

Syria: What to Expect in Detention

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Former detainee's account of interrogation and torture.

“Where are you from?”

“From Suweida.”

“And Douma, you....”

That’s when the beating started.

My jailer kept repeating “Douma” as he beat me until I realised it was a misunderstanding. He could not distinguish between Douma, the suburb of Damascus that is a stronghold of the opposition, and the Douma that lies in the far reaches of the eastern province of Suweida.

That was what was known as a “welcome party”, in which the prisoner is beaten severely the moment he enters prison before his personal information is even registered.

I had been arrested on the morning of June 10, 2012 at the Syrian-Lebanese border. That evening, I was transferred from a customs prison to criminal security before being turned over to political security, but not before spending the night in jail among criminals.

During my “welcome party” with political security, I witnessed another young man who was beaten much worse than me. He was from Kfar Nabal, and it was at that point that I realised that prisoners were treated differently according to sect and regional affiliation.

I screamed as I was beaten and tried to say that the Douma outside of Damascus was not the same as the one in Suweida. Another warden heard me and intervened to stop the torture and complete the registration of my personal information.

When he led me to the cell, he took the opportunity to tell me, “Watch yourself; there’s no evidence against you, you are only accused of protesting.”

That moment has stuck with me, and it helped relieve some of the psychological pressure I had felt since my arrest. I realised two important points. First, that not everyone who is a security agent is bad, and second, that the prisoner is extremely vulnerable.

From the moment of my arrest, I began to play psychological games with myself in which I was convinced that the interrogators knew everything and could even read my thoughts. I remembered everything that had ever happened to me. These are some of the pressures that cause prisoners to break quickly under pressure and begin confessing to anything, whether true or not, just to finish with the investigation as quickly as possible.

The cell was filled with detainees, all of whom expressed an interest in me. Trust builds among people who spend time together in a cell. After they asked my name and where I was from, their first questions were about the duration of my detention. To avoid exposing myself to informers among the prisoners, I did not trust anyone immediately, and limited myself to listening to the stories of others rather than sharing my own.

I quickly became friends with a young man from Daraa named Mohammed, who had been arrested 50 days before. Having someone to talk to eased the pain of torture, and he told me about the experiences of other detainees and gave me advice about how to behave in certain situations, especially when security begins asking for the names of the coordinators of the revolutionary movement. He advised me to only give them the names of the martyrs if they forced me to talk, so as not to bring harm to someone who was still alive.

The next morning they took me to be interrogated. I was blindfolded and shackled, but I tried to summon the energy to focus and benefit from the guidance of Mohammed and all the other prisoners I had known.

I remembered a friend of mine, who had once been a volunteer with the security forces and who was arrested at the very beginning of the revolution. He told me later that the most important thing is to maintain mental sharpness, and not to provoke the anger of the interrogator by trying to approach him as

an equal. The investigator's job is to extract confessions, so it is important to find something to confess that is true but will not harm others.

Before being taken to the interrogator's office, I tried to keep my breaths long and regular in order to remain calm. I found that this was made easier by counting to five as I inhaled and exhaled slowly. It is also useful to try and remember a soothing, repetitive song. Try moving the fingers of both hands separately, if possible, to the rhythm of a melody as part of an exercise in "the separation of the senses". These steps helped to alleviate my tension both before and during the interrogation.

I gave my answers quickly and clearly to give the impression of truth, and in order to avoid confused confessions and contradictions. I did not try to refute anything the investigator said, so as not to provoke him, instead saying things like "it's possible", "you are right", "maybe", "I think", but nothing that might instigate more conversation. Anything to convince the interrogator that I had no useful information.

At one point, the investigator asked one of the guards to take off my blindfold as he continued the investigation. I looked into his eyes whenever I had to speak, because when one looks into the eyes of the person one is talking to, it inspires confidence in one's words and the person is more likely to believe them.

Knowing that in the end the investigator wants a confession in any form, one should admit immediately, if asked, that one has participated in demonstrations. I chose to recount events dating from the early part of the revolution which would have fallen under the amnesty granted by the government, according to Mohammed's recommendation.

I told the investigator that I had stopped attending demonstrations because I disapproved of the militarisation of the opposition. When asked about my opinion of the events, I said that taking up arms against fellow Syrians would only destroy the country, so I had decided to live like any other citizen. I admitted to having reservations about official corruption but emphasised that I did not support the armed uprising as a solution.

After the investigation, I was moved to a new cell, where I spent a week. I feared that security had placed informants in the cells, so I did not say much. We calculated the time by the number of meals and the angle of the sunlight falling on the wall of the cell.

I also began to exercise - something I never did in my normal life - as much as the tight space allowed, in order to relieve some of the stress and sleep.

I succeeded in convincing some of the detainees not to go on hunger strike, based on the experience of Riad al-Turk, the veteran opposition activist who spent nearly two decades in prison. Turk advises prisoners to stay focused and in good condition, especially those subjected to interrogation.

On the tenth day, I went before a judge in Damascus who ordered my release, but I still remember the last sentence uttered to me by the friendly guard:

"Go, and never come back here again."

This account is from the author's experience of being detained in 2012.

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