

Inside Syria's Secret Torture Prisons: How Bashar al-Assad Crushed Dissent

By **Anne Barnard**

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GAZIANTEP, Turkey — Syrian security officers hung Muhannad Ghabbash from his wrists for hours, beat him bloody, shocked him with electricity and stuck a gun in his mouth.

Mr. Ghabbash, a law student from Aleppo, repeatedly confessed his actual offense: organizing peaceful antigovernment protests. But the torture continued for 12 days, until he wrote a fictional confession to planning a bombing.

That, he said, was just the beginning.

He was flown to a cramped prison at Mezze air base in Damascus, the Syrian capital, where he said guards hung him and other detainees from a fence naked, spraying them with water on cold nights. To entertain colleagues over dinner, he and other survivors said, an officer calling himself Hitler forced prisoners to act the roles of dogs, donkeys and cats, beating those who failed to bark or bray correctly.

In a military hospital, he said, he watched a nurse bash the face of an amputee who begged for painkillers. In yet another prison, he counted 19 cellmates who died from disease, torture and neglect in a single month.

“I was among the lucky,” said Mr. Ghabbash, 31, who survived 19 months in detention until a judge was bribed to free him.



Muhammad Ghabbash, left, with his colleagues at an organization for refugees in Turkey, survived 19 months in Syrian detention. Laura Boushnak for The New York Times

As Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, closes in on victory over an eight-year revolt, a secret, industrial-scale system of arbitrary arrests and torture prisons has been pivotal to his success. While the Syrian military, backed by Russia and Iran, fought armed rebels for territory, the government waged a ruthless war on civilians, throwing hundreds of thousands into filthy dungeons where thousands were tortured and killed.

Nearly 128,000 have never emerged, and are presumed to be either dead or still in custody, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, an independent monitoring group that keeps the most rigorous tally. Nearly 14,000 were "killed under torture." Many prisoners die from conditions so dire that a United Nations investigation labeled the process "extermination."

Now, even as the war winds down, the world's attention fades and countries start to normalize relations with Syria, the pace of new arrests, torture and execution is increasing. The numbers peaked in the conflict's bloodiest early years, but last year the Syrian Network recorded 5,607 new arrests that it classifies as arbitrary — more than 100 per week and nearly 25 percent more than the year before.

Detainees have recently smuggled out warnings that hundreds are being sent to an execution site, Saydnaya Prison, and newly released prisoners report that killings there are accelerating.



A satellite image of the military-run Saydnaya Prison, where the Syrian government has executed thousands of prisoners. Amnesty International, via Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Kidnappings and killings by the Islamic State captured more attention in the West, but the Syrian prison system has vacuumed up many more times the number of people detained by ISIS in Syria. Government detention accounts for around 90 percent of the disappearances tallied by the Syrian Network.

The Syrian government has denied the existence of systematic abuse.

However, newly discovered government memos show that Syrian officials who report directly to Mr. al-Assad ordered mass detentions and knew of atrocities.

War crimes investigators with the nonprofit Commission for International Justice and Accountability have found government memos ordering crackdowns and discussing deaths in detention. The memos were signed by top security officials, including members of the Central Crisis Management Committee, which reports directly to Mr. al-Assad.

A military intelligence memo acknowledges deaths from torture and filthy conditions. Other memos report deaths of detainees, some later identified among photos of thousands of prisoner corpses smuggled out by a military police defector. Two memos authorize “harsh” treatment of

specific detainees.

A memo from the head of military intelligence, Rafiq Shehadeh, suggests that officials feared future prosecution: It orders officers to report all deaths to him and take steps to ensure “judicial immunity” for security officials.

In an interview in his office in an Ottoman palace in Damascus in 2016, Mr. al-Assad cast doubt on the truthfulness of survivors and the families of the missing. Asked about specific cases, he said, “Are you talking allegations or concrete?” and suggested that relatives had lied when they said they saw security officers haul away loved ones.

Any abuses, he said, were isolated mistakes unavoidable in a war.

“It happened here, all over the world, anywhere,” he has said. “But it’s not a policy.”

Over seven years, The New York Times has interviewed dozens of survivors and relatives of dead and missing detainees, reviewed government documents detailing prison deaths and crackdowns on dissent, and examined hundreds of pages of witness testimony in human rights reports and court filings.

The survivors’ accounts reported here align with accounts from other prisoners held in the same jails, and are supported by the government memos and by photos smuggled out of Syrian prisons.

The prison system was integral to Mr. al-Assad’s war effort, crushing the civil protest movement and driving the opposition into an armed conflict it could not win.

In recent months, Syria’s government has tacitly acknowledged that hundreds of people have died in detention. Under pressure from Moscow, Damascus has confirmed the deaths of at least several hundred people in custody by issuing death certificates or listing them as dead in family registration files. The Syrian Network’s founder, Fadel Abdul Ghany, said the move sent citizens a clear message: “We won, we did this, and no one will punish us.”

There is little hope for holding top officials accountable anytime soon. But there is a growing movement to seek justice through European courts. French and German prosecutors have arrested three former security officials and issued international arrest warrants for Syria’s national security chief, Ali Mamlouk; its Air Force Intelligence director, Jamil Hassan; and others for torture and deaths in prison of citizens or residents of those countries.

French and German prosecutors have issued arrest warrants for Syria’s national security chief, Ali Mamlouk.

AL-WATAN NEWSPAPER, via Agence France-Presse

Yet Mr. al-Assad and his lieutenants remain in power, safe from arrest, protected by Russia with its military might and its veto in the United Nations Security Council. At the same time, Arab states are restoring relations with Damascus and European countries are considering following suit. President Trump's planned pullout of most of the 2,000 American troops in eastern Syria reduces already-minimal American leverage in the conflict, now in its ninth year.

That impunity is not just a domestic Syrian problem. Without security reforms, the five million Syrian refugees in the Middle East and Europe are unlikely to return home to risk arbitrary arrest. And in an age of emboldened authoritarianism from the European far right to Saudi Arabia, Mr. al-Assad has demonstrated that maximum violence against civilian dissent can be a winning strategy.

"This will not stay in Syria," Mazen Darwish, a Syrian human rights lawyer, said in Berlin, where he has assisted prosecutors. "People forget what is dictatorship, because we have 70 years of peace after World War II. But human rights is not in the DNA of states or politicians."

"Justice is not a Syrian luxury," he said. "It's the world's problem."

Mazen Darwish, a Syrian human rights lawyer, with his wife, Yara Bader, in Berlin. Both were imprisoned in Syria. Laura Boushnak for The New York Times

An expanding gulag

The Syrian detention system is a supersized version of the one built by Mr. al-Assad's father, President Hafez al-Assad. In 1982, he crushed an armed Muslim Brotherhood uprising in Hama, leveling much of the city and arresting tens of thousands of people: Islamists, leftist dissidents and random Syrians.

Over two decades, around 17,000 detainees disappeared into a system with a torture repertoire that borrowed from French colonialists, regional dictators and even Nazis: Its security advisers included Adolf Eichmann's fugitive aide Alois Brunner.

When Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father in 2000, he kept the detention system in place.

The Syrian detention system under President Bashar al-Assad, right, is a supersized version of the one built by his father, President Hafez al-Assad, left. Marko Djurica/Reuters

Each of Syria's four intelligence agencies — military, political, air force and state security — has local branches across Syria. Most have their own jails. CIJA has documented hundreds of them.

It was the detention and torture of several teenagers in March 2011, for scrawling graffiti critical of Mr. al-Assad, that pushed Syrians to join the uprisings then sweeping Arab countries. Demonstrations protesting their treatment spread from their hometown, Dara'a, leading to more arrests, which galvanized more protests.

A flood of detainees from all over Syria joined the existing dissidents at Saydnaya Prison. The new detainees ranged “from the garbageman to the peasant to the engineer to the doctor, all classes of Syrians,” said Riyadh Avlar, a Turkish citizen who was held for 20 years after being arrested in 1996, as a 19-year-old student, for interviewing Syrians about a prison massacre.

Riyad Avlar, a Turkish citizen, was imprisoned in Syria for 20 years after being arrested as a 19-year-old student for interviewing Syrians about a prison massacre. Laura Boushnak for The New York Times

A photo of Mr. Avlar, saved on his phone, showing him at age 18. Laura Boushnak for The New York Times

Torture increased, he said; the newcomers were sexually assaulted, beaten on the genitals, and forced to beat or even kill one another.

No one knows exactly how many Syrians have passed through the system since; rights groups estimate hundreds of thousands to a million. Damascus does not release prison data.

By all accounts, the system overflowed. Some political detainees landed in regular prisons. Security forces and pro-government militias created uncounted makeshift dungeons at schools, stadiums, offices, military bases and checkpoints.

The Syrian Network's tally of 127,916 people currently caught in the system is probably an undercount. The number, a count of arrests reported by detainees' families and other witnesses, does not include people later released or confirmed dead.

Because of government secrecy, no one knows how many have died in custody, but thousands of deaths were recorded in memos and photographs.

A former Syrian military police officer, known as Caesar, in blue hooded jacket, at a 2014 congressional briefing in Washington. Alex Wong/Getty Images

A former military police officer, known only as Caesar to protect his safety, had the job of photographing corpses. He fled Syria with pictures of at least 6,700 corpses, bone-thin and battered, which shocked the world when they emerged in 2014.

But he also photographed memos on his boss's desk reporting deaths to superiors.

Like the death certificates issued recently, the memos list the cause of death as "cardiac arrest." One memo identifies a detainee who also appears in one of Caesar's photos; his eye is gouged out.

The prisons seem to have been hit with an uncanny epidemic of heart disease, said Mr. Darwish, the human rights lawyer. "Of course, when they die, their heart stops," he said.

A tour of torture

Mr. Ghabbash, the protest organizer from Aleppo, survived torture at at least 12 facilities, making him, he says, "a tour guide" to the system. His odyssey began in 2011, when he was 22. The oldest son of a government building contractor, he was inspired by peaceful protests in the Damascus suburb of Darayya to organize demonstrations in Aleppo.

Mr. Ghabbash survived torture in at least 12 facilities. Laura Boushnak for The New York Times

He was arrested in June 2011, and released after pledging to stop protesting.

“I didn’t stop,” he recalled with a grin.

In August, he was arrested again — the same week that, a memo from CIJA shows, Mr. al-Assad’s top officials ordered a tougher crackdown, criticizing provincial authorities’ “laxness” and calling for more arrests of “those who are inciting people to demonstrate.”

Mr. Ghabbash was hung up, beaten and whipped in a string of military and general intelligence facilities, he said. His captors eventually let him go with a stern recommendation given to many similar youths: Leave the country.

Even as they released Saydnaya Prison’s most radical long-term prisoners, Islamists who would later lead rebel groups, they aimed to get rid of civilian opposition. Both moves, critics say, appear to have been part of a strategy to shift the uprising to the battlefield, where Mr. al-Assad and his allies enjoyed a military advantage.

With like-minded civilians fleeing or jailed, and security forces firing on protesters, Mr. Ghabbash struggled to dissuade allies from taking up arms and playing into the government’s hands.

Soon he was arrested a third time, by Air Force intelligence in Aleppo. What struck him most was interrogators’ surreal insistence on some trappings of judicial procedure. They accused him of an apparently fictional bombing on a date before any insurgent bombs hit Aleppo. Despite having the power to charge him as they liked, they insisted that he confess.

Sometimes he was stuffed into a tire for the beatings. He would pass out, wake up naked in a freezing hallway, and then the beatings would start again. One officer put a gun into his mouth; another insisted that a woman screaming out of sight was his mother.

His account closely matches those of others held in the facility, and some described worse. One survivor, who asked to be identified only as Khalil K. to protect family still in Syria, watched a teenager take 21 days to die after interrogators doused him with fuel and set him alight.

Syrian prisoners sign release papers at the Damascus Police Command headquarters in 2012.
Bassem Tellawi/Associated Press

“Between me and my conscience, I don’t want to confess something I haven’t done,” Mr. Ghabbash recalled. “Five people asking questions at once. You’re cold, you’re thirsty, lips full of blood, you can’t focus. Everybody is screaming, hitting.”

He saved toenails they pulled out, and strips of skin that peeled from his beaten soles. He put them in his pocket, dreaming of showing a judge. But then one day they took his pants.

On the 12th day he wrote a confession.

“Make it convincing,” a Capt. Maher told him. “There is someone who drove you. Imagine how he looks. Tall, short, fat?”

Mr. Ghabbash settled on a silver car and “a tall guy, with glasses and light hair.”

“I started to feel my talent in writing,” he said.

Surreal punishment

In March 2012, Mr. Ghabbash was flown to Mezze military air base, named for a well-off Damascus neighborhood nearby.

By then, he and numerous survivors said, there was an industrial-scale transportation system among prisons. Detainees were tortured on each leg of their journeys, in helicopters, buses, cargo planes. Some recalled riding for hours in trucks normally used for animal carcasses, hanging by one arm, chained to meat hooks. Mr. Ghabbash's new cell was typical: 12 feet long, 9 feet wide, usually packed so tightly that prisoners had to sleep in shifts.

Outside the cell, a man was blindfolded and handcuffed in the corridor. It was Mr. Darwish, the human rights lawyer. He had been singled out for lecturing a judge on Syrian laws guaranteeing fair trials.

He later ticked off his punishment: "Naked, no water, no sleep, forced to drink my pee."

Prison torture grew more brutal and baroque as rebels outside made advances and government warplanes bombed restive neighborhoods. Survivors describe sadistic treatment, rape, summary executions or detainees left to die of untreated wounds and illnesses.

Mr. Ghabbash soon got his own special punishment. He was interrogated by a man calling himself Suhail Hassan — possibly Suhail Hassan Zamam, who headed Air Force prisons, according to a leaked government database — who asked how Mr. Ghabbash would solve the conflict.

"Real elections," he recalled replying. "The people just wanted some reforms, but you used force. The problem is either we have to be with you or you kill us."

That won him a month of extra torture, the most bizarre in his ordeal.

A guard who called himself Hitler would organize sadistic dinner entertainment for his colleagues. He brought arak and water pipes, Mr. Ghabbash said, "to prepare the ambience." He made some prisoners kneel, becoming tables or chairs. Others played animals. "Hitler" reinforced stage directions with beatings.

"The dog has to bark, the cat meow, the rooster crow," Mr. Ghabbash said. "Hitler tries to tame them. When he pets one dog, the other dog should act jealous."

The audience also included prisoners, in nearby cells or hanging blindfolded on nearby chain-link fences, who confirmed the account. Some guards made those hanging beg, "Master, I'm thirsty," then sprayed them with hoses, Mr. Ghabbash said.

After weeks or months, many prisoners got so-called trials lasting minutes with no defense lawyers. Mr. Ghabbash's was typical. At a military "field court" in 2012, he heard a judge rattle off his conviction, "terrorism that destroyed public property," and his sentence: death.

"The whole trial was one and a half minutes," he said.

He expected to go to Saydnaya Prison, which by then was a mass execution center. Thousands have been hanged there after summary trials, according to an Amnesty International report.

“Good, it’s finished,” he recalled thinking. But it was not. He would endure another year of daily beatings.

Satellite images of Saydnaya Prison in 2010, left, and in 2016, right. Amnesty International said they show an expanding cemetery, evidence of mass killings there.

Amnesty International, via Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

His last stint was in a makeshift prison deep underground near Damascus, a military bunker of the elite Fourth Division, a fief of Mr. al-Assad’s brother Maher. Survivors recall officers with the unit’s insignia visiting and seeing the conditions. But Air Force intelligence ran operations there after Mezze prison overflowed, according to survivors and CIJA’s files.

There were no more interrogations.

“Torture just for torture,” said Mr. Darwish, who was also transferred there. “For revenge, for killing, for breaking the people.”

Survivors tell these stories with black humor, if only because others suffered worse.

“O.K., I was beaten, I played a dog,” Mr. Ghabbash said. “But some people were killed or raped.”

Rape and assault

Women and girls have been raped and sexually assaulted in at least 20 intelligence branches, and men and boys in 15 of those, a United Nations human rights commission reported last year.

Sexual assault is a double-barreled weapon in traditional Muslim communities, where survivors are often stigmatized. Relatives have killed female ex-detainees in so-called honor killings, sometimes merely on the assumption they have been raped, rights reports and survivors say.

Mariam Khleif, a 32-year-old mother of five from Hama, was repeatedly raped during her detention. Ms. Khleif said she had aided injured protesters and delivered medical supplies to rebels, acts that the government labeled terrorism.

Mariam Khleif, a mother of five, said she was repeatedly raped during a month in prison.

Laura Boushnak for The New York Times

In September 2012, she said, security officers dragged her from her house. At state security's Branch 320 in Hama, she said, the investigation chief introduced himself as Colonel Suleiman. CIJA's archives show that Ms. Khleif was detained and that a Col. Suleiman Juma headed the Hama branch.

"He was eating pistachios," she recalled later in her sparse apartment in Reyhanli, Turkey. "He spat the shells at us. He left no dirty word unused."

A three-foot-square basement cell held her and six other women. Guards hung her from walls and beat her, knocking out teeth. She saw them drag a prisoner complaining of hunger to a toilet and stuff his mouth with excrement, a method recalled by other survivors.

"At midnight," she said, "they would take the beautiful girls to Colonel Suleiman to rape. I remember Colonel Suleiman and his green eyes."

Ms. Khleif identified the colonel in photographs of a security officer's funeral. Then she broke down.

The colonel and friends — men in tracksuits — assaulted the women on a bed in a room adjoining his office, decorated with Mr. al-Assad's photograph, she said. They splashed arak on the victims, a further insult to Muslims who abstained from alcohol.

The women's cell had no toilet. Blood from violent rapes stained the floor. One cellmate miscarried. By the time Ms. Khleif's cousin made a deal to release her a month later, Ms. Khleif said, she had lost a third of her weight. She later fled to rebel territory as a medic.

Another female survivor separately told CIJA's investigators that she had been raped by Colonel Juma the same month in the same prison. The details closely tracked Ms. Khleif's account.

Even women who were not raped reported groping, sexual insults, threats of rape to extract confessions, and cavity "searches."

In one Damascus facility, several survivors said separately, the chief investigator reserved for himself the job of digitally penetrating them. They called him Sharshabeel, the Arabic name for the evil wizard in "The Smurfs." One, who covers her head, said he stroked her hair and naked body during interrogation, details she kept from her family.

Ms. Khleif's family rejected her over what they considered her loss of honor and her politics, she said. Her pro-government brother texted death threats; her husband divorced her.

For some conservative men, the conflict changed attitudes. Several survivors and male relatives say their families now honor sexual assault survivors as war wounded. Ms. Khleif hid nothing from her new husband, a former rebel.

"You are a medal on my chest, you are the crown on my head," she recalled him telling her. "He cooked for me, massaged my face with oil. He made me my old self."

Rampant infection, rotten food

Torture aside, unhealthy detention conditions are so extreme and systemic that a United Nations report said they amounted to extermination, a crime against humanity.

Many cells lack toilets, former prisoners said. Prisoners get seconds per day in latrines, they said; with rampant diarrhea and urinary infections, they relieve themselves in crowded cells. Most meals are a few bites of rotten, dirty food. Some prisoners die from sheer psychological collapse. Most medicine is withheld, injuries left untreated.

Mounir Fakir is 39, but after his ordeal in Mezze, Saydnaya and elsewhere, he looks at least a decade older. A veteran dissident, he said he was arrested on his way to a meeting of the nonviolent opposition. Before-and-after photos show the toll: A hefty man, he was released so emaciated that his wife did not recognize him.

Mounir Fakir, 39, said that cold was used as punishment in Saydnaya prison. For more than a month, he and his cellmates were forced to sleep naked in freezing temperatures. Laura Boushnak for The New York Times

Mr. Fakir with his daughter at their home in Istanbul. Laura Boushnak for The New York Times

In Saydnaya, cold was the punishment for talking or “sleeping without permission,” Mr. Fakir recalled over steaming herbal tea in an Istanbul cafe. Once for more than a month, all of his cellmates’ blankets and clothes were confiscated; they slept naked in freezing temperatures. Sometimes, he said, they were denied water. They tried to wash themselves by scrubbing their skin with sand that ants unearthed from floor cracks.

The day we met, Mr. Fakir was marking the anniversary of the death of a cellmate felled by an untreated tooth infection, his jaw swollen almost to the size of “another head.”

Yet “treatment” can also be deadly. Torture and murder take place in hospitals where, on other wings, dignitaries visit wounded officers, said Mr. Fakir, other survivors and defectors.

Mr. Fakir was taken twice to Military Hospital 601, a colonial-era building with high ceilings and views of Damascus. Up to six prisoners were chained naked to each bed.

“Sometimes one dies and it becomes less,” he said. “Sometimes we want him to die, to take his clothes.”

Once, he said, he watched staff withhold insulin from a diabetic — a 20-year-old waiter — until he died.

Many nights, a man who doubled as a nurse and a guard and called himself Azrael — the angel of death — would take a patient behind a frosted-glass door.

“We’d see the shadow of someone hitting, we’d hear the scream, then silence — suffocating silence,” Mr. Fakir said. “In the morning we’d see the body in the hallway to the bathroom. You would see bodies piled. We stepped on our comrades’ bodies, barefoot.”

Mr. Ghabbash remembers “Azrael,” too. He was taken to the same hospital with an infection that left a deep scar on his leg. In the night, he heard an amputee groan for painkillers, and a man answer, “I’ll make you comfortable.”

Pretending to sleep, Mr. Ghabbash squinted as the man raised a metal-tipped baton, declared, “I am Azrael,” and smashed the patient’s face to a bloody pulp. Mr. Ghabbash said he was forced to carry the corpse to a hallway bathroom. Two bodies were already inside.

Mr. Fakir said fellow prisoners had told him of carrying bodies first to the toilet, then to a hospital parking area, a site where Caesar photographed corpses.

“People didn’t believe me,” he said. “Then Caesar’s photos came out.”

A survivor of another prison, Omar Alshogre, said he had been ordered to write numbers on corpses’ foreheads, as seen in Caesar’s photos. But as corpses piled up and decomposed, he said, he had to write on paper and shovel out bodies in pieces.

Government memos obtained by CIJA show that the head of military intelligence, a member of the National Security Bureau that reports to Mr. al-Assad, knew of rising prison deaths.

One memo, from December 2012, noted increases in detainees' deaths and corpses piling up and decomposing in hospitals. It ordered officials to inform the agency's head of how they had died and what they had confessed — preferably phrased to protect officials from liability under “any judicial authority in the future.”

Another memo a year later showed that deaths were still rising. “It is imperative to attend to cleanliness and hygiene and detainees' health,” it says, to “preserve lives and reduce deaths which have considerably risen lately.”

The memo complained of a shortage of interrogators. Near the end of a long list of “errors,” including late paperwork, it added “beating and torture of detainees.”

“It sounds like they are telling people to behave nicely,” said Nerma Jelajic, CIJA's spokeswoman, “but we know the context.”

CIJA's documents show that officers were punished for offenses like “not following orders,” she said. Not one mentions anyone disciplined for torture.

Names written in blood

Detainees and defectors have risked their lives to tell their families, and the world, of their plight.

In the Fourth Division dungeon, several detainees decided to smuggle out the names of every prisoner they could identify.

“Even though we are three stories underground, still we can continue our work,” recalled one, Mansour Omari, who said he was imprisoned for human rights work.

Mansour Omari, who said he was imprisoned for human rights work, smuggled out a cloth scrap containing detainees' names written in blood. Lexey Swall for The New York Times

The message in blood reached Western capitals; the shirt scraps were displayed at the Holocaust Museum in Washington. Lexey Swall for The New York Times

Another detainee, Nabil Shurbaji — a journalist who, by coincidence, was the first to inspire Mr. Ghabbash to activism in 2011 and later shared his cell in Mezze — tried to write on cloth scraps with tomato paste. Too faint. Mr. Shurbaji finally used the detainees' own blood, from their malnourished gums, mixed with rust. A detained tailor sewed the scraps into Mr. Omari's shirt. He made it out.

The message in blood reached Western capitals; the shirt scraps were displayed at the Holocaust Museum in Washington. But Mr. Shurbaji was still inside.

"Fatigue spread on the pores of my face," he wrote his fiancée during a brief respite in a prison that allowed letters. "I try to laugh but mixed with heartbreak, so I hold on to patience and to you."

Two years later, a released detainee reported that Mr. Shurbaji had been beaten to death.

'Don't forget us'

In Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Germany, France, Sweden and beyond, families and survivors push on.

After he was freed in 2013, Mr. Ghabbash landed in Gaziantep, Turkey, where he runs women's rights and aid programs for refugees in the last patch of rebel-held Syria.

Ms. Khleif works at a refugee school and to empower other female survivors. Mr. Fakir, whose wife's cooking has replenished his chubby cheeks, has joined a kind of alumni association for Saydnaya Prison survivors who help one another document their experiences, navigate trauma and find work.

Mr. Darwish struggles with insomnia and claustrophobia, but continues his work for accountability. He recently testified about Mezze prison in a French court hearing in the case of a Syrian-French father and son who died there — a university student and a teacher at a French school in Damascus. That helped French prosecutors secure arrest warrants for Mr. Mamlouk, the top security official, Mr. Hassan, the air force intelligence chief, and the head of Mezze prison. Now, Mr. Mamlouk could be arrested if he travels to Europe.

The threat of prosecution, Mr. Darwish said, is the only tool left to save detainees.

"It gives you energy, but it's a heavy responsibility," he said. "This could save a soul. Some are my friends. When I was released they said, 'Please don't forget us.'"

Last year, the United Nations General Assembly voted to create and finance a new body, the International Independent and Impartial Mechanism, to centralize preparation of war-crimes cases. But the body doesn't have the muscle to enforce, charge or arrest.

Syria's war remains without a political solution. With peace talks stalled, Russia is urging the West to normalize and finance reconstruction anyway, deferring reforms.

A Syrian briefed at high levels on the government's war effort, not identified for his safety, said recently that there was no chance of reforms to make security agencies respect human rights. At most, he said, Russia might make the detention apparatus more efficient.

The millions of relatives of missing detainees float in a social and psychological limbo. Without death certificates, presumed widows cannot remarry. Children cannot inherit.

Fadwa Mahmoud, who now lives in Berlin, has not heard from her husband and son in six years.
Axel Schmidt/Reuters

Fadwa Mahmoud, who now lives in Berlin, has no idea whether her husband, Abdelaziz al-Khair, is alive.

Six years ago, Mr. al-Khair, a prominent dissident, flew to Damascus from abroad, with security guarantees, for talks between the government and the nonviolent opposition. Ms. Mahmoud's son went to pick him up. They never made it out of the airport, which is controlled by air force intelligence. They have not been heard from since.

“We don’t have the right to get depressed,” Ms. Mahmoud said, crocheting a blanket in her living room. “We have to keep going.”

In the corner stood a pile of blankets: lavender, yellow, baby blue. It is still growing. She imagines her husband cold in prison. She is making them for him.

[Here’s a brief look at what we know about Syria’s secret torture prisons.]

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Reporting was contributed by Saad Alnassife and Carlotta Gall from Gaziantep, Turkey; Karam Shoumali from Berlin; and Mahmoud Bitar from Reyhanli, Turkey.

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