, he ordered us to turn and face him. We did so with our eyes still closed and he lathered our beards with the soap on his brush. He then sent us in the direction of the second barber who repeated this step. This was their opportunity to express their sectarian hate as they swore at us, pushed the brush in our mouths or noses, or slapped or punched us as they worked.

When we reached the third barber, he used an exposed razor blade to shave off our beards, as the officers in the background yelled to them, "Skin the dog! Cut up the bastard!" And the barber followed orders with complete willingness placing one or more cuts on the prisoner's face along with a series of slaps and punches. When he was finished, the prisoners were taken to another area where they cut our hair. We were ordered to sit on our knees with our hands behind our backs and our eyes shut. Like everyone else, I always had my eyes closed, and for the following years of this regular procession, I only managed to catch a hazy glance of the barber who stood just inches

from my face. We were shaven by means of a manual hair clipper that yanked our hair out and was often smashed against our cheekbones causing our faces to bleed.

When our shave was over and our hair, beards and mustaches had been removed, we received an order from the officers behind us:

“On your stomachs!”

We lay on the ground and they would take turns stomping on our backs, kicking us, or beating us with their whips. When they were done, we returned to the wall where we were continuously beat until all those in the hall were groomed. Finally, we were taken back to our hall and locked inside. We looked around and found ourselves bald and hairless, like watermelons. Despite the pain we were in, the sight was so odd that everyone couldn't help but laugh at our appearance. Soon, this became the only look we were accustomed to.

### **The Blood Bath**

The haircut was over, but the program for the day was not, and before we knew it another officer yelled into the room ordering us all back outside in only our underwear. We thought we were being called for another torture party and began to review our actions to see what we did wrong. Everyone followed orders and undressed; we were driven outside with chests exposed like a blind flock of sheep, beat and kicked as we proceeded.

Along the way to our unknown destination, we passed the *baladiya* delivering food to another hall of prisoners. As we approached, they left their work and ran toward us like hunting dogs attacking their injured prey. They assisted in the beating until we passed. We walked for about fifteen minutes and ended up in the first courtyard, where we were told it was time to shower.

Typically, when one thinks of bathing, thoughts of clean, warm water and fragrant lathered soap stream through the mind. Our perceptions, though, were quickly changed.

We were split into two groups. The first group was ordered to remain in the field seated on the floor with their heads lowered to the ground, exposing their bare

backs to the officers. I was driven with the second group, consisting of over fifty men, to the shower. We were expected to force our way into no more than ten shower stalls.

There were at least seven men in my stall, and we were all ordered to stand under the single showerhead inside of it. The ice-cold water flowed out and onto our bodies, and as we shivered beneath the water, we could hear the crack of the whips as they fell upon the backs of the prisoners waiting in the field. It sounded like a rain of bullets against their backs and the noise made us forget the sting of the icy water. The cold chills that ran through our bodies were replaced by tremors of fear as we anticipated that our turn would be next.

A number of officers entered the stalls and gave us a preview of what we were going to face: they flung their whips at us and some of them ordered us to remove our underwear, adding to our humiliation and disgrace. We had no choice but to obey as the guards laughed, ridiculed and swore.

The entire ordeal lasted no more than five minutes and we exited the stall with water dripping from our bodies. We were received by whips that led us toward an open channel of sewage. Since we could not see where we were going, many tripped and fell into it while others stepped onto the rough edges of the passageway and walked on the serrated rim. It seemed as though an entire lifetime had passed before the first group was finished, and by that time, our bodies were soaked in blood. When we finally reached our hall, everyone raced toward the door as usual and pushed his way through. Inside, we found that our first occasion of bathing at Tadmur left us drenched in blood and dirt, weary and broken in body and spirit.

When the door shut behind us, we dropped like the dead to the ground. Each one of us groaned from the excruciating pain. But the devastation was not over. The guards, it seemed, wanted a comical finale. The door opened and a guard informed the Hall President that we had to pay the appropriate cost for our haircut and shower! The few brothers who had some money remaining paid him, and he left the room amused at the preposterous request.

The prisoners made their way into the bathroom and washed their bodies from the blood, hair and dirt. By the time we were finished, the day had ended and so

expired every ounce of energy and our ability to cope. We set our depleted bodies down on our mats and prayed for at least an hour's worth of peaceful sleep before any new surprises were introduced.

The tradition of this shower continued every week until the year 1984 when the order that all bathing be done inside the hall was issued. The shaving ritual continued until 1986 when jaundice spread throughout the prison, as one affliction replaced another.

### **God's Mercy**

The days passed and inside our hall, we grew closer to one another as our troubles and woes increased. With each additional day we learned new information about the government of the Prison. We discovered that the guards took shifts watching over the halls from the vents above. We found out when their shifts began and ended and used the moments during which they were changing shifts to converse or move around more freely. Eventually, we began to hear the sound of the *athan* from the neighboring city of Tadmur; nothing thus far offered us greater comfort than that, and we were thankful for the kindness God had bestowed upon us. It was as if the guards sensed the encouraging effect this blessing had on us, and so whenever the *athan* was voiced they came to the vents and following every declaration of the Greatness of God with words of blasphemy and irreverence.

Sometimes we even heard the sound of cars passing on the roads outside the Prison; we could not imagine how life was resuming so normally for those just outside the prison walls while we were caged only steps away in this dungeon from hell. It was truly from the mercy of God when, during our second week there, a male nurse serving in the army went from hall to hall and compiled a list of essential medicines we were in need of. Although skeptical at first, we found that he actually brought us some of what we requested, most of which were anti-bacterial ointments for our cuts and injuries. Many of us were in dire need of these treatments long before we arrived at Tadmur, and though we were grateful to have this bit of medicine, our need for care only increased as the constant torture and the animalistic beatings intensified.

### **Wounds and Infections**

From among the men in my hall, in the worst condition was Brother Nadeem Mansoor whom I had carried with Jamal ‘Ayyar when we first arrived to Tadmur. During his arrest, he was shot once in the leg and once in the hand. Another brother, Haytham Mulla Uthman, was also shot in the leg. Haytham was one of the seventeen brothers who had escaped from the *Kafar Soosah* Prison, only to be re-apprehended and shot during that episode. Both of them were transferred from one Military Prison to another and then finally to Tadmur, all the while never receiving any treatment for their gunshot wounds.

It was amazing that they were still alive. The bullets that penetrated their legs tore through the muscles and shattered the bones, and then settled inside. The nerves of the leg must have been damaged as they could no longer move that extremity. Remarkably though, the bones recuperated and mended themselves, but developed abnormally in an awkward position. They were disabled from even minimal walking. The brothers of the hall tried to offer whatever assistance they could, and when it was time for our weekly bath or daily recess of torture, we took permission from the Sergeant to leave them in the hall. If he agreed—depending on his mood—they were spared, but if he refused the request, we carried them through the ordeal. Haytham and Nadeem wrestled with the continually increasing pain until their execution in 1984.

Another brother who endured no less suffering was Hussain Uthman, who regularly faced the anguish of the German Chair. He, too, was always in distress and never able to rest. Despite this, the officers did not spare him punishment, and he was forced to bear agony beyond belief until God allowed him the honor of martyrdom in 1982.

As for the remainder of the brothers, although their conditions were better and their injuries less detrimental, their pain also knew no end. Some of them had injuries that took many months to heal. These were from the initial torture sessions at the Intelligence Branches—injuries that were exacerbated by the welcoming party at Tadmur. Things became more intolerable when we carried lice on our bodies from the

Intelligence Branches to Tadmur where they spread through the hall. We resorted to picking them out by hand as our only means of containing their presence.

### **The Ka'ba of the Torturers**

As we settled into our new routine of life, we generally knew what to expect throughout the day—from roll call to recess, and from the barber to the shower. The younger men among us made their way to the front of the group when we gathered for any of these activities and endured the throbs of pain from the whips in order to save the older or ill brothers from the wrath of our oppressors. There were a number of prisoners who were old and frail, their ages exceeding sixty and sixty-five years<sup>iv</sup>!

The officers used to emphasize beating these brothers, assuming they were leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood simply as a result of their old age and receding hairlines. We tried to defend them as much as possible and often took their turns to bring the food into the hall. In essence, the brothers were potentially sacrificing their own lives for the lives of our brothers as we took their share of beatings along the way.

As I mentioned, our Hall President, Brother Jamal, had divided us into groups. This served to organize our actions and lessen from the problems we faced with the guards. It was also a factor that allowed us a chance to meet other brothers in the hall. We developed into a family as the strong supported the weak both emotionally and physically. We went out of our way to ensure that they maintained whatever possible comfort was available. The brothers in my first group were Abu-Rasheed Hussein Uthman, Amjad Tayyarah from Homs, as well as Ibraheem Ahmado and Muhammad Taher Mustafa from Areeha.

The bitterness of those years and the sorrowful incidents we faced cause one to forget many names and episodes that came to pass. One memory that will never leave my mind, however, is that of an *'Alawi* guard named Sh-hadeh who learned that the elderly prisoner Ahmad Ghareer had performed the *Hajj*<sup>44</sup>. He stretched his foot

---

<sup>44</sup> If a Muslim is able to, he is obligated to perform a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime

before the old man and the entire room was ordered to watch as he commanded Brother Ahmad to kiss his foot just as he had kissed the *Ka'ba*<sup>45</sup>. The frail old man, humiliated by this disgraceful act, succumbed to the order and obeyed, fearing the consequences of his refusal to do so.

### **The Savagery of Torture**

Another week passed and we entered our third week in the given state. Early one morning, the door abruptly opened introducing a new wave of over sixty prisoners from Aleppo and its suburbs<sup>v</sup>. At this point, the number of men in our hall reached nearly one-hundred and eighty! Sleeping was nearly impossible as each person lying down had only a few inches between himself and every other person on all sides. Every small movement woke up nearly all those around, and if the officer above sensed any motion beneath him, it was enough to have him mark whomever he pleased and call him out the next morning for a sunrise beating.

Despite the difficult circumstances, the arrival of the new brothers was a sort of temporary relief for us. They benefitted from our valuable system of organization, and our familiarity with Tadmur helped them gain a quick understanding of the unjust prison regulations. As for them, they assisted us and quickly partook in the work inside the hall, helping the increased effort of serving the large number of men remain steady. They informed us of what was taking place in the world outside the Prison and we shared with them what we had faced and learned inside the penitentiary. The talks kept us busy and the new information enlightened us, as we somehow felt connected with the outside world.

They also shared with us different types of cruel acts being conducted by some of these guards—behavior that God alone saved us from but tested these poor brothers from Aleppo with. I, myself, saw two products of this brutal treatment. The first brother, Hussein Al-Tunji, faced heinous torture by being hit with an axe on the top part of his feet to the point that they were almost cut off. This was done in

---

<sup>45</sup> The *Ka'ba* is the holiest place of worship in Islam and is located inside the Sacred Mosque in Mecca

order to force him to confess information more quickly. After a number of occasions during which he was penalized this way, he could no longer walk and was in constant pain until his execution a few months later. The second brother was Mamoon Kurdi from Hama, who the torturers used to burn with an electric heater. The scars of this brutality remained on his back testifying to the savagery of this regime. He, too, was executed later on, may the mercy of God be upon their souls.

### **With the Book of God**

As the wait for rescue was proving long and futile, we decided to organize our days and gain the most possible benefit from our time. The days we were spending in prison, we knew, was part of the fate and destiny that God had written for us. It was a temporary phase in our lives, bound to end either by means of freedom or death. We decided that nothing was nobler to occupy ourselves with than learning and memorizing the Quran. We felt that if God willed for us to die, our last moments spent in this life would be with His noble book. A burst of enthusiasm emerged from the brothers, and since having a Quran was not allowed in the Prison, they verbally taught each other what Chapters they already had committed to heart.

After torture sessions and other matters settled, one prisoner would sit discreetly next to another to exchange parts of scripture. They would keep count of the verse numbers using the three segments of each finger. When each solidified one set of five verses, they would move on to the next five. Once one memorized all that the other knew, they rotated into another group in order to gain maximum knowledge.

When night fell and it was time for bed, we took turns in the bathroom making *wudu* and retired to our mats, slipping beneath the covers and praying internally, reviewing what we had memorized in our prayer. Whenever we had the chance, we tried to benefit from every type of knowledge or viewpoint that existed amongst the brothers. This could only happen on an individual basis or between members of one group, and we always exercised utmost caution and care.

### **Cholera**

The outbreaks of disaster in our dreadful abode never ceased. One morning in the summer of 1981, we awoke to the sounds of men throwing up and shouting in pain, many of them suffering severe cases of diarrhea. Day by day, their symptoms spread throughout the hall as others were afflicted with this mysterious disease. The brothers began to collapse from weakness and fatigue during recess and in the hall. We knew that it was an outbreak of cholera<sup>46</sup>.

When the situation worsened, we found the Prison Doctor, Muhammad Yunis Al-Ali, going from hall to hall and recording the number of ailing men in each. A few hours later, the guards requested from the Hall President that all those with cholera symptoms prepare to leave. They were relocated to Hall 13 in Courtyard 3 that had been opened for the sick. Nearly forty men left from our hall alone.

They spent weeks in isolation along with others from different halls. The prison authorities ordered that they receive immediate and regular treatments. This was, of course, out of fear they may contract the disease if it was not controlled. Another great concern was that the bacteria might leave the boundaries of the Prison through the sewers that were shared with the City of Tadmur's sewage system, and ultimately drained into the fields of the farmers for irrigation!

As fate would have it, this relocation allowed many prisoners to come across family members and friends who were also at Tadmur in different halls. It was also an opportunity to receive new information, particularly regarding the other halls and the people inside them, which was then passed on to us from those who returned. We learned that brothers in other halls discovered bullet holes and the residue of human blood across the ceilings and the walls. These, we knew, were the remnants of the mass murder at Tadmur in June of 1980. Another benefit of the shift of prisoners was that a number of brothers from our hall memorized new verses from the Quran that no one in our hall knew. Of course a final advantage that was greatly welcomed was that the guards, out of fear of coming close to us and contracting cholera, kept their

---

<sup>46</sup> An often fatal intestinal disease that results in severe diarrhea, vomiting, dehydration, and gastric pain

distance as much as possible at all times, even lessening the number and length of torture sessions and other random beatings.

When those who were cured returned to the hall, we were informed of a number of deaths that resulted from the disease, one of whom I remember was the brother Naasih Shuneyti from Damascus. Truly, though, the kindness of God was illustrated here, for despite our poor circumstances and meager conditions, most of those who were affected were cured, and a minimal number of casualties resulted from conditions that we thought would certainly bring about the death of hundreds.

### **The Women's Hall**

It soon became known that somewhere between the borders of this Prison were female sisters being held at what was once the prison's clinic, now converted in to the women's Prison Hall. It was first discovered when a brother from our hall, Bassam Saffour from Homs, was called for interrogation. He was accused of providing counterfeit passports to individuals who were wanted by the government. There was a non-Muslim woman by the name of Um-Tony<sup>47</sup> who had apparently sold him the passports; she was eventually apprehended and later exposed him as well. When he was called for questioning, they confronted one another and answered the inquiries that the interrogators asked them. When they were finished, he saw that she was led out of the room and into the old clinic where the women were kept.

At another time, as we were in the middle of our recess outside, we caught a glimpse of a number of women in *hijab*<sup>48</sup> in the corner of a nearby field, and that ensured us of their presence in the Prison. Beyond knowing they were there, there was no way for us to learn anything about them or offer any type of help whatsoever.

---

<sup>47</sup> Mother of Tony

<sup>48</sup> *Hijab* is the Islamic dress code for a woman, comprised of the scarf that covers the hair and long clothing

### Execution

We woke up one morning and began our regular routine of folding our blankets and organizing our mats, in preparation for the first round of degradation that we had largely acclimatized to, when the officer yelled to us from above,

“Everyone in the corner!”

We hastily gathered in the far corner of the room seeking refuge in God from what evil may come. Within minutes, we heard a lot of raucous and strange noises from the field that we had not heard before. It sounded like loads of wood were being thrown onto the cement floor. The windows were too high up for us to see out of and none of us dared to cross the room and look out of the opening in the door. We remained where we were trying to decipher what was going on, gripped by an increasing sense of uneasiness and fear.

The noise continued and all we could see were the ghost-like shadows of the officers through the windows. We anticipated the worst, expecting that at any moment, the doors would open and the officers would rush in and gun us down, just as they had done less than a year ago in the same place. After a while, the reverberation of *takbeer*<sup>49</sup> grew louder and louder as the prisoners outside yelled their names out for all others to hear. Their words reached us with great intensity and might:

“Your brother (so and so) testifies to the Oneness of God!”

I still remember that Muhammad Naasir Al-Beck from Homs was among those who we heard call out his last words,

“Your brother Muhammad Nassir Al-Beck testifies to the Oneness of God.”

A number of brothers from Homs in my hall recognized his name. We were certain now that there were executions taking place and that prisoners were being hung right outside our hall. We held our breaths and the words we had just heard froze in our minds. Less than ten minutes later, all was quiet and movement ceased.

---

<sup>49</sup> *Takbeer* means ‘to glorify’ or ‘make great’ and is used when referring to the Arabic phrase “*Allahu Akbar*” (“God is Greater!”) This is said at the beginning of each prayer, during religious holidays, and also during times of tribulation as a sign of steadfastness and resolve.

Everything outside the hall slowly resumed its normal pace; the daily count was delayed and our recess was cancelled that day. The officers brought our breakfast without mention of what had taken place outside. The door closed as we were engulfed with worry. We were now face to face with death and the executions we feared had taken place just steps outside our hall. And though we were led to believe that the martyrs of the 1980 genocide were killed based on an impulsive decision of the government after a failed assassination attempt on the President, what we heard and saw now made it clear that the killings at Tadmur were not rash and premature decisions, but rather well-calculated, planned murders as part of a scheme to annihilate certain prisoners. We recognized, now, that the possibility that we would be next to stand in the fields with a rope around our necks was not too far away.

### **Questions and Explanations**

There was a sudden eruption of questions within us. Whispers traveled from person to person and from group to group. In this scary place, each person's words were shadowed by a reflection of the personal traits that emerged through our trial. Different scenarios and possibilities circulated the room, and while everyone had a question to add to the commotion, none of us had answers.

The incident shook us with fear, but it had the greatest impact on those who were not even part of the movement. These were men who acquired some sort of benefit or emotional satisfaction from their transactions with the organization. They were, however, later incarcerated and charged at the same level as those involved in the movement, including its armed fighters. Among them were a few arms dealers who were not at all prepared to face the harshness of this penalty, let alone execution!

Every group in the hall came up with their own explanations and rationalization of what had happened. Some decided that they were probably sentencing only those who were directly involved in organized military operations against the government. Others said that the regular members should be safe, for they were innocent of these types of activities. Still further groups deduced that the armed members were comprised of two groups: those who had weapons but did not fight or

kill (and would therefore be saved), and those who were involved in combat that resulted in government casualties. These were the ones being executed. Unexpected discord broke out between the brothers as everyone defended his self-serving analysis.

The more mature brothers who were able to maintain themselves amidst this terrifying time reminded the rest of us that all matters were in the hands of God, and that our years in this life were predestined and known only to Him. The brothers who had been accused of military action against the government said that martyrdom was an honor for every Muslim, and if that's what was written for them, then they welcomed it. But they went on to remind us that we were all enemies in the eyes of the government, and just as they did not differentiate between us in torture, they would not distinguish one from the other in execution.

### Winter

The harsh desert winter introduced its bitter cold, unsympathetic to our thin, worn blankets and the open windows above us. Unfortunate was he whose turn it was to sleep underneath the window, and especially pitiable was the one among us whose fate brought him to that position on a night when the winter sky squeezed the water from its clouds, allowing a stream of rain to enter through the windows and soak the prisoner beneath.

As a result of the freezing air and the wet climate, we suffered vicious degrees of the flu, rheumatism, and arthritis. Eventually, tuberculosis spread among us, and we did not recognize its presence until it had extended its symptoms amongst a majority of us.

And so continued the cycle of agony: we were prisoners of Hall 26 moving from one torture to another, from the count to recess, from the barber to the shower, from random torture to scheduled beatings. The only thing we possessed as a pillar of strength was our bond with the Book of God and our constant memorization and recitation of its verses. This was by no means an easy task in these harsh circumstances, but we persevered, *alhamdulillah*. It was also difficult for us to perform

*wudu* before each prayer or to make *ghusul*<sup>50</sup> when necessary, but most of us took our chances and performed our religious obligations. It was, we later learned, religiously permitted to make *tayyamum*<sup>51</sup> because of the dire circumstances we were in, but the Islamic jurisprudence related to those in prison under strenuous conditions was not familiar to us then.

Once we learned the Islamic teachings that permitted us ease in performing our religious duties, we acted upon them as much as possible in order to ensure our utmost safety and comfort. There were, however, those who insisted on performing *wudu* with water, praying publicly while standing, and announcing their fast even when it was forbidden by the Authorities. By doing this, they put both themselves and everyone else in harm's way.

### The 'Court Trial'

A few weeks had passed since the hangings took place when a group of officers entered our hall and called out the names of a number of men. They had never called any of us by our first or last names before, and we were shocked to hear them do so. None of the names they called, however, were from our hall, so we remained quiet. This happened a few times that same day, and we sensed that something troubling was coming our way. A few days later, the officers entered in the morning and this time called the names of nearly fifteen brothers from Homs from our hall. They took the brothers with them.

Approximately six hours passed and the officers brought us our breakfast and lunch, dismissing us from that day's count and recess. When the brothers returned and we asked them where they were, they informed us that they were in court, and we learned that many of them had been sentenced to death. The demeanor of these brothers quickly changed: they left the matters of this world completely and turned

---

<sup>50</sup> *Ghusul* is a purification process that entails a complete washing of the hair and body. It is mandatory after a wet dream, menstruation, or sexual intercourse

<sup>51</sup> *Tayyamum*, a form of waterless ablution, is a substitute for *wudu* when there is no water around, or if circumstances do not permit for one to safely make *wudu*

wholly toward the worship of God to the point that it seemed they were no longer a part of this world. Two months later, they were called again – this time for execution. They were the first wave of brothers from our hall who left us and headed toward the heavens to be with their Creator. I ask God the Most Just to bring due punishment upon their oppressors and to accept them in the highest levels of Heaven.

### **Welcoming the Meeting with God**

The officers entered that morning and called out the names of those brothers as the hanging posts were being constructed outside. It was of great surprise that many of those whose names they called had attended the grossly unfair court trial but had not been informed that they too would face the death penalty. When those brothers heard their names and were certain of their destiny, they rushed to the bathroom where they made *wudu* in order to offer a final prayer before leaving this world. To protect the rest of us, they prayed secretly in the bathroom.

More than ten brothers left the hall that morning. As they walked out, it was as if they were different men than the brothers we had known all this time. They were calm and composed, with traces of happiness on their faces. They were content with the path that was chosen for them and looked forward to meeting their Creator. A number of us hugged some of the brothers on their way out, but other brothers walked out without bidding us farewell. From that group, I recall Hasan Al-Sagheer and ‘Abdul-Ghani Al-Dabbagh and Bassam Kaalo.

I still remember that Bassam woke up that very morning and said to the brothers around him,

“I had an interesting dream last night. I saw the words of Allah (swt) from the Quran:

*‘Be quick in the race for forgiveness from your Lord, and for a Garden whose width is that of the Heavens and of the Earth, prepared for the righteous’ (3:133).”*

Less than an hour later, he was called for execution, and we felt as though Allah (swt) made his dream a reality and accepted him in His heavens, *inshaAllah*<sup>52</sup>.

### A Martyr's Swing

The officers closed the door behind them and led the brothers to a far corner of the field. We realized that Sulayman Al-Khateeb was present. He was a Military Intelligence Officer who was appointed as an interrogator and a field court judge. He personally came to ensure that all those whose names were written were executed, and he read their sentence before they were hung. The Warden of the Prison was with him, and we knew it was him when we heard the Sergeant call out the traditional military commands:

“Attention! At ease! Prepare!”

He would continue to say,

“The field is ready to be inspected, Major General, Sir!”

Afterwards, the officers led the prisoners to the hanging posts one after the other. When this stage began, I ran to the door of our hall and peered through a small crack in it. I found the posts erect along the entire width of the field. The brothers, now at the verge of their death, made *takbeer* in their loudest voices and professed the Oneness of God. With eyes closed and hands tied, they were led one after the other onto the three-pronged base of the post where a thin, wire noose hung from the top. The scene—particularly the pitiful equipment being used—was a gross violation of even the basic provisions a hanging field should present.

The prisoner was ordered to kneel in front of the noose unaware of what was before him. When the officer standing on the field gave a signal to the two *baladiya* workers next to him, they pulled the rope around the prisoner's neck, and then retreated to the back of the structure where they awaited the proper gesture. When it was given, a lever was pulled and in the blink of an eye, the prisoner was lifted into the air. You could hear him take his final breaths as his soul left his body. If after a

---

<sup>52</sup> Literally means “God-willing.”

few moments the body moved, indicating the prisoner was still alive, two members of the *baladiya* would hang onto the brother's legs pulling him down and ensuring that the wire was suffocating him properly. Finally, the Prison Doctor Yunus Al-Ali came forward and checked for a pulse, confirming that he was dead.

The noose was released and the body fell to the floor. The martyr was then thrown onto a pile of bodies on the ground, and the wire was prepared for the next prisoner. This was repeated over and over across the many posts on the field until all the prisoners were hung. A military truck then drove onto the field and the *baladiya* threw one body after the other inside. More than fifty brothers died that day, and while their bodies were taken to an unknown place, their souls traveled to the Heavens carrying the glorious status of a martyr, *inshaAllah*.

### Solace

The thick air of oppression and despair suffocated us, and we possessed only prayer and faith in God to maintain our sanity. Our brothers left to meet their Creator and we were left in an increased state of hopelessness and misery. Our brothers were gone... those whom we were eating with and sleeping next to just one night ago... whom we prayed *fajr*<sup>53</sup> with just hours before... whom we used to race with in memorizing the Quran as we recited to them or listened to them recite.

Perhaps one of these men had spent his last night by one of us, or sent his last smile in this world our way before leaving indefinitely. These men had become our true brothers through the darkest times, despite not having known them for more than a few months. They left this world, and we would never see them again until the end of time when all will be called for Judgment.

We sat there alone, each one of us quietly absorbed in his own thoughts. We reflected upon our lives, starting from our innocent childhood and on to our youth. What youth? A tyrannical hand had snatched it away from us and seized us from the world. Then we thought of our future. Morose thoughts clouded our minds,

---

<sup>53</sup> The first prayer of the day performed before sunrise

manipulated by the nooses that were still hanging outside. We were overcome by feelings of compassion and longing, of grief and fear, of devastation and hope. We had nothing or no one to turn to for sympathy, no one to offer us solace for our grieving souls—except the Most Gracious, Most Merciful. We asked that He accept our struggle as one for His cause, that He forgive our sins accept us in His Paradise.

### **With the Book of God**

We quickly returned to the recitation and memorization of the Book of God, our only source of comfort and the cure to our suffering and wounds. A number of weeks later, God blessed our hall with a brother who had the entire Quran memorized. He arrived with a new group of fifteen brothers from Damascus, all from the Mosque of Zayd bin Thaabit<sup>54</sup>. The brother's name was Muhammad Sanobar from the suburb Jadeedat-ul-Thibaani around Damascus. Our pleasure at his arrival in our hall was indescribable, and we learned from him many new Chapters and verses from the Quran.

I used to memorize with my brother Haytham Uthman, who despite his critical wounds was consistent and quick in memorization. We were so adamant and persistent in our studies that we found our entire time dedicated to the Book of God. I remember being so devoted to memorizing that I completed the Chapter of the Cattle<sup>55</sup> in four days! Before I was arrested, I only had the thirtieth and part of the twenty-ninth sections<sup>56</sup> of the Quran memorized. When we discovered that execution was a real possibility for us, we wanted to learn by heart as much of it as possible so that we could meet our Creator with the light of His book. *Alhamdulillah*, Haytham and I were the first amongst all the brothers in the hall to commit the entire scripture to memory.

---

<sup>54</sup> Zayd bin Thaabit was a companion of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Mosques are often named after Islamic figures of the past.

<sup>55</sup> The Sixth Chapter of the Quran consisting of 165 verses that span 23 pages

<sup>56</sup> There are a total of 30 sections in the Quran; each section is 20 pages

### **Conspiracy**

One day many days later, an officer entered our hall and called for Abu-Rasheed<sup>57</sup>. He was escorted out of the room and disappeared for a few hours. When he returned, it was clear that he had been tortured. Although it was not in Abu-Rasheed's personality to discuss things openly, because of the trust we had built based on past experiences, he shared what happened to him with me alone.

An officer from the Intelligence requested his presence for questioning as a result of his relationship with the Head of the Syrian Military Unit, Hikmat Al-Shihaabi. As I mentioned earlier, Al-Shihaabi had come to the Prison before and tried to convince Abu-Rasheed to confess in return for his help. The repetition of interrogative sessions were perhaps of the most difficult things on a prisoner, for just as he thought this chapter of his life had closed, he was once again called to face the intimidation tactics and the coercion by force.

In reality, Al-Shihaabi had helped the Government against Abu-Rasheed, but Abu-Rasheed refused to admit to anything that could be used against himself. Now, once again, the officials tempted him with promises of exemption from the death penalty if he testified that there was a relationship between him and Al-Shihaabi. However, he refused to do so. They tortured him with no compassion at his unyielding rejection of their offer. Through this ordeal, Abu Rasheed ascertained that there was an attempted conspiracy against Al-Shihaabi and that the Intelligence officers were trying to use him to settle internal disputes. But with the honor of a Muslim, he refused to oppress even his enemy, and as a result faced the most horrible torture.

### **The Predestined Day**

Months came and went and the injuries Abu Rasheed received from our initial welcoming party were almost healed. His health was improving, and the wounds from his more recent torture session were also fading. Life went on—we moved from one

---

<sup>57</sup> (the journalist for the Syrian News Agency who had been tortured in the German chair)

worry to the next only to find a greater dilemma before us. Never did we escape a session of torture without another affliction awaiting us.

In October or November of 1981, waves of new prisoners were called to attend the preposterous court tribunal they had established at the Prison. Standing at these 'trials' was both physically and psychologically tormenting. From among nearly forty brothers who were called from our hall, Abu-Rasheed's name was announced. When he returned from his hearing, they had not sentenced him with death as they had most of the others, but he knew that his end was near regardless. He detected this through the treatment he received by Sulayman Al-Khateeb, who sat in front of the prisoners on the Judge's chair. Sulayman had personally tried to persuade Abu-Rasheed to falsely accuse Al-Shihaabi of dealings with the Brotherhood. He was also the one who promised to relieve him of the death penalty if he granted the request. Abu Rasheed, however, had adamantly refused to make such an accusation no matter the consequence.

When Abu-Rasheed returned to the hall, he made the intention to fast every day until he would meet his Lord. When the day came almost two months later, I had saved some tea and food from breakfast for him to break his fast on at sunset. That morning, the officers came into the hall and read the list of men being called for execution, but they did not mention his name among them. The brothers rushed to bid the others farewell and were escorted out of the room. As we inched toward the door to watch what was happening, Abu-Rasheed, who could not move very well, called me over and said,

"My brother Abu Saleem, I feel tired today and don't think I should fast; give me the tea and food so I can eat."

I did as he asked, and By the One God whom there is no other than He, Abu-Rasheed took one sip of the tea and barely started on the second when the door opened and the officer called,

"Hussein Rasheed Uthman."

"Coming," was all he responded, with the cup of tea still between his lips.

We saw before our eyes that every person that lives will receive what is destined for him, even from food and drink. It was meant for him to have these last two sips of tea before he left this earth.

He stood up, walked over to the corner of the hall and took off his clothes as he repeated,

“God is Great; God is Great. I bear witness that there is no God but Allah; I bear witness that there is no God but Allah.”

He left only his shorts on and the officers at the door were outraged at his actions. He threw his clothes to us so that we could benefit from them and then he left the hall. May God rest his soul. This time, I could not look through the window and watch the brothers being hung, may the mercy of God be upon their souls.

The procession was over quickly. After the field was cleared, the officers led us outside, attacked us with their whips and lashed at us with their cables in order to wipe away any encouraging affects Abu-Rasheed’s *takbeers* may have had on us. May God have mercy on him.

### **The Incident of Hama**

The year 1982 was gradually passing. We remained in the hands of our oppressors as our circumstances perpetually deteriorated. Throughout this year, the Incident of Hama<sup>58</sup> exploded, but because we were incarcerated, we knew nothing of the affair at the time. We did, though, experience the negative impact of the massacre, as the officers were constantly agitated and the brutality intensified. We did not know what to attribute these strange conditions to. Beginning in the month of February the degree of torture we faced was multiplied and the number of those who died as a result of the regime’s brutal techniques of punishment increased. It reached a point where if it was a prisoner’s turn to step outside the hall door and carry in the

---

<sup>58</sup> Massacre that claimed the lives of some 30,000 people in February of 1982

Tadmur: witnessed & Observed

food, he read *al-Faatiha*<sup>59</sup> at the great possibility that he may be subject to torture methods so atrocious he would die.

Many instances of death resulted from the officers striking a prisoner on the head with a huge stick using such force that he fell lifelessly to the ground. Also during this period of elevated hardship, the percentage of those who returned from the prison court hearings with a death sentence significantly increased, averaging around 98% of every group that was tried. Moreover, the hearings took place every two days, whereas before they were conducted three times a month at the most. It was during this time that Abu-Rasheed and his group were sentenced to death, may God rest their souls.

### **Cautionary Procedures**

One day, as executions were being performed, an officer entered our hall, number 26, and called ‘Abdul-Kareem Ghanem from Zabadaani<sup>60</sup> for execution. He was a university student in the College of Engineering in Damascus. We were surprised to hear his name. With tearful eyes, we gathered around to bid him farewell before he departed. He stood before us strong and content, and said,

“Why are you crying? Don’t cry for me, weep for yourselves. As for me, I am finally free of this torture.”

And with those words he left the room.

An incident took place around this time that led the guards to take extra caution during the executions. Once, as the tyrannical officers led a group of prisoners to their death, one of the brothers was able to free his hands and attacked an officer who held a whip in his hand with all his might. He hit a number of officers before they managed to control him and led him to his death. Following this occurrence, all members of every hall were taken outside where we received the most testing beatings. The Authorities wanted to ensure that what had taken place did not

---

<sup>59</sup> *Al-Faatiha*, or “The Opening,” is the first chapter of the Quran; it is traditionally read in numerous occasions, including upon the deceased

<sup>60</sup> A Damascus suburb

encourage any further misconduct. Cautionary procedures were adopted thereafter in order to guarantee that nothing of this type would happen during executions again.

### **The Defector**

As I mentioned at the beginning, I was arrested in October of 1980, shortly after Salem was detained and Yahya was designated my new liaison. Despite the unfathomable types of torture I experienced in the underground basements of Military Intelligence Prisons, God helped me remain steadfast and I never exposed the name of Yahya or any other person. I was therefore shocked when I heard that amongst the escalating number of assassinations in February of 1982, among those who were put to death at Tadmur Prison was Yahya. Fate eventually joined me with brothers who had met him through different phases of his imprisonment and knew his story.

Apparently, Yahya had been arrested only shortly after my own detainment. He was assigned a meeting between him and an individual by the name of ‘Abdul-Kareem Rajab, a student from Hama who was studying medicine in Damascus. The Intelligence Officers recruited ‘Abdul-Kareem to work for them and benefitted immensely from his relationship with members of the Brotherhood.

I knew ‘Abdul-Kareem before my detainment and I vividly recall how he would swarm around us regularly, always enthusiastic to meet new Brothers. He asked a lot of questions and requested explanations for different actions that were taken. Ultimately, this single defector was responsible for the imprisonment of a significantly large number of brothers. He was also able to uncover many military bases of the Muslim fighters, particularly in Damascus. He mostly involved himself with the Syrian brothers who had left the country and then returned to the capital to help establish new bases under the leadership of Abul Faraj.

Through ‘Abdul-Kareem, Yahya found himself in the hands of the Intelligence Officers. When Yahya arrived at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus for a scheduled meeting, he was surrounded by officers who apprehended him *and* ‘Abdul-Kareem. They took both of them to the Military branch for interrogation. Yahya was

Tadmur: witnessed & Observed

driven to Tadmur while ‘Abdul-Kareem Rajab, of course, was released in order to continue his destructive mission.

We later learned that the Muslim fighters in Hama discovered the reality of ‘Abdul-Kareem’s character. They were able to trick and apprehend him, and he confessed everything before he was executed as a consequence of his treason. Yahya and I were both in Tadmur’s Prison at the same time, but I never had the opportunity to see him there.

In February 1982, while the genocide in Hama was at its peak, Yahya was called for interrogation. The officers demanded that he give them a list of names and information that they were in need of, and threatened him of ominous circumstances if he did not cooperate. Upon Yahya’s refusal, ‘the tire’ was presented and they lowered him through it. They beat him without mercy in the field of the Bookings office. Suddenly, they stopped to ask once again for the facts they sought. When they saw that he was persistent, the interrogator ordered that he be undressed of everything but his shorts. He was returned to the tire where he faced the most horrific degrees of viciousness. The strikes were so fierce that one of his fingernails flew off, landing in front of another prisoner awaiting his turn for questioning. When I met this brother much later, he still had the nail with him!

Yahya’s beatings continued with such intensity that he eventually fell unconscious. The interrogator ordered the officers to hang him, though there were no posts set up that day. Instead, they dragged him across the fields until they reached Hall 5-6. According to what was later conveyed by eye witnesses, Sergeant Faysal Kaheela, along with two officers named Sameer Koshari and Shah-hadeh, wrapped a rope around his neck as he lay unconscious and choked him with their own hands until his soul left his body. May God have mercy upon his soul.

### **A Surprise**

Among the haunting executions that continue to have a deep impact on me is the story of a dentist from Aleppo of the Qura-Ali family. He was at Tadmur with his sister-in-law’s husband, who was eventually freed following a long chain of

connections and immense bribes. The dentist, however, remained incarcerated, regularly praying and patiently waiting for the announcement of his release.

On one of the unfortunate mornings at the Prison, his name was called by one of the officers and he jumped up ecstatically preparing for his departure. He was overjoyed at the thought of seeing his family and rushed to put on the suit that he had been detained in. He took out his gold watch and wore it as well. When he was fully dressed, he dusted the dirt from his jacket. He tried to brush his hair, struggling to attain a decent appearance. He was sure he was on his way to freedom. Right outside the hall, however, he found a rope awaiting him. He was hung. It was a huge shock to all of us and the memory haunted us for a long time.

### **Scabies**

Our situation worsened. Along with the increased torture and executions was a decrease in the amount of food we were given and a serious reduction of water. The Prison Authorities left us for an entire month without water. The only food or drink we ever received came in jugs that the officers filled for us whenever they pleased and with whatever quantity they desired. During this time, our hall entered a state of absolute filth, and its unsanitary condition brought about an intolerable smell. Under these circumstances, scabies broke out amongst us affecting nearly everyone, myself included.

Scabies is a contagious skin disease that afflicts its victim with severe itching, eventually resulting in inflammation of the skin and infected bumps. Unfortunately, there is no particular area of the body that this disease contains itself to. It may spread on the arms, legs, chest, back, or even the private areas. The pain it causes is unbearable, and if a victim does not receive the proper cure, he will likely die from the infection. Indeed, death was the outcome for many brothers in my hall and others, where scabies was transmitted from person to person and hall to hall.

One brother confronted with this illness was ‘Abdul-Kareem Al-Salih from Deir Ezzor. His entire skin was affected and his whole body became swollen. For an entire month, he screamed from the intensity of the pain and all we could do was pray

Tadmur: witnessed & Observed

for him. When the Hall President informed the officers of the direness of his situation, they simply ignored him. Upon insisting that treatment was imperative for this man's survival, they ordered him to stop complaining and leave the brother in a corner of the hall to die.

Eventually, the rapid spread of scabies throughout the other halls of the Prison forced the administration to yield to our demands and provide treatment for those who had contracted the infection. They appointed one person to be responsible for the health situation in each hall. This person was to assess the health conditions of the prisoners and pass the information along to the Prison Doctor. He was very careful not to visit the halls himself, as that would subject him to the highly contagious scabies. The health manager of our hall was a brother and physician named Qaasim Moosa.

When the circumstances worsened and the spread of the scabies was uncontrollable, a special hall was opened for the sick, just as had been done during the cholera outbreak. This, however, came after the disease had claimed the life of a large number of men across many halls. Brother 'Abdul-Kareem Al-Salih, who had been suffering severely from the scabies, was eventually cured only to be executed with the next wave of prisoners.

#### **From the List of Victims**

As a part of the retaliatory treatment we received because of the Incidents of Hama, the Prison Doctor did not visit the inmates for nearly five months. Throughout this time, the types of illnesses we contracted increased and they spread rapidly amongst us. Along with scabies were many other syndromes whose names and causes were unknown to us. All we could do to help the sick was try to protect them from being subject to the callous beatings of the officers. We also shared our meager portions of food with them, but that was not enough to stop the disease from spreading or save their lives. Despite our efforts to help, we could not deter the fate of nearly sixteen brothers who died from our hall<sup>vi</sup>.

The first brother to die from that group was a prisoner from the village of Soran near Hama by the name of ‘Abdul-Aziz ‘Awadh Al-Salim. It appeared that he had tuberculosis. He would regularly cough up blood, and when Abul Fadl, the Hall President, informed the Sergeant of the prisoner’s grave condition, the Sergeant crudely replied,

“*Wala!* Once he dies, knock on the door!”

After two months of insufferable pain, one day, ‘Abdul-Aziz rested his head against the chest of his biological brother, who was imprisoned in the same hall at Tadmur. ‘Abdul-Aziz repeatedly glorified God’s name and repeated the *shahaadah*<sup>61</sup>. He took his last breaths and left our world, may the mercy of God be upon his soul. When we were sure that he had indeed passed away, his brother requested that a number of us wash the deceased<sup>62</sup> before informing the officers of his death. The brothers, however, were afraid that they might contract his illness, or that the officers may find them doing so and beat them for it. No one stepped forward. The situation was extremely difficult for the deceased’s brother as well as the others in the hall. I stepped forward, relying upon God to help me, and carried the brother to the bathroom where I washed him alone. From that day, I washed all those who passed away for as long as I remained in that hall.

When Jamal knocked on the hall door and informed them of ‘Abdul-‘Aziz’s death, they carelessly ordered him to bring out his body. I helped him carry the brother outside and returned into the hall, leaving Jamal with the officers. When he returned, he told us that one of the officers was doubtful of the matter, and so he forcefully kicked the lifeless brother in order to make sure that he was in fact dead. When he was convinced, members of the *baladiya* were called to take him away.

---

<sup>61</sup> The *shahaadah* is the testimony to the Oneness of God, and to the Prophet Muhammad as the Messenger of God. It literally means ‘to bear witness.’ Just as it is proclaimed upon embracing Islam, a Muslim should also try to declare it at the time of death.

<sup>62</sup> It is a religious tradition to wash the body of the deceased before burial

### *Suhoor*

The illnesses increased until we reached a point where every day, one person died from our hall. I remember sleeping next to the brother Kamal Andoorah on one of these daunting nights. I had made the intention to fast the next day and so I woke up before dawn to eat my *suhoor*<sup>63</sup>. Kamal's illness had become so severe during this time that he could not lie down to sleep or else he would suffocate. Instead, he used to sit with his legs folded beneath him and lean against the wall, where he remained all night groaning from pain. When I awoke that morning for my *suhoor*, I could not hear him as I usually did. I looked over at him and whispered his name. When I received no response, I patted him on the side and he fell over, dead.

I could not make any movement that would attract the attention of the officers above, for if they detected that I was awake at this time of the night, I would surely receive a harsh beating. All I could do was pull a blanket over the brother's face, taking utmost caution not to make any noise, and lay myself down next to him. I pulled out the small sandwich that I had saved from the night before for *suhoor*. Even the smallest bites were suddenly so hard to swallow. I remained next to my lifeless brother until the morning, when I fearfully washed him with the help of a few others before the officers learned of his death. His body had stiffened and we figured he had died early on in the night. When we were done, we informed the officers of his death and they dragged him out of the room.

### **A Noble Tradition**

From the unforgettable stories of pain and disease is that of the brother 'Abdul-Mu'iz Al-'Ajami from Homs. He was afflicted with jaundice of the liver in 1982 and was near death as a result thereof. At the time, Abul Fadl suggested that the healthier brothers spare a portion of their share of food for him and the other ill members of our hall. He was the first one to establish this noble tradition of altruism and the concern for our sick before ourselves, may God rest his soul.

---

<sup>63</sup> *Suhoor* is the early breakfast that may be eaten before dawn on a day of fasting, after which the individual cannot eat or drink until sunset.

Despite the scarceness of our food, we volunteered most of what we had to ‘Abdul-Mu’iz and regularly prayed for God to cure him. *Subhan-Allah*<sup>64</sup> who answered our prayer and showered His mercy upon this brother, for less than a month after we were sure this brother would meet his death, his health swiftly returned to him and he stood before us healthy and strong. ‘Abdul-Mu’iz served as yet another sign to the wonder of God’s ways when, in 1984, he was called for execution. He had been saved from his ailment only to be granted the honor of martyrdom in the future.

### **The Murderous Doctor**

While stories of the tribulations faced in the Prison of Tadmur will never end, one incident that must be mentioned for its depiction of the brutal savagery and hatred possessed by the ruling regime is the story of our dear brother Zahid Dakhil. Through this account, one can truly understand the extent of the demise and viciousness the Syrian Authorities inflicted upon its citizens. With such events, we came to understand that the groups who fought the government militarily did so because it was the only way they could defend themselves against the tyranny and oppression they were facing.

Zahid, may God rest his soul, was an honor student in medical school at the University of Aleppo. During his last years of study, fate joined him with a student from the government’s sect whose name was Muhammad Yunus Al-Ali. Yunus developed an interest in a girl in their class who came from a conservative family of Aleppo. He followed her around pestering her, while she repeatedly expressed no interest in the matter.

Many months later, when the previous issue was closed, Zahid himself approached the girl’s parents and proposed to their daughter. The two were married and everyone was overjoyed by their union—except, of course, for Yunus. He considered it an insult upon his honor and an unforgivable act, and swore to seek revenge. As both students were still in school, he began threatening the girl and her

---

<sup>64</sup> “Glory be to God!” used when expressing amazement at a miracle or admiration of God’s creation

husband publicly, and warned them of great atrocities he would bring their way. Zahid and his wife, in the highest Islamic character, ignored Yunus' ill manners.

Their schooling came to an end, and after graduation they went their separate ways. Life proceeded as normal until one day, the country's anarchic, totalitarian Intelligence seized Zahid like a prey in its hands. He was thrown from torture to torture and from prison to prison, until his destiny landed him in Hall 5-6 of Tadmur. How unfortunate it was that at the time, the Prison Doctor was no other than Muhammad Yunus Al-Ali himself! No one knew how Zahid and Yunus were united here, or whether Zahid's imprisonment had anything to do with Yunus' previous threats. We did know, however, that since his first day of work at Tadmur, the Prison Doctor frequented many halls in search of a prisoner by the name of "Zahid." The officers were given instructions to find this man, and eventually, he was located in one of the halls of Field 1.

During the recess one day, Yunus awaited the prisoners outside, and when he saw Zahid amongst them, he confirmed it was the person he had been searching for. At once, the officers pulled him out of the group and ferociously attacked him with sticks and cables while yelling the crudest language. They designated him the new 'mark.' Zahid must have either seen Yunus or heard his voice, for he immediately understood why he had become the victim of such a tragedy. In his case, it was not the officers who beat him, but rather the Prison Doctor Yunus himself. Upon returning to his hall devastated and defeated, he informed the brothers of his finding and asked God for His protection.

The officers began to isolate Zahid from amongst the men in his hall and constantly took him outside for a special dosage of multiplied torture. After weeks of this treatment, we all knew that he was approaching death. Eventually, he was completely shattered and could not even go out for the daily recess. When he remained inside, as was customary for the ill or those who could not move as a result of the torture, the officers searched for him in the hall and served him his beatings there.

One dark day, the officers came into Hall 5-6 and performed the customary search inside instead of the typical outdoor routine. The Sergeant, Faysal Kaheela, ordered that the brothers gather in one corner of the room. When they did so, only poor Zahid, who was completely disabled from moving at that point, remained in his place, sitting before them like a helpless prey before its predator. Faysal moved toward him accompanied by the officer named Shah-hadeh. They each took their stick and with all their might, delivered a violent blow to his head. His head split open and he fell to the ground. Blood surged from his head and drenched the floor around him. He was dead.

The murderous animals did not even flinch at the horrendous sight. They carelessly turned around and exited the hall, locking the door behind them. Seconds later, the very same murderers opened the window in the door and called to the Hall President.

“What happened?” they asked him with intimidation.

Astonished, the poor man replied trembling,

“I don’t know, Sir. I think he fell and suffered a concussion to the brain.”

The evil fiends closed the shutter. Satisfied at the answer, they simply walked away.

The brothers ran toward Zahid and found that his soul had departed his body. They carried him toward the bathroom to wash him, and at that very moment, the door opened and an officer ordered the Hall President to bring out the body. The brother looked around and asked the others to help him, but all remained quiet and no one stepped forward. The terror of what had just transpired paralyzed them. It stripped each person of every bit of courage. The brother found himself dragging Zahid’s body toward the door, where the *baladiya* took hold of him and carried him away.

### **Orders of Indecency**

The officers increased in their illicitness and immorality. Their rage toward us amplified and they constantly devised new ways of humiliating the prisoners. Many

nights we awoke to find the officer who was serving the night-shift urinating on us through the vents above. Other times he would repeatedly spit on us, and woe to the prisoner who lifted his head or shifted in order to avoid the harm.

I cannot count the number of instances when prisoners were randomly pulled out of their hall in the middle of the night and beat heartlessly for absolutely no reason at all. Or when during any outdoor procedure, the officers gathered around one individual and lashed at him under the blazing afternoon sun until he fell to the ground nearly dead, with the officers laughing at their triumphant achievement.

The cables, sticks and whips that we were struck with were excruciatingly painful. They tore at our skin and split open our flesh, while the sticks broke our bones and mutilated our faces. And as if this was not enough torment, the torturers also took great pleasure in using metal bars to beat us. Even a single hit with one of those was unbearable.

On the days we would go to the barber, the officers would approach our hall from Field 6, which was tens of meters away. As they walked, they beat the cement floor with the rods, and the terrifying sound it made devastated our psyche. To us, it served as a warning that death was right around the corner. Not all of the brothers were at the same level of mental and physical strength. Many of them would tremble at the sound of the metal bars as they crashed against the cement floor and burst into tears even before the officers arrived.

During this phase of my imprisonment, there were certain unforgettable incidents of immoral, coerced acts. One day, an officer yelled from the vents above for two biological brothers, both of whom were in my hall, to take off their clothes. With all impudence and vileness, he ordered them to commit crude, sexually-oriented acts with one another. As the officer laughed and swore at them from above, he directed them in detail of what he wanted to see. The brothers faced no option but to succumb to his sordid requests, fearing the consequences of disobedience. They took off their clothes as the vile man above us ordered them to do more and more.

We, the fellow brothers in the hall, lowered our heads and closed our eyes. We could not believe the level of wantonness these monsters had reached. We prayed in

our hearts that God end the burden that had been placed upon these brothers and protect us from ever facing anything of its kind. The officer yelled blasphemous words from above, and when he was satisfied with the mortification he brought upon them, he left. We were engulfed by a nightmarish air, and remained in our places with our heads down for hours, unable to look one another in the face. We never mentioned the incident again out of consideration for the two brothers' emotions and honor, and especially out of respect for the brothers' father, an old man who was also in the hall when this transpired.

Occurrences such as this were repeated in other halls as well. Sometimes, the officers would randomly call one of us during our recess and say to us,

“You \*\*\*\*! I want to do (profanity) to your mother. What do you think?!”

When the prisoner would remain quiet, the officer would beat him or whip him and yell,

“Repeat it you \*\*\*\*! I want to do (etc, etc.) to your mother! What?!”

And the prisoner, falling into a state of utmost disgrace and degradation, would repeat,

“You want to do (etc, etc.) to my mother, Sir.”

If he was satisfied with the response, he released him. Often, though, the brother was forced to repeat the expression over and over or yell it loudly so that all those on the field could hear it. When his wicked spirit was content and his evil desires were satisfied, he let him go.

### **Solitary Detention**

One day in 1982, the military officers entered our hall and ordered us to lie on the ground. When we did so, they commanded us to stand up and continued this routine with the simple intention of demeaning and tiring the prisoners. When we were standing, they spotted one of the brothers among us by the name of Ahmad Fatooma from Hama. His sleeves were rolled up and his arms were exposed. They slapped him on the face and yelled,

“*Wala!* Are you trying to intimidate us? Are you challenging us? Get up, you’re going to the *sawaleel*<sup>65</sup>.”

They dragged that unlucky brother among us to one of a few cells used for solitary confinement. It was located near the kitchen and, in the language of the prison, was called *salool*. Along with Ahmad they took another brother from Homs for a ridiculous reason as well. I left that specific hall nearly one year later, and the two brothers who were taken that day never returned.

I later received news that Ahmad Fatooma had been beaten to death. It was explained to us that the torture in solitary confinement cells was absolutely relentless; instead of the distributed beatings those in the halls received, one helpless individual fall victim to all their ferocious strikes. The horror of the solitude and the defenseless nature of this type of confinement, I believe, remain worse than the physical aspects of persecution.

### **The Roster of Criminals**

Although the officers and the guards tried to prevent us from knowing their identities and names, and despite the strenuous circumstances that we faced when we were in front of these fiends, with time, we were able to get to know who some of these characters were. We mostly discovered their names when we heard them calling out to one another, or if two of them were discussing a third person and accidentally used his name.

Through these means, we learned that the Prison’s Warden was Colonel Faysal Al-Ghanem under whose reign the Massacre of Tadmur was carried out on the 26<sup>th</sup> of June 1980. His Captain was Barakaat Al-‘Ish, both of whom belonged to the ‘*Alawi*’ sect and were originally from Latakia. Ahmad Keesani, or “Abu Jahil,” as we called him, was given the responsibility of order enforcement in the institution. One of his assistants was Corporal Fawwaz, who served from 1980 to 1984. Then there was Jihad, who, throughout his stay between 1981 and 1985, reached the epitome of

---

<sup>65</sup> Plural of *salool*

cruelty and violence toward the prisoners. Succeeding him was another Sergeant who was no less ruthless and oppressive by the name of Sha'ban Hussein. All of these men belonged to the minority ruling 'Alawi sect. Another officer, Na'eem Hanna, continually devised new ways to beat the prisoners, especially during Tadmur's "welcoming parties." We were informed that he was an Assyrian Christian.

When Abu Jahil left the Prison in 1982—it was said that he fled to Iraq, although we were uncertain of the statement's accuracy—he was followed by Sergeant Faysal Kaheela, also an 'Alawi from Latakia. He, too, was a sadistic criminal who, when beating the prisoners, only used the enormous wooden rod that was so strong it could break one's back or even kill him. It was said that Faysal was later killed, but of course the information was among many things we heard but could not confirm. Faysal's assistant was a Corporal by the name of 'Ali Sha'ban who was later promoted to the status of Sergeant Major. Another Corporal, no different than the others in his brutality, was Shah-hadeh, also from the same sect. Among the most notorious officers, also an 'Alawi, was Sameer Koshari, whom we called "*Hayyu*"<sup>66</sup> because he ecstatically yelled this as he beat us.

After Faysal Kaheela came Sergeant Muhammad Al-Khazem, who was replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Faysal Al-Ghanem in 1984. This happened, we heard, as a result of efforts to settle differences between President Hafez Al-Assad and his brother Rif'at following Hafez's recovery from a serious illness. At this time, the responsibility of the Prison was temporarily assumed by Captain Barakaat Al-'Ish until it was assigned to Lieutenant Colonel Ghazi Al-Juhani, an 'Alawi from the village of al-Mukharram near Homs. Ghazi put Sergeant Muhummad Nu'ma in charge of enforcing order in the prison. Muhammad Nu'ma was also an 'Alawi from the village of Jub-al-Jaraah also near Homs. Barakaat Al-'Ish remained an assistant to Ghazi Al-Juhani until he relocated to the Prison of Sidnaya in 1987, where he assumed the position of Warden.

---

<sup>66</sup> *Hayyu* is an Arabic command meaning, "Salute!"

### **Intense Surveillance**

The motive behind the choice of these particular individuals for the ranks they assumed was clear: they were the flesh of a structure established on sectarian premises. It enabled this hateful minority to control the helpless majority. The ‘*Alawis* were the hegemons controlling the majority of leadership ranks in the Prison. The remaining positions were held by other corrupt, minority sectarian or ethnic groups that acted as claws controlled by the ‘*Alawi* grasp.

Additionally, though, there were some *Sunni* soldiers who were stationed at Tadmur while serving their mandatory military service. All of the groups were under constant and intense surveillance. It was forbidden for any soldier to talk to a prisoner out of concern that a prior relationship between the two individuals or their families may be discovered, resulting in sympathy and leniency of treatment.

The penalty faced by a soldier who was caught being even minimally compassionate toward the prisoners was extremely serious. One particular Sergeant was from the Sibaa’i family of Homs who was serving his mandatory service before my arrival at Tadmur. He expressed a hint of forgiveness and moderation with the prisoners and was consequently arrested, put on trial, and sentenced to death! After he was killed, we learned that his picture was hung in the Prison’s Personnel Office so that other officers and soldiers could take heed and comprehend the gravity of the warning.

### **Quarrels**

One product of the Massacre of Hama was the arrival of waves of new prisoners from the city. From them, we learned of the atrocity that took place there. We also met new brothers who became so close and dear to our hearts.<sup>vii</sup> Most of the brothers who came as a part of this group of prisoners were arrested either from their homes or their universities, and none of them had any direct connection with the clashes in Hama. They were a different type of prisoners. They were members of the general public who were moved by the events of the time and participated in the clashes—despite not having previous training or discipline.

As a result, they were surprised by this affliction, unprepared for the ordeal they would face. Some of these men, at the beginning, caused a rise of disputes and quarrels among the brothers in the hall. This, *alhamdulillah*, was a short-lived phase that we were quickly able to overcome. Their attitudes eventually changed. Most of them even joined the brothers in the secret religious activities like supplication and memorizing the Quran.

### **Separating the Youth**

The Prison's administration sensed the effect that the inmates who had been there for a while, particularly the elder among them, had on the new, incoming youth. As a result, they distributed all the young prisoners, or the "Juveniles," as they were called, amongst Halls 31 and 34 in Field 6. Later, when a seventh field was opened, they were transferred there and distributed between Halls 35, 36, and 37.

### **A Bit of Yogurt**

Nearly seven months passed without us hearing of any executions. We thought the matter was over and assumed that we had seen the last of the prison assassinations. There was no basis for this conjecture, except perhaps our hopes and wishes that the dark days of our imprisonment had passed and that things would slowly improve.

It wasn't long, though, before our aspirations dissolved and the wings that carried our dreams were broken. One morning shortly after dawn, we heard the construction of the hanging posts outside. Officers entered different halls and asked for individuals by their names. The reverberation of *takbeers* echoed through the air, followed by a deadly silence. Our hopes were devastated. Our optimism was demolished. We returned to a state of silence and apprehension.

The door to Hall 26 opened unexpectedly, startling our already tense nerves. Each of us expected the officer to shout his name and call him to his death. He called only one brother who was from the town of Saraqib. His name, I believe, was 'Abdul-Hakeem Al-'Umar. He was an Arabic teacher and was a Lieutenant serving his mandatory service when he was arrested. He was a distinctive member of our hall in his amiable personality and his pleasant company. He used to give us detailed lessons of Arabic grammar and rhetoric, and we studied with him often, learning much from what he offered. The officer told him to pack his belongings as he was being relocated to the Artillery Academy in Aleppo. Despite our perplexity at the officer's strange behavior, we assumed that the brother's execution had thus far been delayed simply because he had been a soldier. Now his fate was inevitable.

'Abdul-Hakeem understood that this was his end, and he walked around the room bidding us farewell. He looked deep into our eyes and to each of us, he repeated the same final words before he left this world,

“Forgive me my brothers. By the will of God, we will meet in Heaven.”

When he reached a group of brothers in the hall who were from his city, he requested that they look after his family and children should they be freed. He surprised us when, while our eyes and hearts followed him as he was leaving the room, he suddenly turned toward those brothers once again and requested a bit of the yogurt they were saving to break their fast on at sunset. By God, it was a sign attesting to the truth behind the words of the Prophet (peace be upon him) who said,

“The Holy Spirit<sup>67</sup> has given me this inspiration that no soul shall die until it has completed its life duration and received all its provisions.”

And By God, ‘Abdul-Hakeem took the plate of yogurt and ate from it before heading toward the door. We couldn’t believe he was leaving us and we watched him go with an aura of contentment and assurance. It was as if he was on his way to meet the most precious person to him.

### **We Will Not Submit**

In Hall 33 of Field 4, where the tuberculosis patients were gathered, Yusuf ‘Abara from Aleppo was among those called one day to be hung. At this time, I was not yet among the brothers in the tuberculosis hall. Soon after the incident, I contracted the illness and was transferred there, and the brothers told me the story. Yusuf ‘Abara was called for execution shortly before *fajr*. He quickly performed a prayer and bade his brothers farewell before leaving to meet his Lord. Among those in the hall was an eloquent poet whose emotions surged at the sight of his brothers being summoned to their death from a long line of victims. As tears streamed down his face and the faces of those around him, he composed a poem with words flowing from his soul. We memorized the poem and sang its heartfelt words:

The funeral procession passed in the morning,  
leaving behind it wounds,  
and painting a march of struggle and strife.

For there is no life without the presence of arms;  
before it came the resonant call,  
“Come toward success... Come toward success!”<sup>68</sup>

And the procession of youth modestly passed,  
submitting to no other than their Lord.  
Their eyes were lit like a candle’s flame,  
Calling to the generations, “We will not surrender!”

Before it came the resonant call,

---

<sup>67</sup> The Angel Gabriel

<sup>68</sup> This expression is part of the *athan*, or call to prayer

“Come toward success... Come toward success!”

### **Bidding Brothers Farewell**

As the assembly of hanging posts continued, so did the parade of youth being led to their death at the hands of ruthless murderers. One of the most difficult and painful episodes was when a brother from the Al-‘Abidi family of Damascus heard an officer from the next hall summon his father’s name among the list of those to be hung. In disbelief, he looked through the cracks in the door and saw his father. The two were arrested together when the son was fifteen years old and still in secondary school. He watched his father take his last breaths as the noose tightened around his neck and lifted him into the air.

There was another incident, no less heartbreaking and sorrowful, related to two men in my hall: Tareef Haddad and Mulham Al-Atasi, both from Homs. With us were their brothers, Bashar Haddad and Mutaa’ Al-Atasi, both of whom were called for execution one morning. When Bashar stepped forward to bid his brother farewell, Tareef said bravely,

“Hold steadfast and be patient, and we will meet in Heaven, by the will of God. *Alhamdulillah* that you are being given the blessing of martyrdom. Do not forget us from your *shafa’ah*<sup>69</sup>.”

The bleakness of these days also took another brother, ‘Abdul-Ghani Dabbagh from Homs, to meet his Lord. Shortly thereafter, we heard of yet another two maternal brothers who were executed after a short period of imprisonment.

### **Impudence**

The Massacre of Hama was concluded, and months later, so too ended the year 1982. Throughout this year, we faced the most strenuous circumstances and the most

---

<sup>69</sup> In Islam, martyrs are placed in the highest of ranks and are granted many rewards; among them is the ability to provide *shafaa’ah*, or mediation, between a servant and the Creator on the Day of Judgment. Forgiveness for the individual is requested on behalf of the martyr. It is granted and Heaven is attained.

dreadful treatment. The sadism of that period gradually reduced, and we found ourselves entering a new and different phase of struggle and strife.

This chapter began when we heard that Colonel Faysal Al-Ghanem initiated visitations to the Prison Halls. Occasionally, he would threaten and intimidate the prisoners. At other times, he asked them of their needs and conditions, and promised them optimistic news in the near future. We heard that during this period, one of the brothers gathered the courage to ask him why the prisoners were forbidden from praying, to which Faysal impudently responded that the Prison's administration was not against praying or religion, but that the floors in the halls were not clean and therefore unsuitable for prayer. After the Colonel left, the officers returned to the hall and attacked the questioner viciously, teaching him and all who heard the story never to try to reason with these arrogant individuals.

Things moved very quickly during this period, and strange, new events surfaced. We could not decipher one affair before another perplexing incident was presented. The apparent beginning of these new and bewildering happenings was when one day in 1983, we left our hall for the daily recess. As we walked along the regular route, one of the officers called for a prisoner from our hall named Khaled 'Awadh Al-Salem. He was escorted with his eyes closed to the new Sergeant Muhammad Al-Khazem. Al-Khazem was the wicked successor to the evil Faysal Kaheela.

Without opening his eyes, the Sergeant instructed him to raise his head. He asked him for his name, and when he responded, the Sergeant slapped him across his face and ordered him to return. The incident was nothing out of the ordinary, as the prisoners often faced much worse treatment for absolutely no reason. Then, however, Sergeant Jihad came to our hall accompanied by a number of his assistants and requested that Abu 'Awadh<sup>70</sup> go with them. He did as commanded and returned about one hour later. We were shocked to find him a completely different person.

---

<sup>70</sup> "Abu Awadh" was the name Khaled 'Awadh Al-Salem went by

### **Abu ‘Awadh**

Khaled ‘Awadh Al-Salem was a prisoner from Soran<sup>71</sup>. It was his brother who had died less than a year ago from tuberculosis while resting against Khaled’s chest and repeating the Islamic profession of faith. Both were arrested and accused of arms trade, and although they were brothers, their personalities represented two polarized extremes.

Even before his arrest, Khaled was infamous for his bad reputation and corrupt behavior. Because he was athletic and a very muscular man, when he served his mandatory service a few years prior to his arrest he was stationed with either the special units or the military police.

When Abu ‘Awadh returned from this visit with the officers, he had mysteriously evolved from an ordinary prisoner to the status of Hall President. The officers ordered Abul Fadl, who had assumed this role thus far, to hand the responsibility over to Abu ‘Awadh. Jamal, of course, had no choice but to agree. Abu ‘Awadh changed overnight, and his controlling personality and arrogance became apparent.

He was suddenly exempt from the trips to the barber, where he used to receive severe beatings like the rest of us. Additionally, he was permitted to grow out his hair and mustache. For the remaining prisoners, seeing someone with this appearance was a very strange sight. He looked no different than the guards. Eventually, the secret behind the special treatment was passed on to us by those who were close to Abu ‘Awadh.

In the past, Abu ‘Awadh served a temporary sentence as a military prisoner at Tadmur because of an offense he committed during his mandatory service. Also during that time, Muhammad Al-Khazem was the Sergeant at Tadmur, and a relationship was founded between the prisoner and his commander. The two decided to establish a business among the prisoners that would serve their interests. Muhammad Al-Khazem would provide the materials and Khaled would sell the items

---

<sup>71</sup> A village in Syria

to prisoners at incredibly inflated prices, taking advantage of their need for these objects. When Al-Khazem realized that Abu ‘Awadh was back at Tadmur, he knew that he was the ideal man to help continue this scheme that even the Warden himself wanted to implement.

When Abu ‘Awadh’s brother passed away, we expressed the highest degree of consolation toward him and went out of our way to ensure that he was always as comfortable as possible. We often gave him portions of our food because his body was bigger than ours and we thought he was in greater need of it. Other times, we protected him during the recess and haircuts and let him hide behind us, for the officers had ‘marked’ him because of his large body and he always received extra beatings. Despite all this, the new power he possessed quickly led him to forget all the generosity we offered.

He became a strict and controlling individual who apparently thought of himself as an officer rather than a prisoner. He tried to cause division between the brothers in the hall, and assigned the weaker members among us the role of spies. They would report to Abu ‘Awadh all that they heard in the study circles and especially what the prisoners were saying about him. He wanted to know every minute detail and would then pass the information on to his master and new partner – the Sergeant.

His ruthlessness had no limits: he began to prey on other prisoners’ food and took from any person whatever and however much he desired. His audacity took him as far as hitting some brothers if they defended their belongings. He even began to occasionally beat the brothers just as the officers did! I remember that one of his victims, Muhammad Sanobar, who had memorized the Book of God, received a severe beating from him that was no less brutal than that which we received from the cold-blooded officers.

### **The Hall of Privileged Prisoners**

In March of 1983, with the change in the administrative rules of the Prison, we were presented with a period of relative ease and improvement. We were now

permitted to open our eyes and raise our heads normally in front of the officers. We also saw a noticeable change in the behavior of the officers and the Prison administration toward our hall in particular. The stress that we had been facing was somewhat alleviated. Most of the time, concerns pertaining to our hall were dealt with by Abu 'Awadh. The officers did not visit us as often as they did in the past. Abu 'Awadh was regularly called out of the hall to meet with Muhammad Al-Khazem at the Personnel Office. When he returned from their gathering, we often asked him what they discussed but he refused to provide any significant details.

We began to hear of visitations to some of the prisoners, whose families were allowed to bring them a great deal of presents and money. This, of course, was only possible for the extremely wealthy families, as it required a long chain of connections and tremendous bribes. We were surprised to find these fortunate prisoners being transferred to our hall groups at a time! We began to refer to our hall as what it had indeed become: the hall of privileged prisoners.

With these advancements, the Prison Doctor began to make rounds across the many halls and present the prisoners with their primary needs. A health manager from among the prisoners was designated for each hall. His task was to present a report to the Prison Doctor, who would in turn be spared the exposure to the infections and illnesses.

### **Forced Brotherhood**

We were astonished when one day in June of 1983, we were taken outside onto the field along with prisoners of other halls. Colonel Faysal Al-Ghanem, one of those who oversaw the Massacre of Tadmur in 1980, stood before us for the first time and addressed us in a rather gentle manner that we were not accustomed to hearing throughout our past years in prison.

For over forty minutes, he told us of our mistakes, specified our points of error, repeated that we wronged our country, and informed us that despite our offenses and shortcomings, we remained brothers! After every sentence he spoke, the officers

directed us to applaud his words. During his speech, he questioned the differences between an *‘Alawi* and a *Sunni* and said,

“I am your brother, whether you like it or not!”

As we stood there still overcome by shock and reservations, Al-Ghanem continued his sermon by mentioning Israel and the horrific Sabra and Shatila Massacre, citing the number of innocent victims, and pointing out that Syria was the only Arab nation that stood firm in the face of Israel and America. Finally, he redirected his words to us and said,

“As for you, you were persuaded to carry out actions that were not in the best interest of this country. Although a son who makes a mistake is disciplined by his family, he is not disowned. Similarly, you are now serving time as a penalty for your faults, but you will eventually be released and matters will be rectified.”

Then it was over. The lecture ended just as obscurely as it had begun. The halls were flooded with questions and discussion analyzing the episode. The general feeling we all had was that the Prison was progressing toward new advancements and overall improvement.

During this time, one development worthy of note was that, for the first time ever, the silence of the halls was broken by the installment of speakers that delivered live coverage of Damascus Radio twelve hours a day! To us, this was a window of opportunity to follow the news of the outside world. It was a chance to break the harsh lifestyle we had adopted. We were not, of course, allowed to have radios in our halls, nor were we permitted to use paper or have books. Qurans, naturally, were at the top of the list of forbidden articles of possession. Still, things were quite different.

### **The Snake’s Tail**

Driving the apparent developments was a devious plot led by Colonel Faysal Al-Ghanem and enforced by Abu ‘Awadh. Abu Awadh was like the snake’s tail that slithered left and right moving the head forward. We soon ascertained that Al-Ghanem had developed a network of parasites that thrived on the grief of the prisoners’ families. This ring of individuals, headed by Al-Ghanem’s own mother, set

up visits between wealthy families and their imprisoned kin in exchange for vast amounts of money. In essence, it was a guaranteed business, but profiting from the emotions of devastated families was not enough.

As the families gave cash to their relatives in hope that it may protect them from harm and torture, Al-Ghanem watched the money exchange with mouth-watering temptation. When the transaction between visitor and inmate was complete, another network advanced to do its job... this time within the prison. Officers, and even a number of appointed prisoners, were paid to devise and carry out plans to rob the prisoners of their money. Abu 'Awadh was the dirty hand in this equation. Through him, Al-Ghanem knew what our needs were and what items we wanted to have. In order to execute his plan, he delivered his unique speech and allowed for exceptional rules to be implemented.

And so our circumstances slightly changed: our beatings were not as regular as they used to be, and we were allowed to leave for recess with our eyes open. For the first time, we absorbed the soft rays of the warm sun without the trauma of harsh torture. While days may have passed under these rather lax conditions, every other week we were compensated for the lenience by a sudden and severe session of torture. This ensured the officers that we were still under their command. It quelled their fear that we would slip out of their grasp of control. As for the mock trials and the executions, they continued, unaffected by the change. The shadow of death lingered above us always. Its suffocating grip wrapped around our necks and swept away one after the other... and there was nothing we could do about it.

### **Final Breaths**

I was sleeping next to Brother Ma'moon Al-Thahabi one night when he woke me up and complained of chest pain. Ma'moon was afflicted with a disease that caused a rapid and frightful deterioration of his health. Although he used to practice karate and possessed a strong and muscular body prior to his arrest, he now lacked the ability to leave his mat. He stretched his feeble hand toward me and shook me until I awoke. I asked him what was wrong.

“My chest is hurting me,” he said. “Make a prayer for me.”

I put my palm on his chest as I read verses from the Quran and repeated supplications. He quieted down, and when I sensed that he was asleep, I too returned to my slumber. That morning, Abu ‘Awadh woke us up as usual.

“Everyone up! Wake up!”

We all stood except for Ma’moon, whose blanket was covering his face. Abu ‘Awadh yelled at me to wake him up, but when I called him he did not respond.

“Kick him so that he can get up!” ordered Abu ‘Awadh in front of everyone.

I lifted the blanket from his face and told him to wake up. Moments passed, and I realized that he had passed away. Suddenly, I felt his final heart beats and his last breaths against my palm.

“He’s dead man,” I said.

No different than the officers, Abu ‘Awadh pitilessly walked to the door and informed the guards of a new death in the hall. I hurried along with a number of brothers and we carried Ma’moon to the bathroom where we were able to wash him before he was taken away.

### **Imaginary Kingdom**

Abu ‘Awadh’s weak kingdom expanded. The Prison’s authorities designated a special area for him where he could run his business. Indeed, he set up a little shop where he sold the prisoners tea, fruits, vegetables, and other necessary items they were previously prevented from having, charging atrociously high prices for everything.

In the meantime, Faysal Al-Ghanem monitored the visitors and subjected them to searches on their way into the Prison. If they were carrying money to give to their sons, he took his share of it. If the visitors brought clothes or other items with them, he occasionally permitted them to keep them, but many times he took them and gave the garments to Abu ‘Awadh. Abu ‘Awadh would then make trips from hall to hall and sell the stolen articles. By these means, nearly all the money that the

visitors came with was redirected into the pockets of the Warden and his circle of partners.

Accepting that there was no way we could halt the candid exploitation of prisoners, we bought the stolen items with no remorse. In those difficult and depressing circumstances, we were in dire need of an extra morsel of food to strengthen us, another piece of clothing to provide us additional comfort and warmth, or anything that would ease even a little bit of our suffering.

We, too, were able to benefit from the moderate situation. For the most part, we were spared the threats of the officers from the vents above, which allowed us to strengthen our relationship with other brothers in our hall. We got to know one another on more personal levels, exchanging stories, experiences, and information.

Our determination for reviewing the Quran was multiplied and we helped groups of brothers complete its memorization. When one group committed the Book of God to memory, we prepared a small party for them. For two or three weeks, we would save bits of food and sweets that we purchased or received through visitations, and when a good portion of it was collected, we designated a day for celebration. Abu ‘Awadh, of course, took a lion’s share of what we had saved. We yielded to his behavior for otherwise, he threatened to tell the officers what was taking place. The rest of the food was distributed among the brothers, particularly those whose achievements we were celebrating.

### **Forgiveness**

Another benefit from our exceptional circumstance was that we could now buy items from Abu ‘Awadh’s stolen products and send them, accompanied by a small note, as gifts to dear brothers in other halls. In the same manner, they would return notes and gifts. This allowed many brothers to learn the conditions of friends and family and discover whether they were alive or had been executed. By these means, while I was in the tuberculosis ward at the end of 1983, I received a teapot from Jamal, who had been moved to another hall. In his note, he wrote:

“To Muhammad Saleem... Muhammad Jamal Samaah<sup>72</sup>.”

With these words, Jamal indicated to me that he was sentenced to death. I knew that he was asking for my forgiveness because he would soon leave this world. Indeed, only weeks later I received notice of his death, may the mercy of God be upon his soul.

Meanwhile, Abu ‘Awadh became increasingly conceited and was ecstatic in his imaginary world. We heard that he requested that the Warrant Officer allow his family to come visit him, and it was done. We also heard that he smuggled some of his prison earnings to his brother when he came to visit him, but all this is in the knowledge of God. In time, the tables turned on Abu ‘Awadh and God taught him a lesson for the evil and the oppression that he inflicted upon his fellow prisoners.

### **Regional Divisions**

Our behavior in the Prison was by no means ideal or angelic. While the more difficult times brought us closer to Allah and made us more sincere and close-knit, we eventually drifted back to our instinctual characters influenced by our backgrounds and upbringing. After years of living in these repulsive halls and having been subject to diverse groups from many backgrounds, this period of relative freedom allowed for the emergence of the different religious schools of thought among us. It also led to divisions across regional lines, both of which caused a split between the brothers of the hall.

This first surfaced when we found ourselves able to organize quiet study circles, after having ensured that the officers above and around us would not hurt us. Suddenly, the brothers began to bring up issues pertaining to opposing scholarly opinions. Others discussed innovations and concerns regarding different rulings and practices. These were issues that have caused centuries of conflict in the Muslim world to no avail. The brothers even disagreed regarding the *athan* that we heard from the

---

<sup>72</sup> Samaah literally means “forgiveness.” As I knew his last name was not “Samaah,” I was able to understand his message.

city of Tadmur's mosque beyond the prison walls. The source of their argument was whether or not it was permitted to say "peace be upon him"<sup>73</sup> aloud after the *athan!*

The quarrels promptly led to the formation of different branches of the Brotherhood within the Prison. At the surface of this argument was a discussion about the historic discord regarding the Muslim Brotherhood's organization between Aleppo and Damascus, or more specifically, between the group that supported 'Isam Al-'Attar and the group in favor of Sheikh 'Abdul-Fattah Abu-Ghudda.

The brothers from Aleppo pulled the Damascus group away from the organizational conflicts and led them toward ideological disputes. They spread the idea that the brothers from Damascus were *Salafi*<sup>74</sup>, with no *math-hab*<sup>75</sup>. These trivial quarrels were very detrimental to the morale of the prisoners. Most of all, they harmed the neutral, non-denominational brothers among us. As those in discord regressed into pointless, centuries-old conflicts, this group was presented with the worst image of Islamic movements.

Matters deteriorated rapidly from here. Following the rift between the different schools of thought and ideologies, the formation of narrow-minded region-based sects transpired. The *Salafi* followers of 'Isam formed a "Damascus" group, and the *math-hab* followers of Aleppo who defended Sheikh 'Abdul-Fattah established their own provincial circle. Those from Hama, who followed 'Adnan Sa'id Al-Deen, took advantage of the split and gathered themselves into a third cluster. This led to extremely damaging results within the hall. Our hearts were divided as every individual sat within his sphere of influence, completely ignoring the group of brothers gathered only inches away. This was despite the fact that the difficult circumstances we were facing did not differentiate between any of us.

Things continued to get worse and each faction grew more obstinate. It even reached a point where groups moved beyond questioning the legitimacy of the

---

<sup>73</sup> Referring to the Prophet Muhammad

<sup>74</sup> A Sunni tradition strictly adhering to the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)

<sup>75</sup> Religious school of thought

regime's faith and started accusing those of a different ideology or leadership of apostasy.

### **Tuberculosis**

After years of torture, starvation, depravation, and life under the worse health and emotional conditions, the bodies of the prisoners were devastated. Despite the façade of improvement and progress, it was too late. The number of casualties increased as brothers continued to die from illness and fatal injuries. From our hall alone, about fourteen brothers died from what we later learned was a new epidemic of tuberculosis. We learned from new prisoners we met that tuberculosis does not only affect the lungs, but also the intestines, kidneys, bones, and numerous other body parts. At this time, we did not have a specialized doctor in our hall to diagnose the disease nor did we have the necessary treatment if we did discover it.

Tuberculosis was first discovered in 1982 in Hall 5-6 of Field 1, one of the oldest halls in the Prison of Tadmur. It was a very large, gloomy and extremely humid hall. One of the prisoners in that hall was Dr. Mahmood Al-'Abid from Hama, who was a physician specialized in chest illnesses at one of the hospitals in Aleppo. He, of course, knew the proper diagnosis and shared the information with the brothers. Fearing the wrath of the officers and acknowledging that they would neither help nor care, the brothers did not notify them of the outbreak. This second outbreak began during the period of slight improvement at the Prison. When the Prison administration noticed an increase in the number of deaths, they opened a special hall, Hall 23 in Field 4, for those infected with tuberculosis.

Back in our Hall 26, where the brothers remained under the forced reign of Abu 'Awadh, we faced privileges that established us as the most unique hall in the Prison. As I mentioned earlier, the administration decided to transfer all the prisoners who came from wealthy families and received regular visitors to our hall. There, they were under Abu 'Awadh's constant supervision. When the prisoners returned from visits with their families, the money they were given was closer to Abu Awadh's pockets than their own.

Amid the regular transfer of prisoners to and from halls, a group of brothers from Damascus arrived in our hall. Among them I recall Muhammad Al-Hourani, Saleem Al-Asad, ‘Adnan Al-Mu’ayyid, and a brother from the family of Dabash. Saleem Al-Asad was a doctor from Damascus who was transferred from Hall 5-6. While there, he was trained by the specialist Dr. Mahmood Al-‘Abid on how to examine and diagnose a victim of tuberculosis. When this group arrived, they informed us of a wave of the disease passing through the halls and the designation of Hall 23 for the sick. They also told us of Zahi ‘Abbadi, a fourth year medical student from Deir Ezzor who volunteered to move to that hall where he could oversee and aid the tuberculosis patients. Eventually, he too contracted the illness, may God rest his soul.

While I was outside during recess one day, accompanying me was Brother Subhi Barakaat, a member of my group. I was surprised to see him leaning against my arm, exerting great effort to keep from falling. Barely able to speak, he whispered to me that he felt nauseous and dizzy, and that he could not move. We requested permission to enter the hall from the Sergeant and he approved. When we made it inside, the brother vomited and fell to the ground nearly lifeless. When the recess period was over, Brother Saleem examined him and determined that he had, indeed, contracted tuberculosis. He was quickly transferred to Hall 35 in Field 7, which had been recently opened after Hall 23 was overcrowded with patients.

A month passed and in due course, I found myself suffering the same symptoms as the brothers before me: high temperature, low appetite, bad cough, constant sweat, and extreme exhaustion. After a week of these symptoms, Doctor Saleem examined me and found that I, too, had tuberculosis. This was in June of 1983, only a few days after the public address delivered by Faysal Al-Ghanem. When the officers were informed, I was moved for the first time out of Hall 26 and into the tuberculosis ward.

### **A Dosage of Torture**

I entered Hall 35 in Field 7 and found an unspeakably horrendous sight before me. There were over one hundred ill-stricken brothers seemingly on the verge of life. One of them was continuously coughing and in his hands was a rusty, metal pail that he spit blood and mucus into. Another was vomiting uncontrollably. A third had tuberculosis of the liver and his stomach was so swollen he looked pregnant. Other brothers suffered from tuberculosis in their testicles, bones, lungs, as well as tuberculosis meningitis. All these suffering individuals were gathered into a single hall, where we had to share one bathroom and sleep side by side, passing along our ailments and contracting the diseases of others.

I had suspected, or perhaps hoped, that the tuberculosis ward would be better than the other halls in terms of cleanliness and care, but found that things were no different at all. The shredded mats and the worn blankets were the same, and the vent above and the open windows were still present. Officers still stood above the hall and outside its door intimidating the prisoners. We were not even spared the schedule of searches and recesses. Along with all this, of course, were the unchanged poor standards of eating and living. If, at any time, an officer saw something that did not please him, he beat us with the same force and ruthlessness that our healthy brothers in other halls received.

Perhaps the only advantage of the hall was the medicine we received. Even that, though, was more like a dosage of torture, for not a month of treatment passed without being followed by a ten day interruption of medication. When the medicine was finally re-administered, we grew apprehensive about the next time it would be discontinued.

The combined effects of this trepidation along with malnutrition and harsh conditions led the brothers to fall dead one after the other, until over twenty brothers died from our hall alone<sup>viii</sup>.

### **Heart Attack**

Among the martyrs from the tuberculosis ward was Brother Muhammad Hasan ‘Aj’ooj from Hama, who was from the initial advocates of Sheikh Marwan Hadeed. The Syrian Intelligence arrested him in Lebanon shortly after arresting Sheikh Marwan. He was imprisoned with other brothers arrested at the time at the Mazza Prison. With the worsening conditions in Syria and the rise in the number of arrests at the beginning of the ‘80s, he was transferred to the Prison of Tadmur following the Great Massacre. He moved from Hall 9 to Hall 11, and then, after developing tuberculosis, he was finally relocated to Hall 35 where I met him.

It was in this hall that one day in the morose year of 1983, Muhammad Hasan ‘Aj’ooj received notice that his entire family was killed during the Massacre of Hama less than one year ago. He was also informed that one of his brothers was dragged across the streets after his death. The poor man could not cope with the news and suffered a heart attack that took his life, may God rest his soul.

It became an ordinary occurrence to call the officers every few mornings and inform them that another prisoner had died. We then casually turned to our daily routines, and instead of feeling sorrow and despair for the fate of our brothers, we were envious that God took their soul and relieved them of the torture we still suffered.

### **Hysteria**

One incident that remains engrained in my memories of the tuberculosis ward is that of Brother Bassam Al-Hafeth from Homs, who, after enduring all types of torture and pressure, could no longer manage the stress or cope with additional persecution. He jumped up one night with eyes the color of blood and began screaming and yelling with every ounce of energy he possessed. When the brothers tried to calm him down, he reacted more violently, unrestrained and uncontrollable.

The officer from the night shift entered the room investigating the commotion. He ordered the health manager, Zahi ‘Abadi, to quiet him by force. The brother had no choice but to inject him with a tranquilizing substance that gradually calmed him

down. The next morning, the officer ordered the health manager to identify the brother. When he did, the poor man was dragged outside where the officers who were waiting whipped and beat him. They threw him back into the hall in a near lifeless state of being.

That night, the same episode was repeated and Brother Zahi once more gave him a sedative drug. When the officer entered this time, Zahi informed him that Bassam suffered a case of hysteria that was out of his control. He promised him that he would do his best to calm and treat the brother. Upon convincing the officer, Zahi turned to us and requested that we discontinue conversing with Bassam and build for him a tent-like structure in the corner of the room where he could sit alone. The poor brother quickly took to his corner, where he remained isolated for two months. He did not speak to anyone and no one spoke to him. During this time, his condition slowly improved; he was eventually transferred to another hall, after which none of us heard of him or his fate.

### **Ibn Malik's *Alfiyyat***

The sequence of torture continued as the shadow of death pulled at our bodies, consuming one after the other and still thirsty for more. There was no outlet of escape. The only source of ease we had came from the Almighty Protector, Allah. Our spirits often weakened, followed by a period of revitalization and patience. We were grateful that the perseverance gained by our strength of mind prevailed over our broken bodies. Whenever we felt hopeless or when our emotional wounds bled, we stood by each other and supported one another through supplication and prayer. We supplicated to Him with every opening of the hall door, and thanked Him each time it closed with no harm inflicted upon us.

When we sensed even the slightest bit isolated from the watchful eye of the officers, we turned to our regular programs that nourished our souls and comforted our hearts. The pearl of these gatherings was the Quran. Each of us persisted in its revision until he secured its words by heart, and then proceeded to learn other beneficial information from any brother who offered the knowledge. This ranged from

Islamic jurisprudence to *tajweed*<sup>76</sup>, and from the classical Arabic language to scholarly literature. When this was perfected, some continued to learn English, Physics, Chemistry, or any other education that was available. These studies were passed orally from one brother to the next.

As for me, with the grace of God, after memorizing the entire Quran I chose to focus on the study of authentic scholarly writings. My sheikh and educator of this discipline was a brother from Aleppo, may God reward his efforts, who was erudite in his memorization of these texts. I learned from him the *Bayqooniyya*<sup>77</sup>, the *Jazariyya*<sup>78</sup> and the *Rahbiyya*<sup>79</sup>. I also memorized nearly 650 stanzas from Ibn Malik's *Alfiyyat*<sup>80</sup>, *alhamdulillah*. By means of these studies, incredible talents and skills surfaced among the brothers. Amazingly, some of the brothers even memorized *Seerat ibn Hisham*<sup>81</sup> in its entirety. When they perfected it, they completed the incredible task of developing it into a poem for ease of memorization.

#### “The Martyr of Tadmur”

From the talents that emerged was that of a brother who wrote many poems that we memorized and spread throughout the halls. This poet had been sentenced to death, and when names were being called for execution one day, all the brothers sentenced with him were killed, but his turn never came. This incident caused an upsurge of emotion and unparalleled talent. In the art of words, he managed to compress the anguish that we experienced into a few lines of poetry. One ode he wrote was dedicated to the brothers in the tuberculosis ward. In it he said:

Your face will shine through the darkness  
as your chest bleeds behind the metal bars;  
Sordid spite could not change your ideals,  
Oh Martyr of Tadmur,  
Peace be upon you; Peace be upon you.

---

<sup>76</sup> The knowledge of the rules of Quranic recitation

<sup>77</sup> Knowledge of *Hadith*, which are teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)

<sup>78</sup> Knowledge of *tajweed*, which is the study of the rules of Quranic recitation

<sup>79</sup> Knowledge of how to distribute inheritance

<sup>80</sup> A poem written by Ibn Malik composed of 1,000 (*alf*) stanzas explaining the rules of Arabic grammar

<sup>81</sup> One of the most famous biographies of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)

My brother, after the pain and disgrace,  
    we will rise above all creation, human and jinn;  
For us is the spotlight or a heavenly abode.

And despite the tempest and the tremor of the earth,  
    I feel as though my heart will explode.

### **Departing You**

The dark times we faced also led to an explosion of poetic talent in a brother from Aleppo. He wrote a poem for his mother calling to her from behind the barriers of imprisonment. Another brother from our hall added beautiful tunes to the elegies and sung them. This particular poem became a song that was sung from hall to hall by one chained brother after the other. With its words, our perseverance strengthened and our emotions soared.

When she came, she was flowing with love and compassion.  
She knocked on the door, and in her knock was a melancholy tune.  
I wonder: does she hope this meeting will change my ideals?  
Or does she think these chains can break the strength of the steadfast?  
With internal feelings of a storming revolt, I simply said,  
    “Allah is sufficient for me and He is the best Protector.”  
I carried my belongings and rifle, and decided to depart,  
Leaving words at the door, saying,  
    “I am leaving you, traveling, suffering from my wounds.  
    I do not care about death; I will fight the tyrant.  
    I challenge the darkness of the night and live to fight.  
    The camaraderie of shackles and the sound of chains taught me,  
    that the religion of God cannot rise without a fight.  
    Leaving you, I sing to the streams and the fields,  
    Filling the earth with light and songs, and glad tidings.  
    My bullets are the tyrants’ tickets to hell.  
    For the cause of Allah I stride, following those before me.  
    The camaraderie of shackles and the sound of chains taught me,  
    that the religion of God cannot rise without a fight.”

### **“I’m A Ba’thist”**

One of the valuable features of the tuberculosis ward was the combination of different types of prisoners and the myriad ideologies and organizations of affiliation.

Coming from Hall 26, where all the prisoners were detained because of religious association (or accused thereof), we found ourselves in the tuberculosis Hall 35 accompanied by prisoners from right-winged organizations loyal to the Iraqi Ba’th party<sup>82</sup>. While the brothers and I sympathized with any oppressed individual who fell victim to the subjugation and tyranny of the regime, I found the majority of these men who came from the rural areas of *Jazeera*<sup>83</sup> concerned solely with their own benefit and gain.

The Iraqi Ba’thists came to them and took advantage of their poverty and simplicity. They gave them money and supplied their basic needs until these Syrian loyalists to the Iraqi Ba’th party practically worshipped their providers. Upon their arrest, this faction of Ba’thists was a source of constant disturbance for the brothers in the hall, causing excessive suffering for the rest of us. Although their numbers fluctuated between only ten and fifteen, their presence and actions repeatedly harmed the brothers. Despite the common hardship we faced, they never ceased to view and treat us like ancient enemies, and they continually referred to us as ‘backwards<sup>84</sup>.’ As a result, they would pass along information about us to the officers and even lie about us. Whenever it occurred to one of them, he left the hall and, facing the Sergeant or the officers, said,

“Sir, I am a Ba’thist.”

Having acquired their attention, some of them would inform the officers of the study circles that we conducted. They told them we had a Sheikh among us who we followed. Some even went as far as saying that through our study circles we called individuals for *jihad*! Upon hearing this, the officers often commanded all the brothers to exit onto the field where we were punished collectively as a result of these false accusations.

---

<sup>82</sup> The Ba’th party split in 1966 between Syria and Iraq, which resulted in discord between the two nations. The Iraqi Ba’thists were considered the ‘right-wing’ of the Ba’th party while the Syrian Ba’thists were regarded as leftists.

<sup>83</sup> Eastern part of Syria bordering Iraq

<sup>84</sup> The Ba’thists used the term ‘backwards’ as an official label when referring to any religious-based ideology, considering it old-fashioned.

I still remember the names of a number of these right-winged individuals. One was Hussein Hafeth, along with Ya'qub Ya'qub, and a third was known as Abu 'Ali. As for the right-winged men who were sensible and wise, they left behind the outlandish ideologies of their group and converted their path of life toward Islam. There was one individual whom we witnessed make this transformation. I will not mention his name and ask God to protect him and keep him steadfast.

### **Spoiled Communists**

While this was the status of the Iraqi Ba'thists accompanying us, the communists were elevated to a completely different level. We learned of the communists' existence in the Prison in 1984. In that year, the incarcerated Muslim sisters were transferred from the clinic in Tadmur to another prison. We discovered this through the distribution of meals.

During this relative period of improvement, we were assigned the tasks of distributing food among the halls of Fields 6 and 7, where the clinic was located. One day, the *baladiya* who gave us our instructions informed us that there would be no delivery of meals to the clinic. Just the day before, we saw a group of approximately twenty or more women leaving the hall, and so we knew they were being transferred elsewhere. We asked God to protect them and grant them and ourselves safety and freedom.

When that area was vacant, the communists, who were less than forty in number, were transferred there. We occasionally caught glimpses of them and heard of their presence as well as their privileges. When I was later transferred to Hall 29, we became neighbors on the same field and I was able to see them regularly and witness the ease they were granted with my own eyes.

The fact that their situation was completely different than that of all the other prisoners was truly a strange matter. They were allowed to grow their hair, and were regularly let out for a relaxed recess. They conversed freely amongst themselves and even with the officers. They even smoked, cooked, and received visitors regularly. We

never saw them being tortured or hit, and never did we hear of executions being carried out among them.

### **Trapping the Vanguard**

The days passed, and although at the surface there was a more liberated pretense, the burden of dealing with the baseness and greed of the administration was crushing. During this period, new waves of prisoners continued to join our halls and the hangings resumed. Every time a group of prisoners was executed, a new cluster was admitted to replace them. There was, though, an incident that aggravated the terrible situation we were already in. It was the regime's success in luring groups from the Brotherhood's Vanguard to Syria and then capturing them all in a carefully plotted scheme that led even 'Adnan 'Uqla<sup>85</sup> himself into the hands of the Intelligence.

The 'reception' of the members from the Vanguard was at the epitome of viciousness and malice. At the beginning, they were isolated in a specific hall designated for them, where they faced indescribable torment and cruelty. The officers lacerated their skin and shredded their bodies, and then left them to suffer in anguish and distress. They left them without treatment until their blistered feet rotted and their decayed wounds gashed open with every new beating. This led to the spread of gangrene that eventually took the lives of them.

Later, those who survived the initial phase at Tadmur were distributed amongst the halls. I met one brother from that group, Ayman 'Anjareeni from Aleppo, who was later executed. Another brother I heard of was Taher Al-'Alo from a village near Aleppo. I never met Taher, but later learned that he, too, was executed. Through encountering these individuals, we learned what happened to them. The new prisoners informed us of what transpired step by step, starting with the trap that led them into the hands of the regime through a spy named Muhammad Jahid Dandash

---

<sup>85</sup> One of the well-known leaders and official spokesman for the group known as the Vanguard

and ending with the monstrous torture that they faced before being moved to our halls.

After the Massacre of Hama, the members of the Vanguard were distributed between Jordan and Iraq. At some point, the leadership decided to return to Syria in order to rebuild its bases and reinitiate opposition toward the regime. Jahid Dandash took this lead and misleadingly said to those in Jordan that the path to Syria was clear and safe. When he assured the leaders of the Vanguard that he could establish a secure route to Aleppo, a stream of brothers began to cross into Syria through the Syrian-Turkish borders, led by ‘Adnan himself.

Jahid, along with the Syrian Intelligence, received the brothers as they crossed into the country group after group. He proceeded to deliver the agreed upon signal to the Vanguard headship indicating that all had arrived safely. Then, another group from the Vanguard was sent. A total of nearly seventy brothers arrived this way, all falling within the grasp of the government.

We received no definite news of ‘Adnan ‘Uqla after his capture. The other brothers were transferred from the ‘Adawi Branch to the Military Interrogation’s Branch, and then finally to Tadmur. Their arrival at Tadmur only added to our anguish for these brothers isolated themselves and were exceedingly critical of the Muslim Brotherhood’s leadership.

Following the plunge that they had now sunken into and the conflicts they had previously faced with the Brotherhood’s headship, they went so far as to accuse them of betrayal and treason. Additionally, they accused them of being responsible for the atrocities that had taken place in Hama, as well as other incidents preceding and following it. Their words upset the Brothers within the hall who had no choice but to listen to their historical leaders and ideologies slandered. This, of course, ultimately caused us greater anxiety and unease.

### **Where is the Discrepancy?**

This dilemma led to serious quarrel between the members of the hall. Surfacing to this level for the first time were the differences between the two organizations,

causing serious repercussions for brothers of one predicament. What was even more dangerous was the effect it had on our personal beliefs and character. Initially, we did not know much about the friction that existed. For the most part, the extent of our knowledge regarding the discrepancies dealt with the dissonance between ‘Isam ‘Attar’s group and that of other leaders.

Even regarding these issues, we were led to believe that they were ideological differences only, and surely nothing that would lead to bloodshed or cause brothers to fall into the clutches of the government. With the new accusations and arguments that emerged, we found ourselves internally questioning that which had transpired.

We reviewed the facts and flipped through the pages of our memories, questioning whether the individuals we followed in fact matched the description we now received. Were there truly traitors and conspirators within this historical leadership? Were the accusations merely smoke without fire? Was what we were hearing mere exaggeration and a reaction to the situation? And if this were the case, then what extent of it was true? To what degree was each party at fault? Where is the discrepancy? Who was responsible?

Increasing the complexity of the situation was the fact that many of those who partook in the arguments did not belong to either of the groups. They did not possess the level of teaching, knowledge or wisdom necessary to accuse or defend one party or the other.

In truth, the reopening of these old wounds after many bitter years of torture and destitution led to severe depression among us. We found ourselves falling into a new adversity, despite the fact that more than anyone else, we needed to be as far away from it as possible. Our once strong and solid lines were now divided by deep rifts, and the ensuing schism brought about a dark shadow that affects our hearts until this very day. Without a doubt, the soreness of these wounds produced pains far more hurtful than anything we faced from the officers’ whips or cables or sticks.

### **Collective Executions**

During the bitter, unforgettable days of 1984, we witnessed what was perhaps the largest collective execution at Tadmur. After a hiatus in hangings that lasted many months, we were horrified one morning to hear the endless sound of construction as lynching posts were being assembled in Field 6. The guards called group after group of brothers to their death. On that day, the brothers who were able to get a glimpse of the hangings through a crack in the door estimated that around two-hundred men were killed without exaggeration. Among them was Brother Yusuf ‘Obeyd from Damascus.

Information that was later disclosed explained that this mass murder coincided with the struggle for power that was taking place between the President Hafez Al-Assad and his brother Rif’at. This dispute led to military friction between the two brothers. We assumed that Rif’at, who was preparing himself for presidency after his brother fell critically ill, ordered the killing of prisoners in order to remove any potential threat from his future reign in power.

### **The New Warden**

Hafez Al-Assad miraculously overcame his ailment and regained full authority over the country and its citizens. He was alarmed to find friction and division within the pillars of his regime’s leadership, including among his own personal assistants. Consequently, he initiated a series of purges and reassignment of roles. In the process, the management at Tadmur was also replaced. In October of 1984, we found the military officers at the Prison calling all Hall Presidents for a collective meeting.

When our Hall President returned from the assembly, he informed us that Tadmur now had a new Warden, and that the previous Head Correctional Officer, the tyrant Muhammad Al-Khazem, had also been replaced. The new Warden was Captain Zakariya Al-‘Ish, who had called the meeting and met with the Hall Presidents himself.

During the meeting, he ordered the Hall Presidents to close their eyes. He reinstated the rule mandating that prisoners keep their eyes closed at all times –

especially when standing before Prison staff – and warned the brothers that the leniency of the past was now over and that organization and discipline would be restored. He also warned of dire consequences for anyone who refused to comply.

We were still asking our Hall President questions when the officers stormed into the room and announced a search. They yelled at us to close our eyes and stand at attention. We barely began to arrange ourselves when they pushed us all outside and attacked us without warning with sticks and lashes. From that moment, we entered a new phase of severe torture and punishment. Once again, we faced stringent searches, excruciating recesses, harsh beatings and constant degradation. In the tuberculosis hall, we were saved one hour of torture that the others faced in the routine showers we were spared from. The officers, however, quickly made up for it by doubling the torture we received during recess.

Among many other changes, the radio broadcasting was halted. Additionally, a new rule commanded that all those who were escorted to their death would have their mouths covered so that they could not voice the *takbeer* or pronounce the *shahaadah*. The brutal totalitarianism returned stronger than before, and it multiplied with the arrival of yet a new Warden, General Major Ghazi Al-Juhani, who reclaimed his position after nearly two months of being replaced. With these changes, the officers resumed their old ways of ferocious treatment of prisoners.

One day, we were led out of the hall with our eyes closed as usual for recess. As we ran around in an effort to escape the battering of the sticks and cables that chased us, ‘Abdul-Basit Dashaq, a brother from Aleppo, was struck in the eye with a blow so powerful it ruptured his eyeball, which burst and oozed blood and tissue.

The poor brother returned to the hall with his face soaked in blood, vomiting from the immense pain. When the health manager, who at the time was ‘Ali ‘Abbas from Idlib, knocked on the door to inform the officers of the grievance, he could not bring himself to say that one of the officers had burst a prisoner’s eye, and so instead he apologized and said that one of the brothers fell in the bathroom and split open his eye.

Despite this, no action was taken and the repetitive attempts made no difference. After three days of constant effort to have a doctor examine the brother, one finally came, but did little more than give him a few sedative pills to tranquilize the pain. For many months, the ill-fated brother remained suffering from unspeakable pain, and was given no attention or care from the guards.

### **Discipline**

Perhaps it was the unbearable intensity along with the disgraceful torment we faced that finally drove a youth from Idlib to defend himself against one of the officers. During our daily recess, a young prisoner of the Sayyid 'Isa family who belonged to Hall 36 was painfully wounded by the beatings. Consequently, he attacked the officer responsible for his injury and beat him in return.

Although the incident was surely a reflexive reaction to the pain and harm that the youth was exposed to, and even though the officer who was attacked retaliated and beat the boy intensely, the matter did not end there. All of the prisoners were returned to their halls, and the new Sergeant, Muhammad Nu'ma, appeared in order to examine the issue himself. The youth was presented and seated in 'the tire' where he received another round of whippings and beatings until he was literally on verge of life.

When they were finished with him, all the prisoners of Field 7 were led outside where we received our share of the punishment. They did this to discipline us and to strip us of even the thought of ever reacting in such a manner.

It was for the following reasons that never again did a prisoner assault an officer or any Prison staff: first, he knew that it would have little, if any, affect and that he would jeopardize his life, and second, out of fear that he would endanger the lives of the other brothers and bring upon them further pain and harm for no reason at all. We all acknowledged that we had fallen into this predicament by the will of God, and so we understood that patience and perseverance were better for us than causing ourselves and those around us more strife.

### **God's Justice with Abu 'Awadh**

Like all other prisoners, the brothers of Hall 26 could barely withstand the suffocating oppression they faced, but adding to their frustration was the sordid Abu 'Awadh, the Prison authority's vile aide. Unable to tolerate the transgression and injustice, some brothers in the hall decided amongst themselves to take revenge against Abu 'Awadh. A group of them surrounded and attacked him with such manpower and force that he was unable to protect himself. Following this incident, Abu 'Awadh found himself defeated—the fear that the prisoners had of him had now been broken. Upon realizing this, he decided to pursue a relationship with the new Warden.

He requested a meeting with the Sergeant claiming that he had crucial information he wished to relay to the administration. When he was questioned regarding the nature of information, Abu 'Awadh replied that he had discovered the presence of a Muslim Brotherhood society within the hall. This immediately triggered the attention Abu 'Awadh sought, and he now captured the interest of the Sergeant, the Warden and the officers.

The guards raided the hall immediately and awaited the appropriate signal directing them to begin the assault. When the brothers saw that the matter had reached this degree of gravity, they stood firmly together against Abu 'Awadh's accusations. They refuted the false allegations he made and in turn informed the Sergeant of the incalculable violations, including the theft and bribes, that Abu 'Awadh was involved in. They assured the Sergeant that the charges were simply fabricated tales in order to gain brawn and influence, and they further stated that they were collectively willing to endure the harshest penalty should any of his words prove true.

With the grace and mercy of God Almighty, the Prison leadership believed the prisoners this time. We were not sure if it was out of jealousy toward Abu 'Awadh, who now enjoyed more wealth and treasures than even some of the administration possessed, or if the decision came with the reign of the new Warden, who wanted to

treat the prisoners with an equal level of adversity and force his respect upon the figures of the old reign.

All that we learned was that the Sergeant ordered Abu 'Awadh, who was astonished at the courage expressed by the brothers, to pack his belongings and leave the hall. From his position of Hall 26's president, he was escorted to the barber where his hair and mustache were shaven, thrown into Hall 31, and stripped of all prior status and gain. The tide turned for Abu 'Awadh and from that point on, the officers marked and targeted him. Every day, he was taken outside onto the field where we heard him yelling and begging for help as he received isolated beatings. He was attacked mercilessly until his skin ripped apart. He was completely broken as he endured six or seven months of being punished by his previous employers.

At the end of 1987, he was transferred to the Sednaya Prison with a group of other inmates. God saved us of his evil and immorality, and showed us an unforgettable sign of His fairness and justice.

### **The Court**

The days of 1985 passed under the same conditions of torture and suffering. I was approaching my five year anniversary of imprisonment. Over the years, most of the brothers who arrived at Tadmur with me had been tried and sentenced. Many had already faced their fate of execution. I, however, had not yet been called for a hearing. This was a source of constant trepidation for me, for being informed of an ill-fated destiny remained preferable than awaiting the unknown. Ultimately, life is all in the hands of God.

Then, at around ten o'clock in the morning on the 30<sup>th</sup> of March, 1985, an officer opened the small window in the door of the tuberculosis Hall 35 and called inside. He read a list of names, only three of which were in the tuberculosis ward: Hazeen Qaasim Mahameed from Al-Ma'arra, a second brother of the Mustafa family from a village near Aleppo who was a graduate of Religious Studies (if I recall correctly), and finally, me.

We were gathered in front of the Personnel Office near the entrance of the Prison among seventy or eighty others. The officers ordered us to sit on the floor facing the wall with our hands cuffed and our eyes closed. Our exposed backs were once again subject to their thrashing and we were forced to bear the pain until it was our turn to be presented in court. Nearly two hours of beatings and swearing must have passed before it was my turn. My name was called and I raised my hand in response.

When we reached the door of the room that the hearings were held in, the Sergeant commanded me to open my eyes. He led me to a chair placed before the judge and ordered me to sit in it. The terror that grasped my soul did not allow my eyes to open, and despite the instructions, I sat before the judge with a lowered head and eyes squeezed shut. Once again, the person sitting behind the desk called out my name. He told me to lift my head and look at him.

When I glanced upwards, I found a man of short stature, with a pale face and a despising stare. Falling around his lips were two thin strips of a gray mustache, resembling the whiskers of an old rat. He sat in the middle of two men, one on his right and the other at his left. I figured that this man was Sulayman Al-Khateeb, whose iniquity and stupidity I had heard so much about from the brothers in the halls.

“Who was responsible for your initiation, *wala*?!?”

This is how the questioning began, suddenly and aggressively.

“I do not belong to any organization, Sir.”

“What is your name?!?” he asked.

“Muhammad Saleem Hammad, Sir.”

He peered into my file,

“You are Jordanian, *wala*!!”

“Yes Sir.”

“What?! Don’t we have enough bastards in our own country?! You need to come fight with them?!?”

I said to him,

“Sir, I did not fight or do anything.”

He read through my file for a few seconds, and then asked,

“What is your relationship with Salem Al-Hamid?”

It was apparent that he had not reviewed my file prior to our meeting. I responded,

“I knew him from the university.”

Without saying anything further, his eyebrows drew tightly together. He turned toward me and roared,

“We’re sentencing people to death here! As for you, we should hang *you* from your balls!”

He looked toward the Sergeant and said,

“Take him.”

It was over—that was the end of my hearing. I walked toward the Sergeant, numb of all emotions. I did not know what to make of that which had just transpired. Before I reached the waiting area where I was to find my spot and face the wall, the Sergeant ordered me to open my hands. He pulled out his whip and slit my palms with merciless strokes before ordering me to sit.

In turn, the remaining brothers walked in and out of the courtroom, and when the entire group was tried and sentenced, we were returned to our halls. When inside, I approached the two brothers who were called with me and asked them of their sentence: execution.

After the five strenuous years we had endured, this verdict did not mean very much to us. We knew that at Tadmur, death was a possibility that could present itself at any moment. It was no longer a feared aspect of life, for it had evolved into a means of escape and relief. I swear by God, through all my years at Tadmur, I never saw a brother leave for execution showing even an ounce of concern or fear. When they were called for their fate, the brothers hurriedly presented themselves. They were grateful for the opportunity of martyrdom and the chance to meet their Lord.

### Abu Sulayman's Cow

I cannot forget the ridiculous story of a brother who was called to court and tried based on the most ludicrous charge. The brother was a veterinarian who worked along the coastline of Syria in the village of Derekish, which was also the native city of the Judge, Sulayman Al-Khateeb.

Sulayman's family were farmers who raised cattle, specifically cows. When one of the cows fell ill on day, his family took the animal to this brother's veterinary office for treatment. The cow, however, eventually died from the sickness. Months and years passed until fate brought this veterinarian, now imprisoned at Tadmur, before this Judge, Sulayman Al-Khateeb himself. When Sulayman knew who the doctor was, he was enraged and yelled at him furiously.

"Do you remember the day we brought you the cow and you killed it, *wala?! Well now, I want to execute you,*" he said.

Indeed, in the next round of lynching, the poor brother was hung. Another story I heard attesting to the senseless nature of the court and the preposterousness of its judge was that of a soldier who used to serve in the Syrian Army and was stationed at the Artillery Academy in Aleppo. We heard this story from a number of brothers who were with him in the same hall and whom we later met.

This soldier served during the martyrdom of Captain Ibraheem Al-Yusuf, who carried out the massacre of the Artillery Academy just months before. When Ibraheem was killed, all the soldiers and officers at the Academy were commanded to walk past the Captain's dead body and spit on him. This particular soldier did not spit—perhaps he was unable to react at the shock of the dead, disfigured body before him. The reason, though, was insignificant, and he was immediately apprehended and driven from one prison to the next until he finally stood before Sulayman Al-Khateeb at Tadmur.

When he was asked why he refused to carry out the military command, he responded that he did not refuse, but that his throat was dry and so he could not spit. Upon hearing this, Sulayman turned toward the court scribe and dictated,

“He spit, but it was a dry spit. Execution!”

The brother was executed, and those who were in his hall witnessed the hanging themselves, may God have mercy on him. The story was passed between the prisoners and the halls as one of the contemptible incidents that took place under the oppressive regime. It was evidence of this lying judge’s inaptness and negligence.

### **Awaiting Death**

Within the two months that followed this incident, we regularly heard the hanging posts being constructed and watched the believing brothers driven to their death. One morning, the hall door opened and an officer called the name of the third brother who accompanied me on my court day. However, he had died just weeks earlier as a result of the tuberculosis that overcame his body. The officer left and joined his colleagues in gathering brothers from nearby cells.

Although the officer had not yet called my name, I knew that all those who were tried on the same day were customarily executed on the same day as well. I quickly prepared myself for my fate and offered a final prayer before they called my name. I undressed and left my clothes for the other brothers to use and stood at the door awaiting my call. The brothers in the hall approached me one after the other and bade me farewell. They presented me with words of courage and strength. I was lost in my thoughts... I pictured my family in my mind and was overcome with grief. I prayed within my heart to God Almighty and asked that He grant them patience and solace, and that He join me with them in Heaven. I asked my Lord to forgive my sins and grant me His grace and mercy.

As I waited, I anticipated that every next second would be the one in which the door would open and my name would be announced. Time passed and before I knew it, the executions had ended and matters outside were resuming normally. No one came for me. I returned to my spot feeling like a drowned man who had fallen into a comma and just regained consciousness. I acknowledged that it simply was not my time to die.

Weeks passed and once again, our field was being prepared for another group of executions. The officer returned to our hall and called Hazeen Qaasim, who had also been tried with me. He escorted him out of the hall and to his death. Once more, I waited at the door... and again no one came. For the next five years, during every single occasion of executions, I performed the same routine of prayer and waiting at the door, thinking to myself in each instance that this time, I would surely be called. I never was.

### **Limiting Food**

Many months passed and death never came. I was eventually moved from Hall 35 to a different tuberculosis ward, Hall 37. There, I found new faces and was introduced to brothers I had not met before. The poor conditions that we lived in, however, were the same. The affliction was increased when, in September of 1986, the decision to lessen the food portions was implemented. Now, each prisoner received only half of a small loaf of bread instead of the two pieces that was barely enough for us in the past.

In order to cope with our hunger, we used to eat the crust of the bread during one meal, and save the dough from the inside for another serving. Before, we used to eat the crust and throw the dough away because it used to cause us stomach pain. The direness of our situation led us to knead the dough with onions and salt and save it for our next meal. On the rare occasions that we received oranges, we replaced the onions with the orange and its peel and mixed that with the dough, sprinkling whatever sugar was available on top of it. To us, this was such a treat, and we celebrated as if it were a plate of sweets before us.

### **Jaundice**

Starvation spread between the halls, and accompanying it was a greater presence of disease and an increase in the number of deaths. In time, we found ourselves reporting one or two deaths a day. During this period, we were overcome by

the life-threatening jaundice of the liver, which heavily increased the number of victims.

The severity of this disease led the Prison's authorities to hold a meeting with the health managers of the halls in order to devise a solution to the problem. Members of the administration, of course, feared for their own lives and for the lives of the Prison staff. God must have inspired one of the health managers that day, for he told the officials that this disease spread primarily by means of contact with blood. He said that people were contracting the disease through the group trips to the barber.

With the grace of God, the administration was convinced by his words. From then on, collective haircuts were barred. Instead, each Hall President was given clippers and was responsible for the task of cutting the hall members' hair. God had saved us from the pain and agony of those trips, and had spared us a portion of the distress we were facing.

### **Forbidding Fasting**

The sordid affair continued with no mercy. Our lives became hollow and were of no value to us. Our daily routine did not change and the distress we constantly faced did not allow us even an ounce of comfort. The murderous massacres killed within us the desire for life and exterminated any hopes for a brighter future.

This is how the year 1986 arrived, carrying with it the same strife of the past years and connecting us to the misery of the years to come. At the beginning of that year, I was transferred to yet another tuberculosis ward in Hall 29 of Field 7. There, I was designated as the Hall President. On our field, there was only one other hall, Hall 30, in addition to a clinic that was assigned to the communist prisoners as I mentioned earlier. As a result, the time we spent during recess was doubled, and instead of it being conducted once a day, we now were taken outside once in the morning and once in the evening. Each session lasted one hour instead of the customary thirty minutes. This, of course, meant an increase in beatings and exposure to the destructive officers.

The officers embraced new and more aggressive means of torture. When we were taken outside for recess, we prepared ourselves for a full session of torture. The officers enjoyed pushing us to the floor and jumping on our backs and chests. Many of our ribs were broken and our bones were often fractured. Every crack they heard added to their joy and merriment. I will never forget when one of these despicable officers ordered us to sit on the ground before him during recess and proceeded to pull out his private part and urinate on us as we sat there powerless and helpless. As for the beatings, the torture and the cursing, there's almost no need to discuss those incidents as they became such an inevitable and routine part of each day throughout the many years.

One of the most adverse decisions enforced was when in Ramadan of that year, for the first time ever the administration forbade the prisoners from the obligatory fast. During Ramadan in the previous years, our daily meals were replaced with an early morning *suhoor*, and then dinner after sunset. Beginning this year, however, the three meals continued as usual, and if the officers sensed that one of us was fasting, they would beat him senselessly and forced him to break his fast. We found ourselves not only prohibited from our mandatory prayer, but now from our religious obligation to fast as well. This was yet another source of worry and hardship to our lives.

Also during this year was the execution of Brigadier General Ahmad Ghanoom, who had been imprisoned since 1980. Throughout this time, his torture was multiplied and he faced the most severe and brutal punishments from the officers. The officers found special pleasure in beating him because of his high military ranking in comparison to their status at the lower end of the military chain of command.

### **Suffocation**

With an increasing number of prisoners crowded into the already congested halls, the year 1987 witnessed yet another tragic incident. In the month known as 'blazing August,' this year's temperatures rose to unbearable degrees. The fan in the hall was not functional and the windows only allowed waves of heat to seep into the

over-packed room and choke our breath. This situation led to suffocation that nearly claimed the lives of many brothers in the hall.

The incident began in the tuberculosis Hall 36. We were overcome by a lack of fresh air one day a little before sunset. The prisoners, on the verge of death, pounded on the door and called to the officers in a state of hysteria. The officers approached casually, and when they asked what the problem was, the brothers responded that they were choking. The officers did not take the matter seriously and ignored the dire problem. The poor prisoners went mad as they were being suffocated to death, and they began to beat at the door and bang on the walls while yelling and swearing.

Orders were quickly given to the officers who rushed to the top of the halls and pointed their 500mm rifles through the vents at the now unmanageable prisoners. The administration feared an insurgence if the situation was not contained. The doors were opened and the prisoners poured out of the hall and onto the field. Those outside threw themselves onto the ground panting and vomiting while the remaining brothers stumbled to find their way out. The Prison Doctor appeared and confirmed the seriousness of the matter. He ordered that all prisoners be released onto the fields in order to avoid a similar situation in other halls. That day, we remained outside in the fresh air until nearly two o'clock in the morning.

For the following two weeks, we were taken outside for recess twice a day without any beatings or torture. We were allowed to spray the cement floor of the fields with water in order to alleviate the scorching heat. Soon enough, these exceptional times also ended and we returned to our customary program of misery and woe. We survived the high temperatures and suffocation—but only for a while.

### **Transfers**

A few days after this incident, I was transferred from the tuberculosis Hall 29 to a new hall built across Hall 25 in Field 6 designated for the healthy prisoners. We called this hall “the New Back.” I was pushed into the small room along with one hundred and twenty other prisoners. When the door shut behind us, we were virtually sitting on top of one another. Once again, I was selected Hall President.

When the first meal was delivered, I approached the Sergeant and said to him that there were too many people in the hall. Without responding to my complaint, he simply walked away. A short while later, he sent officers who dragged me outside and beat me so severely that I had to be carried back into the hall.

The heat had not subdued. Trapped inside this small room with concrete walls, it was as if we were in a grave. After midnight only a few days later, we could no longer tolerate the heat and the congestion. We yelled to the officers and pounded on the door. We jumped as high as we could toward the windows in an effort to breathe some fresh air. The officers allowed us onto the field for one hour and then forced us back inside.

The next day, they called for twenty brothers to leave the hall and transferred them to Hall 28 on the same field. I was among those twenty. I was grateful for the opportunity to escape the crowdedness on one hand, as well as for the chance to meet new brothers. I was fortunate to encounter leading figures including Sheikh Muhammad Sa'eed 'Ata, a student of Sheikh Muhammad Sa'eed Ramadan Al-Booti.

During this time, I benefited greatly from Sheikh 'Ata's knowledge and friendship. Additionally, I met a man from the 'Attar family of Aleppo. I found the brothers constantly trying to serve him and ease his pain. I was informed that the poor, elderly man had witnessed his two young sons executed before his eyes—a painful ordeal indeed, but it had only increased him in faith and submission.

### **Departures ... and Arrivals**

My time in Hall 28 did not last long as I was once again transferred back to a tuberculosis ward in Hall 18 of Field 4. This, too, was a short stay, during which the Prison administration decided to move the communists and another group of recent prisoners to the Sednaya Prison that had been recently constructed. When the clinic was subsequently unoccupied, I was transferred there along with a number of other prisoners.

From our new locality, we heard the arrival of a new group of men replacing those who had left to Sednaya. We learned that the new detainees were accused of a

series of bus and train explosions at the time, and that their numbers were between sixty and seventy men. They were isolated from the rest of the prisoners and received the fiercest penalties that claimed the lives of many. We could hear their screams of pain and gathered pieces of information about them from here and there, but we never came across them and did not learn anything definite of their fate.

After remaining some time in Hall 18, I was once more moved to Hall 29 and then again to Hall 28, where I remained for five or sixth months before finally being taken to Hall 22 in Field 4. It was at this abode, however, that I faced a new adversity that nearly claimed my life. There, I endured terror so turbulent I nearly forgot all that I had suffered in the past.

### **Even in Our Dreams**

My first weeks in Hall 22 were like an oasis to a thirsty, weary traveler through the desert. While we were constantly under the watchful eyes of the officers through the vents in other halls, I found that in Hall 22 there were no vents or other means by which the officers could torment us. This granted us an indescribable feeling of relief and an unprecedented sense of freedom at Tadmur.

For the first time ever, we were able to perform our prayers in congregation and did so very comfortably. After years of being prevented from prayer of any type, this came as an enormous blessing to us all. We took advantage of our new freedom in every way possible. Now, if one of us wanted to talk at a time the guards were not present, he would stand and speak normally while the remaining brothers listened quietly or participated in the discussion.

In addition, God blessed us during these initial weeks through our meals, for despite that we were less than sixty brothers in the hall, we received food designated for nearly one-hundred and fifty men, which is the number that usually occupied a hall like this. Additionally, I was elected the Hall President since the first day I arrived.

The blessings, however, did not last long. Due to the increased rigidity at Tadmur in 1988, the Prison's management decided to make two vents in the ceiling of

our hall. The recess once again increased to twice a day, and with every session came a new round of pain and grief. Each time the door opened for the daily search or to bring in food, we faced yet additional beatings. Also, for the first time ever, we were commanded to cover our eyes even as we slept. Each one of us was given a piece of cloth that we were to cover our eyes with at night.

Moreover, we received the order that while asleep, we were to remain on our side. If one of the brothers turned over or even moved during his sleep, the brother serving the shift of night guard was ordered by the guard above to mark him. The next morning, the marked man received a dreadful punishment. With that, we returned to the constant state of exposure to the guards above our halls.

Many times, a guard would walk into a hall in the middle of the night and choose a random brother as his prey, pulling him out and beating him simply to satisfy his craving to torture and kill. Other times, he simply told the night guard among the brothers in the hall to mark himself. The next morning, when the new shift of guards approached, they called for the marked individual. If no one was marked, they asked for the night guard who was on duty between such and such hours of the night and beat him for absolutely no reason at all.

The guards also became very strict with regards to prayer. They regularly called out the Hall President and asked him for the names of the brothers who were still performing this pillar of faith. As Hall President, I was questioned regarding this matter a countless number of times. They would take me out of the hall and beat me while asking for names of brothers who were either praying or teaching others in the hall.

### **Forced Divorce**

Among the truly painful stories of this time was that of a dentist from Damascus by the name of Ridwan Al-'Omar. After having spent nine years in prison, he was called to the Personnel Office where he was ordered to sign papers divorcing him from his wife. The brother was taken aback and refused to do so, but the session of torture that followed his refusal led him to sign the documents under duress.

This was tremendously devastating for Ridwan, for after all these years of misery and patience—after suffering the loss of his youth and his freedom—he now lost his wife and family against his will and without explanation.

I do not know what happened to this particular brother, but I can suppose that the affect of this last adversity that fell upon him was perhaps heavier than all that he had faced in his years of detainment. All that he could do—all that any of us could do—was submit his cause to the Almighty Creator and seek patience and guidance.

### **The Mouse**

Since the beginning of our detainment at Tadmur, it was quite regular for the guards to order us to search through the garbage and eat whatever food particles we found. Other times, they would command us to catch a fly or even a cockroach that was passing and force us to swallow it. The debasement reached such a level that sometimes one of them would spit on the cement floor and then make a prisoner lick the spit off the ground. Despite the wretched emotions these repulsive acts caused, one particular incident in 1989 appalled us far beyond that of anything in the past.

As meals were being delivered one day during this treacherous year, the guards reached Hall 18, which stood immediately across our own hall on Field 4. The sudden uproar of commotion from across the field attracted our attention. I hurried to the door and peered through a crack as I tried to discover the source of the disturbance. I found the guards surrounding the Hall President, a brother from the Khareeta family of Al-Zabadani.

Prior to this brother's detainment, he was a Captain in the Army, which added to the guards' love for degrading him. I saw them kicking him and thrashing at his bare chest with their whips as he lay on the ground. They screamed at him and commanded that he ingest something that he held in his hand. Looking intently, I found that it was a dead mouse. The poor man naturally could not bring himself to put a mouse in his mouth and swallow it, and so they continued to beat him mercilessly and repeatedly ordered him to obey. When he was finally overcome by

exhaustion, they stuffed it into his mouth and forced him to swallow it before throwing him back into the hall.

The head guard who led this nightmare called himself Abu Ghadab<sup>86</sup>. He was of the most ruthless guards at Tadmur. Each time he had the opportunity, he would hit a prisoner in the face with such force that he often ruptured the brother's eardrum. Then he would say, "Take that from Abu Ghadab, *wala!*"

Only a short while later that same day, someone from Hall 18 called to the officers and informed them of a problem with one of the prisoners. I could not hear the full extent of their conversation, though I understood that the issue dealt with the mouse that was forcefully consumed earlier. That night, Abu Ghadab came to our hall and called for the health manager, Brother Ghassan 'Abdul-Baqi from Hama. He asked him what the possible outcomes were if a person ate a mouse. "Could he die?" he asked. Under the intensity of that moment, the brother could only respond that no, he could not, and Abu Ghadab rudely dismissed him.

We never knew what affliction had fallen upon the brother, but we did comprehend that he faced some type of serious harm.

### **To the Dumpster**

And so the torture continued. The ceaseless pressure and terror conquered our hopes and minds, and we were unable to acquire a single moment of peace—not even in our sleep. Our patience perished, and some of the brothers lost their sanity or were very close to it.

One cold night in December of 1989, we awoke to the sound of a prisoner from the nearby Hall 20 who was yelling and swearing at a guard with absolute contempt and anger. Within moments, other military officers approached shouting,

"What's wrong with you, *wala!*!"

The conversation was not entirely clear to us, but we heard the guards command the Hall President to tie up the brother and lock him in the bathroom. The

---

<sup>86</sup> *Ghadab* means rage or fury

next morning, Sergeant Muhammad Nu'ma appeared. On his orders, the officers pulled the brother outside and threw him into the tire, where he was publicly flogged and beat so severely that his thunderous cries made the ground beneath us tremble.

He was thrown back into the hall and when it was time for the daily search, the officers pulled him outside once again, threw him onto the ground, and ruthlessly beat and stomped on him until he lay limp and silent beneath them. The officers ordered the Hall President to take him inside. Within minutes, he knocked on the door and informed them that one of the prisoners had died. The officers, completely unperturbed by what had just befallen, simply replied,

“Throw him in the dumpster.”

From a crack in the door, I saw them drag him away.

### **Collapse**

With the increasing pressures that we faced from the officers, some of those who survived thus far began to experience an internal breakdown. They collapsed... not out of weakness, but from the severity of the inhumane torture and the bitter suffering that fell upon us. It even tested some in their faith. I remember how one morning, as we woke up a brother among us for the *fajr* prayer, he refused to get up and pray. From that day on, he insisted upon this path... may God forgive him. Despite his educated background, when we asked him why he refused to pray, he explained that God said in the Quran,

“O you who believe! If you help (the cause of) Allah, He will help you...”  
(47:7).

“Well,” he argued, “we have supported Him for all these years and He has not responded and saved us, so why should I pray?”

Nevertheless, despite the gravity of these words and actions, and even though the majority of other brothers faced the same struggle without allowing their faith to be affected, we excused his words and prayed that God would guide him back to His path and keep him steadfast. We recognized that if poverty alone is capable of leading someone astray, then what of the combined effect of poverty, subjugation, torture,

starvation, and terror that has overpowered a single individual for the past ten years?!

### 350 Lashes

Less than a week after the incident at Hall 20, I was faced with my own ordeal that nearly overcame me. At ten o'clock in the morning on December 20, 1989, one of the military officers came into our hall and said,

“President of the Hall! Over here!”

“Yes Sir,” I responded.

“What’s that racket in here?” he asked

“There’s no noise from our hall, Sir” I responded.

“No, it’s too loud in your hall.”

“Yes, Sir. We’ll lower our voices.”

And with no indication of what was to come, he said,

“I want to do (such and such) to your mother. What?”

I decided to remain silent and let the aggravation pass, but instead, he asked again in a more challenging tone,

“*What?!*”

So I responded to his question, except that I repeated his exact words:

“I want to do (such and such) to your mother.”

The officer was flabbergasted as he yelled,

“*You* are swearing at *me?! You \*\*\*\*!!!*”

I replied calmly, trying to extinguish the fire from hell that had burst in his black heart,

“No Sir. You said to repeat after you, and so I did.”

He left me in my place and stormed away toward the Personnel Office, returning a few minutes later with the Sergeant and a group of officers, one of whom was carrying the tire. The Sergeant approached me and asked what had happened, and when I responded, he said to me sarcastically,

“Then get into the tire. It won’t hurt.”

There was no escape. I lowered myself into the tire and not a second passed before the sticks and the whips crashed against my body. I started to yell and scream and shout with all my might as the throbbing pain tore at my skin and my feet. I could feel the bottom of my feet being shredded apart and ripping open. The officers delivered one blow after the other, and after receiving at least three-hundred and fifty lashes, I was released. Unable to walk or even stand, I crawled back to my hall and threw myself against the nearest wall inside, barely conscious and struggling to survive.

### **Mini-Ratib**

Before I knew it, the guards entered the hall for the search. As Hall President, it was my duty to stand and call the brothers to attention. Since I was unable to do so, my assistant, Brother ‘Imad, took over. When the guards did not see me, they asked ‘Imad of my whereabouts and he informed them that I was sick. They ordered him to bring me to them and so the brothers carried me and put me in front of them. The guards attacked me once again, kicking me and stomping on me. They ordered me to present myself before them every day at this time for a similar beating.

From that day onwards, I received at least three separate rounds of beatings every day depending on the number of times the door opened that day. In addition to these punishments during the day, I had to endure the torture of a night shift guard whom we called “Mini-Ratib.” He was given that name because he resembled a previous officer from 1984 by the name of Ratib who also inflicted upon us a great deal of pain.

When Mini-Ratib first arrived, he asked for the President of the Hall and the brothers responded that he was ill and asleep. He ordered them to wake me up, and when I stood before him, he ordered me to assume the position of the night guard until the morning. Typically, the Hall President shared this responsibility with a number of brothers so that each person would only have to serve a one or two hour shift. Mini-Ratib, however, ordered me to complete this task alone for the entire night. His shift ended at one o’clock in the morning. I struggled to stay awake and

deal with my pain, asking God to protect and save me. At around four o'clock in the morning, Mini-Ratib returned for the beginning of his new shift and called,

“Night Guard!”

My heart jumped and I responded,

“Yes Sir!”

“Take off your clothes and stay in your underwear.”

I did so, seeking refuge in God from his evil. He ordered me to wake up my assistant ‘Imad. When I did, he said to me,

“Sit on the floor.”

I sat. He ordered ‘Imad to fill a pail with water and pour it on top of me. On that cold January night, the brother had no choice but to obey. The freezing water was spilled over me and the cycle continued until seven pails of water were emptied. The floor around me was soaked and the mats and blankets of all those nearby were drenched. When the ordeal ended, he instructed me to return to my duty until the morning. At six o'clock, Mini-Ratib's shift ended and he left. Just one hour later, he returned suddenly and told me to sit in my spot, still undressed, and wait for his call.

When it was time for breakfast, he called me outside and beat me ruthlessly with his whip. My screams of pain and my pleas for him to stop were to no avail. He continued to beat me until the fire of evil inside his heart was quelled. I crawled back to the hall and felt myself slipping into a state of unconsciousness, but I wasn't even allowed a single minute to escape from this world. It was now time for the search. ‘Imad stepped forward to take my place and call the brothers to attention. The guards asked him where I was. When he responded that I was ill, they beat him and ordered that he call me so that I could line up the prisoners.

For the next four months or more, this sequence of selective torture continued. I had been marked and it was my turn to deal with what difficulties fate brought my way. The brothers tried to help me particularly during the night shift. Whenever Mini-Ratib was on duty, I was forced to stay up the entire night. When he would leave, one of the brothers would take my place and allow me a few hours of rest. If he

returned, the brother woke me up so that I could resume my post before he noticed I was asleep.

Once, Mini-Ratib maliciously sent another guard to ensure that I was awake and on duty. When he found another prisoner in my place conducting the task that was assigned for me, he pulled me out along with the other brothers who helped me with the night shift and whipped us all. From then on, I had no choice but to stay awake all night. The officers then marked ‘Imad as well and included him in the torture that I received. I knew that I was more deserving of the punishments because it was I who had swore at the officer.

I resumed my role of calling the brothers to attention during the searches. Shortly thereafter, my body could no longer handle the physical pressure and I suffered a relapse of tuberculosis. In April of 1990, the tuberculosis specialist and health manager, Zahi ‘Abbadi, diagnosed me with the illness and requested that I be transferred to the tuberculosis ward. The irony of this predicament was that it was both a source of mercy and harm, for it saved me from the wrath of these officers after being literally on the verge of death.

#### **Additional Information**

An interesting occurrence worthy of note took place in February of 1990. The Prison’s administration sent an officer to every hall throughout Tadmur. He inquired about the last prisoner from each hall to receive visits from family or relatives. We reported the appropriate person, and the following day, these individuals were called for a meeting with the management.

The officials offered the prisoners additional visitations and other benefits in return for their blatant cooperation with the system. They requested specific pieces of information regarding the circumstances of the prisoners in each hall, the thoughts and ideologies that were being spread, and the beliefs that the prisoners still held. They also asked if there were any brothers calling others for *jihad*, and how willing the brothers were to follow their leaders from the Brotherhood in the past. Finally, they asked the brothers of their personal opinions of these leaders.

The issue evolved into a serious matter, and despite the turmoil that ensued, the past years had prepared us for almost anything and trained us to accept all that fell upon us with patience and submission.

### **The Death of Zahi ‘Abadi**

I was returned to Hall 35 where I escaped the evil of Mini-Ratib and the torture to a slight degree. As I began receiving treatment for the tuberculosis, my condition improved. I regained my strength and was moved once again to Hall 28 with the healthy prisoners. One day, we received the shocking news of the death of our beloved brother Zahi ‘Abadi, who had patiently volunteered so many years ago to serve the brothers in the tuberculosis ward.

The story that was passed on to us was that he developed a strange abscess on his foot and was taken to a hospital outside of Tadmur. Upon returning, he was dead. This, of course, arose much suspicion among the prisoners. We deduced that he was deliberately killed after having spent so many years moving between halls and acquiring a great deal of information on the prisoners and the Prison itself. It was highly probable, we thought, as nothing was impossible in this jungle amongst a species that was so accustomed to ruthless bloodshed.

### **A Witness of the Massacre of Tadmur**

I wrote earlier that when we arrived at Tadmur ten years ago, a number of the halls still held the remnants of the Great Massacre of Tadmur that took place in June of 1980. I had heard of the carnage while in Damascus only months before I was detained. At the time, a brother from the Watfa family of Damascus who was performing his mandatory military service was able to obtain a list of the victims’ names from files belonging to the Defense Brigades. He sent the list to the Brotherhood’s leadership that was being established in Damascus at the time.

That brother was later apprehended and executed at Tadmur himself. The official count of fatalities, as I recall, was around eight-hundred victims. Until this point, my ten years at Tadmur had not united me with any prisoner who had

witnessed the massacre. Fate, however, finally crossed my path with a right-winged prisoner from Hama whom I established a relationship with.

He told me that he had been detained since 1980 with a group of Iraqi Ba'thists. Before the massacre began, the administration of Tadmur separated him and a select group of prisoners from the Brotherhood detainees and other Islamic prisoners. They were moved to a hall in Field 4. One night, they received the sudden order to transfer to Hall 29 in Field 7. Early the next morning, they heard helicopters flying above and landing nearby. Moments later, they heard the deafening sound of gunfire and explosions along with the yells of the prisoners' *takbeers* from the adjacent fields. Soon, the noise quelled and the helicopters left. None of them were aware of what had happened until new prisoners arrived who had heard of the Great Massacre of Tadmur prior to their arrest.

This person remained alive and it was meant for me to meet him and hear his personal account of the Tadmur Massacre. I do not know what future this brother faced, but I hope that one day I will find him on a witness stand where he may relay his story before a just courtroom. That day, the files of brutality that the foundation of Tadmur and other military prisons possess will be open and the true trial will begin. Perhaps then, the souls of all the innocent who were unjustly slaughtered will finally be in peace. Then, the fog of brutality and the oppression of the sectarian regime will be erased.

### **The Final Newcomers**

Conditions at the Prison took a relatively calm turn. The group sessions of torture were significantly reduced and the animalistic beatings were also less frequent. In April of 1991, we found that the Prison administration had established new halls for the prisoners. We were distributed amongst the modernized halls across the different fields, and I was transferred to Hall 7 in Field 4. There, I spent almost an entire year during which the agony and suffering were considerably decreased. During this period, there were relative improvements in the meals we received. The primary

ingredient that greatly added to the quality of the food was an increase in the amount of garlic.

The execution committee, who did not stop or even lessen the number of killings throughout this time, passed through Field 4 on their way to Field 6 where the assassinations were conducted. When they passed, we could see them through the cracks in the door. Our location also enabled us to detect the approach of new prisoners. We heard their screams and pleas for help as they faced their ‘welcome party’ outside the neighboring Personnel Office from Field 1.

In November of 1991, I witnessed the final arrival of a group of newcomers during my time at Tadmur. We heard their shrieking screams and cries of pain that shook the entire Prison yet did not even move a muscle in the hearts of the officers. In order to ensure that the new prisoners did not acquire any knowledge or information from the old ones, they were segregated into separate halls. We never met them and they never met us, but we felt their presence and prayed that God protect them as they began this nightmare that we were all trapped in.

#### **“Yes!” to the Leader**

One day near the end of November or early December of 1991, Sergeant Muhammad Nu'ma approached and informed us that the national presidential elections were a few days away. He told us that we were to express our love and respect to the Leader, Hafez Al-Assad, and say, “Yes!” to the Leader in our loudest voices. No one in all of Syria had any choice but to declare this “yes” vote.

It was no different than the “yes” of acceptance we were forced to utter to the incompetent Judge Sulayman Al-Khateeb when he informed us of our death sentence, or the “yes” that the poor Doctor had to sign to, after being tortured, to divorce his wife, or the “yes” we conceded when responding to the officer who said he wanted to do this and that to our mothers or sisters. It was like the thousands and thousands of other marks of approval that every coerced and subjugated citizen who possesses no other alternative before the tyrannical regime has to offer.

The Hall President wrote a list with all our names on it and each of us signed “yes” near our names. What was even more irritating was when a number of prisoners who were seriously affected by this adversity suggested that we write “Yes, to the Leader” on our white shirts—not with pen and not with paint, but with our blood! A number of these brothers agreed and asked the health manager for a needle. They drew enough of their blood to write the expression on their shirts.

### Glad Tidings

One night in December of 1991, I found myself drowning into my sleep. I dreamt that the military officers entered my hall in their khaki-colored uniform, their red hats, and their sinister attitudes. They led us out of the Prison after a decision was issued to relocate us from this place. In my dream, I made my way toward a corner that we had gathered all our belongings in and pulled out my worn out suitcase. A group of other brothers followed me and did the same.

We walked alongside ‘Ali Dooba, the Chief of Military Intelligence, toward a bus. We were loaded into the vehicle and drove off. After leaving the premises of Tadmur and driving for a far distance, the dream ended. When I awoke, I relayed the vision to the brothers around me. They were hopeful and optimistic, and said that *insha’Allah* the dream was an indication that God would free me soon. Only two days later, the guards called my name after ‘*asr*<sup>87</sup> prayer. It was a Wednesday. When I presented myself, they asked me for my full name... my father’s name... my mother’s name. I answered appropriately and all that they said afterwards was,

“Pack your belongings and prepare yourself to leave.”

We were accustomed to hearing this exact order all the time, either because we were being moved to another hall, or because we were being called for execution. The brothers gathered around me and bade me farewell, none of us knowing what my future would bring. I covered my eyes and locked my hands together behind my back.

---

<sup>87</sup> The fourth prayer of the day

When the officers returned, they led me out of the hall. I sensed that they were leading me toward Field 6, where the executions were typically held. A mixture of so many emotions rushed inside of me, and while I predicted that this would be my end, a strange feeling inside of me told me I would soon be free. I asked myself why I was being taken toward Field 6 if freedom awaited me, and why they did not, instead, take me toward the Personnel Office in Field 1 so that I could walk out of it just as I had entered over ten years ago!

The questioning did not last long. We suddenly stopped and I heard a door open. One of the guards said to me,

“Get in, *wala*.”

The door was closed behind me. I sensed that the officers had left and that there were others in the room whispering around me. With extreme caution, I slowly moved my hands from behind me and brought them to my sides. When I was not received by yells and curses, I raised my hands and untied the blindfold around my eyes. When I looked up, I found myself surrounded by a number of brothers, all of whom were watching me. I stared back for a few moments, nervous and afraid. When the initial confusion subdued, I asked,

“What’s going on? Good news I hope?”

They responded with a touch of enthusiasm,

“*Insha’Allah* it’s good news. They’re releasing some prisoners.”

“What?” I said, unable to believe what I was hearing.

They repeated their answer and assured me that it was true. Moments later, an officer looked into the hall from the vent above and for some reason, he passed along the same information. Less than half an hour had passed when the door opened again. We hurried toward the side of the room and faced the wall, a reflexive reaction we had grown accustomed to. One of the brothers among us assumed the role and called us to attention. Still facing the wall, we sensed that a number of individuals had entered the room. I expected the worst. Suddenly, we received the order,

“Face forward!”

We turned around with our eyes closed as usual. Then came the next command,

“Raise your heads and open your eyes, *wala*.”

### Surprises

Almost paralyzed by the fear, I opened my eyes. It frightened me to see, for the first time in all these years, the faces of our torturers in flesh and blood. We were not accustomed to seeing anyone in this place who did not carry the scars of persecution and harassment, whose clothes were clean, whose hair and mustaches had grown normally without the rugged trim of a clipper.

We stared at them like infants viewing the world for the first time. Before us stood Sergeant Muhammad Nu'ma, as well as Warden Ghazi Al-Juhani himself. Behind them to the left and right stood a number of officers who glared at us with their evil stares. In a succinct manner, Colonel Al-Juhani said,

“His Excellency the President has pardoned you. It is only a matter of days before you will be amongst your families again.”

He ordered us to undress of everything except our underwear. Then, he turned toward a pile of new military clothes and shoes and ordered the officers to distribute them among us. When that was complete, he turned and walked out, followed by his assistant and the other officers. The door closed behind them and we were left speechless and in shock. When our surging emotions finally settled, we turned toward one another and tried to rationalize what had just transpired. I took a good look around me and found nearly thirty-five other brothers who had suffered the same past as I with me in the room. Like me, they too were withered, with pale faces, weary eyes, and a frail body.

Wednesday passed and we remained in this hall that they called the new 6 on 2. We conversed and introduced ourselves to one another. Thursday also came and went, and we passed time by sharing news of people from other halls, along with stories of our previous afflictions. The next day passed as well, and we were growing skeptical of the glad tidings we had received. Our optimism was diminishing and we

began to slip into our regular state of pessimism. On Saturday morning, however, the officers ordered us to exit the hall and form a line outside. We walked with our eyes closed and heads lowered, each one of us closely holding on to the brother in front of him out of fear of tripping. We were commanded to open our eyes and look around normally.

When I did so, I surveyed my surroundings and found myself face to face with this terrorizing place that had held me hostage. This was the place whose grounds carried me and whose guards' sticks and whips ate from my body for ten years. I felt as though it was the first time I saw the Prison.

Every wall I came across was like an invisible weight that pressed against my chest for all these years. Every dark door lined with metal bars was like a thorn in my throat. The dreadful faces of the officers and guards stirred the most powerful emotions within my soul. The locked halls that I passed were no different than bolted coffins that hosted the living dead. I thought of all the different halls that I resided in as a prisoner of fear and oppression, able to see only darkness ahead. But now, I thought, perhaps there was a dim light flickering in the distance...

### **The Exit**

Our group of pardoned prisoners moved like a line of ants toward Field 5. I expected that we would continue toward the Personnel Office to collect our belongings, sign our names and depart from the same door we entered through. We were taken, however, along a different route.

We walked past the kitchens and headed toward a back door of the Prison. The big army trucks typically came through this door. On their way in, they would bring food as well as the hanging posts. Just as casually as they entered, when they left they took with them empty pots and the bodies of the brothers who died or were killed.

As we approached the door, we found a red bus of Toyota make awaiting us. We boarded the bus without a sound. Accompanying us were three Intelligence Officers who paid no attention to us. When I looked at them, I felt that perhaps these

men did not know where we had spent the last ten years of our lives... or perhaps when we were initially arrested twelve years ago and thrown into the cells of the military branches that they came from, they were probably students still in middle school or high school.

### **A Tear of Thanks**

The bus continued noisily along a narrow path, moving fast at some times and slowly at others. We were like children in the wombs of their mothers viewing the outside world with no knowledge of how our relationship with this new place would be or what was in store for us. The scenes around us were changing. The faces... the houses... the animals... the cars, even the clouds in the sky—they were like foreign terms in a dictionary of words we had forgotten over the past decade.

At that moment, I remembered the dream that I had only a few days ago. I compared the bus that I rode in my dream to the bus I was on now, and the group that was with me then with the brothers who sat with me now. I thought of the head of the Military Intelligence from my vision and his guards here. Reflexively, I found my lips curling upwards in a gesture that was unfamiliar to my face for so many years. I turned all my thoughts and concentration to Allah, the most High, the most Merciful, and wanted only to bow down to Him in eternal prostration, expressing my appreciation and gratitude. The combined emotions along with the rapid pace of events were overwhelming, and a remote tear trickled down my face.

The driver raced forward, as did our deliberations of what was to follow. Nervousness, apprehension, fear... all were emotions that rushed through us. We passed the city of Tadmur with no one outside giving us the slightest notice or consideration. We passed Homs and the site once inhabited by Khaled ibn Al-Waleed, now overcome by despondence and gloom. Finally, we approached Damascus—the historic capital of the Umayyad Empire and the center of glory and honor of the past. Today, it was the cradle of oppression and brute force, and the nest of the sectarian regime.

The bus delivered us to the Military Intelligence branch, and its officers received us once we arrived. Their names and their faces had changed but their enmity toward us was no different. After recording our names and taking our belongings, we were led into one of the underground halls where we spent the night.

### **A New Page**

On the following day, the 28<sup>th</sup> of December, we were assembled in a spacious lecture hall and seated on its soft, opulent couches. A number of officers seated themselves on the platform at the head of the table. One of them stepped forward and delivered a brief speech, which he introduced by praising the President. Our leader, he said, is one who all people know is characterized by kindness and benevolence, and one who always looks toward his citizens with compassion and care. He continued to explain that for these reasons, and in celebration of his re-election, the President issued the order to release us.

The speaker said that perhaps some of us did not deserve a prolonged detainment, while others have now paid the price for their actions. He invited us to forget the past and begin a new page in our lives starting today. The student should return to school, he said, the worker to his factory, and the employee to his profession. All of us should resume our lives as normal and put our past behind us. He concluded his words by informing us that the branch we were at would deliver each of us to our district or city.

The meeting was over and the Intelligence Officers directed each group of prisoners to separate corners based on the district they were from. I was the only Jordanian and was taken by four officers to a car that headed straight for the Syrian-Jordanian border. It was after midnight when we arrived at Dar'a<sup>88</sup> where I was handed over to the local police in the city. These officers, in turn, transferred me to the Jordanian Intelligence on the other side of the border. They told them that I had been 'temporarily apprehended' in Syria, and then they left.

---

<sup>88</sup> Located at the Southeast border of Syria just a few miles from Jordan

When the Jordanian officers requested that I present them with my passport or any document to verify my identity, I had nothing to offer. One of them asked me how long I had been held in Syria.

“What is today?” I asked him

“December 29, 1991,” he replied.

I answered his question and said,

“For over eleven years then—since the 8<sup>th</sup> of October 1980.”

The officer staggered at my response.

When my mother, father and sister arrived a few hours later, their surprise was no less than that of the officer. Their son, who had left them as a youth of nineteen years, returned to them as a thirty-one year old man with a thin, pale face, a shaven head, weak, in khaki military uniform and army boots. I saw that my family, too, had grown frail and were devastated by the grief they faced.

I ran to my father’s hands, may God rest his soul, and kissed them. I hurried to my mother and embraced her, asking her to forgive me. My mother held my face in her hands and examined me through her tearful eyes.

“You are Muhammad? Are you sure you are Muhammad?”

She took my hands and kissed them, staring at them in disbelief. I held her hands in mine and kissed them in return, incessantly asking for her forgiveness and blessing. Moments passed as we embraced each other, sobbing, as if we sought shelter from the tyranny of life.

After over a decade since my disappearance, we headed toward my beloved parents’ home. They had thousands of questions for me, and as I shared my story, the buried suffering and sorrow erupted within me. I had survived an era in which every moment was more burdensome than the troubles of a lifetime... where every breath carried its own story... where anguish was so strong it ripped one’s insides apart... where all the dictionaries of the world would fail to describe the horror of the memories that would haunt me eternally. It was a burden whose torment could only be eased by the Most Beneficent, Most Merciful.

### **Final Words**

With the passing of these events, so conclude the pages of my memories from the tribulation that fate determined I endure in the prisons of the Syrian regime. I praise Almighty God who allowed me to transform my thoughts and experiences into this written memoir, and I thank Him eternally for having saved and liberated me, and for bestowing upon me the underestimated blessing of freedom. There remain a few points that I would like to mention, as I find that they are worthy of closing with. I ask Allah, the Most High, to bring benefit through my words.

- i. A number of years have passed since my release from the Prison of Tadmur. During this time, I have encountered circumstances that have been both numerous and strange. Combined with the effect of time, I have forgotten much of what I witnessed and heard during this terrorizing experience. As I transcribed my thoughts, I endeavored to capture the accuracy of every instance and occasion and to verify the facts that I have recorded to the best of my ability. However, I acknowledge that perfection belongs to Allah alone, and that every son of Adam is prone to err. Therefore, I ask for the forgiveness of my dear readers if they detect shortcomings, weaknesses, or mistakes in the reading. Furthermore, I ask all those who possess more precise facts or additional information to share them with me.
- ii. In that regard, I implore everyone who has encountered a similar trial, along with every citizen who witnessed the repressive practices of the Syrian government or heard of incidents relating to them, to record your experiences and testimony. Even if you do not find the opportunity to publish your writings today, know that tomorrow things will be different and circumstances will shift in your favor, by the will of God. We must fulfill this trust, as what we witness is a reality that must not be concealed. Our minds cannot forever carry the details of the memories as we recall them today. Our lives are in the hands of Allah, and no soul knows when its days on this earth will end. Since it was our generation who faced the tyrannical dictatorship of Syria's exclusive authority, then it is upon us to pass the information along to

future generations and people of other nations. It is imperative for all those who wish to call to the path of God to study the experiences of those who preceded them. As for the idea that the experiences are all the same or similar, or that the people will not benefit from the encounters of predecessors, you must recognize that these are but excuses you offer yourself. The resultant idleness is enough of a reason to allow for these offenses to be repeated.

- iii. In an effort to prevent the repetition of adversity and to complete the benefit of my story, I find it is essential to discuss the resultant ideas and views that the years of hardship left us with. Speaking in the plural sense, I am referring to the majority of brothers I met throughout the years I spent in prison. With these brothers, I shared many gatherings of discussion and debate comprised of both evaluation and criticism. At the end of our deliberations, we concluded that the religion of Islam that we had recognized and accepted—the religion that we held dearly in our hearts and were tested and persecuted as a result thereof—remained the undeniable truth. Even after the torture and the hangings and the massacres that we witnessed, we held to our sincere conviction that it was our duty to work for the sake of this religion and spread its message, as it is the only hope for saving humanity.
- iv. The point at which our discussions of the above points always united was the means by which we could fulfill the goals that we so strongly believed in. After paying the price of blood and soul, and after watching budding youth perish before our eyes, we acquired certainty on one extremely vital point: before moving forward, before attempting change, we must stand in a single, unified line. I swear by God that our brothers who are fighting for the sake of this religion in Syria or anywhere else are not faced with inadequate money or weapons or apparatus, and they are never defeated as a result of their enemy's despotism or military strength. Rather, history has proven that the despair faced is a direct product of the conflict and divergence that exists between different Muslim groups and the divisions that emerge as a consequence thereof.

Throughout my period of imprisonment and the suffering I was exposed to, nothing pained me more than the discussion of the differences among us. These rifts resulted in the division between the branches of the Islamic movement and the organization of the Muslim Brotherhood itself. The Brotherhood formed separate factions amongst its members from Damascus, Aleppo and Hama. It hurt me to watch the finger of blame being shifted from one group to another whilst the guards dragged waves of our men and youth to their death. Then the subject of debate would change to problems dating back to medieval times. This caused further partition between the best of people who were part of these Islamic movements... between the Sufis and the Salafis... between the followers and the innovators... and the list goes on. It even reached a point that we began to argue about the *athan* that reached us from beyond the walls of confinement!

- v. We discovered the factor of *tarbiyah*<sup>89</sup>, and found that starting anything without it leads to suffering, and continuing a path without strengthening it will lead groups astray. It was the strangest of matters that all Islamic movements spent most of their time and efforts discussing *tarbiyah* and its application in our lives, yet when we were struck with an incident testing our patience, we found ourselves furthest from its real teachings and implementation. When I mention *tarbiyah*, I am referring to all aspects that fall under this broad topic, including the spiritual, behavioral, physical, mental, and organizational realms. It is of the essence that all these matters are involved in building the personality of a Muslim. Otherwise, imagine the consequences of having one person bring about the arrest of hundreds of others from a new, secret organization. Where is the rationale of assigning a single individual within this organization the responsibilities that enable him to know every line of leadership present, as well as all its members, its secrets,

---

<sup>89</sup> *Tarbiyah*, here, refers to the mannerism adopted by Muslims, encompassing a conglomeration of Islamic traits including educational, personal and communal responsibilities.

its arms cache, the location of all its bases, the communication codes, and every other major and minute detail involved in the establishment?

- vi. Even after all the hardship we faced, our conviction that we are obliged to combat oppression under any and all circumstances has not been shaken and will not change. Working for the cause of Islam is still an indubitable responsibility and an explicit trust that we carry, just as it was the first day our tribulation began. If we choose to fulfill our duties in this regard, we must do so with comprehensive wisdom and absolute competence, or else allow those who are more qualified and capable to lead.

Following my experience, I believe that if we disregarded our obligations, then Allah the Almighty will bring forth a group that can more adequately carry this trust. Additionally, if we insist on moving forward without proper preparation, judgment and experience, then we will have wronged ourselves and aggrieved the religion of Allah. And there is no way that Allah will grant success to a people whose conditions and state of affairs are as such.

These are but a number of realizations and notes that I chose to conclude the journal of my memories and the account of my experiences with. I ask God Almighty for His mercy and forgiveness, and for a noble end in this life.

At last, from beginning to end, all praise is eternally due to Allah, Lord of the Universe, Creator of Mankind.

Muhammad Saleem Hammad

August 1996

## **Afterword**

### **An Account of the Great Massacre of Tadmur Given by its Executors**

In the month of February in 1981, the Jordanian Security Forces announced that they had arrested a group of Syrian Intelligence Officers in Jordan. They were planning the assassination of Mr. Mudar Badran, who served then as the Premier of Jordan.

It was quite surprising that a number of those individuals who belonged to the Syrian Defense Brigades admitted to their involvement in the Great Massacre of Tadmur one year earlier. In a televised confession, they verified the details of this crime. Their testimony will be included here as one of the rare accounts of what took place. We will pass along the statements of these criminals as they appeared in different Jordanian media outlets and as they were later presented by Arab and international news agencies.

### Statement of Sergeant Issa Ibrahim Fayyad

*Question: Would you introduce yourself?*

Answer: Issa Ibrahim Hamed Fayyad from Qweiqah in the Latakia Governorate. Born in 1960. Single. ‘*Alawi*. My father is Ibrahim Hamed Fayyad, a farmer. My mother is Jamila Saqr, a householder. I was educated until the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. I studied in my village until the 9<sup>th</sup> grade and then enlisted in a high school in the village of Ein Al-Arous in Latakia. After I left school, I worked with my father as a normal farmer for one year. Then I joined the Defense Brigades on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 1979. I am now a Sergeant and my number is 956982.

*Q: Mr. Issa, tell us in detail about your military service.*

A: I joined the Defense Brigades in the Qaboon barracks. Forty-five days later, I joined another course in the same barracks for a little over three months. Then I was sent to the Ya’qub barracks in Damascus. There, I received training in a Ranger Battalion and on how to use a Kalashnikov and grenades. We continued to do these and other classical training for about three months before returning to the Qaboon barracks where I had parachute training for 25 to 30 days.

Afterwards, I joined Division 40 commanded by Major Mu’een Naseef, an ‘*Alawi* from Latakia and the son-in-law of Colonel Rif’at Al-Assad (Tamader Al-Assad’s husband). I continued this training under the same infantry.

Then, I became a guard for the home of major Mu’een Naseef. There were 25 guards there. First Sergeant Salah Ibrahim, an ‘*Alawi*, was in charge of us. The other guards were also ‘*Alawi*.

*Q: Issa, what were the missions that you were charged with during your service in the Defense Brigades?*

A: I was given two missions.

*Q: What was the first one?*

A: The first mission was that at Tadmur Prison. On June 26, 1980, His Excellency the President Hafez Al-Assad was the target of an assassination attempt. The next morning on June 27, 1980, we were awakened at 3 a.m. to attend a meeting in full

uniform with our weapons. We were taken to a movie house in Division 40 where Major Mu'een Naseef, the Commander, was waiting for us. He delivered a speech in which he said that the Muslim Brotherhood did not differentiate between an '*Alawi* Muslim, a *sunni* Muslim and a Christian.

"They're killing all. Yesterday, they tried to assassinate the President. Therefore, today you are going to attack the biggest of their base at Tadmur Prison."

He asked us: Who doesn't want to fight?

No one raised his hand.

It was a military order. Then he ordered us to get in the cars. We got in and we were about 82 in number. We arrived at the old Mezza Airport where we met a group from Division 138 of the Defense Brigades commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Ali Deeb, an '*Alawi* from Latakia. There were ten helicopters waiting for us. We got into the helicopters under the command of the leader of the 138<sup>th</sup> Division, Lieutenant Colonel Sulaiman Mustapha, an '*Alawi*.

With us were First Lt. Yasir Baker, an '*Alawi* from Hama, Lt. Muneer Darweesh, an '*Alawi*, and Lt. Raef Abdullah, an '*Alwai*. All of them were from the 40<sup>th</sup> Division. We left heading for Tadmur and arrived at about 6:30 a.m.

We got off the planes and we were divided into two units: one was for the offensive and the other remained at the airport.

A Dodge truck carried the first unit to the prison, where we were divided into about six or more groups. My group had 11 people in it. The entire group that went to the Prison was about 60 in number. My group was led by Lt. Muneer Darweesh.

The hall doors were opened for us. Six or seven soldiers entered the hall and killed all those inside. There were about 60 or 70.

I heard that one of the prisoners took a machine gun from one of my colleagues from the Brigades named Sergeant Iskandar Ahmad. I went to see the Sergeant when someone called me. I said, "What do you want?" He said, "Give me a magazine." I asked why and he said,

"Someone is still alive and we want to kill him."

I had given my machine gun to a colleague because his was messed up.

So I took his machine gun and shot the prisoner.

I killed about 15 in total. The total number of those killed from the Muslim Brotherhood reached around 550. The total of those killed from the Brigades was one soldier, and two were wounded.

We walked out and he started washing his hands and feet. Some of them were splattered with blood.

Lt. Raef Abdullah was there.

They asked him,

“Why did you separate the prisoners, one by one?”

He said,

“Because they killed our brothers the other day at the Artillery Academy.”

*Q: How did he separate the prisoners, one by one?*

A: I mean he killed anyone who hadn't yet died.

*Q: Was he inspecting them?*

A: Yes. Also, when one officer shot a prisoner who didn't die, Raef called the officer over and said to finish him off. He said to him, “You didn't kill anyone from the Muslim Brotherhood gang.” Then we got in a car and took us back to the Airport. The other group that stayed at the Airport was waiting for us with the helicopters.

*Q: How long did that mission last?*

A: About half an hour. There were explosions and shouts of *Allahu Akbar*, then we returned to Damascus in the helicopters toward the old Mezza Airport. From there, the 138<sup>th</sup> Division returned to their camp. Our group, the 40<sup>th</sup> Division, returned to its camp. Major Mu'een Naseef was waiting for us. He thanked us for our efforts and condoled us for the death of one of our colleagues. He told us all to return to our jobs, so we did.

*Q: You told us what your role was. What about the role of your colleagues in the operation?*

A: For example, there was Mohammad Ammar, who killed the prisoner who shot Iskandar Ahmad, the Sergeant that was killed from among us. They snatched the machine from the prisoner and killed him. Mohammad Ammar also told me that he opened fire inside the hall. He is an *'Alawi* guard at Major Mu'een Naseef's home.

Tadmur: witnessed & Observed

[There was also] Ibrahim Moonis, an *‘Alawi* and a Corporal from Misyaf. He told me he opened fire too. I don’t know what he shot, but he told me he opened fire.

*Q: How many did he shoot?*

A: He did not say. Then there was Ibrahim Mukanna, an *‘Alawi* was with Lt. Raef Abdullah. He was a Corporal from Jibla in Latakia. He helped Lt. Raef Abdullah in separating the prisoners.

*Q: Where did they talk to you about their roles?*

A: I saw Ibrahim Mukanna myself with Lt. Raef Abdullah at the Prison. Ibrahim Moonis told me at our residence. We were walking together to the city and he told me. Muhammad Ammar told me about his kill.

*Q: When you returned from the prison, were any orders issued to you?*

A: Major Mu’een said that the information about the even should not go out of our circle and the operation should be kept a secret.

*Q: How was the situation at Tadmur Prison before the operation?*

A: Quiet. There were no sounds or anything. It turned out that everything was arranged before we entered. I mean that nobody opposed our entry. The guards were standing in a group guarding the door. There was a head guard and guards in the Field. The officers completed a roll call before the operation.

*Q: They inspected the prisoners?*

A: Before the start of the operation.

*Q: Okay. Sergeant Issa, can you tell me whether any of your colleagues in the Defense Brigades was charged with different tasks?*

A: I know of one in my battalion who guarded Major Naseef’s house and accompanied the Foreign Minister Abdul Halim Khaddam. His name is Sergeant Ali Moosa.

*Q: Where did he accompany him?*

A: He accompanied him to Amman for the Arab summit. I know Sergeant Ali Moosa from Homs. He is an *‘Alawi*. I also know Sergeant Humam Ahmad from Jabla area, an *‘Alawi*. Sgt. Badr Mansour from Jabla, an *‘Alawi*, Corporal ‘Ali Salha from Misyaf, an *‘Alawi*, Corporal Abdul Rahman Hadlan, an *‘Alawi*, Corporal Nazeeh Balool, an *‘Alawi*, Basheer Qalo and Ali al-Moosa who took part in the Tadmur operation.

*Q: They took part in the Tadmur operation and accompanied Mr. Abdul Halim Khaddam to Amman?*

**A: Yes. There are also Ali Saalha and Tahir Zabari who went on a secret mission to Rome and Spain.**

**Statement of Corporal Akram ‘Ali Jameel Beeshani**

*Q: Would you introduce yourself?*

A: I am Akram Ali Jameel Beeshani from the village of Yahmour in the Tartous Governorate. Born in 1962. Single. I finished elementary school. ‘*Alawi*. My father’s name is Ali Jameel Beeshani, an ‘*Alawi*. My mother’s name is Halima Ya’qoob and both currently live in Yahmour.

*Q: What is your job?*

A: At present, I am a Corporal in the Defense Brigades.

*Q: When did you enlist in the Defense Brigades?*

A: I joined the Brigades on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 1979 and was moved to a training camp at Qaboon in Damascus. There, we joined two courses: the first was in language and the second was training in a Ranger Battalion. Then I was transferred to the 149<sup>th</sup> artillery battalion of the 40<sup>th</sup> Division of the Defense Brigades. In exactly May of 1980, I was assigned with a company to guard the home of Major Mu’een Naseef with a group of about 25 individuals.

*Q: What is the exact post of Major Naseef?*

A: Naseef is the Commander of the 40<sup>th</sup> Division of the Defense Brigades. He is an ‘*Alawi* from Latakia and the son-in-law of Colonel Rifat Al-Assad, who is the brother of President Al-Assad and Commander of the Defense Brigades.

*Q: What duties were you assigned when you were in the service of the Defense Brigades?*

A: I was given two assignments: the first was to attack Tadmur Prison and the second was in Jordan.

*Q: What was the first assignment?*

A: The first was to attack Tadmur prison. Following the assassination attempt on the life of President Assad last June, we were awakened at our barracks at around 3:30 a.m. and were asked to assemble with full battle dress in the cinema hall at the Brigade base camp. There were around 100 persons from the 40<sup>th</sup> Division along with three officers. Then, the Brigade Commander came and addressed us. Afterwards, he

explained that the Muslim Brotherhood had killed officers, clergymen, doctors and then dared to make an assassination attempt on the life of President Assad.

“Now,” he said, “we will give you the first combat assignment.”

We left the base with cars and arrived at the old Mezza Airport where some 100 individuals from the 138<sup>th</sup> Division were waiting. This Division is commanded by Lt. Col. Ali Deeb, an ‘*Alawi* from Latakia. There were nine helicopters and we split into groups. Each group was taken over by an officer. We boarded the aircraft which seated 24 individuals each. The Commander of the operation was the assistant of Lt. Col. Ali Deeb, an ‘*Alawi* from Latakia, but I don’t remember his name now. We left Mezza Airport at 5 a.m. and arrived at Tadmur Airport at 6:00 or 6:10 a.m. We were reassembled there while the officers were called for a meeting.

The operation commander told the officers to give us a 45 minute rest. After the rest, we were divided into four groups. The 40<sup>th</sup> Division was divided into three groups, each was commanded by an officer. The officers started to randomly select the troops who would enter Tadmur Prison. They chose some 80 troops for the Prison and 20 for guarding the helicopters while the rest were left as a reserve at the Airport. The 80 individuals chosen to execute the operation were led by cars to the Prison. Forty-five minutes following their entry into the prison, we heard shooting and explosions. There was an estimated seven bombs that went off. The firing continued for about 45 minutes. Then the troops returned to the Airport in groups.

*Q: Which group were you with?*

A: I was left with the reserve group at the airport. When the troops left the Prison, we saw some of them stained with blood. I remember seeing Lt. Raef Abdullah, Lt. Muneer Darweesh, and Sgt. Ali Muhammad Moosa. Then, each boarded an aircraft.

*Q: Were they all from the 40<sup>th</sup> Brigade or others?*

A: No, these were all from the 40<sup>th</sup> Brigade. We got on the airplanes just as we came and returned to Mezza Airport. We arrived there at 12 noon. One of the individuals was wounded. Lt. Yasser Bakeer of the 40<sup>th</sup> Brigade told us that the Brigade Commander would be meeting with us at the cinema and that if he asked about the

Tadmur: witnessed & Observed

wounded man, we should tell him that one of his bullets hit the wall and returned to him. We agreed to tell this story and left by car to the cinema at the base camp.

*Q: All of you went to the base including those of the 138<sup>th</sup> Brigade or only those of the 40<sup>th</sup> Brigade?*

*A: Only those of the 40<sup>th</sup> Brigade as those of the 138<sup>th</sup> Brigade had left for their own camp. The commander of the 40<sup>th</sup> Brigade met with us and thanked us.*

*Q: You mean Major Mu'een Naseef?*

*A: Major Mu'een Naseef told the troops that they had carried out a heroic operation although it was the first of its kind. Then we left the cinema and split into parties chatting with one another. There, I met with one of my colleagues, Sergeant Ali Moosa, from the group of those who guard Major Mu'een Naseef. I asked him how the operation was executed, because was among the group who entered the Prison. He said that they were divided into groups of eight soldiers each. Each group was commanded by an officer. They entered the halls that had prisoners inside. They opened the doors and shot them immediately without any questions or words. I asked if the prisoners yelled for help. He said that they were pleading, saying "Allahu Akbar," and begging us not to shoot them in the name of Allah and Prophet Muhammad and for the sake of our mothers and sisters. The Sergeant added that the troops turned a deaf ear and completely ignored the pleas. They shot them and then left. I asked him how many were killed and the Sergeant estimated the number at 500 to 600 prisoners. The following day of the operation, each soldier who participated in this operation was given 200 Syrian pounds as a bonus.*

*Q: Who do you know from those who participated in the operation?*

*A: I know Corporal Nasser Abdel Latif from Tartous or Latakia, I'm not exactly sure. He's an 'Alawi. I know Corporal Ghassan Sh-hadeh from Latakia, an 'Alawi. I know Sergeant Ali Moosa from Homs; Corporal Taher Ziyadi from Latakia; Sergeant Talal Muhyi-ddin Ahmad, an 'Alawi from Latakia; Sergeant Nazeeh Balool, an 'Alawi from the Homs governorate, Corporal Hussein Issa from the Homs governorate, Sergeant Humam Ahmed from Latakia. These are the ones I know who participated.*

*Q: Do you know any officers who took part in the operation?*

A: I know Lt. Raef Abdullah from the infantry battalion of the 40<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the Defense Brigades. He is an 'Alawi from Latakia. I know Lt. Muneer Darweesh from the same battalion, also an 'Alawi, and First Lt. Yasir Bakeer from the 40<sup>th</sup> Brigade who is from the Hama governorate and an 'Alawi as well.

*Q: You are a young man, Akram, at the beginning of your youth. Why did you implicate yourself in such assignments and why did you choose the Defense Brigades?*

A: I chose the Brigades due to my bad financial conditions. The salaries earned by troops of the Brigades are higher than those of the Army. A soldier in the Defense Brigades earns 1200 Syrian pounds while any other soldier in the Syrian Army earns only 500 to 600 Syrian pounds. As for my involvement in this, I can say that they took advantage of my condition as a poor man and tempted me with money. They took advantage of my youth and of being a soldier who cannot refuse an order.

*Q: Are the officers of the Defense Brigades different than other officers in the Syrian Army?*

A: I don't know about all the officers but I know about the officer I work for.

*Q: Who?*

A: Major Mu'een Naseef who has eight cars.

*Q: His own?*

A: Yes and his financial status is good.

*Q: What's the lifestyle of this officer whom you guard?*

A: He lives luxuriously in an exceptional way.

**Statement of Taha Muhammad al-Khalidi**

We were in Abu Shalha's car. On our way back to Damascus, a conversation took place between the two men we brought from the hotel. One was Maajid Abu Shalha. We talked about the internal situation and the problems in Syria. One of them, I think his name was Abdel Mun'im, said that he had participated in the Tadmur Massacre. He told 'Ali that they rode eight airplanes that carried them and dropped them off near Tadmur Prison. He said,

“We went to the prisoners and killed them—finished them all.”

After he told us about killing the prisoners, Abdul-Mun'im's friend or brother, Maajid Abu Shalha, asked him,

“What was the number of those killed?”

He answered,

“More than 700.”

Then he added,

“They brought bulldozers to carry the corpses into trucks and they took them to a valley east of Tadmur where they were buried.”

We arrived at Damascus.

### **From the Roster of Martyrs**

It is not at all easy to issue a true statistic on the number of martyrs from Tadmur Prison or of the martyrs' names. The terrorism that envelopes the life of the detainees is the one reason for this. Another is the secrecy by which the executions are carried out. The extinction of waves of witnesses; the nervousness, fear and transfers; the constant state of awaiting death; these aspects make such a task extremely difficult. All of this makes a prisoner unaware of what takes place around him, ignorant of what is happening behind the door of the very hall he sits in.

After careful deliberation and repetitive review, I am able to confirm the following names of individuals that remain in my memory. These are either people whose execution I witnessed myself, heard their names being read from the list of those being called for execution, or whom I was informed from a reliable source that their execution was indeed carried out. Most of them were killed at Tadmur Prison and a few of them were killed at Mezza Prison. Their information was carried to us by those who were there at the time of the executions.

Asking God Almighty that His mercy and acceptance be granted to the martyrs, I emphasize what is already well known about the situation: that the number of those who died at the hanging posts or at the hands of the oppressors and the guards are multiples and multiples of this number.

Again, I appeal to every brother who witnessed this trial or who knows anything about it to record what he saw and document what he knows and understands so that these records can complete one another. That way, the numerous efforts can present a full, clear picture of the atrocity and preserve for the coming generations the extent of the ugliness that these sinful hands executed upon people of the devastated country of Syria.

---

<sup>i</sup> (Translator's note: In the Arabic version of this book, the author mentions the names of many individuals he came across throughout his time in prison. The purpose of this is partially to relay the story accurately but more specifically to document history and provide information to readers who still have family or friends whose whereabouts remain unknown. Because of the many names mentioned, and in an effort to preserve the flow of the story, they will be added as references in the endnotes.)

...from different precincts of Syria, among them were Hussein Rasheed Uthman and his cousin Ayman Uthman from the "Bab" near Aleppo, Tahir Jeelo from Idlib, Jamal 'Aqeel and Jalal-ul-Deen from Aleppo, Muhammad Armanaazi and Jihad Kallas Al-Halabi, Ja'moor, Najjar, Usama Fatoohi the soldier from Hama, Tayseer Abul-Ruz, Jihad Hallaq, Ma'mun Al-'Athmah, Al-Safadi, Abdul-Ilaah Ba'albaki from Damascus.

<sup>ii</sup> ...twelve individuals, from whom I remember Abdul-Kareem Muhalhil from Deir Ezzor who used to teach medicine in Damascus, and another brother from the Sarraj family also from Deir Ezzor; I think his first name was Mahmood.

<sup>iii</sup> ...calling my name among a long list of others. If my memory serves me correctly, they were: Haytham Mulla Uthman and Jamal 'Ayyar from Aleppo, Waddah Al-Din from a village around Aleppo, Qaasim Moosa from Tadmur, Hussin Rasheed Uthman from the Bab, Muhammad Thaabit Na'is and Nadeem Mansour from Idlib, Muhammad Tahir Mustafa and Ibraheem Ahmadu from Areeha, Mustafa Al-Shir from Jisir Al-Shaghoor, Shareef Al-Ba'th from Idlib, Umar Al-Haydar and Hazeen Qaasim Al-Mahameed from Mu'rat il-Nu'man, Ibraheem Toubal and Umar Hamzah from al-Mu'rah as well, Shaakir Moumah and Kamal Andoorah from Damascus, and a brother from Hama who was the brother of Muhammad Fakhri.

<sup>iv</sup> ...sixty-five years! From them I recall Shareef Al-Ba'th and Haj Muhammad Ghareer, both from Idlib, Ibrahim Tobal and Umar Haydar (who died of a heart attack in 1986), both of whom were from al-Mu'rah, and Haj Ahmad Al-Barboor from Areeha.

<sup>v</sup> ...from Aleppo. From that group, I remember Riyadh Al-Shaawi, a civil engineer, and Hussein Al-Tunji, a high school student, both from Aleppo. There were also Ahmad 'Un-'un, a student of civil architecture, and Ahmad Hamzah, a teacher, both from the Bab.

<sup>vi</sup> ...died from our hall. Among them were Kamal Andoorah and Ma'moon Al-Thahabi from Damascus, and Hishaam Mshandaf, Bassam Al-Haashimi and Sami Wahood from Homs.

<sup>vii</sup> ...to our hearts. Among them was Brother Suhban Barakat, who was arrested in 1981 but was transferred to Tadmur after the Massacre took place. He was executed while in prison, may God rest his soul. Transferring to Tadmur with him was his cousin Subhi Barakat, who was an honor student in the Medical School of the University of Damascus. Additionally, I recall Brother Ahmad Da'du' from Hama, who was executed two or three years after his arrival.

<sup>viii</sup> ...from our hall alone. Among them was Brother 'Abdul-Rahman Fleetani from Homs, 'Abdul-Sattar Mustafa also from Homs, Mustafa Al-Mustafa from the village of Mannikh near Aleppo, and another brother whose first name was Mustafa, from Aleppo.

## From the Roster of Martyrs

<b>Name</b>	<b>City</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Method</b>
Ghalib Haddad	Hama	?	1980	Hanging
Hasan Al-Sagheer	Homs	Soldier	1981	Hanging
Abdul-Majeed Al-Dabbagh	Homs	Mathematics Teacher	1981	Hanging
Bassam Kalo	Homs	12th grade - High School	1981	Hanging
Hussein Al-Tunji	Aleppo	High school student	1981	Hanging
Ameen Asfar	Hama	Graduate of Islamic High School	1981	Hanging
Muhammad Fakhri	Hama	Handy man	1981	Hanging
Ma'moon Kurdi	Hama	University student	1981	Torture
Naasih Sh-naytbi	Damascus	?	1981	Cholera
Jihad Hallaq	Damascus	?	1981	Torture
Nasir al-Deen al-Beck	Homs	Engineering student	1981	Hanging
Na'eem Siyam	Jordan	Business student in Aleppo	1981	Hanging
Hussein Rasheed 'Uthman	Al-Bab/Aleppo	Journalist at the Syrian News Agency	1981 or 1982	Hanging
Ayman 'Uthman	Al-Bab/Aleppo	Army Captain	?	Hanging
Jamal 'Aqeel	Aleppo	Engineering student	1982	Hanging
Jalal al-Deen Jalal	Aleppo	?	1982	Hanging
Muhammad Sadiq al-'Awn	Hama	Islamic University	1982	Hanging
Abdul-Kareem Ghanim	Damascus	Engineering student	1982	Hanging
Kamal Andoora	Damascus	Electrical Engineering student	1982	Sickness
Hisham Mujandif	Homs	Soldier	1982	Sickness
Bassam al-Hashimi	Homs	High school student	1982	Sickness
Sami Wahood	Homs	Mechanical Engineering student	1982	Sickness
Zahid Dakhil	Aleppo	Doctor	1982	Torture
Hassan Tarabeeshi	Homs	Mechanical Engineering student	1982	Hanging
Tawfeeq D-raaq al-Siba'i	Homs	Neurologist	1982	Hanging
Abdul-'Aziz 'Awad Salim	Soran/Hama	Soldier	1982	Tuberculosis
Yahia 'Abdul-Kareem al-Shami	Hama	Pharmacy student	1982	Tuberculosis

## From the Roster of Martyrs

<b>Name</b>	<b>City</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Method</b>
Abdul-Wahab Halmooshi	Homs	University student	1982	Torture
Yusuf 'Abbara	Aleppo	?	1982	Hanging
Bassam Siba'i	Homs	Engineer	1982	Hanging
Muhammad Sanobar	Damascus	12th grade - High School	1982 or 1983	Hanging
Abdul-Hakeem ...	Saraqib/Idlib	Arabic Teacher and Lieutenant	1983	Hanging
Abdul-Rahman Fleetani	Homs	Employee	1983	Hanging
Mustafa ...	Aleppo	Businessman	1983	Tuberculosis
Abdul-Saatir Mustafa	Homs	?	1983	Tuberculosis
Muhammad Hasan 'Aj'ooj	Hama	?	1983	Heart Attack
Abdul-Kareem al-Saalih	Deir Ezzor	Engineering student	1983	Hanging
Ma'moon al-Dahabi	Damascus	12th grade - High School	1983	Sickness
Ahmad Da'da'	Hama	Handy man	1983 or 1984	Hanging
Abdul-Kareem al-Saalih	Al-Bab/Aleppo	Engineering student	1983 or 1984	Hanging
Hussein al-'Adam	Jordan	Taxi driver	1983 or 1984	Hanging
Abdul-Mu'iz al-'Ajami	Homs	Engineering student	1984	Hanging
Nadeem Mansour	Idlib	University graduate	1984	Hanging
Jamal 'Ayyar	Aleppo	Graduate of Islamic High School	1984	Hanging
Sahban Barakat	Hama	Agriculture student	1984	Hanging
... al-'Abidi	Damascus	Businessman	1984	Hanging
Mulham Ataasi	Homs	University student	1984	Hanging
Tareef Haddad	Homs	12th grade - High School	1984	Hanging
Haytham Malla 'Uthman	Damascus	Engineering student	1984	Hanging
Omar Badir	Homs	Businessman	1984	Hanging
Yusuf 'Obeyd	Damascus	?	1984	Hanging
Diyaa Aswad	Aleppo	Engineering student	1984 or 1985	Hanging
Abdul-Kareem Mhalhal	Deir Ezzor	Medical school student	1984 or 1985	Hanging
... Sraj	Deir Ezzor	Medical school student	1984 or 1985	Hanging

## From the Roster of Martyrs

<b>Name</b>	<b>City</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Method</b>
Hazeen Qaasim	Al-Ma'arra	Elementary teacher	1985	Hanging
Mustafa al-Mustafa	Minnikh/Aleppo	Graduate of Islamic High School	1985	Tuberculosis
... Attar	Aleppo	High school student	1985	Hanging
... Attar	Aleppo	High school student	1985	Hanging
Ayman 'Anjareeni	Aleppo	Student	1985 or 1986	Hanging
Ahmad Ghanoom	Aleppo	General Brigadier	1986	Hanging
Omar Haydar	Al-Ma'arra	Teacher	1986	Heart Attack
Tahir al-'Alo	Aleppo	?	1986	Hanging
Zahi 'Abbadi	Deir Ezzor	Physician	1990	Unclear
... Watfeh	Damascus	Soldier	?	Hanging
Abdul-Ilaah B'albaki	Qudsiya/Damascus	Engineer	?	Hanging
Ahmad Fatoomeh	Hama	Handy man	?	Torture
Tahir 'Arif Jeelo	Salqeen/Idlib	Islamic Education Teacher	?	Hanging
Muhammad Armanaazi	Hama	?	?	Hanging (Mezza)
Mutaa' Ataasi	Homs	Doctor	?	Hanging

