

Syria's Tadmor Prison Massacre: Reliving Horrors of 32 Years Past
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27 June 2012

It was June 26, 1980; then Syrian President Hafez al-Assad stood with his usual retinue of bodyguards and staff outside the official Guest Palace in Damascus, waiting to greet a visiting African dignitary.

Assad at the time was in the middle of one of the biggest crises of his presidency, a full-scale uprising by the country's Muslim Brotherhood. It had all started ten years earlier, after he had submitted a draft constitution to the People's Council which failed to designate Islam as the official religion of Syria. Even though he had rescinded the draft under pressure from Islamists, they still felt politically marginalized in favor of the secular Alawite elite of which the president was part.

Suddenly, gunfire broke out. A grenade landed at Assad's feet, and he managed to think quickly enough to kick it away. A bodyguard threw himself onto a second grenade and was killed in the resulting explosion. As Patrick Seale describes in *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Seale uses a different spelling for Assad), the Alawite minority in Syria to which Assad belonged reacted with fury, and no one was more furious than Hafez' brother, Rifaat, commander of the paramilitary Defense Companies.

The following morning, on June 27 at 6:30 am, 60 Syrian soldiers under Rifaat Assad's command were delivered to the gates of Tadmor prison, on the outskirts of the western city Homs. Considered one of the world's most oppressive jails, Tadmor housed hundreds of members and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood. The group of soldiers, according to accounts, was split into squads, and each was ordered to kill every prisoner in sight. Rights groups estimate that between 500 and 800 inmates may have died in the bloody melee which, it is said, took two weeks to clean up.

Others think the death toll was much higher. Bara Sarraj is the author of *From Tadmor to Harvard*. He was transferred to Tadmor in 1984, four years after the massacre. He explains that the prison was comprised of two sections – an older one, built by France in the 1930s, and a new section, built by Assad in the 1970s. The new section was reserved for a general criminal population. But suspected members and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood were housed in the old section, says Sarraj, who pointed out that he actually got to know one of the survivors.

"The old section had 24 rooms of different sizes," Sarraj told Middle East Voices. "The average capacity of the rooms is 100 persons. So, if you do the math, 24 times 100, if they had the highest capacity, the death toll could be as high as 2,400."

According to Sarraj, there are no records of those who were imprisoned or died there. "We do know a lot of names, but many others will be forgotten. Nobody will know but their families."

Sarraj served a total of nine years at Tadmor, which he describes in his book as a place where unimaginable torture took place. His book tells in detail of constant humiliation, horrible beatings, hangings. "Tadmor has no trace of life," he said, noticeably switching to the present tense. "There are no books, no radios, nothing. They don't even have salt to spray over your food. Sometimes there are no needles to sew our clothes. It's indescribable, and the constant torture, that was unique to that place. At all times, even during the night."

That is why, Sarraj said, he named Tadmor "Symphony of Fear."

Language cannot describe it. Fear is the internal sensation when you physically feel your heart between your feet and not in your chest; fear is the look on people's faces, and their darting eyes when the time for the torture sessions comes near. – Bara Sarraj, *From Tadmor to Harvard*

In order to cope with the terror and chaos of daily life at Tadmor, Sarraj said prisoners organized themselves into something that resembled a type of democracy.

“We had a president, it’s the major position,” he said. “Sometimes the guards would select that president. And because of the large size of the place, you needed an administration, basically. So we elected.”

“We even used to do the ballot – voting – on small pieces of paper that remained from packets of tobacco.” Sarraj recalled with a laugh: I was elected leader twice, and I was even ousted by a democratic vote. They ousted me because I wanted to ban smoking.” He says he later became friends with the new leader, who was a member of what Sarraj called the Smoking Party – “His campaign was built on allowing smoking.”

Sarraj may be injecting a tad of humor into his narrative now, but the fact remains that it took many years before he could talk about his experiences at Tadmor. He began telling his story in early February 2011 using Twitter. In fact, he says his first tweet was not about his own experience, but about the uprising that toppled Egypt’s president Hosni Mubarak. In this tweet he expressed hope that “our Egyptian brothers will forgive Mubarak.” He says he later erased that tweet.

“I wanted to see a president who would leave gracefully,” said Sarraj. “But that does not happen. Egyptians know what Mubarak did to them, as I know what Assad did to me. If an Egyptian comes to me and says, ‘Go and forgive Assad,’ I will say, ‘No way.’ I cannot forgive Assad. So to me, that was a contradiction on my part. So that’s why I erased it.”

“I wish that [the time will] come when a president will go and live normally, like American presidents,” Sarraj said after a brief pause.

Tadmor prison was closed down when Hafez’s son, Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father in 2001. But only for a decade. On June 15, 2011, Tadmor reopened to house those arrested in Syria’s Arab Spring uprising.

Today, Syria finds itself on the brink of – if not immersed actually in – civil war. “The practices in the streets?” Sarraj pointed out, “the beatings that we see in the streets? That’s exactly what we suffered through every day in Tadmor – morning, noon and evening.”

Actually, added Sarraj, Syria – the entire country – really is Tadmor now