

Interview with Ali Abou Dehen September, 18, 2007. In his house.

I spent few years in a cell, small, very small cell (90cm x 190cm and 190cm high). I spend ten months. I couldn't hear or see anyone. So please, when you ask me something, you have to speak with a loud voice. (...laugh)

Can you introduce yourself?

My name is Ali Abou Dehn, I am Lebanese. I was born in 1950, on the 5th of May. I am a PR, a Public Relation. I fought against the Palestinians first and the Syrians later. Maybe it was the first step that drove me in this situation because I fought against the Syrians. And in this first step, it drove me to the Syrians prisons.

I came from Hasbaya, it is a very nice and calm city in the South of Lebanon. Maybe you know Khiam? It is in this area. I don't know if you want my religion, I am Druze, but I don't like to say it. I prefer to say proudly **LEBANESE**

When they captured me I was in Damascus On that unlucky night, I was going to ask for an Australian visa. Because of the civil war in Lebanon, most of the foreign embassies were closed here, so you had to go to Cyprus or to Syria to ask visas. I choose to go Syria, as it was closer. The way to the Australian Embassy in Syria was the shortest, so I went over there. I don't know what happened, somebody reported me or something like that, I don't know.

We went through the border in an legal way. When were in Syria, two Syrians member of the Intelligent Services stopped the car, and asked me about my name, where I was from and so on...

I answered that I had my papers with me, so the members of the Intelligence Services easily answered: "You have your papers, why are you afraid then? Just come with us, we will offer you a cup of coffee, and speak". My wife was with me. I went with them and never came back!

During thirteen years of detention they didn't offer me a cup of coffee! (Laugh...). However, I won't go back for it!.. (Laugh...)

What was the charge against you?

The charge was talked from the end. The charge against me was spying for Israelis. Because you know, we were living in the South of Lebanon. They caught me on December, 27th of 1987 until 15th December 2000. We were under the Israeli colonisation in the south of Lebanon. If I were from Hezbollah, I was supposed to be with Hezbollah. When they caught Druze or Christians, they were supposed to work for South Lebanese Army or with the Israeli Army. If they caught Muslims, they were supposed to work with Arafat or Saddam Hussein, because all of them were against Syria.

They used torture to force prisoners to confess their fault. You confess because you can't endure more. I was tortured two months and after I confessed. They forced me to confess that I met two Israelis Prime Ministers who are dead now. I lost two friends!! (Laugh...). I said that I met the two, I confessed that.

What were the conditions of the questioning?

Well, it was... it was very very very bad, you know, I don't believe that anyone believe what we saw. To hear something it is not like to see it. I ask all the people to pray for God and to fear him.

Hell is very hard, I have visited it and I am back, really. So I saw it and lived there really.

When they caught me, they directly sent me to jail for investigation. It was in Damascus. I forgot the name of the place. I stayed in the Defence Department for four months and a half, and then they moved me in another department. There, they started again from the beginning, with all kinds of torture, beatings slashing slopping and so on...

They did the same a second time, they put me in a cell, a solitary cell with no people, just with myself. They started investigation from the beginning "How did you go and so on..." I didn't have to change what I had said before during the first investigation. So I kept the same story during the second one.

Then, they transferred me to Palmyra: "Tadmor". There, it was the hell in Palmyra!! We lived in very hard conditions and I should be forgetting what I have said during the investigations. They conducted another investigation there and I couldn't change my story, you know... During the investigation, I told them that I didn't see anybody, I didn't meet anybody, and that I was not working for the Israelis...

But they interrupted me many times, and beat me... When they beat me, I was keeping on saying the same thing. But after a while, I told them: "Ok, I met the Prime Ministers or something... Ok, the Israeli Intelligence recruited me to work for them... ok!" This is what I confessed. And I didn't say more than that. And for this confession, I stayed thirteen years in jail in Syria.

I stayed more than 5 years in Tadmor. I went to Tadmor in 1988, and I left it in the end of 1992. And in 1992 they transferred us in a better place, you know Saydnaya (detention center). It is beside Damascus, it is a very good... you know, prison. It was very bad for the others but because we were coming from hell, it was the paradise for us, really! It was completely different from Tadmor! There, the rooms were painted, and we had somewhere to look at! Because all the time we spent in Tadmor we couldn't look at anything, our eyes were blindfolded or we were always looking down with closed eyes and we didn't have the right to talk. In Tadmor we couldn't speak with a high voice. We had to speak like that: (he whispered to show us) "Hey how are you"... So, in Tadmor we couldn't talk...

That's why in the first years (after being released) I couldn't talk easily with my daughter, I could not talk with a loud voice. But now, I am a little bit better.

Did you have any means to defend yourself and to obtain legal aid from a lawyer?

There?? (He was surprised)... lawyers??...we were in hell, in Syria, in military prisons, when you are in a political detention, you can never see a lawyer... lawyer... it's a joke to ask for a lawyer!

I was presented in front of a Court, it was a Military Court. There are, you know, very old chairs and an old man was sitting there. They told me: "This is your lawyer". And the lawyer didn't speak to me at all. My trial was finished only after less than two and a half minutes.

They asked me some questions: "Are you working for the Israelis and so on, and so on..." I told them "no". The judge said: "You bitch, you have admitted and you confessed that, do you want us to begin again with investigations?" I said "Ok, everything in front of you is true." (...)

It was on the 27th September 1991, after three and a half years of detention. I had only one trial. You just have to confess what you have confessed during the investigations.

Before the trial, they called all the detainees at 5 o'clock in the morning, at 6 o'clock they opened the doors, without breakfast, without anything... And we were in a place, blindfolded, and the hands bound in the back. Imagine yourself sitting from 6 o'clock in the morning until 10 o'clock like that. We were not allowed to talk, and we did not know who was sitting beside you. All the times, we had someone walking around us (he imitates the sound...), so we were afraid. If we just moved a little bit, they slashed us. We couldn't do anything....

Suppose you are two in the same case, in the same trial, we can talk (he whispers) "you have to tell this and that..." That's why they just gave us numbers, no names, no names at all. And they called ... 15, and when you stood up, in a very low voice some other officer could ask you "Ali Abou Dehn?"

"yes"

"ok".

During the trial, 33 persons were heard in front of the Court in less than 2 hours. Imagine 33 political detainees, 2 minutes each person! They were deciding your future in two minutes. They would tell you if you are still detained or if you are free. They could decide whatever they wanted. Whether you had death penalty, and be hanged, or kept in prison....

Ok. That's all. Nobody could tell that the judgment was wrong and criticize it!

What were the conditions of torture?

(He shows us all his scars due to the torture on his hands, his legs, his feet, and his neck cigarettes)

(He explains us how they tortured him: dislocation of his arm and his hand, beatings with iron rod on his legs and feet, on his back, the scars of cigarettes on his necks....)

(Sigh...)

All the time in the Tadmor prison, you can't talk, you can't move, you are not allowed to go to the bathroom. Sometimes there were so many prisoners in the same room that we had to sleep... we called it by "squeezing". So, some of us were lying on the floor, heads to legs, and others were pushing all the prisoners that were on the floor with their foot, in order save space. And we were repeating several times the same operation, in order to have enough space to sleep for everybody.

We couldn't go to the toilets, we just had to make it on the floor. So when we were waking up in the morning, I don't want to say all the time but, most of the time, our clothes were wet of pee. And we (the inmates) never quarrelled; we didn't accuse the others, saying: "You, you did it!".

We just had cold water to wash. We were in a desert, during the winter, the water was 5° or 6°. We had to take a shower with this cold water and we didn't have other clothes then those on our backs, so we had also to wash them with this water.

In that room in Palmyra, the sergeants stayed outside, they watched us during the day and during the night from a window that was on the cellar. We couldn't move. We were blindfolded. The guard could ask to one of us, a prisoner, to check it. So if he would see that you can see through, the next day the person would be beaten. So we used to always put two or three pieces of cloth, you know old pieces because we didn't have cloth, we didn't have anything. So we couldn't see him. Because they (The guardians and sergeant) were afraid to show themselves.

There were also the psychological torture, we suffered from psychological pressure. In front of all prisoners, some guardians asked us to describe the sex of our mother, with a lot of precisions about the colours and so on. If we would say "it's red"; the officer would say: "no, it's pink!" and asking for more details.... It is very humiliating!

If we said that we were married, they were using it against us... We said it because we didn't know in the beginning that they would use this to torture us. Once, an officer came, and asked me: "You! How much would you ask me if I spend one night with your wife?" I didn't know what to say, so I answered: "10 Syrian pounds." He answered: "You son of a bitch, I'm taking care of you, so if I fuck you wife, you have to let it for free! You can't charge me for this!"

It was very hard, even harder than the beatings! Until now, I still make some nightmares about it...

Have you been ill?

Many, many times. We didn't have anything to wash (the food or take shower), nothing. One day, a prisoner was sick, during the night, he started to have some diarrhoeas and vomiting.

So that person was dying, we told the guardian that it was the truth, we told him: "He is dying" He said: "Ok, band of bitches, never smack the door again or tomorrow I will kill you. When he will be dead, you can knock the door again!" We went on knocking the door...

At three o'clock in the morning, the person died. The inmates washed his body, and put him in a blanket. It was the first time for me to see how to wash a person, a dead body.

We told the guardian: "Open the door, he is dead!" He answered: "When you will all be dead, then I will open the door".

I am not a hero, but believe me, I told the guardian "Ok, he is died so open the door now!"... He answered me: "Tomorrow, bitch you are number one". When he said "number 1" it meant that in the morning, when they would bring breakfast or something like that, they will say "those who have numbers, number 1, 2, 3, 4, you come out" and they will beat you.

In the morning, somebody came, one of the doctors from there, and asked: "How did he died? We were supposed to say that he has felt in the bathroom, and consequently, he died. We didn't have to tell the truth. So we told him that he felt in the bathroom. He said: "Ok, keep him with you and after a while we'll come to take him". After one hour or half an hour something like this, they came to bring the body with them. They drew him by his feet and we could hear the sound of his head knocking the stairs.

This is one of thousands examples of what happened in this jail.

Sometimes, we also had some chicken for lunch... Tell me in your opinion for how many people was one chicken....

(I said) "thirty"...

No, one chicken for 45 prisoners. So the guardians were taking the legs of the chicken to eat them, and we had to divide for 45 prisoners 1 chicken. We were cutting it in very small pieces and putting it in a bowl.

Once, one of us had the tuberculosis, and he was old men, so we gave him all the bowl, because he was sick, and we were not.

How long have you been in isolation?

I stayed in isolation ten and half months. But all the time of detention it was a kind of isolation, because we could not talk. But inside the collective room we knew each other, there were Syrians, Jordanians, Egyptians, Lebanese and Iraqi people.

I met a Syrian detainee who was imprisoned in Abou Graïb in Iraq. I told him that Abou Graïb was the hell. He said "Friend, don't say that!" "Here, it is hell! In Abou Graïb at least, they closed the door by melting it, but after you could speak!"...

During your detention what was your relation with your family?

In 1993, I received the first visit of my family. I had 6 visits from 1993 to 2000 and I was released the 15th December of 2000.

Before 1993, my wife went in a jail in Syria to see me. She believed to see me, so she made me some signals but it was not me. The torture touches also your family. It is a psychological torture, they don't know where you are, if you are dead or not... It is very hard for them.

I have three daughters, one has just got engaged. I don't have son. I met a prisoner who were condemned to 30 years imprisonment. He was arrested when he was 13 years old. I met him when he was 24 years old. He didn't know a lot of things about life, about things of love, he was supposed to be part of the Muslims Brothers and spent his life praying and so on... When he knew that I didn't have son, he hoped for me that when I could come back to home, I would have 4 sons!!!.... (Laugh...).

They released me in the 15th of December 2000. My family didn't know where I was, they just knew that I was released. I rang my house's door. It was my wife who opened. Watching me, she passed out. I left her on the floor, I stepped over her and I joined the living room where there was all my family, all my friends. They hugged me, they cried, we kissed each others. With all this emotions I forgot my wife.

When my wife came back in the living room, she told me: "Ok, I waited for you 13 years and you let me over the door!"

Somebody called me and my daughter gave me a cellular, I didn't understand who spoke to me... I never saw before this new technology, and I didn't know how to use it!

Did you receive any explanation or help from the Lebanese government?

Nobody offered us any help, until now. The Lebanese government doesn't recognize our detention, so we don't have help from the government. They never spoke about us. They said that maybe you were detained. In newspapers they wrote our names but it was not officially. You know, in newspapers you can write whatever you want. When it is official it means that you have a government paper where it is written, "Ali Abou Dehn was in Syrian prisons, he was released this morning". They never said it, they never said that, ok, which means that deliberately the Lebanese government ignored us, as the Syrian government didn't say that we were detained over there. How can you get help, from where? You are a Human Rights NGO, now you believe me, but if you ask me for an official paper, I don't have any proof that I was detained. We only speak with the press to make interviews.

Now, I am little bit better. Better than two years ago. I was talking to people. I was more than brave to go speaking to the people, to discuss whatever you know. I talked with many ambassadors, many foreigners many... whatever. Ok, but on the other side, I was in a very bad situation. Now my daughter is graduated, at least she is making money for herself. But before few years, really we were in a very bad situation. But since two years, we are coming little bit better. But we are living thanks God!! I believe it is nice for me. We are not going to restaurants and so on, people are going to movies, we are not going. We lived all together, in family. If you want to see a film, just wait two months, and you will see in the television... (Laugh...)

If you want to eat good food or something like that, ok, we eat all the times you know boiled potatoes. We just imagine that the potato is... a hamburger, or whatever you want (laugh...).

Now, it's little bit better for us. I had to make reconciliation with myself. You have to forget at least the time you were tortured, you know. Nobody helped us, we did it by ourselves. Most of the others, who were detained with me and they are free now, they are living in a bad situation. I know at least two, or three or four people in very very bad situation. We received ten thousand dollar for ten personers from Amnesty International. It was about four years ago. It was nothing, you know, but at least it was money, it was an aid. At least if you want to buy a telephone you can buy it on your own.

Someone asked me what I would like: we need the help of all the nations to free our friends from the Syrians detention places. Then, to look after them, not only to free them. We are not much. We are few, you know. I believe with 1 million dollar, 1 million, it will be more sufficient to buy house or something like that. On another hand, we try to have an international trial...

Do you have some activities since your liberation?

I find a job that is why I am little bit better now, it is not the job that I wanted ok, but I accepted it. It is very nice for me. At least, I am freer, I can go, come, talk to people, and tell my story to people. They have to know about us, what happened there. Maybe, someone who has some powers somewhere, he can do something, it will be good.

I work also with the American channel Fox News, I made some interviews with the Lebanese political leaders.

I would like that everybody knows "How they deal with the humanity, they are supposed to be punished!".

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September, 18, 2007. In his house.**