

Fact Sheet: Prisons and Torture in Syria

Syrian Prisons: For generations Syria's prison system has been a symbol of oppression and violence. Prisons in Syria have been used in many cases to quiet political dissent, to sow fear and as a way to kill dissidents.

Syrian poet Faraj Beraqdar, who has been detained as a political prisoner since March 1987 and was held in Tadmor prison (below) for five years, from 1988 to 1992, described the prison as a "kingdom of death and madness."ⁱ

Before going into all these details (which are great) I would talk about the Caesar photos, 11,000 dead mostly peaceful protesters, and point out how the deaths of these prisoners to an extent rebuts the kumbaya narrative that the Revolution should have remained peaceful to lower the death toll (it would have just meant the regime could arrest/torture/kill more people from up close instead of bombing them from afar).

Tadmur Prison: Tadmur prison sits in the shadow of the ancient Roman ruins of Palmyra, 130 miles northeast of Damascus.

Since its construction as an army barracks during the French Mandate, Tadmor was originally meant to be used as a military prison,ⁱⁱ and has been used for criminal imprisonment, rendition, torture, extra-legal imprisonment and executions.

The prison is widely known as a site for long-term sentences, and as the site of some of the most abhorrent human rights abuses in Syria.



Tadmur Prison (130 mi NE of Damascus)ⁱⁱⁱ

Tadmur & The Ikhwan Rebellion

In the late 1970's and early 80's there was severe political tension between the Muslim Brotherhood and Hafez al-Asad's government. As many as 17,000 people are thought to have been "disappeared" into places like Tadmur under the rule of al-Asad.^{iv}

In the early 80's, Islamist factions arrayed against the government led a popular uprising several thousand strong. This uprising was met with the full force of the Syrian military.^v However, in 1980, an assassination attempt was made on the president.

The president's brother, Rifaat al-Asad, Commander of the Defense Companies, in response to the attack on the president, led a group of between 60 and 80 men to Tadmur prison.vi There they executed, in their cells, between 500 and 800 members of the Muslim Brotherhoodvii, some estimates even go as high as 1000 murdered.viii

Tadmur was closed after Hafez died in 2000. The so-called "Damascus Spring" ushered in a brief period when the policies of the former president were widely discussed. Prisons, their role in oppression and torture were all widely discussed. The prison supposedly lay dormant until 2011 and the onset of the Arab Spring. Since then, the rumors of widespread abuse, political imprisonment, torture, rendition and murder have flourished once again.ix

Sednaya Prison:

Sednaya military prison sits 10.5 miles north of Damascus and about 8 miles NW of Adra prison (see below). Horrific accounts have come out of Sednaya detailing torture, abuse, extended isolation, disease and over-crowding.x

A Human Rights Watch report described, "abhorrent conditions, including overcrowding, lack of food, inadequate heating and ventilation, poor medical services, and extremely poor sanitary conditions that caused detainees to develop skin diseases and diarrhea."xi

These conditions were consistent with photos taken and smuggled by Syrian Army defector, Caesar, corroborating starvation, emaciation, abuse and deaths. Sednaya has also been a repository for rendition and mass deaths, possibly execution-style.xii

*Sednaya Prison, 10 miles north of Damascus*xiii

Adra Prison:

Adra Prison is notorious for housing political prisoners and civil dissenters and for torture and widespread abuse of human rights.

Among the most famous prisoners, is Bassel Khartabil. He is widely credited with opening up the Internet for Syrians and vastly extending online access and knowledge to the Syrian people.xiv In 2012, *Foreign Policy* placed him at 19 on its annual list of *Global Thinkers*, "for insisting against all odds on a peaceful Syrian revolution."xv

While torture and abuse are rampant, many say that people in Adra suffer because of the cramped and corrupt conditions.

The Annual Prison Assessment, co-authored by the Syrian Association for Human Rights and the Arab Organization for Penal Reform, made these conclusions:xvi

- Adra was built to detain some 2,000 prisoners and, as of February 2011, there were said to be over 9,000 inmates housed in Adra. Surely there are more today.
- Cells designed for 20 people currently house over 80.
- Black mail and corruption are rampant, with wealthier people being able to bribe guards and other inmates for visits, food, mattresses, hygiene products, showers and phone calls.
- Medical amenities are said to be standard, but only if you can afford to pay for them.
- Some 46 people are supposedly held in Adra, but there is no way of knowing if they are there.

Other Notorious Prisons in Syria:

[Aleppo Prison](#): the largest prison in the country and site of a major battle in Syria's civil war.xvii

[Mazza military airport](#): highlights the problem with finding and documenting human rights abuses against those detained by the regime and by the opposition.xviii

[Far' Falastin](#): Rendition, torture, rats, disease, and inhumane conditions are the most notorious aspects of this most secretive prison.xix

Why prisons pose such a problem: Maybe write here what I said above (that this refutes the kumbaya narrative).

Due to the nature of the political climate in Syria, human rights groups cannot officially operate, do not have direct access to prisons and their conditions, and direct confrontation with the policies of the state are why so many people sit in Syria's prisons today.

So, these groups must rely on testimonies of former inmates and guards when available. This is what makes the contributions of Caesar so valuable: The world needs a first-hand record of the atrocities committed at the hands of the al-Asad regime against Syrians.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights estimates that the Syrian regime is using rendition, or enforced disappearance as a weapon of war by currently holding over 85,000 "forcibly disappeared" persons.xx

End Notes:

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Syrian Network for Human Right