**4.3.2 TORTURE AND INHUMAN TREATMENT OF DETAINEES**

PROGRAMME OF ABUSE

Former detainees told Amnesty International that they were transferred from the various branches of the security forces to Saydnaya in white delivery trucks known as “meat fridges”. Upon their arrival at the prison, detainees are immediately subjected to severe beatings, widely known as a “welcome party”. Former detainees reported that these beatings were often directed toward the head and sometimes led to the death of their fellow detainees.115

A former official from Saydnaya confirmed this practice by the prison authorities:

*The white truck came, and inside there were usually between 50 and 60 prisoners. Of course, they are blindfolded. Two guards would go up to the car... They would start to throw them from the truck... They would take their rings, watches, anything. While registering their names, they would start kicking and beating them. We had to show them that detainees have no rights in Saydnaya*.116

Salam, a lawyer from Aleppo who was detained in Saydnaya from 2012 to 2014, described this stage of his detention:

*The soldiers will practise their “hospitality” with each new group of detainees during the “welcome party” ... You are thrown to the ground and they use different instruments for the beatings: electric cables with exposed copper wire ends – they have little hooks, so they take a part of your skin – normal electric cables, plastic water pipes of different sizes and metal bars. Also, they have created what they call the “tank belt”, which is made out of tyre that has been cut into strips... They make a very specific sound; it sounds like a small explosion. I was blindfolded the whole time, but I would try to see somehow. All you see is blood: your own blood, the blood of others. After one hit, you lose your sense of what is happening. You’re in shock. But then the pain comes.*117

The detainees are then taken in groups of between five and 15 people to small underground cells, referred to by guards and detainees as “the solitaries”. Once detainees reach these cells, they are usually ordered to strip naked and crowd into the small shower area of the cell. Detainees are forced to stay in the shower area either for a few hours or days, or for the duration of their detention in the underground cells, which generally lasts between a few days and one month.118

A former guard from Saydnaya explained the logic behind this practice: “We put them in the solitaries, to make them fear us, right from the beginning. We started doing this after the revolution... We needed to make them understand that now they were prisoners. Now they were under our shoes.”119

After their detention in these underground cells, prisoners are transferred in groups of between 30 and 35 people to larger, above-ground cells, which are referred to by detainees and prison authorities as the “group rooms”. There, they are ordered to select the *shawish* [leader of the cell], who is tasked with designating which of his cell mates should be tortured by the guards on a given day. If he fails to do so, he must endure the torture himself. “Jamal” explained: “The *shawish* would be told that he would have to choose five from the cell who had broken the penalty of not talking. If he didn’t bring the five, then he would be tortured himself, very badly, maybe even until death.”120 Omar added: “The guard would put a spoon on the head of one person in the cell, and he would say ‘You are the pimp of the room’... Because the *shawish* took a lot of beating, that person would die every week or two, and we would need a new one. The guard would put the spoon on the head of a new detainee, and then we would have a new *shawish*.”121

Other than those already identified above, which tend to happen in the first days or months after the detainee’s arrival, detainees are subjected to an unrelenting catalogue of torture and other ill-treatment during their detention in Saydnaya.

TORTURE

In Saydnaya, torture is not used to force a detainee to “confess”, as it is in branches of the security forces, but instead as a method of punishment and degradation.122 The most common form of torture used at Saydnaya is regular and brutal beatings. Detainees told Amnesty International that the beatings they endured were sometimes so severe that they caused life-long damage and disability or death. According to “Sameer”,123 who was arrested when he was a student at a military academy in Homs: “The beating was so intense. It was as if you had a nail, and you were trying again and again to beat it into a rock. It was impossible, but they just kept going. I was wishing they would just cut off my legs instead of beating them anymore.”124

The systematic use of beating was confirmed by a former guard at Saydnaya. He explained: “Every breakfast and lunch, we would enter the cell and put the food out. The prisoners should kneel and face the wall. Four or five lay on their stomachs. They were beaten on the feet and beaten everywhere.”125

Former detainees told Amnesty International that they were also subjected to sexual violence at Saydnaya, including rape. According to former detainee “Hassan”: “They were making people take their clothes off, and touch each other in sensitive places, and rape each other too. I went through this only one time, but I heard about it happening so much.”126

Omar told Amnesty International:

*I don’t even know what term to use to describe what I saw. The guard would ask everyone to take off all their clothes and go to the bathroom one by one. As we walked to the bathroom, they would select one of the boys, someone petite or young or fair. They would ask him to stand with his face to the door and close his eyes. They would then ask a bigger prisoner to rape him... No one will admit this happened to them, but it happened so often... I know all about it, I lived it... Sometimes psychological pain is worse than physical pain, and the people who were forced to do this were never the same again. I know some who died because they became so depressed, they just stopped eating the little food they were offered... If the larger prisoner would refuse to carry out the rape, he would then get beaten very badly. Once [when a man refused] they inserted something into his anus as punishment*.127

DEPRIVATION OF FOOD AND WATER

Throughout their detention in Saydnaya, detainees are denied adequate food, which leads to malnutrition and starvation and leaves them vulnerable to contracting serious illnesses such as tuberculosis. At least three former detainees reported to Amnesty International that they had lost half their body weight, or even more, during their detention in Saydnaya.

“Hassan” described his experience of this:

*In January 2013, they began to kill us. We started losing more and more weight. I had trousers with belt loops on them, and I had to use a rag that I cut from my T-shirt to close the belt. Our T-shirts became so big that we looked like children wearing our fathers’ clothes. Our shapes were changing in front of our eyes. The bones started to come out. You could see our collarbones, our shoulder bones. We were turning into new people – starving people.*128

“Jamal” added:

*What you saw in Madaya [a town in Syria whose residents have been besieged since June 2015] is nothing compared to what is going on in Saydnaya. I was 50kg [down from 90kg when arrested]. All of us had skin diseases, and we were suffering from hunger, and almost all of us were anemic. Almost all of us had diarrhea, too, which was more severe than any diarrhea I have seen... I remember we were lying down and looking to the ceiling, for hours and hours. There was one piece of ceiling that fell, and one of our cell mates ran to it. He started eating it. He thought it was bread. He had been one of the most refined, educated men in Damascus. He had a lot of money, and he had barely struggled in his whole life. And this was his fate in Saydnaya.*129

“Kareem”,130 a physical therapist from Damascus, explained how his and his cell mates’ hunger drove them to eat the food they were given, no matter the form it came in:

*On the floor, we have the scabs and puss of the scabies, hair from our bodies, blood from the lice. All of this is on the floor. But the floor is where they put the food. When the time of “feeding” starts, we go to the wall and close our eyes. Then we hear the sound of the bowl for the food being shoved into the cell, and it tips over. The food spreads out all over ground. Tomatoes, courgettes, bulgur, eggs, everywhere. On the first day, we don’t eat it. We eat only the bread. Then the second day, the third day. We need to survive. We need to survive – we need the protein from the eggs, the carbohydrates from the bulgur. We need all of these nutrients to stay alive. In the end, of course, we eat it. We take the wiper from the shower, and we scrape it all into a pile, and we eat it.*131

Detainees in Saydnaya are also regularly subjected to the prolonged denial of water. Omar described his experience of this:

*Then the water stopped... The thirst was indescribable. It was the summer; we would sometimes pour a bucket of water mixed with cleaning chemicals into the cell to control the bad smell. After the drinking water stopped, we would wait by the little window in the door which they usually poured this cleaning water through and try to drink it. We would lick the condensation from the wall and ceilings. By the ninth day, people started drinking their own urine. Can you imagine that? Can you imagine how thirsty and broken a human need to be in order to do that?*132

“Hosam” added:

*Their most common punishment was to cut off the water. We went five days with no water – no water to drink, no water to clean, no water to flush the toilet... Sometimes, there was a big quantity of food, but they cut off the water, so we couldn’t use the bathroom. So, they were forcing us to eat and to create waste that we couldn’t get rid of, which would create a horrible smell. We used to sometimes throw the food from the vent so that we wouldn’t be forced to live with our waste.*133

INADEQUATE ACCESS TO SHELTER AND SANITATION

Prison authorities at Saydnaya regularly expose detainees to extremely cold temperatures, especially during the winter months. “Adnan” spoke about his experience of this:

*In the first winter, we had clothes and blankets. In the second winter, the snow came, and they opened all of the windows and the external doors. They took our clothes and blankets, and they kept us only in our underwear. When they came to give us food, they threw water on us... In that winter, 19 people died in my wing from the cold. In my room, four of us died.*134

Detainees are also denied access to showers and adequate sanitation, which has led to the spread of infections and diseases such as scabies. As “Sameer” explained, “Almost all of us had scabies, lice, and diarrhea. You couldn’t even touch yourself because you could give yourself an infection.”135 Diab, a human rights activist from Damascus, described his experience: “Scabies was the biggest problem. We were covered in red sores... If you got them on your butt, you couldn’t even sit down. They would be full of puss, and then when the puss exploded out, it would leave a hole behind that you can’t get rid of. It took me two years after I was released to get rid of these holes.”136

Anas, a farmer from northern Syria, described the infections that he and his cell mates experienced at Saydnaya:

*A terrible smell came from the toilet. But still, it was better than the smell coming from people with scabies. My cellmate had been beaten on his toes, and had got some wounds from that, and they became infected in his toes and leg. The wounds were becoming black – he developed gangrene. The whole hallway could smell it. The guards stopped coming because of the smell. The doctor couldn’t even look at it. He said the legs would have to be amputated... He died on 17 April 2014, in front of me.*137

Former detainees reported that the conditions in which they were held were so unsanitary that guards and doctors often wore protective clothing or masks. According to “Adnan”: “The guards would usually wear surgical masks over their mouths, so that they wouldn’t get sick.”138 A former guard at Saydnaya confirmed this practice, saying, “The guards would wear surgical masks to stop them from getting diseases. You could get terrible diseases from the prisoners.”139

DENIAL OF MEDICINE AND MEDICAL CARE

Detainees in Saydnaya are routinely denied medicine and medical care, and in fact are often tortured if they make requests for either. “Jamal” explained:

*There was no health care or medical treatment. When the doctors came, they would torture the detainees instead of helping them. If a patient had some kind of pain, they would just beat him harder. After we saw that happened, we stopped telling the doctors where we had pain, because we knew he would just focus the beating on that spot.*140

Omar added: “There was a doctor in Saydnaya. He came every morning at 8am, but it was pointless. Every day before the doctor came, the guard would warn that if any of the heads of cells said they have an ill person in their cell, that ill person would leave the cell as a corpse. So, when the doctor came and asked, of course no one replied.”141

SAYDNAYA PRISON RULES

In addition to the types of torture and other ill-treatment discussed above, Saydnaya has its own rules of operation, many of which are unique and different from those imposed in the detention centres run by the security forces. For instance, according to former guards, officers and detainees from Saydnaya, detainees must maintain silence at all times; they are not allowed to speak or even whisper. Former detainee “Hassan” described the environment this rule created: “In the prison, there is complete silence, the absence of all sound. If you throw a needle, you will hear it... It is a kind of silence you can’t conceive.”142

“Sameer” explained that this rule held even during torture:

*The guards told us that we couldn’t make any sounds, as the release of pain from the body is forbidden. So if you are brave, you might just whisper a noise, but that would bring more beating. One of the prisoners was begging “please God”, and two soldiers attacked him. They took him aside and started beating him separately. He was like the example for us, to show us how they would deal with us if we let any sound leave our mouths.*143

“Wael”,144 a factory owner from Damascus, added: “Not yelling when you were beaten was completely impossible at the beginning. If you don’t scream or yell, it’s like all of the negative energy of the hit will go inside of you. You scream to share your pain with the world.”145

Detainees are also ordered to assume a certain position whenever the guards passed by or entered the cells. Ahmed explained, “When [the guards] came, we had to be on our knees, facing the wall, and covering our eyes with the palms of our hands.”146 “Kareem” described his experience of this rule:

*There was one time that I had diarrhoea, and I couldn’t stand because it was so bad. The guard came, and everyone ran to the wall. I pulled up my trousers, and I ran to the wall and put my hands on my eyes. I was shaking, and the guard asked me why I was shaking. I said I was on the toilet. He kicked me and said that was the last time I would ever use the toilet... [T]he beating and kicking was coming from every direction. My breathing stopped, and I fell down. I had no muscles to protect myself – I was just skin and bones. I thought then that this was my end.*147

Detainees told Amnesty International that, in addition to these rules, they were forbidden from looking at the guards, as any glimpse of a guard was punished by death; that food must not be touched unless authorized by the guards; and that blankets must be used only at night, regardless of how cold it was in the cell*.*148

A former guard confirmed the implementation of many of these practices and rules at Saydnaya:

*We don’t give them medicine, not at all. And every day, they would get very little food. Sometimes just one piece of an olive... Every day they would be beaten. We would use the tyre of a tractor – a big one. We would cut it, and made it into a tool for hitting... [The detainees] were not allowed to speak at all – they made no sound. Praying was forbidden... Door by door, the guard would go inside [the cell]. When he opened the door, all of the faces had to turn to the wall. We would ask them who needed to go to the hospital. Most of them wouldn’t ask for this, because if they did ask, we beat them... Our orders came from [one of the high-ranking officials at Saydnaya]. He said, “Show them that you are the guards” ... Then [the officer’s assistant] would come, and he would say that we should do more. He told us that even if they died, it wasn’t a problem.*149

Former detainees told Amnesty International that their treatment, along with the near-constant cycle of death that resulted from it, created an atmosphere of debilitating fear. According to Anas, “We were always afraid. Actually the best time in the prison was when we were sleeping. When you are sleeping, at least you are not afraid.”150 “Nader”,151 a businessman from Damascus, added, “When they opened the door, we were in shock. You pee on yourself. You don’t know who they will chose to die that day.”152