

## Senate Testimony for Wednesday, March 11th, 2020

Thank you members of this committee for inviting me to testify.

As you read my testimony now, in Idlib civilians face a constant onslaught from the regime and its foreign backers, Russia and Iran. They face constant bombardment. Schools, hospitals, and bakeries have all been targeted. In the midst of this massive humanitarian disaster, one cannot forget that the reason so many have come to this desperate place is to evade the very same detention I faced for over three years. When the regime advances and seizes another village, people either die, flee, or end up in detention centers like me and those cities became cities of ghosts. And here's a brief taste of what happened in detention centers:

The Syrian regime first arrested me on April 12th, 2011 at the center of my hometown, the village of al-Bayda near Baniyas city. when I was fifteen years old. They arrested me for only participating in non-violent demonstrations.

There I got my first taste of what was to come — I spent two nights in jail and experienced torture for the first time. I for the first time braced as I endured electric shocks. I for the first time knew how it felt for my nails to be pulled from my fingers.

The regime released me thanks to the marches of women in Baniyas and al-Bayda. These women took to the streets to demand the release of their family and community members. I returned to my hometown, but faced arrest after arrest for no reason but for going to school or belonging to the Alshogre family.

On November 16th, 2012, the regime arrested me for the final time. I spent three years in many different prisons in different Syrian cities, but mostly in Damascus. I was only 17 years old.

Over a period of almost three years, the regime tortured me alongside my three cousins — Bashir (born in 1990), Rashad (1992), and Nour (1995) — who had been arrested with me. Guards pulled out our fingernails — sparing only Nour of this burden given that she was a girl. They threw us naked into small cells stained with the blood of former detainees who had suffered their torture as well.

At the time of the last arrest, we were taken first to the military intelligence branch in Baniyas. We spent around four hours there before being transferred to a military intelligence branch in Tartus where we spent the following twenty days. Next, we were transferred to a police station in the same city, Tartus, for 7 days and then we were transferred to al-Balouna police station in Homs. Again we were transferred, this time to al-Qaboun in Damascus, then to an unknown place near al-Qaboun, then to Branch 291 where we spent the last hours before being transferred to Branch 215 on December 13th, 2012. I spent around one year and eight months in Branch 291 before being sent to Branch 248 for a few hours then again to al-Qaboun then finally to Saydnaya prison on August 15th, 2014. I was then sent to al-Qaboun for court on the 8th of September 2014 and to the court at the 9th before being sent back to Saydnaya on the 10th of September 2014. I was then smuggled out of the country on June 11th, 2015.

In the Tartus Military Intelligence Branch:

I was first isolated in a small cell with my hands tied and my eyes blindfolded. In my first seven days there, guards took me from my cell to the corridor where most of the torture happens. On those days, I spent sixteen hours standing on my feet being tortured on and off physically. But the mental torture was constant. They put me in a German electric chair or in a car tire. When I wasn't physically tortured, the sound of my cousins screaming in pain instantly soured any relief I felt. I can still hear the screams of my cousin, Bashir, when the guards dug into his back with a screwdriver. My other cousin, Rashad, lost most of his hair on his body, which the guards took amusement in burning. I could hear him crying and screaming of the pain while the guards laughed loudly. Rashad was the first of us to be hung up to the ceiling by shackles on his wrist. I was next.

In the first two days, the guards didn't ask questions. They only tortured. Later, however, they started asking me questions like "how many officers have you killed?" I thought the guards were kidding because I knew I had killed no one. I answered their queries with quiet laughter. For this they beat my face and subjected me to electric shocks. They tortured me for six days. They strung me up and hung me on the ceiling. They again put me in a car tire and pulled my nails. They whipped me with cables and sticks. When I could no longer bear it, I told them what they wanted to hear: "Yes, I killed officers."

For the guards, the specifics of said guards — and even whether they ever lived or died — did not matter. They expected me to admit I had killed officers, and that was all that mattered. They wanted me to write a confession to give a legalistic facade to their dungeon of horrors. On the sixth day, the guards threatened that they would rape my cousin Nour before my very eyes if I did not confess to the murder of ten officers and possession of a weapon. They coerced me to state that I had worked as a spy for the United States and Israel. I didn't speak any word of English then and didn't even know what a terrorist was at the time.

On the 10th day, Bashir and I were taken to our village to the spot where, under torture, I had said I buried my non-existent weapons. The soldiers dug a hole, threw me in it, and buried me alive. For some reason, right as I was about to suffocate, they pulled me out of the grave. We returned back to Tartus branch — where the most extreme varieties of torture and horror were commonplace. The guards again asked the same questions, but I didn't remember what I admitted to before. They tortured me more. They threatened they would arrest my mom and sisters if I did not say I committed crimes.

Bashir's body was scarred. Rashad's ribs broke before we left the Tartus Military Intelligence Branch. My bones were broken as well. Blistering wounds freckled my skin where the guards amused themselves by putting out their cigarettes.

In Tartus police station:

The guards forced my cousins and me to clean the toilets while enduring torture. Back in the cells, during our "sleep time," arrested government soldiers tortured us. In reality, there never was a break. Our meager food was always stolen by these imprisoned soldiers. Our scars got their attention and their torture deepened our wounds. The officers told the imprisoned soldiers

there that my cousins and I had **previously carried weapons and killed officers** so they tortured us and we could not sleep in peace.

In al-Qaboun:

The guard hit me on my face until one of my teeth broke. My cousin, Nour, was still with us but isolated in a different, all-female room. The guards fed us either potatoes or bread and even sometimes eggs. But we could not eat the food because it was mixed with blood and hair. The guards all seemed to enjoy torturing people. They forced us naked and transmitted electric shocks to our genitalia. We tried to tell them that we are innocent. But, to the guards, innocence did not matter.

In Branch 291:

We spent around six hours continually tortured without any questioning. Later, we were transferred to Branch 215, known as “the branch of slow death.”

In Branch 215:

We were put in a room under the ground with hundred of people. These people looked worse than death itself: broken arms and legs, decaying and vanishing teeth, blue bruises peaking through the few spots not covered in blood. Maggots ate at their flesh and the blood covered their skin. The room was so packed that there was not enough space to sit. We stood until we got dizzy and then we would fall over, onto people who then would hit us because we had fallen on their wounds. We endured four days of standing and falling then standing again until the guard took us to the first floor where we were divided to three different groups for scheduled torture. I faced the wall waiting my turn to be hit while a guards tortured a woman in the same room. I heard the voice of two kids with us in the room — her two children. By his or her cry, I could tell the youngest of them wasn't much more than an infant. The guards tortured and raped her. They forced her to say that she had killed officers and that her husband had too. I remember the sound when her younger child was thrown hard on the ground. Like a child's delayed reaction to a fall, it took some seconds before the child could cry. Later this woman's husband, who was held in the same cell as me, told me that the blow had killed his child. Both he and his wife were forced to say that they were terrorists.

My turn came. They asked me to confess that my cousin Nour made bombs. I knew her as a strong student in high school — never as a bomb-maker. Again, the truth didn't matter to the officers.. My cousins and I were thrown back to our room after hours of torture. Since none of us could stand and our knees had been smashed in torture, we lied over other peoples bodies. We were lucky that some of those people were dead so they didn't protest.

On March 15th 2013, Rashad died from the pain of his broken ribs and starvation. Rashad was a hero. He used to donate some of his food to sick prisoners. He was beloved for his kindness and respected by everybody around him. He was carried to the “Azel room,” — a sort of isolation room or mortuary where the guards collected dead bodies before taking them upstairs to a truck and driving them away. When Rashad's body arrived in the dead room, a guy who looked to be in better shape than all other prisoners, gave me a pen and asked me to write a number on

Rashad's forehead. This later became my job. In Branch 215, I numbered the dead bodies of my fellow inmates and, with help of other prisoners, carried them into the truck on the ground floor.

In 2013, the regime arrested another of my cousins and put him in the same jail as Bashir and myself. His name was Hassan. He told me that my family had been killed — cut down and burned — alongside with tens of my other relatives in a massacre perpetrated by regime forces in my village al-Bayda on May 2nd, 2013.

Until March 2014, Bashir couldn't think about anything else than what he would do if he got out of prison. He wondered how he would respond when his mother asked him "where is your younger brother?" Those thoughts — alongside all the torture, sickness, and starvation — robbed him of hope. He died on March 3rd, 2014. I carried him in my arms back from the toilet. Bashir was my closest friend in prison. He gave me a reason to smile and to continue to be alive. His death was the first to break me — and the first to make me unbreakable.

After Rashad and Bashir, I witnessed the guards taking Hassan to his death. At this time and after that I witnessed the death of thousands of prisoners of all different nationalities and walks of life. All the while, I numbered their bodies. I even numbered my cousins and my best friend. I could see my face on every dead body I numbered. During my time in Branch 215, I got sick repeatedly. I was afforded no medicine or medical attention whatsoever. The only thing that protected us was the angel of death. During my time there, I met two prisoners who had been arrested since 2008. They told me they were until recently kept on the sixth floor of Branch 215. There, they had met international prisoners. During a period of time, the guards would search for prisoners who spoke English. Those who could speak English were taken to translate between the guards and the non-Arabic speaking prisoners. It was these same people who inevitably numbered the day after they were taken to translate. Their selection and deaths are the strongest evidence I have for the presence of the non-Arabic speaking prisoners in the regime's political prisons.

I had been the youngest detainee in Branch 215 until a 12-year old child joined our cell. I remember him crying and asking for his mom. I remember him and the other children scared and ashamed after being raped by the guards. I remember the guards laughing when they spoke of raping them again. In prison, we were Muslims, Christians, atheists — all sharing the same kind of torture. All of us were forced to fight to eat, fight to drink, and fight to survive for just one more day.

In the court:

The guards took me to a room and forced my fingerprints on some papers I hadn't read. They had blindfolded me. I could hear screams of pain even in the court.. I was taken to stand in front of a judge and I felt some hope for the first time in a while. Then he asked me "how many people have you killed?" I answered "none." He told me to "get out." That was my one day in court..

In Saydnaya prison:

The level of torture in Saydnaya "the slaughter house," was incomparable even with what I had experienced earlier. Saydnaya was worse than pain, more horrible than anything previous to it,,

worse than death. Someone near to where I was in Saydnaya told the guards he was sick. They called the prison doctor who told him they needed no sick people in Saydnaya and executed him. They ordered me to pull him to the dead room. There, I saw people who seems like they have died of many different reasons — including torture, starvation, and the removal of organs

Between August 2015 and June 2015, a lot of people died. A lot of children became orphans and a lot of women became widows. The guards gave some people knives and asked them to choose between their life and that of their kin. The guards could starve us in days then give food to five of a hundred people. They would instigate a fight between the starving mass and those recently given some small amount of food. The guards would put a pile of food in the corner of our room and force us to look at it for days without being allowed to eat it. The shower days in the winter saw the most deaths.

On June 9th, 2015, I was taken to an empty room where I spent forty-eight hours being asked by the guards at every single hour the same question over and over “how would you like me to kill you? Be creative.” They forced me to give different creative answers of how they could enjoy killing me. Behind the scenes, a huge amount of money was paid to an officer and judge to help smuggling me outside Saydnaya before my execution. They killed someone else who was set for release and saved me in his place. After a mock execution, they carried me off. I didn't know what was going on. I just woke up in the middle of nowhere covered in blood and unable to open my eyes. The sun shone over my head for the first time after almost three years. I managed to get myself to Damascus and get my way out of the country. The regime stopped me at a checkpoint and again brought me to the brink of execution near Idlib. However, my tuberculosis-borne coughs of blood scared the soldiers and in a panic they released me into rebel-held areas. From there I made it to Turkey, where I found out that my mom and some of my siblings had survived the 2013 massacre and escaped to Turkey after the death of my father and brothers. My mom had paid the money to smuggle me out of prison. She didn't know the money she'd paid was the cost to save my life.

On my way to Europe/legal cases:

For seeking treatment, I was forced to risk my life again by sitting on a rubber boat with tens of people in a dark night to go to Greece in the end of 2015. Greece didn't provide me any healthcare so I continued to travel through North Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, Germany, and Denmark. Finally, on December 1st, 2015, I entered Sweden — the country that treated me the best and gave me what was necessary to survive and even thrive. I started to learn Swedish early in the hospital during treatment. Over the past five years, I've learned to speak it fluently. Later, I learned Norwegian before starting to focus on learning English in 2018.

I believe in justice and accountability for those who committed such heinous acts against myself and so many others. For this reason, I have testified to the Swedish police and worked alongside other survivors in legal cases in Germany, France, Sweden, Spain and Norway for war crimes committed by the regime against the Syrian civilians. I have felt immense concern for my safety since the regime actors contacted me threatening that I should remain silent or fear for my life. I refuse to be silent. Bringing Syria's war criminals to justice needs the support of the United States to protect innocent people and right past wrongs. I look to the United States to be the voice for the voiceless people, not only in Syria, but around the world.

*For a copy of my testimony in a Swedish case against individuals in the Assad regime government, please reach out to the Swedish police authorities.*