

Spiritual Humiliation: Sectarian Torture Tactics in Assad's Prisons

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“The greatest jihād is a word of justice in front of a tyrannical ruler.”

Hadith. Sunna from al-Tirmidhī 2174.

Abstract

Using an Islamic lens, this paper will explore spiritual humiliation, a method of torture used by guards in Syria's government torture facilities to violate religious boundaries and demean the spiritual identity of detainees. Spiritual humiliation will be categorized into two forms; the first being forced sin. This is committed in verbal and physical blasphemy and false confessions. The second form of spiritual humiliation is the restriction of religious practice, apparent both directly, by forbidding prayer, fasting, the call to prayer, growing of a beard, and indirectly, by preventing them from seeing the time of day, necessary for fasting and praying, and by imposing a state of religious impurity upon the detainee. Labeling the sectarian abuse that takes place on a smaller scale in torture facilities provides a deeper understanding the religious dimension to the genocide in Syria.

Introduction

Almost all current Regime high-ranking official, soldier commander, leader, and key positions are held by Alawites.¹ The ruling Alawite religious minority accounts for twelve percent of Syria's population, while Sunni Muslims account for seventy-four percent of the population.² While Alawites are often described an offshoot of Shiite Islam,³ many leading Sunni Islamic institutions have issued religious decrees labeling Alawism as a religion of heretics, due to the associations made between God and religious figures in its ideology and their

¹ Rabbat, Nasser. "Syria: Anatomy of a Sectarian Regime." The Zambakari Advisory. Accessed May 15, 2017. <http://www.zambakari.org/middle-east/syria-anatomy-of-a-sectarian-regime>.

² George, Alan. "'A Certain Equality of Misery': An Overview of Syria." In *Syria Neither Bread nor Freedom*, 5. New York: Zed Books, 2003.

³ Brunner, Rainer, and Werner Ende. *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religious Culture & Political Culture*. Leiden: Brill, 2001.

rejection of basic principles in Sunni Islam.⁴ Sunni Muslims hold the *Hadith* and *Sunna*, the Prophet Muhammad's sayings and lifestyle, as a necessary part of their religion. They hold no mediators between a Muslim and Allah. Twelver Shias, including Alawites, discount the *Sunna* and *Hadith* and argue that the *Imams*, or Islamic leaders, must be descendants of the Prophet or certain family members, and hold divine powers to mediate with God. It is estimated that 85% of Shia are Twelvers.⁵ It is important to note, sectarian struggles for power are not a recent phenomenon in the Middle East, Syria particularly. Heterodox Shia groups, particularly the Nizari Ismailis, prospered along the Crusader states until 1256 in Greater Syria. Saladin's Ayyubid dynasty and then the Mamluks re-established orthodox Sunni rule, which the Ottomans continued for 400 years.⁶

Syria's iron-fisted intelligence agencies were originally established by the French during the period of colonialism which began in 1917, after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. European forces known as SIME, the Security Intelligence of the Middle East, established detention centers in "Syria/Lebanon, Palestine, Cyprus, and Egypt" in the late twentieth century. In fact, many torture facilities created by the French are used by the Syrian Regime to this day.⁷ The Arab Revolt led to eventual decolonization and the establishment of numerous civilian governments, which were lastly overthrown by the coup de tat' of Hafez al-Assad in 1971. Hafez al-Assad, an Alawite, created a Regime largely controlled by Alawites. The despotic Regime established a police state which utilized torture facilities to ruthlessly control the population and

⁴ "According to Majority of Islamic Institutions: Bashar al-Assad is a Disbeliever." *YouTube*. n.d. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hrvTF-X0aSM>.

⁵ Guidère, Mathieu. *Historical Dictionary of Islamic Fundamentalism*, 319. Scarecrow Press, 2012.

⁶ Yassin-Kassab, Robin, and Leila Al-Shami. *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 2. 2016.

⁷ Hashimoto, Chikara. "Fighting the Cold War or Post-Colonialism? Britain in the Middle East from 1945 to 1958: Looking Through the Records of the British Security Service." *The International History Review* 36.1 (2014): 22. Web.

extinguish political, social, or religious dissent against the government through means of arbitrary arrest, forced disappearance, and torture, despite international and domestic law which prohibit torture entirely.⁸ A State of Emergency law was enacted in 1962, and is routinely used as an excuse for such detainment.⁹ This system of oppression was succeeded by Bashar al-Assad in 2000, who renewed the intelligence agencies, continuing and adding to the legacy of suppressing the Syrian population.¹⁰

There are estimated 300,000 political detainees in Syria's torture facilities, most detained with no charge.¹¹ In the Seydnaya prison alone, 13,000 people were executed by means of hanging since 2011.¹² A recent report revealed that crematoriums were built in Seydnaya to get rid of the unimaginable number of people tortured to death.¹³ They are subject to routine, malicious torture including but not limited to the *dullab*, or tire, where the victim is hung from a suspended tire and beaten with sticks, clubs, cables, or whips, *al- 'Abd al-Aswad*, the Black Slave, where the victim is strapped onto a device which inserts a heated metal skewer into the anus, using domestic appliances to burn parts of the body such as the chest, back, genitals, buttocks, and feet, extinguishing cigarettes on sensitive parts of the body, plucking hair or skin with pincers or pliers, extracting finger and toe nails, sexual abuse and assault, forcing the victim to sit on bottle necks or inserting bottles or sticks into the rectum, complete isolation in a small dark cell with no human contact for days, subjecting the victim to mock execution, torturing or

⁸ Wisniewski, J. Jeremy, and R. D. Emerick. *The Ethics of Torture*. London: Continuum, 2009.

⁹ *Torture in the Eighties: [an Amnesty International Report]*, 242. Oxford: M. Robertson, 1984.

¹⁰ George, Alan. *Syria Neither Bread nor Freedom*. New York: Zed Books, 2003.

¹¹ "Went Out and Never Came Back - Female Detainees in Assad's Prisons." *YouTube*. n.d.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvCsUT-jaGU>.

¹² *SYRIA: HUMAN SLAUGHTERHOUSE: MASS HANGINGS AND EXTERMINATION AT SAYDNAYA PRISON, SYRIA*. Amnesty International, n.d.

¹³ "Syria's Saydnaya Prison Crematorium Hid Killings, Says US." BBC News. May 15, 2017.

sexually assaulting the victim's relatives in his or her presence, and depriving the victim of sleep, food, water, fresh air, and toilet.¹⁴

Evidence of torture in Assad's prisons has been documented for decades by NGOs, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, as well as government organizations around the world. Arguably the most important documentation is that of personal testimony, and for decades previously detained persons who survived Assad's prisons have shared their stories of detainment in explicit detail. Personal interviews have been conducted for this research with forcibly displaced Syrians living in Jordan. In the face of their stories of darkness and mortification, people of utmost honor and courage shared their experiences to advocate for justice on behalf of all detained persons in Syria and across the world.

Reports and personal testimonies reveal a pattern of systemic abuses, one pattern overlooked is that of spiritual humiliation. This paper will use an Islamic lens to explore spiritual humiliation, a method of torture used by guards in Syria's government torture facilities to violate religious boundaries and demean the spiritual identity of Sunni detainees. Spiritual humiliation will be categorized into two forms; the first being forced sin. This is committed through verbal and physical blasphemy and false confessions. The second form of spiritual humiliation is the restriction of religious practice both directly, by forbidding prayer, fasting, the call to prayer, growing of a beard, and indirectly, by preventing them from knowing the time of day in order to pray and fast, and by imposing a state of religious impurity upon the detainee. Labeling the sectarian abuse that takes place on a smaller scale in the Regime's torture facilities provides a deeper understanding to the religious dimension to the genocide orchestrated by Assad and his sectarian allies.

¹⁴ *Amnesty International: Syria, Torture by the Security Forces*. London: Amnesty International, 19-21, 1987.

Forced Sin

Physical and Verbal Blasphemy

Forced blasphemy for the purpose of this paper is defined as the forced physical and verbal violation of Islam's most fundamental principle: the oneness of Allah and maintaining respect for all religious identities and entities. Guards in Syrian torture facilities force detainees to commit actions that directly violate these principles, and have documented numerous instances of their own crimes, providing video evidence. Detainees have also recalled such instances. Forced verbal blasphemy consists of forcing Sunni Muslims to say phrases that violate laws of Islamic blasphemy, by forcing them to curse Allah and religious individuals in Islam. Guards themselves also commit blasphemy by swearing by what Alawites consider "divine individuals." In Sunni Islam, it is impermissible to associate divinity with one other than Allah. Associating any individual with God, and cursing the Prophet and Allah directly violate Islamic blasphemy laws in Islam.

Ahmad El-Maati, a Syrian-Canadian detained on his flight to Damascus for his wedding ceremony, was beaten and tortured until he could not walk on his first day. The guards hurled insults at him, the Prophets, and Allah. As they led him down a staircase, he spotted a picture of Hafez al-Assad beside a verse of the Quran; "And We did not do them injustice, but they were unjust themselves."¹⁵ The placement of his photograph in proximity to the verse, in the content of detainment being the "justice" system, is arguably associating the words of God with a human being, Hafez al-Assad.

¹⁵ Pither, Kerry. *Dark Days: The Story of Four Canadians Tortured in the Name of Fighting Terror*, 29. Toronto: Penguin, 2008.

A leaked video recorded by guards in a Regime torture facility surfaced the internet. They force the young boy to say, "There is no god but Assad", a direct attack on the Muslim testimony of faith, "There is no God but Allah." The following is a transcript of a video of a young child blindfolded and beaten by guards in a torture facility.¹⁶

"Who is your god?"

"Bashar al-Assad."

"To whom do you pray?"

"Bashar al-Assad."

"Who do you worship?"

"Bashar al-Assad."

"Who created you?"

"Bashar al-Assad."

"God is who?"

"Bashar."

"Mohammad is who?"

"Bashar."

"Allah or Bashar, who is better?"

"Bashar."

¹⁶ "Assad Thugs Force Child to say Bashar is their god." *YouTube*. n.d. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SN1O5nhi7-g>.

“Say there is no god but Bashar.”

“There is no god but Bashar.”



Figure 1.1¹⁷

Another man recorded being tortured by Regime guards is forced to prostrate to a picture of Bashar al-Assad, while the guards yell, “Irka!”, commanding him into a position Muslims make during prayer.¹⁸ As a guard kicks him he demands,

“Who is your Lord?”

“Bashar.”

“Bow to your Lord!”



Figure 1.2¹⁹

¹⁷ "Assad Thugs Force Child to say Bashar is their god." *YouTube*. n.d. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SN1O5nhi7-g>.

¹⁸ "Torture Video of a Young Syrian Man Until he Says Assad is his god and Prostrates to his Picture." *YouTube*. n.d. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLcoXJeCT2o>.

¹⁹ "Torture Video of a Young Syrian Man Until he Says Assad is his god and Prostrates to his Picture." *YouTube*. n.d. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLcoXJeCT2o>.

In a Human Rights Report Interview, 22 year old Salma, said she could "... see how the guys were being beaten and interrogated. Some men were not wearing any clothes and were in a prayer position" while they beat them with electrical batons.²⁰ The position of prostration in Muslim prayer is religiously significant in that it is a position when one's most honorable part of his body, his face, is lowered to the ground to worship Allah. It is an act to humble the Muslim and acknowledge the greatness of his Lord. The Prophet said, "The closest that a servant is to his Lord is when he is prostration."²¹ To force a Muslim to prostrate to a tyrant, is a deep insult to his dignity and religious identity.

Hassam, age 13, describes the torture he experienced when he was detained with his relative, who was also 13 years old, in May 2011. During interrogation, "...they asked, 'Who is your god?' And I said, 'Allah.' Then they electrocuted me on my stomach, with a prod. I fell unconscious. When they interrogated me the second time, they beat me and electrocuted me again. The third time they had some pliers, and they pulled out my toenail."²² Malik, another detainee, said he was forced to "...[sign] a white paper saying that I will not go to demonstrations or say Allahu Akbar (Allah is the Greatest)."²³

Fahim, a detainee who was interviewed in 2011, said he was accused of taking part in protests and carrying weapons. "I was on my knees with hands behind my back. The other one was using his boot to beat me on the mouth. I was bleeding. They showed me a picture of Bashar Assad and asked who it was. I said, "The President." They said, "No, it is God." One of them put

²⁰ *Torture Archipelago: Arbitrary Arrests, Torture, and Enforced Disappearances in Syria's Underground Prisons since March 2011*. [New York, N.Y.]: Human Rights Watch, 71. 2012.

²¹ Yousef, Jinan. "The Secret of Prayer: Sujood." Virtual Mosque. n.d.

²² *Torture Archipelago: Arbitrary Arrests, Torture, and Enforced Disappearances in Syria's Underground Prisons since March 2011*. [New York, N.Y.]: Human Rights Watch, 71. 2012.

²³ *Torture Archipelago: Arbitrary Arrests, Torture, and Enforced Disappearances in Syria's Underground Prisons since March 2011*. [New York, N.Y.]: Human Rights Watch, 72. 2012.

a boot on my neck and the other shoved the photo under my nose. This lasted for about an hour.”²⁴

Walid, a member of the riot police at the time, told Human Rights Watch that a protestor was arrested and brought back to the base.

“He was handcuffed and we told him to praise Bashar. He refused so others in my unit beat him... One colonel got angry and ordered that they use more violence against the detainee. Seven officers beat him with batons for more than an hour that evening until he died... I saw the body before it was taken away, his face was bloody- I knew it was the same person they had brought in, but his face was now totally different because of the disfiguration.”²⁵

Dr. Yazan, a displaced Syrian psychologist who provides psychological treatment to Syrian Refugees in Jordan, recalled the story of one of his patients. Young men who had organized protests in Dara’a, the city which sparked the Syrian Revolution, were detained by Regime forces. They were taken to the Jami el-Omari, a masjid known for its significance throughout the Revolution. It was one of the first masjids where protests were held, a masjid which was later turned into a makeshift hospital when Regime forces fired at protestors. This masjid, erected in memory of Omar ibn Al-Khattab, an Islamic Caliphate who is generally disliked within Shia theology,²⁶ now remains as rubble due to Regime bombing.²⁷ In this masjid,

²⁴ *Torture Archipelago: Arbitrary Arrests, Torture, and Enforced Disappearances in Syria's Underground Prisons since March 2011*. [New York, N.Y.]: Human Rights Watch, 59. 2012.

²⁵ *Torture Archipelago: Arbitrary Arrests, Torture, and Enforced Disappearances in Syria's Underground Prisons since March 2011*. [New York, N.Y.]: Human Rights Watch, 29. 2012.

²⁶ *Shia View of Umar Ibn Al-Khattab | Project Gutenberg Self-Publishing - EBooks | Read EBooks Online*. n.d. http://www.gutenberg.us/articles/shia_view_of_umar_ibn_al-khattab.

²⁷ Yassin-Kassab, Robin, and Leila Al-Shami. *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 2. 2016.

guards forced the men to strip to their underwear, and beat them as they were forced to run around the masjid screaming, “We will sacrifice our soul, our blood, for you oh Bashar!”²⁸

Mohammad, another displaced Syrian in Jordan described his experience in the Al-Mezze torture facility in Damascus. He was detained by security forces when attempting to cross at the Lebanese border to visit family. He was detained and tortured for 58 days with no charge, like most detainees.

“Kufr (disbelief) in God was a normal thing. It was even less than normal. They’d say, ‘Be quiet, or I’ll curse so and so, they had no problem with it. I would think to myself, how could this roach curse the Prophet, curse God almighty? It was incredibly disturbing and explicitly sectarian, they harbored hate against us inside of them. If they were to swear, they would say, ‘By Imam Ali’, instead of saying, ‘By God.’ They would torture us and swear by religious figures other than God, and scream, ‘Ya Ali’, ‘Ya Fatima’, ‘Ya Zahra.’ Most of the people- no, all of the people- who run the Regime are Alawite.”²⁹

Another former prisoner of conscience, when interviewed by Amnesty International explained, “Sometimes torture serves as an expression of sectarian hatred. For example, a man was severely tortured because he was in the leadership cadre and a Sunni. The reverse also occurs, for sometimes the Alawite prisoner is tortured more. This happened to [name] because he had, in the words of some officers, ‘betrayed his sect’.”³⁰

Guards have also been accused of creating religious divisions themselves among detainees, with statements such as, “You are a minority, what will you benefit from going against the Regime?” A freed detainee explained, “In the streets, in the protests, people would never ask

²⁸ Yazan, MD. “Psychological Repercussions of Assad’s Torture.” Interview by Malak Shalabi. September 2016.

²⁹ Mohammad. “Detained in al-Mezze.” Interview by Malak Shalabi. September 2016.

³⁰ *Amnesty International: Syria, Torture by the Security Forces*. London: Amnesty International, 2, 1987.

each other what they were. They tried to divide us even in the cells.”³¹ In another instance, a man detained at a checkpoint near his house asked one of the soldiers why they were beating him. “He responded, ‘It’s because of you, Sunnis, and your FSA that I haven’t been home for seven months.’ And he just hit me harder.”³²

Forced Sin: False Testimony

False testimony, or Shahadat Az-Zur, is considered one of five most grave sins in Islam.³³ Surat (Chapter) Al-Nisa, verse 135 in the Quran (the holy Muslim book) states,

“Believers, be the supporters of justice and the testify to what you may have witnessed, for the sake of God, even against yourselves, parents, and relatives; whether it be against the rich or the poor. God must be given preference over them. Let not your desires cause you to commit injustice. If you deviate from the truth in your testimony, or decline to give your testimony at all, know that God is well aware of what you do.”³⁴

Surat Al-Hajj, verse thirty also states, “...and avoid false statement.”³⁵ These verses establish that a Muslim may not provide false testimony, despite potential negative repercussions against one’s self, parents, and relatives. They must be the supporters of justice and only testify the truth as to what they have witnessed. Shahadat az-Zur is strictly forbidden in Islam, and forcing a detainee to provide a false testimony is forcing them to commit one of the five most serious sins in Islam. These places of oppression operate to produce fear, profit, and in almost all

³¹ "Interviews with Detainees of Assad’s Prisons." *YouTube*. February 17, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9QjQ1LF9qw&feature=youtu.be>.

³² Pither, Kerry. *Dark Days: The Story of Four Canadians Tortured in the Name of Fighting Terror*, 39. Toronto: Penguin, 2008.

³³ "Mas’alat Al-Qubur – About Graves — As-Sunnah Foundation of America." As-Sunnah Foundation of America — Unity, Knowledge and Understanding for the Muslim Community.

³⁴ Quran. "Al-Nisa." In *Qura’an*.

³⁵ Quran. "Al-Hajj." In *Qura’an*.

cases; false testimonies. One reason false testimonies are considered a serious sin is due to the impact it can have in a system of Islamic law, or any system in law. An entirely fabricated confession, for example, may lead to the punishment of innocent individuals. On an international scale, it can also lead to wars between nations.

When first detained and beaten, many refuse to provide false testimonies to protect themselves and loved ones. Once interrogators, however begin torturing them, many will say anything to stop the excruciating pain.

“In the morning on the second day they brought me up, blindfolded, to torture me. There were a lot of them, perhaps 10 people, hitting me in the face, stomach, and legs. They used the balance method on me- it is like a chain that they hang meat on. They raised me from my legs so that all my weight was on my hands and legs. The cable cut off my circulation. There is a wooden beam in the ceiling and they hung me from it with just my toes touching the floor. This was the hardest torture, worse than electricity. “I will confess to everything. Just bring me down.” I told them, “For God’s sake, take me down.”³⁶

Ahmad also explains how his will was broken due to the inhumane treatment he was subject to,

“Ahmad lost track of how often he was taken down to his cell and back up for more torture but remembers that eventually he couldn’t walk and had to be dragged up and down the stairs. In his cell, without the blindfold, he saw his legs were covered in blood. His feet were too swollen to fit into his shoes. ‘After, I just couldn’t take it anymore, I told them, “I’m willing to say whatever you want me to say.”’³⁷

³⁶ *Torture Archipelago: Arbitrary Arrests, Torture, and Enforced Disappearances in Syria's Underground Prisons since March 2011*. [New York, N.Y.]: Human Rights Watch, 53. 2012.

³⁷ Pither, Kerry. *Dark Days: The Story of Four Canadians Tortured in the Name of Fighting Terror*, 75. Toronto: Penguin, 2008.

Ahmad was given a pen and paper to write the fabricated story he was being demanded to tell. But when he began writing, he changed it and wrote the truth, so not to implicate himself and his brother in a legal document. Once the guard read what he had written, he yelled, "You want to change your story now?" and brought out a cigarette. He burned his cheek and shins with the cigarette, and said, "I am going to burn your eyes now."

"I said I'd write down whatever they wanted. Ahmad's shins are still scarred from the cigarette burns. He's glad his interrogators didn't burn his eyes. He says that by signing the false confession he traded his innocence for his eyes."³⁸

Salim survived to tell to what extent guards would go to gain a false confession,

"I was naked. They were beating me for the first hour with their hands. Then they used a wood baton. I didn't confess. The interrogator said, 'Bring me the electricity.' ... The guard brought two electric prongs. He put one in my mouth, on my tooth. Then he started turning it on and off quickly. He did this seven or eight times... 'Will you confess now?' I said I had nothing to confess to. They removed the electricity from my tooth and put in on my knees. Here they used the electricity the longest. It is still marked. Then they tortured my genitalia. They were also beating me and there was a guard behind me turning the electricity on. I passed out. They were beating me and shocking me. The interrogator was still beating me with a cable over my whole body. I still didn't have any clothes on... They asked me every thirty minutes if I would confess. I said no."³⁹

³⁸ Pither, Kerry. *Dark Days: The Story of Four Canadians Tortured in the Name of Fighting Terror*, 75. Toronto: Penguin, 2008.

³⁹ ³⁹ *Torture Archipelago: Arbitrary Arrests, Torture, and Enforced Disappearances in Syria's Underground Prisons since March 2011*. [New York, N.Y.]: Human Rights Watch, 62. 2012.

Restriction of Religious Practice: Direct Restriction

Numerous accounts have revealed that guards systemically restrict detainees from religious practice. Praying, fasting, performing the call to prayer, reading Quran, and growing beards are not permitted in many torture facilities. One former PLO detainee claimed that prayer was not permitted in the [Military Interrogation] branch until 1986.⁴⁰ Ahmad said he learned to endure the weekly beard shaving, and when he tried to stop the guards from shaving his beard, they beat him.⁴¹ Amnesty International Records also documented that when detainees were shaved in Tadmur prison, "...their faces are slashed with razor blades and shaving knives."⁴² Another detainee said they pulled out their hair and beards in patches.⁴³ Tarik describes a similar experience, "He pulled my beard with pliers, pulled my nails. Half the nail is still gone."⁴⁴ In the Palestine Branch during Ahmad's detainment, detainees took turns reciting the athan (call to prayer), because if they were caught they'd be beaten.⁴⁵ A former inmate said that Islamist prisoners were severely beaten when caught praying or attempting to observe religious fasts.⁴⁶

Detainees are denied the right to practice their religion in many of the Regime's torture facilities. A religious connection is what helped many detainees hold on, Ahmad described it as what kept him sane. Restricting detainees to practice their religion freely, and fulfill the basic

⁴⁰ *Throwing Away the Key: Indefinite Political Detention in Syria*. New York: Middle East Watch: A Division of Human Rights Watch, 15. 1992.

⁴¹ Pither, Kerry. *Dark Days: The Story of Four Canadians Tortured in the Name of Fighting Terror*, 81. Toronto: Penguin, 2008.

⁴² *Amnesty International: Syria, Torture by the Security Forces*. London: Amnesty International, 2. 1987.

⁴³ "Interviews with Detainees of Assad's Prisons." *YouTube*. February 17, 2017.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9QjQ1LF9qw&feature=youtu.be>.

⁴⁴ *Torture Archipelago: Arbitrary Arrests, Torture, and Enforced Disappearances in Syria's Underground Prisons since March 2011*. [New York, N.Y.]: Human Rights Watch, 74. 2012.

⁴⁵ Pither, Kerry. *Dark Days: The Story of Four Canadians Tortured in the Name of Fighting Terror*, 80. Toronto: Penguin, 2008.

⁴⁶ *Throwing Away the Key: Indefinite Political Detention in Syria*. New York: Middle East Watch: A Division of Human Rights Watch, 22. 1992.

obligations of Islam such as prayer and fasting, place even more pressure and strains the spiritual well-being of the detainee at an already vulnerable moment of their life.

Restriction of Religious Practice: Indirect Restriction

Detainees are also restricted from maintaining their spiritual connection with Allah by indirect means. Most prisons are located underground, and there are no windows or sunlight to indicate what the time of day is. This makes it difficult to know the times for prayer, and times and days for fasting. Prayer and fast are requirements for the religion of Islam, and are mandatory pillars of the faith for Muslims.

Another manner of indirectly restricting detainees from religious practice is by placing them in a place of najas. Najas in Islam is the state of religious impurity, a state of uncleanness which makes a Muslim unfit for prayer or any religious practice. Examples of najas objects include human waste, blood, puss, and vomit. Holding a state of purity according to Islamic standards and ridding oneself and one's surroundings of impurity are a vital part to practicing Islam properly. A *Hadith* narrated by Al-Harith ibn Asim al-Ash'ari, says that the Prophet Muhammad said, "Purity is half of belief."⁴⁷ In Surat Tawbah, Allah revealed, "God loves those who purify themselves."⁴⁸ Not one of these religious requirements for cleanliness was met in any documented experience of detainment.

Somar Mustafa, detained in a hospital that was made into a makeshift torture facility described the impurity there. Dead bodies before they are washed also najas, and Somar recalled when she was chained to a bed with three other people who were tortured to death. She shared a

⁴⁷ "The Book of Purification - Sahih Muslim - Sunnah.com - Sayings and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad." Sunnah.com - Sayings and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad. Accessed May 15, 2017.

⁴⁸ Quran. "Tawba." In *Qura'an*. n.d.

bed with three corpses until sunrise the next day.⁴⁹ Detainees were rarely given bathroom breaks, and were forced to defecate where they sat, remaining in the same spot for days. “We were blindfolded with the smell all around us. You can’t shake the memory of it, even when you leave.”⁵⁰

Many overcrowded group cells have pit toilets, which are open holes in the ground that hold feces and urine. All reports of detainment provide accounts of gross overcrowding, in a typical case a one by two meter cell had 65 people in it. Samir described his cell in the Palestine Branch.

“They brought me down to where the cells are and put me in a room that measured 2 by 1.5 meters. The ceiling was not high. They left me there by myself. I stayed in this cell the whole time I was detained. The cell had every kind of filth, cockroaches, fleas, the smell of dirt and mold. There was no toilet. There was just an old large Pepsi bottle filled with urine. On the floor there was a flimsy mattress with an unreal smell... There was no light and no food and no water. You would hear the sound of torture, beatings, people being sworn at, humiliated, it was routine. They let you go to the toilet two times a day. You just took your Pepsi bottle and emptied and there was another bottle for water, which you filled. There was no showering and no soap. For 61 days I did not shower once.”⁵¹

Detainees have described the humiliation of not being able to clean themselves. “They took my belt, my watch, my shoes, leaving me only the shirt on my back. I had to wear the same set of clothes for more than three months, without being able to bathe myself, or to wash my

⁴⁹ Loveluck, Louisa, and Zakaria Zakaria. “‘The Hospitals Were Slaughterhouses’: A Journey Into Syria’s Secret Torture Wards - The Washington Post.” Washington Post. Accessed May 15, 2017.

⁵⁰ Loveluck, Louisa, and Zakaria Zakaria. “‘The Hospitals Were Slaughterhouses’: A Journey Into Syria’s Secret Torture Wards - The Washington Post.” Washington Post. Accessed May 15, 2017.

⁵¹ *Torture Archipelago: Arbitrary Arrests, Torture, and Enforced Disappearances in Syria's Underground Prisons since March 2011*. [New York, N.Y.]: Human Rights Watch, 16. 2012.

clothes even once.”⁵² Prisoners eat and sleep on the bare floor, and cleaning oneself is very difficult, especially with timed bathroom limits. Ahmad recalled how there was only one tap in the bathroom, and it was a foot and a half from the floor. The process to cleaning themselves after using the bathroom, which is required in Islam in order to be in a state of purity, was made dangerous as the only makeshift bidet available was an old olive oil tank. The top was cut so rim was jagged and sharp, and many detainees cut themselves while trying to wash.⁵³

Animals of filth also live and breed in these underground torture facilities. When the electricity would go out, the rats which lived in the pipes would come out of the toilets to look for food. They would scurry in the dark and fill the “graves” of prisoners, leaving them screaming and kicking in the dark.”⁵⁴ There were cats that would walk on the bars overhead, at times urinating on the prisoners below. When detainee Abdullah arrived to a torture facility in the spring, the cockroaches were enormous, crawling over each other in a constant battle for space on the narrow ledge over the washroom door.”⁵⁵ He remembers the feeling of rats walking over his legs at night and knocking over his food containers.

In addition to being surrounded by najas, prisoners were forced to consume food that was filthy to further internalize a state of impurity. The detainees in the Palestine Branch in Damascus, and as noted in many other facilities, were given barely enough food to survive. Often the food they received was rotten and gave them diarrhea, but due to the daily limit of one or two bathroom breaks a day, detainees were forced to use a bottle in their cells for urine, and a

⁵²*Torture Archipelago: Arbitrary Arrests, Torture, and Enforced Disappearances in Syria's Underground Prisons since March 2011*. [New York, N.Y.]: Human Rights Watch, 25. 2012

⁵³ Pither, Kerry. *Dark Days: The Story of Four Canadians Tortured in the Name of Fighting Terror*, 81. Toronto: Penguin, 2008

⁵⁴ Pither, Kerry. *Dark Days: The Story of Four Canadians Tortured in the Name of Fighting Terror*, 81. Toronto: Penguin, 2008.

⁵⁵ Pither, Kerry. *Dark Days: The Story of Four Canadians Tortured in the Name of Fighting Terror*, 127. Toronto: Penguin, 2008.

food container for feces.⁵⁶ Food and drink was dirty, and in many cases spiked with diesel or dishwashing soap.

The floor is a place of filth, and a testimony describes how the way guards would give detainees food was in an inhumane manner.

“They distributed the bread on the floor. In the metal door of the cell there was a small vent for air. They threw the bread in through this vent. The bread was either dough or burnt entirely. We would only get stale bread. They would serve the food in an old empty halaweh [a sugar and sesame sweet] containers... The guards that distributed the bread at lunch yelled at you to stand at the door and to put out your plate to get food. Then he throws the liquid, the bulgar wheat- it’s all dirt- through the vent. He throws it, some lands on the floor, some on the plate, you don’t know where.”⁵⁷

“Once I actually took a cockroach out of it and drank, as the tea was hot and I was extremely cold”, says Abdullah. Prisoners agreed that the main problems were chronic illnesses due to poor ventilation, extreme crowdedness, and unsanitary conditions. “In mid- 1991, more than half the inmates continued to suffer from scabies and lice, and most inmates suffered from respiratory problems due to a lack of ventilation.”⁵⁸ Mohammad also recalled how men in his cell had mold growing on their wounds from torture. He described the puss filled lumps all over their backs and legs.⁵⁹ A man in Assad’s prisons one day awoke to find insects emerging from

⁵⁶ Pither, Kerry. *Dark Days: The Story of Four Canadians Tortured in the Name of Fighting Terror*, 80. Toronto: Penguin, 2008.

⁵⁷ *Torture Archipelago: Arbitrary Arrests, Torture, and Enforced Disappearances in Syria's Underground Prisons since March 2011*. [New York, N.Y.]: Human Rights Watch, 17. 2012.

⁵⁸ *Throwing Away the Key: Indefinite Political Detention in Syria*. New York: Middle East Watch: A Division of Human Rights Watch, 17. 1992.

⁵⁹ Mohammad. “Detained in al-Mezze.” Interview by Malak Shalabi. September 2016.

his skin. He threw himself against the wall, trying to die.⁶⁰ In another instance, because detainees couldn't sleep and had to stand all the time due to overcrowding in tight cells, people started to hallucinate. One person hallucinating peed on the people as they are sleeping.⁶¹

Analysis

This paper is not a critique of a particular ideology or entire group of people, but an Islamic analysis of the sectarian abuse of power in Assad's prisons. Many Alawite individuals participated in and even led anti-government protests, and were detained and tortured as a result. However, research finds that Shia populations in neighboring countries overwhelmingly favor Assad's rule. For example, in a Pew Research Study conducted in Lebanon, 80% of the Sunni population said Assad should step down. However, only 3% of the Shia population believed so. While only 8% of Sunni Lebanese people expressed a favorable view of Assad, 96% of Shia people expressed a favorable view.⁶² Guards utilize sectarian differences and their understanding of Sunni tradition and beliefs to directly and indirectly weaken the spiritual well-being of detained Muslims. According to Dr. Yazan, many of these detainees suffer dramatically from these episodes and begin to internalize a feeling of inferiority.⁶³ It is apparent that various tactics target Sunni Muslims, and throughout the Hafez dictatorship one of the biggest targets for

⁶⁰ Yassin-Kassab, Robin, and Leila Al-Shami. *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 25. 2016.

⁶¹ *Torture Archipelago: Arbitrary Arrests, Torture, and Enforced Disappearances in Syria's Underground Prisons since March 2011*. [New York, N.Y.]: Human Rights Watch, 16. 2012.

⁶² "Widespread Condemnation for Assad in Neighboring Countries, But Lebanese Shia Backing Syrian Regime." *Global Attitudes Project* (n.d.).

⁶³ Yazan, MD. "Psychological Repercussions of Assad's Torture." Interview by Malak Shalabi. September 2016.

cruelty and repression were Islamist groups. Such targeting has been apparent and documented by organizations around the world for decades.⁶⁴

During the 80's, three-fourths of the political detainee population were arrested for suspected affiliation with Muslim Brotherhood groups.⁶⁵ People who were even remotely religious, or visited the masjid regularly were accused of being part of this organization. Variances between different political detainees is also evident. In Tadmur prison, suspected Muslim Brotherhood members would receive harsher treatment than other prisoners.⁶⁶“At the peak of crowding, former prisoners said, Muslim Brotherhood inmates slept back to back on the floor; conditions in the cells containing Communist Party members were slightly better in terms of space.”⁶⁷

Islamist groups were also beat throughout their entire detention period, while those who had other accusations were generally not beaten after the initial interrogation period.⁶⁸ A Communist Party member said that “... the guards, most members of the Alawite sect, reserve a special hatred for Islamists, who are perceived as an armed insurrection force and were involved in numerous killings of Alawite officials in the late 1970s...For the Muslim Brothers, it was worse. The guards, who were usually from the Alawi sect, beat them then put them in the doulab, and many died.”⁶⁹

⁶⁴ *Amnesty International: Syria: Indefinite Political Imprisonment*. Amnesty International, n.d.

⁶⁵ *Throwing Away the Key: Indefinite Political Detention in Syria*. New York: Middle East Watch: A Division of Human Rights Watch, 9. 1992.

⁶⁶ *Throwing Away the Key: Indefinite Political Detention in Syria*. New York: Middle East Watch: A Division of Human Rights Watch, 11. 1992.

⁶⁷ *Throwing Away the Key: Indefinite Political Detention in Syria*. New York: Middle East Watch: A Division of Human Rights Watch, 20,23. 1992.

⁶⁸ *Throwing Away the Key: Indefinite Political Detention in Syria*. New York: Middle East Watch: A Division of Human Rights Watch, 20. 1992.

⁶⁹ *Throwing Away the Key: Indefinite Political Detention in Syria*. New York: Middle East Watch: A Division of Human Rights Watch, 21. 1992.

Former prisoners can recount dozens of instances where impromptu beatings of Islamist prisoners by guards led to death. In another example, Islamist prisoners had to bend over and were not permitted to look up whenever guards were present, and those who did were beaten or had their eyes poked. “When you talk to the soldiers, you must bow your head down and keep your eyes closed. If you open your eyes, it could cost you your life Communists, however, said they were permitted to stand and look at guards.”⁷⁰

Regime officials have also repeatedly targeted masjids and detained people during prayer. “Abu Ghassan said that while he was praying with his 71-year old brother about 50 soldiers arrived to the mosque with tanks and other military vehicles and, after checking his documents, said that he was wanted by the authorities.”⁷¹ Another detainee, Suleiman, said he witnessed an eight year old boy detained from a masjid.⁷² Abdullah recalls his life in Syria, “We prayed at home because going to the masjid would be dangerous,” Abdullah says. Their family friends who would take his sons to the masjid for dawn prayer were detained for two years for that.⁷³

These instances of sectarian abuse on a smaller scale have become amplified with the genocide in Syria, orchestrated by Bashar al-Assad. While much mainstream attention is on ISIS and foreigners recruited for their organization, little critique is made for Shia groups which fight for the Regime. These groups include sectarian militias from Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Lebanon.⁷⁴ The disproportionate amount of power given to these Shia groups against Sunni

⁷⁰ *Throwing Away the Key: Indefinite Political Detention in Syria*. New York: Middle East Watch: A Division of Human Rights Watch, 21. 1992.

⁷¹ *Torture Archipelago: Arbitrary Arrests, Torture, and Enforced Disappearances in Syria's Underground Prisons since March 2011*. [New York, N.Y.]: Human Rights Watch, 34. 2012.

⁷² *Torture Archipelago: Arbitrary Arrests, Torture, and Enforced Disappearances in Syria's Underground Prisons since March 2011*. [New York, N.Y.]: Human Rights Watch, 73. 2012.

⁷³ Pither, Kerry. *Dark Days: The Story of Four Canadians Tortured in the Name of Fighting Terror*, 56. Toronto: Penguin, 2008.

⁷⁴ Coulsdon. "The Long Haul- Hizbullah's Involvement in the Syrian Civil War." *IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Monitor*, February 2015.

rebel organizations had resulted not only in the ethnic cleansing of the Sunni population through means of siege and mass murder, but also occupation of those lands.

“The Syrian regime, along with its Russian and Iranian allies, is relentlessly pursuing a malicious plan to orchestrate extensive demographic shifts across Syria,” said Riyadh Hijab, a leader of the opposition’s main political body, the High Negotiations Committee. “These changes will undermine the unity and integrity of Syrian territories and Syria’s demographic structure,” he added, saying they are “paving the way for ethnic and political cleansing on an unprecedented scale.”⁷⁵ Families that have lived in Aleppo for generations were killed or forcibly displaced from their soil, and Shia Iranian families are occupying their emptied homes. Iraqi militias have also brought 300 families to an area in rural Damascus.⁷⁶ This process is referred to as demographic engineering and has been documented in almost all Regime held territory.

Conclusion

Spiritual humiliation is a documented pattern of gross violations of Islam’s basic principles to weaken and shame Sunni Muslims detained in Assad’s prisons. Immediate action must be taken by the international community in regards to the explicit human rights violations that are committed in Syria’s torture facilities. Most importantly, however, Muslim governments and masses must mobilize counter sectarian forces of oppression, ethnic cleansing, and occupation.

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