

KEYS TO THE SYRIAN PRISON

WORDS FROM BEHIND THE BARS

وضعية الهرم الترويسة الأمانات التشميس
الاستعباس زيارة الترويسة التشميس
الخزيمجي بلو الخزيمجي
البخشة شؤافة التصليل منفردة يوم التنكيل الطميشة
حارس ليلي مرضية مقشعة التشريرة
البلديات الرهائن بساط الريج عضاضة الدخوية عازمينك على فتجان قهوة
بيت خالتي شهيد التنفس الاستقبال أبوضراس بلانكو حاضرسيدي الفسخ الشرف
التعليم الجمعية شوفوا حسابكم معه العريس والعروس كُرباج
المحرس سخان سخرة قتلة عويني الكرسى الألمانى الدولاى الشراقة
حركة أمان الكابل عام الموت طاقة إفراج السلم تقرير الشبح صومعة
مهجج البراءة الخيزرانة عذرا باحة الحمام المزة
العشرين وضعية الدولاى نظارة الشاويش خمسات سلول المقطوع
فرط مهاجع فرع المسلخ القاوش الكهرباء القطاعة النفق معلم أبدي



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WORDS FROM BEHIND THE BARS

Compiled by
Mahmood Hamadi

under the direction of
Monika Borgmann and Lokman Slim



UMAM DOCUMENTATION & RESEARCH, 2012
Tel.: 01/553604 | P.O.Box: 11-5222 Beirut Lebanon
www.umam-dr.org | info@umam-dr.org

English text edited by John McLean, BA (Psych.), MMAS, MFA.



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The Little Bird who would Be a Dragoman...

“*This is none of your business. Get the tire.*”

As Abu Iyad tried to understand the situation, the warrant officer chastised him. “You know the mistakes and infractions you’ve made better than I do.”

Abu Iyad insisted he had done nothing wrong, even swore to the fact, but the warrant officer seemed unimpressed.

“Perhaps it wasn’t you. We’ll see... Get back to your dormitory. In the meantime, I’ll investigate the issue with the boss. If you aren’t the one who broke the rules, you’ll be spared the tire. Otherwise, we’ll make it a double for you.”

After returning dejectedly to his dormitory, Abu Iyad sat on the ground among his fellow cellmates. An hour or so later, everything became clear to him.

According to a little bird, “The issue is very simple. There was some confusion about the translated meaning of the word ‘bath,’ specifically the difference between the real sense of the word and its metaphoric meaning.

Where prison language is concerned, having a ‘bath’ means being tortured with a tire, which includes all

of the imaginable—and unthinkable—insults and maltreatment that accompany the procedure.¹ Thus, when the prison director told the warrant officer to give Abu Iyad a ‘bath,’ Iyad instantly applied the word’s prison meaning.”² ☹☹

Such was how the “little bird” described the incident to Faraj Bayrakdar and his roommates, a situation that could easily have ended with Abu Iyad being punished brutally. We must acknowledge the astuteness and intellect of this bird, who attributed the incident to something as mundane as *translation* confusion between the words “bath” and “tire.” Indeed, the bird clarified that the circumstances did not involve any *misunderstanding* or *misperception*, but was instead a *mistranslation*. Translation becomes necessary when people either cannot or choose not to understand each other because of the uniqueness that exists between two languages or between the two individuals actually speaking.

It is by no means coincidental that when we try to visualize the state of being *unique* or *alien*, we imagine something remote and distant, something nearly inconceivable. Since the worst example of such incongruity is when it occurs at home, there is no hyperbole involved when we note that the carceral experience imposed by a dictatorial regime—political imprisonment and everything associated with it, to include linguistic differences—is an example of *alienation at home*. By extension, any attempt to evaluate such prison-based experiences must include an analysis that considers even the minutest details,

¹ This form of torture is applied by forcing a tire over the victim’s head and lower body. Once restrained in that position, the victim is flipped onto his back and beaten, especially on the feet.

² Translated from Arabic, Faraj Bayrakdar, *Khiyanat al-lougha was-samt*, Dar al-Jadeed, second edition, Beirut, p. 129 – 130.

be they the testimonies of those who experienced detention or distortions of the language to which they were subjected during their imprisonment. In this sense, it should not be that those who experienced forcible detention must pursue without any assistance their own psychological emancipation from that nightmare. Rather, society should be involved in that effort, particularly if it is being honest about its will to escape from “the Great Prison.”³ After all, imprisonment for political reasons and the facilities that carry out such unjust punishment are nothing but a reflection of that great prison.

Without doubt, this approach toward political imprisonment certainly corresponds with current developments in the Middle East, whether we refer to them as the “Arab Spring,” a series of “uprisings” or attribute yet another description. Several months ago, UMAM Documentation and Research turned some of its institutional focus toward following up on the murky issue of Lebanese (and non-Lebanese) citizens who were, and may possibly remain interned in Syrian prisons. Briefly, this additional focus can be described as a threefold effort. First, the organization will continue supporting the progress made thus far to draw attention to the plight of those believed still to be languishing in Syrian prisons and seek the “truth” about their fates. In view of the current situation, the very least we can say about those who remain incarcerated is that they are doubtlessly in an exceptionally dangerous situation. After all, not only is the infrastructure crumbling around them (along with whatever patience remains among the guard staffs), no accurate records exist to substantiate their imprisonment. Secondly, UMAM continues to advocate the plight of former detainees and support

³ An expression attributed to late Lebanese political leader Kamal Joumblatt, in which he characterized the Arab world as being ruled by dictatorial regimes. Joumblatt was assassinated by Syrian intelligence operatives on March 16, 1977.

their collective claim for moral and financial reparations for the injustice to which they were subjected. Lastly, in the course of supporting that cause, UMAM has commenced a documentation and research project that centers on this complex issue. In addition to its humanistic and human rights orientation, the initiative simultaneously involves war and the civil peace in Lebanon, as well as past, present and future Lebanese-Syrian relations.

After reviewing countless hours of testimony provided by former detainees in Syrian prisons and studying available, associated documentation, the UMAM team undertook the production of a glossary of prison jargon. First and foremost, this lexicon is intended to serve as a tool the organization can use to achieve further advancements in our documentation and research programs. Despite the fact that such a glossary cannot be all encompassing, we opted to publish our findings for two primary reasons. First, we believe that doing so might help prompt a more genuine reflection on the broad issue of political imprisonment, and more specifically on Lebanese detainees in Syrian prisons. Second, publication and wide distribution of the approach conceived by UMAM may become particularly useful for our colleagues in societies that have moved beyond their respective political “spring times,” such as Libya, Egypt and Tunisia, or in other states still fighting to achieve it, including Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Syria and others. Regardless of the country involved, however, management of this springtime is an enduring enterprise that obviously must include a coming to terms with the past—and sometimes more than one. This process of acknowledging history must be so painstakingly thorough that no detail, regardless of how insignificant it may seem, can be ignored.

It goes without saying that this small booklet has not yet achieved the real goal of its lofty title, *Keys to the Syrian Prison*. At this point, its most notable objective is that it describes one of the many critical activities in which UMAM has been engaged over the last several

months. In view of that description, the text also represents an open invitation for others to contribute to this exceedingly worthwhile effort. After all, true success in this endeavor can only be achieved jointly.

This glossary derives essentially from comprehensive reviews of several thematic memoirs and accounts. Some of these sources have been published in book form while others are available only on the Internet. We also reviewed the testimonies offered by several Lebanese who were once detainees in Syrian prisons. Yet the fact remains that the preponderance of the entries in this glossary derive from literature related to unique (and uniquely disturbing) experiences to which the men were subjected in Syria's infamous Tadmor Prison.⁴ A full list of the references we consulted appears at the conclusion of the Arabic section of this publication. Finally, we owe a debt of gratitude to our colleague Mahmood Hamadi, who painstakingly screened all of the literature available to produce the initial version of this glossary.

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⁴ Among the most notorious prisons in the world, Tadmor Prison is renowned for the inhumane treatment of prisoners by the guard staff, the members of which seem to exert unfettered latitude relative to prisoner affairs. A veritable island unto itself, stories about the conditions in Tadmor have been made public only by the few prisoners fortunate enough to have been released from detention.

For more about Tadmor Prison, visit: <http://www.mafhoum.com/press2/62S6.htm> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tadmor_Prison.