

MIDDLE EAST

Father Abdo Raad recounts tragedy of Lebanese Prisoners in Syria

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Opening the prisons was one of the first acts of force carried out by the men of Hayat Tahrir al Sham after they took over Syria in recent weeks. The symbol of the regime, Assad's prison system was notorious for torture, executions and inhumane treatment of

prisoners who were often never heard from again. Lebanon too has paid its tribute to Syria in terms of lives sucked into the black hole of the regime's prisons.

According to the Association of Lebanese Political Prisoners in Syrian Prisons, during the years of Syrian occupation of Lebanon between 1976 and 2005, more than 600 Lebanese citizens were abducted and taken to Syrian prisons on charges of being enemies of the Assad regime. Now that the prison doors have been broken open and thousands of prisoners have poured into the cities, Lebanese families of abductees have begun to hope that they will find their missing loved ones alive. Many have already gone to Syria to look for them, while some prisoners have returned on their own: freed after thirty-two years in captivity, Suleil Hamawi returned to Chekka in northern Lebanon on 9 December.

Hamawi's family had been waiting for him all this time in the same house where he was abducted by Syrian intelligence in December 1992, at the end of the war. At the time of his abduction, Hamawi, now 60, was a young member of the Lebanese Forces, a Christian party opposed to the Syrian occupation. And it was his membership of the party, which had its own militia during the years of the civil war, that marked his conviction. Hamawi himself told the media that on the night of Saint Barbara's Day, a feast particularly important in Eastern Christianity, a man came into his shop and asked for whisky: he did not even have time to respond to the request before being put in a car by armed men and taken to Syria. He says he spent the first year of his detention in Saydnaya prison, infamously known as the 'human slaughterhouse', and was then moved several times before arriving in Latakia. When HTS men opened the door of his cell on Sunday 8 December, Hamawi was helped by local people to reach Arida, the nearby border crossing with Lebanon, where his family was waiting for him. Not all prisoners were as lucky as him, however, and it is estimated that most of those abducted died in Syrian hands.

To better understand the phenomenon, we asked Father Abdo Raad, a Lebanese Greek-Melkite priest who lived in Lebanon during the years of civil war before moving to Syria and then to Italy, for his testimony: "One of the horrors of the Lebanese civil war was the abduction of people because of their religious affiliation, to be used as bargaining chips between the warring militias," says Father Raad. Many of these people were lost in the darkness of prisons and unofficial mobile detention centres. The Syrian occupation of Lebanon and the clashes between the Syrian regime and some Lebanese factions, especially Christians, have resulted in many people being abducted and thrown into Assad's prisons, where their fate is still unknown in most cases. I remember when I

was a boy, some women would come with a cup of coffee and ask my mother to look at the bottom of it to know the fate of their kidnapped children. My mother would cry over this tragedy, listen to the lamentations of the mothers and sisters and try to reassure them that, God willing, their loved ones would return, so from my earliest youth I was connected to this tragic issue. Then, in 2010, when I was elected President of the National Council for Social Services in Lebanon, I came into direct contact with the members of the Committee of the Families of Disappeared and Abducted Persons in Lebanon, who are struggling to learn the fate of their loved ones. Recognised as an association by the Ministry of the Interior in 2000, the Committee was actually founded in 1982 by Wadad Halawani, a woman whose husband had been abducted. The committee is made up of mothers, fathers, wives, children and brothers of those who were abducted and disappeared during the civil war; its main objective is to "find out the fate of all those who were abducted and disappeared, especially in Syria and Israel, to free the living, recover the remains of the dead and to demand the rights of the detainees and their families".

After the resounding news of the opening of Syrian prisons, the committee gathered in a Beirut park last week with photos of disappeared relatives and began a frantic task of gathering information now that the Assad regime has fallen. The outgoing Lebanese government has also taken steps, but has run up against the lack of official institutions in Syria that can cooperate at the moment. Former prisoner Hamawi himself is receiving hundreds of requests for information these days, but as he told the press, he is of little help: he does not know the names of many of his fellow prisoners, only the numbers by which they were known.

Father Abdo why it is so difficult to reconstruct the fate of these prisoners?

Prisons in Assad's Syria were highly corrupt places where, on top of everything else, prisoners were exploited and their families blackmailed: false information was given and false promises made in exchange for money. I saw this first hand when I was a parish priest in Damascus. Moreover, the official rules of Syrian prisons are not clear, and the Assad government has been opaque on this issue. Over the years, some Lebanese prisoners have been released, and each time the Assad regime has said that there are no more Lebanese citizens in Syrian prisons. In 2000, Syria released 54 Lebanese prisoners whom Assad's own government had previously left for dead. In short, total chaos'.

On 10 December, Lebanese Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi announced the return to Lebanon of a further nine prisoners released from Syrian jails. Father Abdo are you optimistic that more Lebanese will return?

About ten prisoners seem to have returned, there are various reports of the release of others, but there is still no certainty. Instead, there is a high probability that many of them are dead, including a significant number of Christians belonging to parties that fought against the Syrian occupation of Lebanon: Lebanese Forces, Kataeb, National Liberal Party. Some human rights organisations estimate that the Assad regime executed around 13,000 prisoners during the years of the Syrian civil war, including priests and bishops, while the number of people who died under torture, abuse or disease is unknown. I do not believe that many Lebanese prisoners will return home in the coming months. If the numbers were high, it would have been obvious as soon as the prisons opened. Instead, thousands of bodies, we are talking about hundreds of thousands, have been found in mass graves. We hope that the new government in Syria will find the graves of the prisoners and subject their remains to DNA testing: it is the right of their families to know.

Father Abdo how will the removal of Assad from Syria affect Lebanon?

A large number of Syrian refugees will return to their homeland, which will ease some of the internal tensions in Lebanon. The sixty-day ceasefire between Hezbollah and Israel is due to expire in about a month's time, and I think a return to war is now more difficult because the Shiite militia has not only lost a significant proportion of its leaders and men, but can no longer send weapons through Syria. Hezbollah will only retain its political arm, and one of the results of this disempowerment could be peace with Israel, or at least the demarcation of borders. On the other hand, I do not believe that the political and economic situation in Lebanon will improve, because the problem is the corruption of most of our rulers. Unfortunately, foreign countries are still dealing with this corrupt clique that has led the country to economic collapse and political bankruptcy. For the country to develop, those who govern it must be independent of religious affiliations; I think this scenario is still far away and Lebanon will continue to suffer, one way or another.

Finally, what can we expect from the regime change in Syria?

The factions that have taken control of the country are based on religious ideologies, which does not bode well. To make matters worse, Israel has started to expand into Syria in recent weeks without any international action. I think the country will be divided, if not legally, into several spheres of influence, like Iraq and Libya. Perhaps there will be a conference to reach an agreement between the factions and the international powers to share influence and wealth. Let's hope so... That's always my last word, let's hope for all good things and work towards their realisation.