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# SYRIA:

## Torture, despair and dehumanization in Tadmur Military Prison

### Introduction

*“Life in Tadmur is like walking in a minefield; death can come about at any moment either because of torture, jailers’ brutality, sickness, or execution.”*

A former prisoner in Tadmur Prison

Tadmur Prison is commonly referred to in Syria today as a place where “the person who enters is lost, and the one who leaves is born”. The prison gained this notorious reputation on account of the persistent reports over many years of systematic torture and ill-treatment. In Syria, Tadmur (Palmyra) was the site of an ancient civilization, an example of great human achievement and creativity -- it is still visited by thousands of tourists every year. Today the prison of Tadmur is synonymous with brutality, despair and dehumanization.

The level of brutality endured by prisoners in Tadmur Prison is shocking. It is hard to believe that the kind of torture and ill-treatment described in this report is still taking place today. Yet the testimonies of former prisoners gathered by Amnesty International paint a consistent picture of daily torture, inhuman conditions, constant victimization, and humiliation. Powerless in the face of such a catalogue of abuses, the victims are denied any access to justice or redress.

Amnesty International has gathered testimonies from people of different nationalities who were detained because of their links with a number of different political groups.<sup>1</sup> Those held in Tadmur Prison include prisoners of conscience<sup>2</sup> and other political prisoners held without charge or trial or following grossly unfair trials, often before a Field Military Court. Most of the testimonies drawn on in this report are those of prisoners held in Tadmur Prison between 1980

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<sup>1</sup>In addition to Syrian nationals, other Arab nationals -- such as Lebanese, Palestinians, Jordanians, and Iraqis -- were also detained for political reasons in Syria.

<sup>2</sup>The term "prisoner of conscience" refers to people imprisoned, detained or otherwise physically restricted on account of their political, religious, or other conscientiously held beliefs, or because of their ethnic origin, sex, colour, language, national or social origin, economic status, birth or other status, provided that they have not used or advocated violence.

and 1996. However, reports over the last few years suggest that the conditions in the prison remain appalling.

Tadmur Prison appears to have been designed to inflict the maximum suffering, humiliation and fear on prisoners and to keep them under the strictest control by breaking their spirit. Prisoners are not only completely isolated from the outside world, they are also prevented from communicating with each other. Every aspect of life in Tadmur Prison is a dehumanizing experience.

Amnesty International is issuing this report focusing on Tadmur Prison as part of its worldwide campaign against torture.

### **Human rights developments in Syria**

For over two decades Amnesty International has documented and campaigned on a range of serious human rights violations in Syria, including the arbitrary detention of political opponents, the long-term detention of prisoners of conscience, torture and ill-treatment, and political killings.

Under the state of emergency, which has remained in force without interruption since 8 March 1963, different branches of the security forces have been able to arbitrarily detain political suspects at will for as long as they please. Tens of thousands of people have been rounded up in successive waves of mass arrests targeted at suspected members of left-wing, Islamist or Arab nationalist organizations or Kurdish political groups, or at anyone engaged in activities opposed to the government and its policies. Among those arrested were hundreds of prisoners of conscience. Those detained have frequently been tortured while held in total isolation from the outside world for months or years without charge or trial. Many thousands of families have been kept in the dark about the fate of their relatives. Some, whose loved ones “disappeared” after arrest, fear the worst.

Since the beginning of the 1990s the majority of political prisoners in Syria have been released in batches by presidential amnesties, or on expiry of their prison terms. The most recent of these amnesties was issued by President Bashar al-Assad in November 2000 and reportedly covered 600 political prisoners from various opposition groups. Since 1991, when the first amnesty was declared, the number of political prisoners, including prisoners of conscience, has been reduced from several thousand to hundreds. Amnesty International has welcomed these releases as important steps towards providing redress for past human rights violations in Syria.

In March 2001, the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee -- the body of experts entrusted with monitoring the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) -- examined Syria’s second periodic report, which was due in 1984. Amnesty International publicly welcomed the decision of the Syrian authorities to submit its

report to the Committee and regarded the step as a positive development indicating a growing interest in human rights promotion and protection on the part of the Syrian authorities.

However, Amnesty International remains concerned that mechanisms, provided for under the Emergency Legislation of 1963, which facilitate human rights violations, remain intact including the wide ranging special powers given to the security forces outside any judicial control.<sup>3</sup> As a result, any member or suspected member of an opposition group risks arrest, detention and torture. Furthermore, Amnesty International is concerned that thus far no steps have been taken by the authorities to provide redress for past and continuing human rights violations; there have been no investigations into “disappearances”, extrajudicial executions, or torture and ill-treatment, including deaths in custody. Despite numerous allegations of torture, some of which were made in court by the victims themselves, no proper investigations appear to have been carried out by the Syrian authorities. Although the bulk of these violations took place in the 1980s and early 1990s, their impact continues to be felt by the victims and their families and friends.

Amnesty International has noted with appreciation the climate of dialogue and discussion that has developed in Syria among officials and in civil society during the past year, despite setbacks and restrictions. Amnesty International believes that such a climate is conducive to legal reform. This should be carried out with the aim of abolishing the mechanisms that facilitate human rights violations, bringing the activities of the security forces and other law enforcement officials under effective judicial supervision, and enforcing human rights guarantees provided for in Syrian law, as well as in international standards.

Effective redress for past violations will provide a clear break with past practices and will give a strong indication that the Syrian authorities are living up to their responsibilities to protect and promote human rights.

### **Theoretical safeguards, actual violations**

Torture is prohibited by the Syrian Constitution (Article 28) and punishable by imprisonment under the Penal Code (Articles 319 and 391). Since April 1969 Syria has also been a state party to the ICCPR, Article 7 of which prohibits torture.<sup>4</sup> However, despite repeated and consistent

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<sup>3</sup> For more details on the emergency legislation in Syria, see *Report from Amnesty International to the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic* (AI Index: MDE 24/04/83), November 1983.

<sup>4</sup> No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. In particular, no one shall be subjected without his free consent to medical or scientific experimentation. (Article 7, ICCPR). No person under any form of detention or imprisonment shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. No circumstance

allegations of torture, Amnesty International is not aware of any cases where Syrian laws against torture have actually been implemented.

As the Human Rights Committee has pointed out in its General Comment 7 (16) on Article 7 of the ICCPR:

***“.... it is not sufficient for the implementation of this article to prohibit torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment or to make it a crime. Most states have penal provisions which are applicable to cases of torture or similar practices. Because such cases nevertheless occur, it follows from Article 7, read together with Article 2 of the Covenant, that States must ensure effective protection through some machinery of control”.***

Reports documented by Amnesty International indicate that political suspects have most frequently been tortured during the initial period following arrest while being held in incommunicado detention in prisons and detention centres throughout Syria. Torture has been used as a means of extracting information and also as a form of punishment. For example, detainees are commonly tortured when they arrive at a prison. The treatment they receive at that point, known as the “*haflat al-istiqlal*” or “reception party”, differs from prison to prison and can range from verbal insults, to kicking and punching, to more severe techniques such as using one or more of the methods mentioned below.

The most common methods of torture reported to Amnesty International include beatings on all parts of the body; beating on the soles of the feet (*falaqa*); the “tyre” (*dullab*), which involves hanging the victim from a suspended tyre and beating him or her with sticks and cables; and repeatedly pouring cold water over the victim's body. Another method commonly reported is “the German Chair” (*al-Kursi al-Almani*), which involves the use of a metal chair with moving parts to which the victim is tied by the hands and feet. The backrest of the chair bends backwards, causing acute hyper-extension of the spine and severe pressure on the victim's neck and limbs. This makes breathing difficult, almost to the point of asphyxiation, and

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whatever may be invoked as a justification for torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. (Principle 6, Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment).

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is reported to have resulted in loss of consciousness and, in some cases, fracturing of the vertebrae.<sup>5</sup>

In a report published in April 1995<sup>6</sup> Amnesty International stated that most of the 500 or more defendants tried before the Supreme State Security Court since July 1992 had testified in court that they had been tortured. None were known to have been medically examined and no investigations were known to have been carried out. In March 1997 the Minister of the Interior informed Amnesty International delegates that any official who committed torture or ill-treatment would be brought to court. He also stated that any person who suffered torture had the right to make a complaint to a judge who would then refer the case to the Ministry of the Interior so that the necessary measures could be taken. However, the torture allegations presented by Amnesty International to the Syrian authorities remain unanswered. No investigations into these cases are known to have been carried out.

Sometimes torture appears to be practised on a more regular basis as a form of punishment. This is reported to be the case in Tadmur Prison where between 600 and 700 political prisoners are currently believed to be held. It appears that the authorities chose Tadmur because its remote location and harsh regime allow political prisoners to be completely cut off from the outside world while they are being tortured and ill-treated.

### **Tadmur Military Prison**

A report smuggled out in 1999 to Amnesty International by a group of former Syrian prisoners referred to the situation in Tadmur Prison as follows:

*When death is a daily occurrence, lurking in torture, random beatings, eye-gouging, broken limbs and crushed fingers.. [when] death stares you in the face and is only avoided by sheer chance... wouldn't you welcome the merciful release of a bullet?*

### **Tadmur Military Prison: Prison Layout**

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<sup>5</sup> A report published by Amnesty International in October 1987 entitled *Syria: Torture by the Security Forces* (AI Index: MDE/24/09/87) documented some 38 methods of torture practised by the Syrian security forces at the time.

<sup>6</sup>See *Syria: Repression and Impunity: The Forgotten Victims* (AI Index MDE 24/02/95) April 1995.

Tadmur Prison is located in the Homs desert, approximately 250km northeast of Damascus. Tadmur Prison was built initially as a military barracks by the French Mandate authorities in Syria (1920-1946).<sup>7</sup> Subsequently it was apparently used as a prison for military personnel accused of ordinary criminal offences. From the early 1970s Tadmur Prison began to be used to hold political prisoners who were kept in complete isolation from the outside world, but mostly for a matter of months. At that time transport was very difficult, making it almost impossible for families to visit relatives sent to Tadmur Prison. From around 1979 the authorities started sending larger numbers of political prisoners to Tadmur Prison who were kept separate from military personnel held there on ordinary criminal charges. The prison is under the administration of the military police, a security force responsible to the Ministry of Defence, and was said to be guarded by a force of the Special Units (*al-wahdat al-khassa*). As a military prison, Tadmur does not fall under the supervision of the Ministry of Justice which inspects civilian prisons.

According to information given to Amnesty International by former prisoners, Tadmur Prison has seven courtyards which between them contain around 40 to 50 dormitories (4x6 or 8x12 metres) -- and 39 smaller cells (ranging from 1m x1.5m to 3.5m x3.8m). All are above the ground, with the exception of some 16 underground cells which are used for holding prisoners facing disciplinary action in solitary confinement. None of the cells or dormitories are adequately ventilated, but dormitories have windows covered with barbed wire grilles in the ceiling which allow guards to keep prisoners under constant surveillance. Some dormitories are constantly lit, day and night, the rest are lit throughout the night. According to most of the testimonies of prisoners held there in the 1980s and 1990s, the average number of inmates ranged between 130 and 150 in the smaller dormitories, and between 200 and 250 in the larger ones. Apparently, numbers have been significantly reduced in the last two to three years. Up until about 1989 women political prisoners were also held in Tadmur Prison, in a section totally apart, never seen by male prisoners; it is not known if any women have been detained there in recent years.

The overall number of political prisoners in Tadmur Prison has varied over the years, but several thousand are believed to have passed through Tadmur at one point or another during their detention. One report by a former prisoner suggests that up to 20,000 political prisoners might have passed through Tadmur between 1980 and 1990, and that the average number of prisoners held there at any one time during that period was probably around 6,000. Since the mid-1990s, however, the number of political prisoners is believed to be in the hundreds.

Currently, around 600 political prisoners are reportedly held in Tadmur Prison. The majority are believed to be Syrian nationals accused of links with the Muslim Brotherhood, the

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<sup>7</sup>Human Rights Watch Report, "Syria's Tadmor Prison: Dissent Still Hostage to a Legacy of Terror", April 1996, vol. 8 No.2 (E).

Islamic Liberation Party, or the pro-Iraqi Ba‘th party; others are non-Syrian Arab prisoners, mostly Palestinians or Lebanese. The majority are believed to have been held since the 1980s. Among them are Khaled al-Shami, a Syrian from Hama in his late fifties who was arrested in late 1981 or early 1982, and Tarif Hatahit, a Syrian engineer from Damascus who was arrested in 1980. Both detainees are apparently held in connection with the Muslim Brotherhood, but Amnesty International does not know whether they have ever been charged or tried. Tarif Hatahit was reportedly transferred to Tadmur from Sednaya Prison in early 2001.

Amnesty International has documented a pattern whereby political prisoners were sent to Tadmur Prison as an additional punishment. The most recent reports of this practice were received by Amnesty International in 1996 and 1998 when two groups of political prisoners, including prisoners of conscience, were transferred to Tadmur from prisons with less harsh regimes, apparently because of their refusal to renounce their political affiliation as a condition for their release. Most of these prisoners were released between 1997 and 2000.

### **Torture and ill-treatment in Tadmur Military Prison**

*When death is a daily occurrence, lurking in torture, random beatings, eye-gouging, broken limbs and crushed fingers.. [when] death stares you in the face and is only avoided by sheer chance... wouldn't you welcome the merciful release of a bullet?*

For many years Amnesty International has documented a pattern of torture and ill-treatment which appears to be peculiar to Tadmur Prison. According to reports received by Amnesty International “receptions” at Tadmur Prison are just the beginning of a lengthy ordeal. The following is the account of a “reception” at Tadmur in the 1980s given to Amnesty International by a former detainee:

*“The bus arrived at Tadmur Prison where the military police awaited us... The warders pulled us off the bus<sup>8</sup> whipping us mercilessly and brutally until we were all out. They removed the handcuffs and blindfolds, and then we were taken into a courtyard overlooked by prison offices, where our names were registered. All the while we were being whipped from all sides. Then we were taken through a metal door into a courtyard known as the torture courtyard. The military police searched our clothes. One by one we were put into the “tyre”, and each person was beaten between 200*

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<sup>8</sup> Prisoners are usually blindfolded during transfer from one prison to another.



*and 400 times on his feet. When they had finished beating us we were lined up in single file. Holding on to each others' clothes, blindfolded and with our heads lowered, we walked into the prison. We reached the fourth courtyard, a cell door was opened and we went in. We continued to be whipped from every direction until the cell door was closed. Everyone was in a bad condition, their legs bleeding and covered with wounds, as well as other parts of their bodies. Some of the prisoners died during the 'reception'..."*

Former prisoners who were transferred to Tadmur Prison between 1996 and 2000 confirmed that they were subjected to this kind of "reception". The following are just two examples of the many similar reports received by Amnesty International.

*"After passing through the search and inspection routine I heard a voice saying: this one is ready, sir. A cruel hand then dragged and placed me in the courtyard. I was then forced into the tyre and ordered to place my hands between my legs; my feet were then stretched and painfully tied with a strong rope to an iron bar to prevent me from moving them in any direction. After that they took the blindfold off my eyes and the lashing started. Two guards were whipping me at the same time -- one ascending, the other descending. Amidst our cries of pain we begin to count the lashes: one, two... Ten, twenty, thirty... then one loses count and concentration. Indeed many people faint. After they finish whipping, they untie and remove us from the tyre. Prisoners are then instructed to run around the courtyard. I was sweating, my feet burning, and my whole body aching with sharp pains."*

Testimony given by a former prisoner held in Tadmur Prison between 1996 and 1999

*"After getting off the bus at the prison of Tadmur we were ordered to cover our heads with towels, or pull our shirts over our heads. We then marched through the prison gate with our heads covered and our hands tied behind our backs. During the first day we completed registration formalities. On the following day we were assembled for the official 'reception party'. When it was my turn, I was ordered to lie on my stomach (being stoutly built it was not possible to force me into the tyre). They then tied my feet to an iron bar with a chain and raised my legs up. Four guards pressed on my back with their feet to make sure that I didn't move. I was then whipped probably over 200 times with a cable until I lost*

***consciousness. One of my fellow inmates -- who received many more lashes -- was not able to walk after the 'reception'."***

Testimony given by a former prisoner held in Tadmur Prison in 2000 and 2001

Detainees continue to be ill-treated throughout their subsequent imprisonment. According to reports arbitrary ill-treatment aimed at intimidating and humiliating detainees is frequently meted out in Tadmur Prison. Former prisoners have stated to Amnesty International that they were beaten, whipped and otherwise ill-treated throughout their time in prison.

***"Punishments were numerous and varied in Tadmur and one did not need to commit a particular offence to be harshly penalized. If the guard at the ceiling saw a prisoner moving his hand or leg or make any movement while asleep, he would ask the prisoner on shift to 'mark' that person (marking means singling out a prisoner for future punishment). Punishments were normally carried out after breakfast and usually ranged from 50 to 200 lashes, depending on the overall conditions in the prison. Sometimes -- for no obvious reason -- the sergeant on duty would ask the head of dormitory or prisoner on shift to: 'mark the one in front of you, the two right behind you, the one to your right, and the one to your left. The total is five, I need all of them to be ready tomorrow.' We all realized that things were pretty tough and punishments would indeed be very harsh. Those marked would then have to endure an agonizing sleepless night in anticipation of what was to come in the morning. The following day, as soon as breakfast was over, the marked group would be ordered out of the dormitory. We would then hear the movements of the torture team: the sound of the iron bars and tyres being dropped on the ground, whips and cables being tried on the walls, and the shouts of the guards instructing inmates. Soon after we would begin to hear the screams of our colleagues, mixed up with sounds of the lashes."***

Testimony by a former prisoner held in Tadmur Prison from 1996 to 1999

At times during the period 1980-1996, the harshness and severity of the treatment meted out in Tadmur Prison reached extreme levels. The jailers seemed to have been given a licence to do anything to certain categories of prisoners, including deliberately kill them. The following account is typical of many of the torture testimonies received by Amnesty International.

***"The soldiers and the sergeant in charge have proved quite inventive in devising methods of humiliating inmates. Apart from beating them up, they [sometimes] resort to painfully comical methods of torture such as forcing the prisoner to eat an insect, a cockroach, a fly, etc as an***

*alternative to making him lick the boots of the guard or the sand and dust of the courtyard to 'clean them'. Another means of torture is to force two prisoners to hold an inmate by the hands and feet, rock him high in the air, then fling him away to fall on the ground. When one prisoner refused to do so he was beaten continuously on his head until he lost his mind completely. The poor man turned into a clown, and died one month later. Liquidation by torture [was also common in Tadmur]. A single blow to the prisoner's head with an iron bar, or a concrete block thrown by a guard stationed on the roof onto the head of prisoners standing in the 'breather' courtyard, and it is all over."*

Extract from the prisoners' report smuggled out of Syria in 1999

Detainees were routinely beaten when entering and leaving their cells, sometimes after they have been forced to strip naked, or are preparing to take a shower. Prisoners are given two meals a day -- the midday and evening meals are both served at lunch time and prisoners save one meal until later in the evening. It is common for prisoners to be insulted, threatened, whipped, kicked, punched and slapped and to have cigarettes extinguished on their bodies as they collect their food.

### **The 'breather', an exercise in cruelty**

Detainees are also routinely ill-treated during their daily exercise (breather). Breathers last between 30 minutes and an hour and take 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 or ill-treatment, such as the "tyre".

*"When it was time for the breather we filed out of the dormitory in groups of five. When we reached the courtyard, the order would come: 'on the ground' and we would quickly sit on the ground cross-legged, heads bent down and hands behind our back. Those of us who did not sit 'properly' would be kicked by the jailers to do so. The slightest movement would of course be severely penalized. Sometimes we heard the guard yelling: 'will the one who moved stand up immediately'. Usually we remained still, everyone hoping that the order was not directed at him. Eventually, the guard would approach one of us and violently kick and strike him to his punishment (usually beating on the soles of the feet or the 'tyre'). Sometimes the jailers would decide to inflict a collective punishment on the*

***whole lot and order us to crawl on our elbows and knees until they were covered with blood.***

A former prisoner held in Tadmur Prison between 1988 and 1992

Other testimonies indicate that the breather was also used to punish those facing disciplinary action for committing what the guards considered “offences”, or for breaking the rules (such as turning over during the night), or for no reason at all:

***“The breather time is primarily designed for carrying out punishments. Those marked [out for punishment] would be identified and handed over to the guards by the head of the dormitory [a prisoner]. Sometimes, when no one had been marked [the night before], the head of the dormitory would have to endure the punishment. On other occasions the head of the dormitory would be asked to bring in the tallest person or the shortest person in his group, or be asked to bring in a married person, or a single one, etc to be penalized. In most cases penalties and torture were accompanied by insults and intimidation centring around the private lives of the inmates, their wives or female relatives. On many occasions we were asked to torture each other, drink filthy water or eat filthy food, and generally subjected to many different kinds of humiliation and intimidation. A prisoner who came to Tadmur would be subjected not only to severe physical and psychological torture, but would leave the prison a broken person...”***

A former prisoner held in Tadmur Prison between 1988 and 1992

An account by a prisoner held in Tadmur Prison from 1996 to 1999 shows that these practices had not changed in the intervening years:

***“After breakfast we were quickly called to the breather ‘penalty’. We sometimes realized that a breather exercise was imminent from the sound of movements emanating from the adjacent dormitories, so we prepared ourselves. Normally we were asked to clean and sprinkle water in the courtyard, therefore we carried with us buckets full of water and left the dormitory for the courtyard. We stood facing the wall until the order came to start sprinkling water in the courtyard. Whoever dropped water before the guards’ starting order, or still had some water left in his bucket after they had given the order to stop, would be severely penalized. All the time the guards would whip anyone who passed near them. After we had finished our chores, we would be told to sit on the wet ground (very cold in winter and extremely humid in summer), our hands behind our backs, and***

*our heads bent on the back of the fellow prisoner in front or facing the wall. We were usually instructed to remain in this position until they told us to return to our dormitories."*

Other forms of ill-treatment in the prison include deprivation of sleep: detainees are forced to stand in their cells with their heads erect and their arms raised, in some cases for up to four hours.

**‘All to the showers and quick’**

*"In Tadmur, no hair may be seen at all on the heads or faces of the inmates... A periodic disaster occurs whenever it is time for collective hair cutting in the courtyard. The barbers are 'military prisoners' [military personnel serving prison terms in Tadmur] and they shave off all the hair of every inmate so quickly and recklessly that very few inmates manage to emerge without injury. The hair cutting tools are blunt and they 'plough' the heads, making deep furrows, in much the same way as the blade of the plough cuts into a plot of fallow land."*

Extract from the prisoners' report smuggled out of Syria in 1999

All aspects of normal prison routine in Tadmur Prison are frequently used to inflict torture or ill-treatment on prisoners. Personal hygiene is no exception. For example, when prisoners are shaved, approximately every three to four weeks, they are beaten while waiting their turn to be shaved and their faces, particularly their lips, ears and noses, are often slashed with razor blades.

Bathing, which should be for the prisoner's comfort and benefit, is also transformed into another form of torture in Tadmur Prison, as the following testimonies show.

*"The baths are situated in the first courtyard while we were in courtyard number six. We would go out in shorts from courtyard six to courtyard one, about 500 metres away, walking like ducks as we were constantly beaten on the head until we reach the baths. We went to the baths in groups of 12. Each cubicle held three or four prisoners. The supervisor would come and say 'I am going to count up to 20 and by that time you must all have finished your baths.' The whole group of 12 people that is. As soon as we started to wash, he would start to count '1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 13, 20, your time is up, all come out.' Then they would put us by the side of the wall and start beating us while other groups were having their baths until the whole lot --*

*perhaps 100, 120, or 150 inmates -- had finished bathing. We were then returned to our dormitory and beaten all the way there.”*

Testimony of a former prisoner held in Tadmur Prison between 1985 and 1995

*“When the word bath is mentioned one usually connects it with warm water, soap and relaxation. Not so in Tadmur, for bathing there is another form of torture. One day we were called to take a bath, ordered to come out in our shorts and as soon as we emerged from the dormitory we found the guards waiting to escort us to where the baths are located in the first courtyard. All the way we were whipped, kicked and punched until we reached the first courtyard. We were then divided into two groups, the first was ordered to kneel on the ground, and the other to go to the baths. I was in the group who were taken to the showers and six or seven of us were pushed into one cubicle under one shower. The water was freezing cold, but that was the least of our suffering in view of the shouts of the guards and the screams of our colleagues who were being beaten while waiting their turn to wash. As soon as we left the cubicles, it was our turn to be whipped all over our wet bodies. When our colleagues finished their baths, after what felt like a very long time, we had to endure the journey back in the same manner amid beatings and various forms of ill-treatment. In fact it was a ‘blood’ bath.”*

A former prisoner held in Tadmur Prison between 1980 and 1991

As a result of routine ill-treatment, most detainees in Tadmur Prison are said to suffer frequently from swollen hands, feet and faces, flayed skin (particularly on the back), broken teeth, and fainting spells. Their psychological health is said to be extremely poor, both as a consequence of the constant degrading treatment and from having to watch others being ill-treated or hearing their screams while they are powerless to intervene.

### **Patterns of torture in Tadmur Military Prison**

In its concluding observations following its examination of the Syrian government’s report, the Human Rights Committee noted with deep concern the “constant and duly substantiated allegations of violations of Article 7 of the Covenant [ICCPR] which are attributed to law enforcement personnel. It notes with concern the many allegations that torture is practised in Syrian prisons, particularly Tadmur Prison.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Concluding Observations of the Human Rights Committee, Syrian Arab Republic, Seventy-first Session, March 2001, CCPR/CO/71/SYR.

Although the overall picture of Tadmur Prison is that of a prison where torture and ill-treatment are routine, reports received by Amnesty International from a number of sources suggest that there have been periods when the treatment of prisoners has shown some improvement. All testimonies are agreed that the 1980s witnessed the most brutal and horrific scenes of torture and the deaths of perhaps hundreds of prisoners, mostly as a result of torture. However, reports suggest that the 1990s saw a gradual but significant reduction in torture and that in the second half of 1991, torture temporarily stopped when several thousand political prisoners were released as a result of a presidential amnesty issued by the late President Hafiz al-Assad.

The treatment of prisoners in Tadmur Prison seemed to change depending on shifts of emphasis in political situations and the state's policies towards various categories of its political opponents. Confrontations between the Syrian Government and opposition groups reached a peak in the 1980s. This period saw gross human rights violations committed by government forces, some of which were in response to human rights abuses committed by armed opposition groups such as the armed wing of the Muslim Brotherhood. Victims of human rights violations, however, included members and sympathizers of various political groups and ideologies and their relatives, who were often held as substitute prisoners to force them to surrender. During the 1990s, in the context of a reduction in the intensity of political disputes and confrontations between the state and opposition groups, the overall trend was one of almost regular releases of political prisoners.

The testimonies of former prisoners also highlight the fact that the treatment of inmates and overall conditions in the prison varied between one prison administration and another. Some prison directors were said to have promoted harsher policies towards prisoners than others. Prisoner testimonies clearly suggest that between 1980 and 1998 all directors of Tadmur Prison but one (who was in post between 1982 and 1984) adopted a very tough regime in terms of the treatment of prisoners in Tadmur and it is in this period that the prison acquired its notorious image as a place of pervasive torture and ill-treatment. During this period any variation in treatment was merely one of focus or emphasis. For example, in the early 1980s prisoners died virtually every day as a result of particularly violent torture methods, whereas other periods saw prisoners facing virtual starvation in deteriorating living conditions which allowed infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis, to take its toll on the prison population.

Torture reportedly resumed in 1992 and continued unabated throughout most of the 1990s. As testimonies of prisoners held in Tadmur during the 1990s demonstrate, the pattern of torture -- though less rigorously pursued than in the 1980s -- has remained a feature of prisoners' lives in Tadmur.

Political prisoners who have been released from Tadmur during the last three years have indicated that torture is still routinely inflicted. Some of these prisoners confirmed that detainees

are still regularly beaten whenever they leave their dormitories -- for example when they collect meals, go to the toilet, or during the breather. Moreover, prisoners are still subjected to harsh punishments at the slightest unauthorized action, such as going to the toilet during the night, or accidentally looking at one of the guards. One testimony stated that punishments for such "offences" usually range from 50 to 200 lashes for each "offence" depending on whether the prison regime was undergoing a more relaxed or a particularly strict phase.

Other testimonies suggest that while the overall conditions in Tadmur Prison remain cruel, treatment varies from one section to another, apparently according to the categories of prisoners and their political affiliations. Those held in connection with Islamist groups or the pro-Iraqi Ba'ath party are said to bear the brunt of the most severe and systematic forms of torture.

### Conditions of detention

Tadmur Prison appears to be run in such a way as to maximize the punishment of inmates and increase their suffering. As has been seen, routine daily activities -- such as bathing, shaving and mealtimes -- are accompanied by torture and viewed by prisoners with utter dread and fearfulness. Prisoners are confined to their cells from six in the evening until six in the morning.

*"Meals are brought to us by some of the 'military prisoners' [military personnel serving prison terms in Tadmur] who put the food containers in front of the dormitories while guards stand watching. Two or three of us are then ordered out to collect the food without looking up either at the guards or the 'military prisoners'. We are then told to sit by the food containers awaiting the order of the guards who would immediately start whipping us before allowing us to take*

At all other times prisoners are confined to their dormitories where they must sit silent and motionless. Prisoners are kept under constant surveillance; guards are stationed day and night at the ceiling windows to keep watch on the prisoners. Prisoners are forbidden to do the most ordinary everyday things, such as walking in the dormitory, going to the toilet during the night, talking to fellow prisoners or to the guards, and looking at the guards or through the window or door. Daily prayers and fasting were also prohibited -- at least until 1999 -- as was reading or giving lessons to fellow prisoners.<sup>10</sup> The majority of prisoners do not receive family visits. Indeed many families of the Tadmur political prisoners have not been informed of their relatives' whereabouts; some only found out after several years.

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<sup>10</sup>However, some testimonies state that in recent years the prison administration has allowed a single copy of the official newspaper, *al-Ba'ath*, to be read in rotation by prisoners in every courtyard.



The overall conditions in Tadmur Prison fall far short of the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners adopted by the UN in 1977. They contravene all the provisions of the Basic Principles for the Treatment of Prisoners and of the Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment. In fact the conditions in Tadmur Prison in themselves amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. The dormitories are filthy, damp, cold in winter, very hot in summer, and infested with cockroaches and other insects. There are no beds; each prisoner is given a thin mat and two worn out and filthy blankets and a sheet. Space for sleeping is usually very restricted because the dormitories are overcrowded. Some reports have claimed that at times prisoners do not even have enough space to lie down on their backs.

Sanitation facilities in the prison are appalling. At times more than a hundred inmates were reportedly forced to share one toilet and a single tap.<sup>11</sup> Facilities for washing clothes and crockery are virtually non-existent.<sup>12</sup>

Food is said to be inadequate and of very poor quality. Sometimes the food ration reportedly consists only of one boiled egg for between eight and 10 people and two or three olives per person for breakfast; some soup for lunch; boiled potatoes or chick peas for dinner; and a daily ration of one or two flat and rather dry loaves of bread. Tea is rationed to a quarter of a cup of cold tea for 24 hours. When food is provided, it is usually badly cooked; the utensils and dishes (all plastic) are always very dirty because they are never properly washed, and the

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<sup>11</sup> The sanitary installations shall be adequate to enable every prisoner to comply with the needs of nature when necessary and in a clean and decent manner. (Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, 12).

<sup>12</sup> Adequate bathing and shower installations shall be provided so that every prisoner may be enabled and required to have a bath or shower, at a temperature suitable to the climate, as frequently as necessary for general hygiene according to season and geographical region, but at least once a week in a temperate climate. (Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, 13).

All parts of an institution regularly used by prisoners shall be properly maintained and kept scrupulously clean at all times. (Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, 14).

All clothing shall be clean and kept in proper condition. Underclothing shall be changed and washed as often as necessary for the maintenance of hygiene. (Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, 17 (2)).

food often contains “dirt”.<sup>13</sup> One former prisoner has described the food as actually causing hunger rather than satisfaction.

Official medical care is said to be virtually non-existent in Tadmur Prison. Detainees who need medical treatment, including those suffering from wounds or injuries resulting from torture, are reportedly only examined by a doctor at intervals of several months. Wounds sustained during the “reception” on arrival at the prison or through the subsequent routine ill-treatment, become infected as a result of prolonged neglect. Consequently, detainees with medical training have reportedly treated fellow inmates, at great risk to themselves and their “patients”, as severe penalties would be imposed if this was discovered. Owing to the lack of medicines and equipment, prisoners had to devise their own imaginative techniques. According to one doctor who was detained in Tadmur, festering wounds were treated with vinegar extracted from fermented apples or grapes. Some testimonies recount how that on occasion imprisoned doctors even conducted minor operations with improvised tools.

Tadmur inmates are also reported to have suffered from a high incidence of serious illnesses such as tuberculosis and cholera. The lack of adequate sanitation, ill-treatment, malnutrition and medical neglect to which prisoners were subjected contributed to endemic infection. Infected prisoners were normally segregated and put in special dormitories where they were given some basic medical treatment, however recovery rates were very low. Scores of prisoners who fell ill are said to have died as a result of inadequate medical care, neglect and poor prison conditions.

For the overwhelming majority of prisoners the demoralization resulting from the appalling conditions and constant ill-treatment is compounded by the absence of family visits. Devoid of the material and moral support that such visits would bring, the majority of inmates are left to cope alone with the daily humiliation and degradation meted out by the regime in Tadmur Prison.

### **Deaths in custody**

Many have died in custody in Tadmur Prison either as a result of torture, the harsh conditions or serious illness. For example, Zahi Abbadi, a Syrian doctor from Aleppo reportedly died in Tadmur Prison in 1990. He had been arrested together with over a hundred medical professionals in 1980 following a one-day strike staged in March 1980 by various professional

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<sup>13</sup> Every prisoner shall be provided by the administration at the usual hours with food of nutritional value adequate for health and strength, of wholesome quality and well prepared and served. (Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (20(1)).

groups including the medical association.<sup>14</sup> As a physician, Dr. Zahi Abbadi used to examine, and whenever possible, treat fellow inmates in various courtyards of Tadmur Prison. The official story was that Dr Abbadi died after he was taken for medical treatment outside Tadmur Prison, but fellow prisoners believed that he may have died as a result of torture or been deliberately killed.

More recently, Attiyeh Dhiab Attiyeh, a Palestinian aged about 31, died in Tadmur Prison in February 2000. The most likely cause of his death appears to have been lack of medical attention and the inhumane conditions in Tadmur Prison. He was apparently in ill health when he was referred to Tadmur Prison in 1996. A member of *Fatah*, the mainstream Palestinian organization led by Yasser Arafat, Attiyeh Dhiab Attiyeh had been arrested in 1989 in south Lebanon and apparently transferred to Syria.<sup>15</sup> Amnesty International does not know whether he was charged or tried, but he was among the scores of Palestinians held on political grounds in Syrian prisons.

Several testimonies bear witness to the complete indifference with which the prison administration views deaths in custody. Most testimonies claim that guards never summon a doctor to examine a dying prisoner. Instead they order other inmates to call them to collect the body when the prisoner has died. When a prisoner dies as a result of torture, the prison authorities do not conduct any investigation or a post-mortem. Rather, as suggested by the prisoners' report smuggled out of Syria in 1999, the prison administration seeks to cover up the real cause of death:

***“Whenever death occurred as a result of torture, the prison administration would call in a doctor and a control assistant to record a medical report which might include one of the following formulas: ‘a sudden fall backwards in a dark room’, ‘cardiac arrest’, or ‘taking medicines not prescribed by a physician or the health officer’.”***

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<sup>14</sup>Amnesty International adopted many Syrian professionals arrested after the one-day strike as possible prisoners of conscience and campaigned on their behalf for many years; other international professional organizations also took up these cases.

<sup>15</sup>Syrian military forces operating in Lebanon are known to have carried out arrests of Lebanese and Palestinians and transferred them to Syria outside any legal framework. See *Caught in a Regional Conflict: Lebanese, Palestinian and Jordanian Political detainees in Syria* (AI Index: MDE 24/001/1999), January 1999.

**Military trials, executions and killings in Tadmur Military Prison**

Trials of political prisoners have been conducted at Tadmur by Field Military Courts whose procedures do not conform to international standards for fair trial. Field Military Courts can impose death sentences and until 1989 or 1990 executions were also regularly carried out at Tadmur. One report suggests that Field Military Courts continued to operate in Tadmur until 1999.

Verdicts of the Field Military Courts are not subject to any appeal and those who appear before such courts do not benefit from the guarantees laid down in the Syrian Code of Criminal Procedures.<sup>16</sup>

Trials before the Field Military Court in Tadmur normally consist of a single hearing during which a few paragraphs are read out to the prisoner from the minutes of the interrogation carried out by the security branch concerned -- that is, by those who carried out the initial interrogation of the detainee after arrest -- and from the detainee's statement, which is often extracted as a result of torture. Usually detainees are not allowed to put forward any form of defence either themselves or through a lawyer. A Lebanese former prisoner has stated that when he appeared before the Field Military Court, he was informed that a lawyer was present to represent him. However, he said that he could not recognize who among those present was his lawyer. "I felt that all of them were against me", he said. Indeed the lawyer "representing" him did not say a word throughout his entire trial.<sup>17</sup>

A Syrian physician arrested in 1980 informed Amnesty International that he appeared before a Field Military Court on 14 November 1981. The court was held in the administrative quarter of Tadmur Prison. In his account he said:

***"The military police brought me blindfolded into the courtroom***

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<sup>16</sup>Constituted by Legislative Decree No. 109 of 17 August 1968, the Field Military Courts are set up by the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces and are normally composed of a president (of a rank not lower than major) and two members (Article 3). While Article 4(a) provides for a prosecutor to be appointed for these courts by the Commander in Chief, the Decree is silent about the defence rights of the accused. The Field Military Courts may not be restricted by the principles and procedures stated in current legislation (Article 5), and their sentences are not subject to any form of appeal (Article 6). The verdicts of the Field Military Court, however, are subject to the approval of the head of the state and/or the Commander in Chief of the army, who has the right to annul the judgment to reduce or suspend the sentence, or order a re-trial before another military court (Article 8).

<sup>17</sup> All persons are entitled to call upon the assistance of a lawyer of their choice to protect and establish their rights and to defend them in all stages of criminal proceedings. (Principle 1 of the Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers).

*and ordered me to sit on a chair in front of the court bench. When they removed my blindfold, the presiding officer asked my name and job, then looked into some papers in front of him, shook his head and cursed me. He then instructed the clerk to write down that 'the defendant repeated his previous testimony saying that he had medically treated a sick person from the 'gangs' of the Muslim Brotherhood'. He then said to me that he would imprison me for 15 years and ordered the police to take me out. I had not uttered a single word before the court and was not given a chance to say anything."*

Sentences vary from a few years on prison to execution. Prisoners are usually not informed about the sentence passed on them, even if it is a death sentence. Field Military Courts are known to have passed numerous death sentences; the exact number of prisoners executed in Tadmur is not known. However, some reports suggest that thousands may have been executed there.

According to many testimonies, when prisoners first realized that executions were carried out in the prison they became extremely distraught. Imprisoned without any information about what sentences had been passed on them, several prisoners -- particularly those held in connection with the Muslim Brotherhood -- came to believe that they would be executed. Prisoners observed that the average time between trial and execution was about two months. One former prisoner has stated that for four years he lived with the fear that he could be executed at any time. This constant threat of execution in itself may be regarded as a form of torture.

In 1980 Tadmur was the scene of a massacre in which hundreds of prisoners were extrajudicially executed. The massacre took place on 27 June 1980, the day after an assassination attempt against the late President Hafez al-Assad in Damascus. More than 100 members of the *Saraya al-Difa* 'an al-Thawra, Brigades for the Defence of the Revolution -- then under the command of the President's brother, Rif'at al-Assad -- and members of the 138th Security Brigade were flown by helicopter to Tadmur. Leaving some on standby and to guard the helicopters, 80 men, divided into units of 10, entered the prison to kill the prisoners in their cells and dormitories. The number killed is variously put at between 500 and 1,000; most of the victims were connected with the Muslim Brotherhood. Their bodies were then buried in a mass grave outside the prison and, in an attempt to cover up the massacre, the authorities stated that they had been executed. However, two Syrian soldiers, who were detained in Jordan in February 1981 on suspicion of attempting to assassinate the Jordanian Prime Minister, stated on

television that they had taken part in the Tadmur massacre and gave details of the “operation”.<sup>18</sup> Amnesty International has repeatedly asked the Syrian authorities to establish a commission of inquiry to investigate the events surrounding the massacre.

Between 1980 and 1990 the bodies of those who died in Tadmur were reportedly never given to the families who were apparently not informed of the fate and whereabouts of their relatives. Information received recently by Amnesty International indicates that after 1990 the authorities started to give information to the families of those who died in Tadmur as a result of illness, but not to the families of those who were executed or died under torture. Amnesty International has not been able to verify this information, or reports that executions continued in Tadmur after 1990. Some reports, however, suggests that executions were carried out there as late as 1994.

### **Conclusion**

Tadmur Military Prison has become synonymous with suffering. Conditions in Tadmur Prison are brutalizing and dehumanizing. They contravene the principles set out in international standards such as the UN Minimum Standard Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, and in themselves constitute torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. In spite of numerous grave allegations of torture and ill-treatment in Tadmur Prison, the Syrian authorities have failed to respond to the persistent calls by Amnesty International and other human rights organizations for an independent and impartial investigation into these human rights violations.

In its April 1995 report Amnesty International highlighted the impunity with which the Syrian security forces had been able to arbitrarily detain and torture political suspects, secure in the knowledge that they would not be held to account for their actions. Particular reference was made to the lack of investigations by the authorities into reports of torture, deaths in custody and “disappearances”. Amnesty International reiterates its call for the authorities to combat impunity by bringing those at all levels who are responsible for human rights violations to account and in particular those responsible for the decades of gross abuses of human rights which have characterized Tadmur Prison.

It is crucial that the Syrian Government order a full, impartial and independent investigation into all allegations of torture and reports of deaths in custody in Tadmur Prison. Special attention should also be given to the very harsh prison regime and appalling conditions of detention in Tadmur Prison.

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<sup>18</sup>See *Report from Amnesty International to the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic* (AI Index: MDE 24/04/83), p35.

All those held in Tadmur Prison have a right to have their fundamental human rights respected. This right will be denied them until the Syrian Government takes real steps to ensure that those responsible for violating those rights are brought to justice.

*“like everyone else [prisoners of Tadmur] have feelings and dreams; they have love stories, some of which were successful, others not; they all long to have a peaceful, quiet life, to return to waiting wives, to children growing up without their fathers, to mothers -- some of who died in agony without seeing their sons again, others who still await their return.”*

A former prisoner

### Recommendations

1. The Syrian Government should immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience from Tadmur Military Prison. All other political prisoners, who have, without exception, been sentenced in unfair trials, should also be immediately released if they are not to be promptly tried in fair trials on recognizably criminal charges. In any case, all prisoners who are not members of the security services should be immediately released or transferred to recognized civil prisons.
2. Amnesty International calls on the Syrian Government to:
  - S ensure that no torture or other ill-treatment is carried out on any detainee by members of the Syrian security services;
  - S bring the administration of Tadmur Military Prison and other prisons under proper and effective judicial control;
  - S implement international standards with regard to treatment of prisoners and prison conditions such as the UN Minimum Standard Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, and the Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment;
  - S introduce urgent measures to establish an independent body competent to receive complaints to inspect Tadmur Military Prison and other prisons and to make recommendations regarding the improvement of prison conditions;
  - S completely separate the authorities responsible for interrogation and prison administration, and give security services and prison guards training in human rights principles and standards;
  - S ensure regular and frequent family visits, access to doctors and lawyers and other contact with the outside world for all prisoners.

3. Amnesty International calls on the Syrian Government to undertake urgently a complete review of the record of Tadmur Military Prison with the view to:
  - S conducting a thorough judicial investigation -- preferably through a specialized commission of inquiry -- into all reports of torture and ill-treatment. Such a body should have the power to investigate all deaths in custody and the fate of all those who "disappeared in Tadmur Military Prison, and to review military trials and executions carried out during the last two decades in Tadmur Military Prison. It should make its findings and recommendations public. Those found responsible for human rights violations should be brought to justice;
  - S informing the families of those who died in custody or were executed in Tadmur Military Prison where their relatives were buried or, wherever possible, the remains of their should be returned to them for burial;
  - S ensuring that the victims of torture and prolonged detention without trial or after Field Military Courts or other unfair trials be rehabilitated and compensated.
4. Amnesty International calls on the Syrian Government to ratify the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment without reservations and to implement its provisions.