

Case of Ali Abou Dehn

“I ask all people to pray and ask God for forgiveness because Hell is too dreadful. I just came back from it.” (Abou Dehn, 2007). This is how Ali Abou Dehn chose to start his testimony claiming that the Tadmur prison (also known as the Palmyra prison) where he was held incommunicado against his will and for no justifiable reason, was in fact Hell on earth.

Part of the Movement for the Lebanese Youth, he was a strong activist against the Syrian presence in Lebanon. As the war started and the situation got worse, Ali decided to leave the country for Australia. Since all embassies were shut down, one had to do his formalities in either Syria or Cyprus. Ali chose Syria where he was caught by the Syrian internal forces in 1987. He was detained in Tadmur prison for five years and afterwards transferred to Sidneya for eight years.

In Tadmur, he was placed in a room with dimensions of sixteen meters by five meters and forty centimeters (16*5.40), with no beds, one toilet, and around a hundred and fifty-three cellmates. The walls were perforated by bullets and marked with shattered blood reminding the detainees what type of risks they were to face every day. An opening was cut through the ceiling in order for the guards to be able to constantly supervise leaving them with no privacy. Looking up towards the trap was a forbidden act with regrettable consequences. The trap was used by the guards to spy on the detainees and many times in order to make the prisoners play

cruel games for their own enjoyment. A single toilet was available for the use of the 153 detainees. Four soap bars were provided for each one, for the use of hygienic purposes, laundry and doing the dishes, which was supposed to last for around twenty days. The clothes they wore were the same for the time they were sentenced. No beds were provided for the detainees, they were to sleep on the floor. Since the cell was too small to fit so many detainees they were squeezed against each other in a way that made them sleep on one side without being able to lie on their backs, but in opposition one another (The head of one prisoner will be between the legs of two of his cellmates). In addition to that, they were forbidden to move at night and were threaten by the guards if they were to do so. Hence, the usage of the bathroom was forbidden and one had to manage while staying in the same position he was squeezed into. The floor of the room was made of broken cement with differences in the level of the floor, which created another burden for the detainees. The food was given in ridiculously small portions (for example one roasted chicken was given for forty persons, i.e. they divide it into one cup per five persons), however the cellmates used to share everything equally. The only medical care that the prisoners had was from a cellmate previously practicing medicine. The prisoners were to be degraded and to lose their names; they were called by numbers only. Ali held the number thirteen; it was his new identity that was forced upon him.

Until 1992, Ali and his cellmates had no news of any kind from the outside world, hence they were completely in the dark about anything that happened between the period when they were captured and 1992 (like the end of the Cold war and the fall of the Berlin wall). It was not enough they were prohibited from communicating with each other; they prevented any contact with the outside world. For almost six years, Ali was held incommunicado, he was not able to contact any of his relatives, until one day he was able to communicate with his family through the wife of one his cellmates who contacted his wife and parents. His family was able to visit him a couple of times before he was moved to Sadnaya.

In every minute as a detainee, life in Tadmur is like walking in a minefield, one is exposed to violence, torture and the risk of death is omnipresent. Detainees are also routinely ill-treated during their daily exercise, a daily torture called “the breathing exercise”. It lasts between thirty minutes and an hour, and takes place once or twice a day. Prisoners are taken out into the prison courtyards and ordered to run around in bare feet while they are simultaneously whipped on their backs by prison guards supervising the exercise. Prisoners are sometimes forced to lie on their backs and raise their legs which are then beaten, sometimes until they bleed. At other times prisoners are forced to lie on their stomachs while the guards step on their heads, necks or backs or whip them. Detainees who refuse to carry out orders during the exercise period are subjected to other forms of torture.

Punishments were numerous and varied in Tadmur and one did not need to commit a particular offence to be harshly penalized. One day, Ali was accused by one of his cellmates to have killed a bird because that bird was a Syrian bird. While what really happened was that the bird used to enter Ali's cell where he used to caress it, until one day the bird died in Ali's cell. Without inquiring whether the cellmate that accused him was telling the truth or not, the guards started beating Ali and did not stop until he fainted, accusing him and calling him names, such as the "killer of Syrians". The next day, during the breathing exercise, still under the effects of the beatings from the day before, Ali was forced by the sergeant to "eat" a dead bird while he was beaten. In the next month, he was put in similar conditions and was forced to "eat" a total of sixteen dead cockroaches including a live one. Ali got sick and lost a lot of weight as a consequence of these torture episodes and it took him many months to recover.

As he was released from Sadnaya in 2000, the shock of the last thirteen years and the time that passed were very hard experiences. Getting to know his children and fighting to rebuild the relationship was a tough experience for him because he always felt that something was missing. The thirteen years that passed made him miss his daughter's

Childhood. However, Ali strongly believes that he gained something from his sentence in Syria: He was able to reconcile himself from within, which allowed him to reconcile with God.