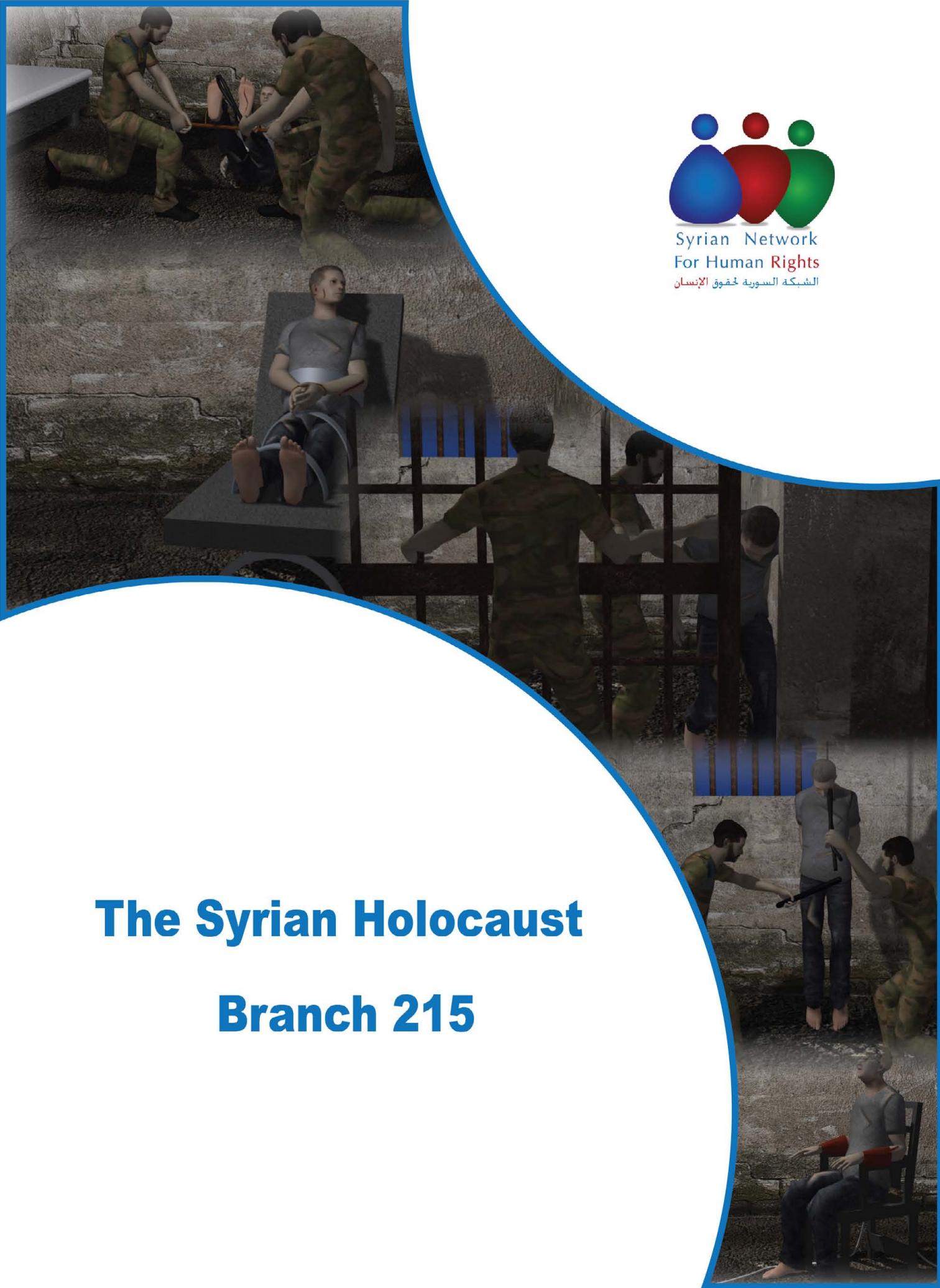


Syrian Network
For Human Rights
الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

The Syrian Holocaust

Branch 215



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Introduction

Security branches in Syria is still torturing the prisoners in the most horrible and brutal ways possible. This systematic daily torturing causes the death of five person everyday as an average. SNHR has published an extensive study on 1 April, 2013 about the security breaches' structure and directors at that time. Nevertheless, due to the unimaginably-horrible testimonies and pictures sent to us from the branch 215 (Raid Squad), we will try, in this report, to shed the light on the branch 215 which has alone more than 7500 detainee all of them experience daily the most brutal and horrible torture.

There are four main intelligence branches in Syria

Air Intelligence (Air Security)

Military Intelligence (Military Security)

General Intelligence (General Security)

Political Security

Prisoners of Air Intelligence and Military Intelligence, whom Branch 215 is affiliated to, are the ones who experience the most brutal torture.

Methodology

The report's methodology is primarily based on personal and phone interviews with male and female prisoners who were released after verifying that they were indeed imprisoned at Branch 215. Out of 65 testimonies, we picked 11 testimonies that include various information. Please know that the names of the witnesses have been modified for security reasons considering that many of them are still in Syria.

Background

Administrational structure and geographic location

One of the eleven main branches that are affiliated to the Military Security Branch as follows:

General Intelligence Administration – Military Security – Raid Squad Branch 215

The branch is located in Damascus city – Kafrsousa neighborhood – 6 June Street (also known as At-Tawjih As-Syasi Street)

The Building

The building consists of identical seven floors as follows

First floor: New prisoners are gathered there as in the main hall. In addition to having other cells, the main hall of this floor is where the prisoner gives his information and fills his file.

The Basement: an underground floor, it is the same as the other floors. There are cells in the basement where new prisoners stay before they are transferred to the upper floors where interrogation takes place. Also, in the basement, prisoners leave their belongings and stuff such as laptops and cell phones which are usually used against the prisoner as evidences.

(2-3-4) floors: prisoners stay in this floor after confessing and signing their confessions.

(5-6) floors: for interrogation and getting confessions.

Each floor contains:

Main hall.

17 rooms that vary in their size and purpose.

15 bathrooms

The rooms' area are approximately as follows:

The main hall: 350 M2 and contains usually no less than 650-700 prisoners.

Eight rooms with an area of 16 M2. Each room contains usually 80 prisoners at least and named in order: wood, wood2, wood3...

The assistant officer's room: 6 M2

The internal dormitory, which is located in the backend of the floor, has an area of 20 M2 and usually they put the prisoners who are about to be transferred to other Military Intelligence-affiliated branches which usually are within Kafrsousa neighborhood's Security Square. Typically, this dormitory has no less than 70 prisoners.

Three rooms each of which have an area of about 20 M2 and are named in order (Steel1 Steel2 Steel3). They put prisoners in these rooms, in total these three rooms have usually 100 prisoners at least.

16 M2 room known as the patient dorm where prisoners with critical health conditions who are likely will die are kept. In very rare cases, some of the prisoners are transferred to Hospital 601 in Al-Muzza.

9 M2 known as the dead room where dead bodies are kept.

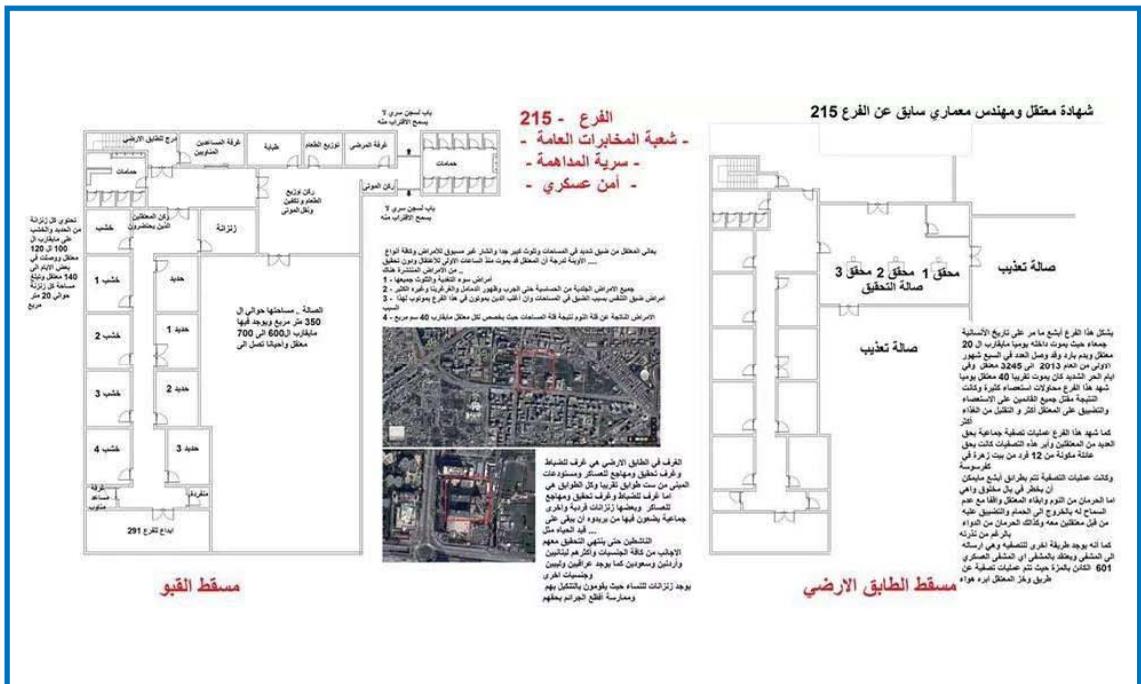
22M2 where food are kept before it gets distributed among prisoners.

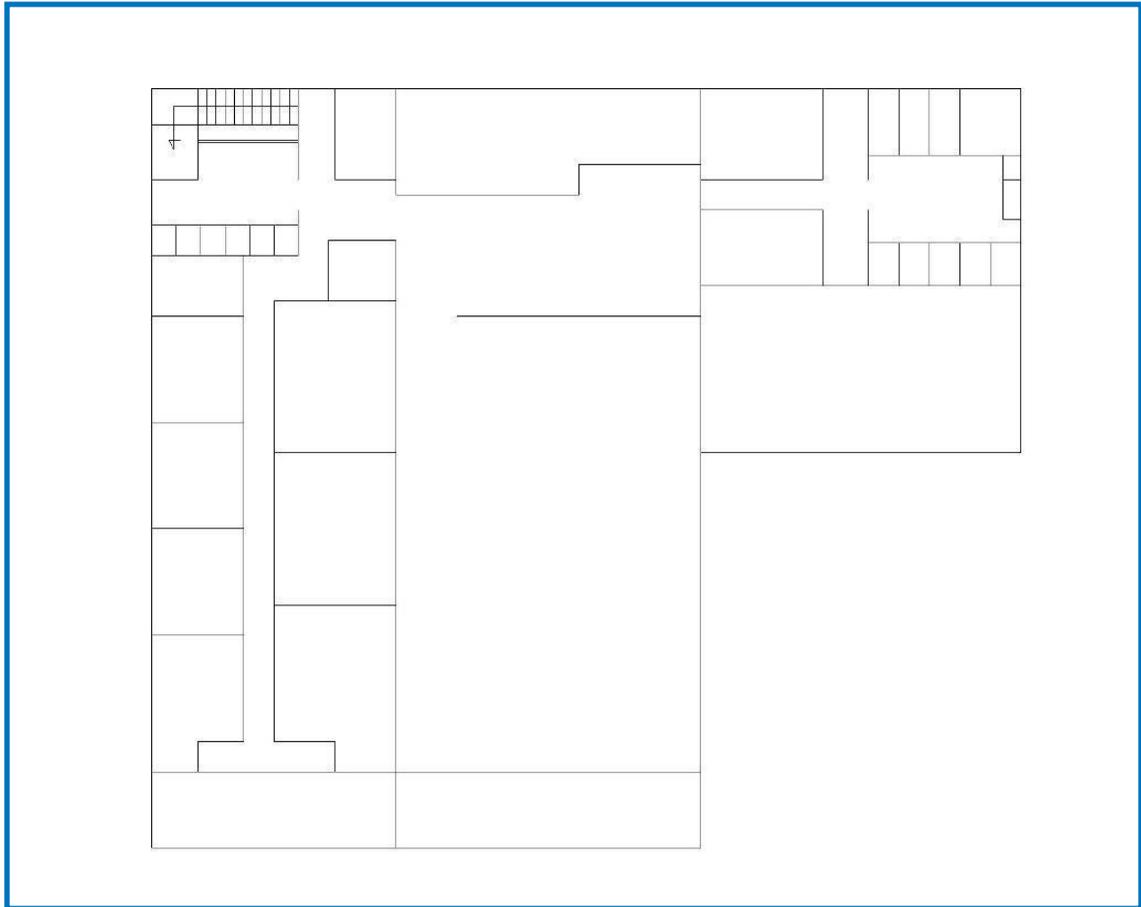
Seven rooms each of which have an area of 1M2.

15 bathrooms only five of which are for the prisoners, the other ten are for the officers and security men.

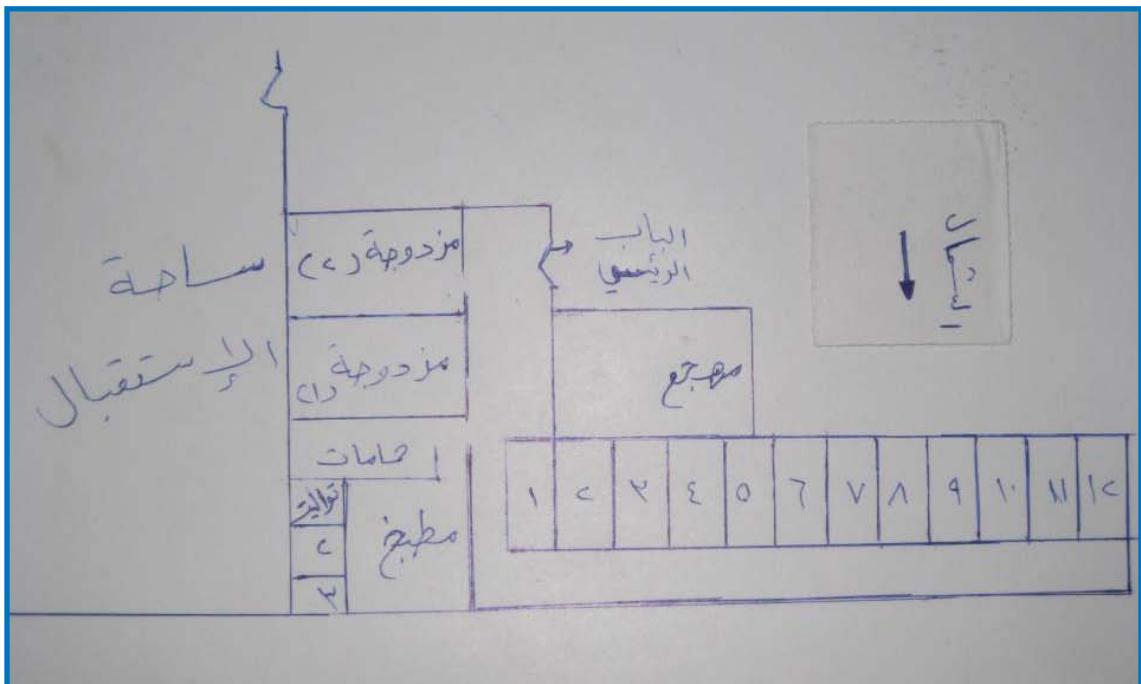
Illustrative pictures of the floors design:

Some of the survivors tried to sketch some illustrative pictures and sent is to SNHR. We already have interviews these survivors and got their arresting's and torturing's details:

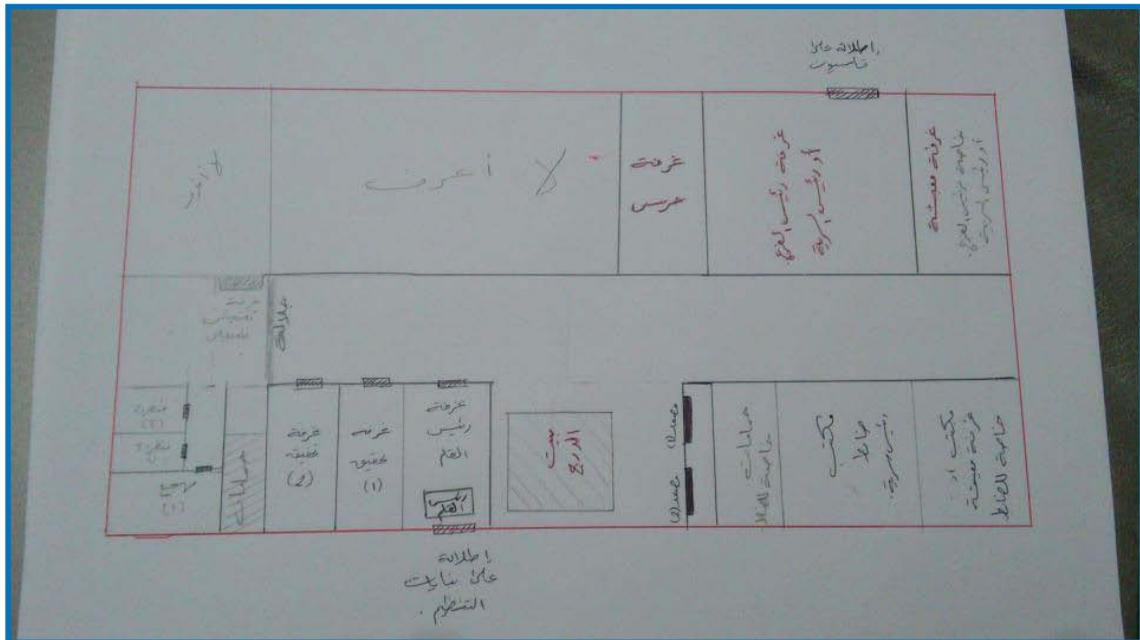




A drawing shows the northern section



A hand-drawing shows the sixth floor



Officers in charge

Head of the branch: Brigadier-General Shafiq, from the coastal area, probably from Tartus.

The Prison director: Ahmad Al-Halua, from Jabla, lives now in Rukn Ad-Din neighborhood in Damascus. He is known as (Gargamel) for his ugliness and dirty mouth. He is approximately 60-year-old and supervises the torturing of women prisoners personally. According to previous women prisoners' testimonies, his torture is more of a sexual harassment. He also supervises the distribution of food. He screams and hits women prisoners always. Usually, when a woman prisoner wants to express anything, he insults her, and promises her she won't get from this prison ever.

Most notable traits: slightly brown-skinned, has wrinkles, averagely tall.

Jailers:

1- Abu-Zaid: taciturn, sometimes sympathetic, his silence hides wiliness, and doesn't get involved with women prisoners.

Most notable traits: Tall, brown-skinned, white-haired.

2- Abu-Hussein: has very bad manners, tortures, curses very insultingly, and usually tries to be friendly with attractive women prisoners.

Most notable traits: Tall, big eyes, bold, about 35-year-old

3- Abu-Taha: very brutal and cruel, always screams, hits and hurts prisoners for no known reason, has bad manners, sometimes he harasses women prisoners, and he from Tartus.

Most notable traits: Tall, has wide shoulders, and has a bright skin.

4- Abu-Abdou: resides in Al-Muzza 86 neighborhood, has very bad manners, has strong influence within the branch judging from his behavior, always neat, tries always to be friendly with women prisoners to gain their trust, always beats male prisoners.

Most notable traits: Tall, White hair, Brown-skinned, and ugly.

6- Abu-Marwan: always nervous, very brutal during interrogation.

Most of the officers and security men in Branch 215 are from coastal areas, which has an Alawite majority of more than 90%. With the beginning of the Syrian revolution, the Syrian regime excluded any employees from rebellious areas.

Survivors’ testimonies

SNHR recorded the testimony of 65 people who were released from Branch 215. These testimonies are similar to a great extent. We choose 11 testimonies that included various information. The survivors can be contacted to this moment:

A- A community of prisoners

Mr. (A.B) is from Hama, he survived imprisonment in Branch 215. He was accused of revolutionary activism. He was transferred to Branch 215 after he was arrested in Hama by Military Security Branch. Mr. A spent five months in the branch and offered us his testimony:

“In Branch 215 there is a complete community. Yes a mini-community of Syrian that include all age groups and specialties. I saw, with my own eyes, three handcuffed children in the yard who were likely from Daraa and the sons of a fugitive. They were brought as hostages to force their father to surrender himself. I also remember well people older than 60 in addition to university students, doctors, engineers, and military personnel also.

B- Dying under torture

N.H, resides in Al-Khaldiya neighborhood in Homs, spent four months in Branch 215 on the account of names resemblance with a Syrian regime fugitive. N.H says:

“First they took our information and belongings in a big hall. I had a laptop and university textbooks. I was arrested at a checkpoint on my way to Damascus University. At that hall, we were brutally insulted and beaten. Then we were taken to basement with a black door. I stayed in Wood1 dormitory along with more 75 prisoners at least. It was very crowded with prisoners from all governorates. The lighting was very weak and we can’t see the sun at all.

It was very difficult to know the time and day.”

“After 5-6 days, I was called, two security men who were talking in a coastal accent. They kept beating me brutally while they were taking me to the upper floor until we reached the assistant room in the fifth floor as I remember. When I entered, I was blindfolded and handcuffed. They welcomed me with kicks, insults, and sectarian remarks. They made me stand against the wall but I couldn’t because I was too beaten. They started interrogating me with a bunch of questions about things I didn’t know what my connection to it was. I answered (I don’t know) because I really didn’t know.”

“The interrogation didn’t usually take long, it used to last about ten minutes; you either admit everything they are accusing you of, or get transferred to other rooms in the same floor for torture. I was taken to Al-Shabah (The Ghost) room which smelled bad because of the blood, sweat, and lack of ventilation. My hands were tied and pulled behind my back, then I was hanged from the ceiling where the whole weight of my body was on my hands and my leg which weren’t touching the ground. I stayed like that for two days, during that time, jailors used to come and hit me with a plastic cord or a cable mostly on the leg and chest. From time to time they used to ask if I want to confess and I answer I don’t know.”

“After two days, I was taken again to the assistant room who asked only one question: “are you going to talk, you pig??” again I answered I don’t know.”

“They ordered them to torture me even more, the jailors took me to a room where there was a chair. They put me on it and tied my hands and legs then they tried to force my back against its original position which caused a huge pressure on the backbone. It was too painful that I passed out. I learned later they call this method of torture (The German Chair). When I woke up I found myself lying and bleeding in the corridor. Also, from time to time a jailor would come and kick me on the chest specifically. I was left there until the next day as I wasn’t able to move at all and sometimes pass out.”

“I thought this I will die in the corridor. I made sure not to make any sound or move. From time to time, they would pour water on my face to wake me up. It was a chance for me to drink even very little sips of water because they almost don’t give us any water ever.”

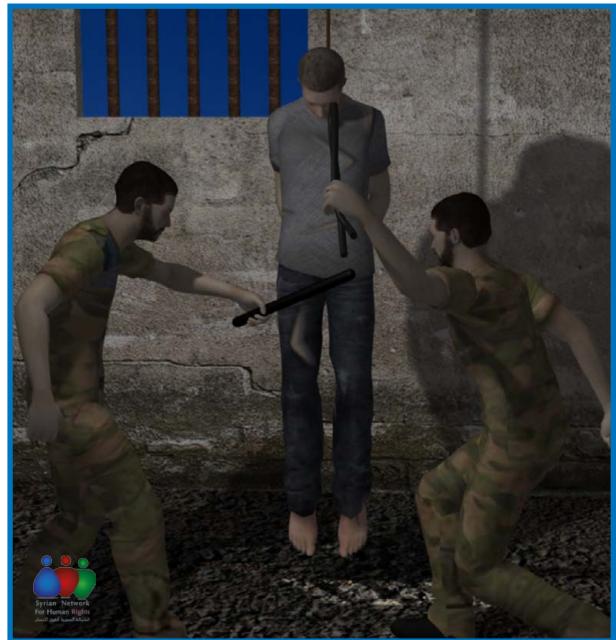
“The nightmare ended when a jailer insulted me and telling me that there was a mistake and the wanted man had the same name and information as me. He pulled me to the end of the corridor and carried me on a blanket to the lower floor because I wasn’t able to move. Afterwards, two prisoners came and carried me to a big hall and started taking care of me”

“Back in the corridor, I remember some phrases I heard when two jailors were talking about a prisoner apparently: take him to the corpses room, he just died.”

“Which means that the prisoner was tortured to death”

“After I was taken to a big hall with so many prisoners, my health returned to me slowly. When I started to see, it was very scary, pale faces and empty bodies, I thought myself in hell. Just skeletons walking around waiting for death. When I asked where I am, I was told by the prisoners that this is Branch 215!”

“I spent about 25 days in this hall, then I was taken to a dorm where I stayed for three days. On one night, they called me and then I was transferred to Adra prison, then to terrorism court, and then I was released.”



C- Imprisonment Conditions

(M.I) spoke to SNHR about how the prisoners live in Branch 215:

“The living conditions is, in itself, a method of physical and spiritual torture in Branch 215, in my cell (Steal4) every prisoner had an area of only one tile on which he have to do everything such as sleeping, sitting, and eating.”

“You had to sleep and sit in the same position. We were about 85 prisoner each of us got one tire. As for the new prisoners, every two must share one where one of them stand and the other sleeps or sit on this very small area.”

“They used to feed us two meals a day; breakfast and lunch”

“The breakfast was a bread loaf with a small oiled potato and 4-5 olives. We used to divide this very small amount of food to two portions for breakfast and dinner.”

“Lunch was very poorly-cooked; a bread loaf and some rice, grain, or potato soup with rot-

ten beans. You had to eat something to stay alive.”

“We were allowed to use the bathrooms only twice a day, the trip to there was agonizing as the jailers beat and insult you on your way to the bathroom and back. We were only allowed one minute in the bathroom and you have to be barefooted even though the floor was very filthy with blood and pus.”

D- Most notable death-to-torture cases

Many survivors talked about daily deaths inside Branch 215. Sometimes, 25 prisoners die under torture on one day. Branch 215 has the most death-to-torture cases of all the security branches in Syria.

(M.A), who spent seven months inside, told SNHR:

“I remember well the daily deaths on the branch. There were many spreading diseases whose symptoms were usually high body temperature followed by preventing the prisoner from eating or drinking. And then the prisoner, usually, enters a state of craziness or hallucination. When this happens, they transfer the prisoner to the patients’ room or isolate him in the corridor to die naturally. Afterwards, the prisoner himself or security men cover him with a blanket and then throw his body to the corpses room. When I asked one of the old prisoners about the fate of the dead bodies, he told me that they give every dead body a serial number, the number of dead bodies in that room is now more than 3400, and they then transfer the dead bodies to an unknown place.

Then (M.A) talked about the leaked pictures of the victims who died under torture

“One of the stories I will not forget all my life is the story of that 30-something guy who was in our dorm for three days before he died.”

“When he entered the dorm, he stayed close to the door holding the bars without eating or drinking anything for a whole day. His body temperature started getting high rapidly then he lost his mind and hallucinated. Afterwards, security men came and took him to the corridor to punish him for his loud voice. I heard him screaming, after a few hours when I went to the bathroom I saw him lying on the floor dead apparently. On the next day, I saw two prisoners carrying him in a blanket to the corpses room.”

E. Medical care

Dr. Karim, a SNHR member, after examining some of the survivor prisoners from Branch 215, some pictures, and survivors' testimonies:

“The most common diseases are skin ulcers that usually reach the bones and cause the meat to fall off in addition to many scares. Mainly, these diseases are what kills the prisoner.”

The medical care is extremely poor at the branch which is why death rates are high among prisoners

Mr. Amer Sallouh, from Idlib, spent five months in Branch 215 and told SNHR about the medical care there:

“The prisoners' health conditions are extremely bad. There are almost no medications or medical care. It is always filthy everywhere, the bathrooms, the corridor, and the dorms where most of the infections happen because of the blood and pus from the prisoners' wounds. This is the main reason behind the death of many prisoners. The Syrian regime uses this approach a lot because it is the most painful.”

“There were a 50-year-old guy from Daraa named Subhi Aba-Zaind who had diabetes. He died due to the lack of Insulin shots whom he must get every day.”

Doctor (Abdulhadi.T) was arrested several times before the beginning of the Syrian revolution and after. He was imprisoned until 2013. He graduated from Damascus University. SNHR interviewed him to tell us about the medical care in Branch 215 given that he is a doctor and a former prisoner:

“The main reason of death in Branch 215 particularly, and security branches in general is septicemia which happens when germs from all the prison gets into the prisoner through the wounds and scars caused by torture. This lead to high body temperature and hallucinations. Usually, the prisoner dies after five days if he didn't get the proper medical care not to mention the utter lack of medication for chronic diseases such as diabetes, blood pressure, and heart diseases which should always be available.”

Also, the brutal torture and the extreme pains with hitting the sensitive chest area are important reasons that cause death. Furthermore, deep abscess can cause death in three days.”

F- Suffocation and torture methods

(A.T), from At-Tal city in Damascus, told SNHR about his time in Branch 215

“After they brought me to Branch 215, I was put along with other prisoners in a room with a height of four meters and a width of three meters. No one was able to sleep in this small room. We were about 70 prisoners there. Most of the prisoners would sleep sitting on each other. There were no place even to sit. There were no window in that room and there many of us died because of suffocation. This the most difficult death in my opinion.”

“The food was very little and terrible where every eight of us get one share of food that is not enough for one person. The food was usually rotten or about to. The bread was very bad, it looked like paper and tasted like it too.”

“There were more than 5200 ill prisoners which suggests that 85% of the prisoners were sick. Some of the cases are untreatable. When a prisoner gets sick, he usually can’t breathe easily, and then he has fever and hallucination followed by a multiple personality disorder... before he become crazy completely or sometimes he stays completely silent to die slowly.”

“Some of the prisoners have deadly skin diseases. Given the climate in the rooms and prisons, the high humidity levels is an environment for dangerous bugs. I have seen several times prisoners lying on the ground and bugs have eaten their meat that you can see the bones and they smell bad. The prisoner’s health condition gets even worse with blood and pus coming from underneath his skin. Of course no one cares.”

“Even the doctor hits the prisoner when he comes tom him. Every day people day because of this fatal diseases and poisonous insects.”

“When we go the bathroom, you have no time to do anything because all you have is 30 seconds and you wouldn’t dare to wash your hands or body because anyone who does that will be punished and beaten and have his time extended by 15 days at least.”

“There are creativity when it comes to finding new ways to torture the prisoners. They hand the prisoner from the roof while he is blindfolded and start hitting him everywhere and he can’t scream or he will be torture more.”

“Other prisoners get electrocuted where the jailer connects the prisoner’s ankle to a 210 V power sources. We saw a prisoner who was tortured like this; his leg turned black and had deep wounds from which worms come out, he was transferred to solitary confinement, after one months and few days we heard that his leg was amputated. I am still suffering physically and psychologically from what I have gone through in Branch 215. I will never forget this experience, they must be punished by the same way.

Woman Prisoners

Woman prisoners gets a fairly similar treatment. Considering the nature of the woman and her special needs, her suffering is certainly deeper especially with sexual abuse which is used widely as a weapon of war to terrorize and press.

SNHR interviewed Mrs. Hasna Al-Hariri in Amman who survived Branch 215. We have published an extensive report about her suffering where she talked about her prison experience that Branch 215 was a part of. She stayed there for one month 13 days. The following is parts of her testimony:

“I was then transferred to the branch No. 215 where I’ve stayed for a month and 13 days. The prison administrator of the security square was the first one to see us there (Ahmad Al-Ali from Jabla - Rokn Al-Deen). He used to unclothe the women when they enter the branch. A girl entered before me and she started screaming after a few minutes so I’ve barged in to find the chief forcing the girl to take her clothes off, I attacked him and beat him. Tens of security members came and started hitting me randomly until I lost my consciousness. The signs of the beatings lasted for a long time.”

“I’ve been taken to a room which had 15 female. I’ve been interrogated for eight intermittent days with severe torturing using methods such as electrocution and random beating. I had a clot in my head so they brought a doctor, after getting treatment, they found out that I have brain damage so they released me.”



Samar An-Najjar survived Branch 215, she is from Hama. We interviewed her tell us about the treatment of woman prisoners and her personal experience:

“When we arrived at Branch 215, I didn’t know where we are. They removed my blindfold and I found myself in a small office, a 50-something officer, who was fat, short, and white-haired, started asking me, I realized I am at a security branch. He was holding my file and asked me about my name, personal information and asked one of his men to search me. He then blindfolded me again and took me inside, we went in the elevator. We reached a place with a big black door. He asked the jailor to open the door and left me with him. The Jailor was 40-year-old Abu-Ahmad from Latakia, he was

short, he searched me too but it was more like a sexual harassment. He removed the blindfold and asked me to take some of my clothes off and kept my shoes with him. He then left me at a 3*4 room.”

“The treatment was very bad. Some jailers used to sit in front of our cell and start insulting and threatening to beat us. One time, a jailor, Abu-Abdou, entered our cell and started starting us with a cord because we asked him to get a doctor for Fatima Al-Msalma after she suddenly passed out. After beating us, he brought a bucket filled with water and gave us a pill he said it was for diabetes and then he left after he said: “why don’t you die” me, and the other women prisoners, tried to Wake Fatima. We gave her the pill and she woke up. But her health conditions were poor. This happened two days before we were transferred to Adra prison. I was in the sixth floor, there were five women prisoners and a four-year-old kid.”

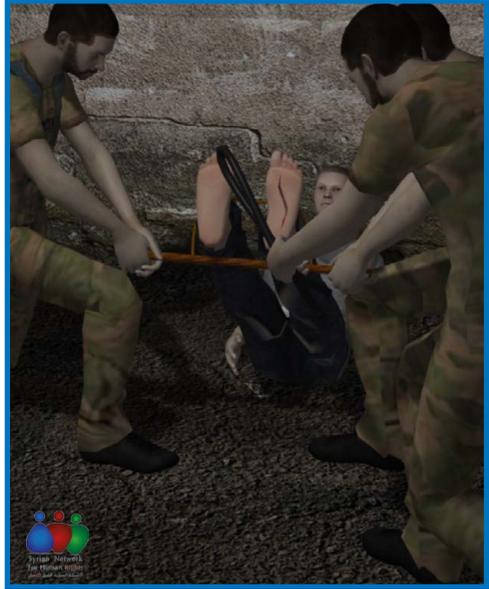
“At approximately 9:00 AM, they would give us ten bread loaves for the whole day and also one potato for each of us. Sometimes, like once every ten days, they would give us olives or yoghurt. At 2:00 PM, they would bring lunch which was some grain, tomato and beans, or spaghetti. The food was usually rotten, sometimes we would find weird things in the food like filth so we wouldn’t eat it and only eat the bread. Some of us used to eat the grain. There were no dinner.”

“On day 53, the officer called me at 10:00. When I left the dorm, I didn’t get back, they handcuffed and blindfolded me before putting me a bus and transferred me to the military police in Al-Qaboun. I stayed there for three hours before I was transferred to Adra Central Prison.”

A detective, a detainee, a judge, and a court

In addition to being one of the most security branches that have death-to-torture cases, very few prisoners get out after getting in after compared to the large numbers of prisoners. According to SNHR prisoners archive, many of the prisoners have been in Branch 215 for more than three years.

When the officer in charge of the interrogation, who usually is not educated, is through with the interrogation he himself decides what to do to the detainee based on his mood at that moment. He is the interrogator, the judge, and the whole court. For instance, Mr. Khaled Bakier, who survived Branch 215, told us that his friend, who is a prisoner from Aleppo, is 31-year-old and his name is Amer. The interrogator sentenced him to ten years of which he only spent two years.



Conclusions and Recommendations

1. The Syrian regime and its militias is practicing torture in a widespread manner which reflects a systematic policy. These torture acts is classified openly as crimes against humanity and war crimes according to the International Humanitarian Law. Furthermore, torture is considered a violation of the International Criminal Law, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
2. The treatment at Branch 215, and the Syrian regime detention centers in general, is less than the guaranteed minimum by the Customary International Law. Also, the Syrian regime detention centers doesn't comply with any of U.N. standards.
3. The Syrian regime should act upon his responsibility to end these practices, and hold the perpetrators accountable according to Responsibility to Protect principle which requires investigation in case of mistreatment and hold the perpetrators accountable. Otherwise, the Syrian regime is a partner in this crime having known and approved this prohibited torturing acts. In addition to the individual responsibility, torture can be justified by orders from superior officers and public officials according to the United Nations Conventions against Torture of 1984.

Reccomendations

Committee against Torture (CAF)

CAF should be more concerned with the Syrian case. It should try to greatly highlight the Syrian regime's brutal practices that kill five persons every day. Also, it should issue a special report on this issue and deliver it to the Security Council to uphold its responsibilities in regard to the Syrian case.

The Security Council

The Security Council not having a real and active role in Syria encouraged the Syrian regime to continue its brutal practices carelessly. Furthermore, there are individuals who support these practices.

The Security Council should be more involved in holding criminals accountable. And refer the Syrian case directly to I.C.C. More importantly, it should find a solution to stop the bloodbath instead of standing by watching the bloodbath getting bigger or even supporting it sometimes.

Acknowledgment

Our thanks go to the people we interviewed whose testimonies contributed greatly to this report.