

Episode 10, season 3 (30 June 2022)

The Syrian Gulag: Reality and Narratives about the Prison System

Welcome to a new season of the Justice Visions podcast about everything that is new in the domain of Transitional Justice (TJ). Justice Visions is hosted at the Human Rights Centre of Ghent University. For more information visit [Justice Visions](#).

Brigitte: Hello, Artino. It's wonderful to talk to you again for our monthly chat on justice efforts for Syrians.

Artino: Hi Brigitte. Yes, it's a great to have the opportunity to look into justice efforts for Syrians again.

Brigitte: Well, you have been quite active within that domain these last weeks, I just admired you in the documentary "[Syria The Poisonous War](#)" which was broadcasted last month by the VRT, the Flemish Television Company. Tell us a bit more about that.

Artino: It's really important to talk about these attacks, which has a huge, tragic impact on the Syrian civilians, victims and their families. And unfortunately, these victims and their families are just still waiting for justice.

Brigitte: Yes, and it's key that this knowledge is spread, that public audiences continue to be confronted to the reality of these crimes and to the chemical weapons attacks and other crimes. And that the [disinformation campaign](#) by Assad propagandists is debunked.

Artino: Exactly, we as Syrian activists continue to document these crimes and to show the reality of the Assad regime's war. But today we're looking into another aspect of the regime's war: imprisonment. You wanted to talk about this subject before moving on to our episode on victims' activism next month, right?

Brigitte: Yes, I did as the Syrian prison system is a central element of the Assad regime's system of governance, that is intent on breaking political subjects. As political dissident and former political prisoner Yassin al-Haj Saleh argues, the political prisoner is the rule, and in Syria and not quite the exception. And there is a very interesting new book '[The Syrian Gulag, Assad's Prisons, 1970-2020](#)' sheds a light on that system. I thought it was important to address that publication here. And of course the title refers to the forced-labor camps that existed in the Soviet Union and that also served instruments of political repression in the Soviet Union. And secondly I also wanted to zoom in on the production of Syrian prison narratives, linking back to our previous episode on truth-seeking, as it's really important to talk about the potential of these artistic expressions against the background of justice efforts, in my opinion. And on that issue of prison narratives I spoke to the literary scholar Anne-Marie McManus.

Artino: You spoke to the authors of the [Syria Gulag](#), Uğur Ümit Üngör, a scholar of genocide and mass violence at the University of Amsterdam and NIOD and [Jaber Baker](#), a Syrian researcher, journalist, novel who is specialized in the prison system.

Brigitte: Good morning, Uğur and Jaber. It's a pleasure to have you on our podcast and also to have you shortly after the release of your book, *The Syrian Prison Gulag*. The idea is that you discuss the book with us and also that you give your perspectives on the Syrian gulag more generally. Before delving into the content of the book, I would like to ask you how you went about writing it. And I'll start with you Uğur. Why did you write the book and how did you go about writing it?

Uğur: Doing this specific book emerged when Jaber actually presented his other book *al-Mahakima al-Ilahiya* (The Divine Trial), which is on [Hospital 601](#). And he had a presentation and discussion of that book at the Goethe Institute in Amsterdam. Then we met up somewhere else for coffee and we started talking. And then the idea was, or the question was: why is there no overview book on the Syrian prison system? It is a massively important political factor in the Middle East in general, in Syria in particular, and yet there is no book that gives a more or less, you know a synoptic overview of these prisons? So, then you know these discussions continued and we decided simply to make the book ourselves.

Brigitte: It's very ambitious and very much needed as well. Jaber, could you give some more details on the writing of the book? You had this plan, you decided to write it, but it's massive. How did you start doing this research project and how did you divide roles also?

Jaber: Yes, actually after that time, what we try is to make a plan, how we can start with this huge number of prisons in Syria under the intelligence service branches, etc. So for that, we choose the 70ies until 2020, these 50 years for the Assad time in Syria. And my work in this book is divided into two parts: research and writing in Arabic because we made everything in Arabic, then we translated to English. It's a long process. And the research and the work was distributed in preparing interview questions, to help us to understand the system, to understand the life inside the prisons, to understand how it worked this place. After completing the interviews, I'm talking about 100 interviews in this case, then we analyzed the Syrian prison literature, then extracted from it all the useful details or at minimum, the environment of, for example, [Palmyra prison](#) and [al-Mezze prison](#). Each narration, according to the place is talking about. The third stage, analyzing the human rights reports and the security studies that dealt with the Syrian intelligence on the prison and extracting all the useful information and the details from them, including the biography for different names that that you learnt from the Syrian gulag, for example [Ali Duba](#), Mohammed al-Khoury et cetera. The fourth stage, the writing and putting all the of the above in the context of answering the hypothesis that the prison in Syria has existed on the horizontal and vertical level in society and in the state. We continue to translate it in English. And then we make the second and third draft, fourth draft until to make the Dutch.

Brigitte: Yes, the Dutch version is just published and we're very excited about it. And I'm sure that the international readers will also be very excited when the English translation is published shortly. I would like to maybe pick up on the idea of the horizontal and vertical level and go back to you Uğur, to talk about the system in general. I know it's vast and we don't have the scope to enter very much into the details, but could you maybe just disentangle this idea of the verticality and the horizontality of the prison system?

Uğur: So one of the major conclusions, of course, in this book is that this prison system is four-dimensional. The four separate entities that are the intelligence agencies, prisons that are the central prisons, the civil prisons and the secret prisons. I mean, that in itself

is a really important conclusion. Then it's not only the case that these four dimensions, they exist separately, but they're entwined in really intricate ways, in complex ways that we haven't even really fully understood, to be honest in this book, because it requires a much more thorough and I think micro-focus actually on what happens when somebody enters the system, goes through it like a pinball machine. But one of the things we did find out, that was the second -I think- conclusion, is that the intelligence agencies system of the four different intelligence agencies, they are like a vacuum cleaner. They clean from the society they enter, penetrate into Syrian society and extract people from it. They then process them -to use a factory term - they process these human beings by subjecting them to violent treatment and to torture and other forms of interrogation, they keep them in these prisons for a while. But then in the end, all these people invariably either they go, for example, to a civil prison and then they're released, or they go to these central prisons, such as Palmyra was one of them, of course, in the 1980s, but also, Saydnaya, most importantly. That is a major fork in the road. The moment that you're sent to these, than you are in a really different universe and you can stay there for a countless number of years, your whole life, and in the end you can potentially still be released through the civil system. And so there's a vacuuming, there's a processing, there's the storing, let's say, in the major prisons, and then there's release. And this process is highly intricate.

Brigitte: You used the term the 'Syrian gulag' and of course the gulag refers to other systems countries. Jaber, could you maybe elaborate on the use of that term and also what, what it evokes for you yourself also as an ex-detainee and currently as a researcher on detention?

Jaber: Actually as a Syrian, I consider the Syrian gulag, I think it's a savage archipelago that kills innocent people on a daily basis. All the time, it works and still working until now we speak now in this in this interview and people die in the Saydnaya and the Syrian intelligence branch. So but as a researcher, as Uğur told you, it's a very complex system at the administrative level and control. It's not a tool for reforming the prisoner. We speak about the prisoner of the freedom of expression, not as a criminal, criminal prisoner. And the Syrian gulag is designed to be an effective killing unit with unlimited powers. That's what it means for me as a man, as a Syrian man, as a Syrian ex-prisoner, and as a researcher and writer for this book.

Brigitte: And you also insist very much you the industrial complex, the industrial complex lying underneath the prison system. Uğur, you already mentioned the issue of vacuuming. Can you also maybe elaborate a bit on how you perceive that industrial aspect and why it is so key also?

Uğur: One of the reasons the gulag metaphor or the concept applies so well is because of the scale of this prison system. So we're dealing here both statistically but also qualitatively, with an impact on the society that is way beyond other countries' prison system, right? So take a neighbouring country like Jordan or Turkey. There are prisons in Turkey, some of them are bad, also historically bad. But it doesn't have in Turkey the disproportionate impact that it has in Syria. In Syria, this is as Jaber once said, the regime is a *nidam sujuni* which means it's an imprisonment regime. Imprisonment in fact, defines the regime because the industrial impact is also linked with the perpetrators. Imagine the tens of thousands of men that wake up every day, they, you know, they wash their faces, they have breakfast, they kiss their children, and they go to work. And the only thing they do during the day is they contribute to a system of imprisonment or they have to discipline, torture, arrest, prosecute also. There is also the entire legal prosecutorial

facade of it. This is a branch of government that is massive inside the Syrian state, or the Assad regime, if you wish, and really, the best exemplification of the industrial scale of it is, ... I mean most of us have seen the Caesar photos, the photos of the tortured to death victims from the prisons and in the branches, but also the hospital 601. One of the photos that for me was the really the most shocking, which is it's a garage in a hangar in which there are dozens, maybe hundreds of bodies there packaged in plastic. And then there are three perpetrators in military clothes, walking around carrying the dead bodies from one side to the other. And that really encompasses the industrial nature of it. For these people processing these packages -I'm using the jargon now of the perpetrator - processing these packages is just work, it is assembly line. And that also means that the perpetrators don't really care who the victims are. They just have to be processed on this massive scale. It is depersonalized; and that's what makes it so industrial.

Brigitte: Jaber, to end, I would like to ask you about the impact on Syrian society. We know it is huge because there is over 100,000 people forcibly disappeared and missing. There so many people detained that not one family in Syria is not directly affected by this issue. But could you expand on the impact on a societal level and new insights that you have gathered during this research project?

Jaber: There's a story about the empty chair that we covered in our book. The empty chair, it's not about just the person who's missing, the person who came back from the Syrian gulag, who came back from this horrible experience. He didn't find an empty chair for himself in his house, in his family, because his family, they buried him or her because they thought all the time he died or she died. It's not easy to recover or return life again from the death and try to be a normal guy. So it's really something we couldn't handle, that we couldn't even think about it, how the Syrian people can be a normal people after this huge and terrifying experience. There are there are hundreds of missing persons in the darkness of this gulag. No one knows anything about them. This breaks up families.... Arrest all the time my friends ask me about the arrest time and when the *mukhabarat* [security services] arrested you on the street or in your house? Arrest meaning economic bleeding for parents who are forced to pay thousands of dollars to find out where their children are, unfortunately, without good results. The gulag destroys society not only at the political level, but also breaks up relations, families, increasing number of savage perpetrators. So in this book, we tried to understand this system. Because my basic study I am a mechanic, to try to find which kind of this mission we can take it off, and this mission stops. That is my dream in the end.

Brigitte: Yeah, I think you're also contributing to that by also expanding that knowledge and deepening that knowledge on the Syrian gulag. And with our next guest, Anne Marie McManus, we will also discuss a very important aspect of the knowledge, the cultural knowledge that we obtained also through prison narratives and prison literature. And as a favour, I would like to ask you to read a poem that's also in the book by Faraj Barayqdar.

Jaber: Sure. Its name is *Story*.

"Once upon a time.
Epoch son of time
told me.
That fire is a guide
so make sure you've got enough
for a long and rugged ride.

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* * *

Attempt night anyway
 And if despair knocks the door
 upon you,
 no matter —
 Rise up
 and write on the walls
 without explication or detail:
 Oh Master Despair,
 tell your Lord the Sultan
 that the cell is no narrower
 than his grave
 that the cell is no shorter
 than his life —
 This
 If the earth accepts his corpse,
 enclosed by footsteps,
 and protected by forgetfulness.”

Jaber: April, Palestinian Branch, 1987, Faraj Barayqdar.

Brigitte: Thank you Uğur and Jaber for the interview, for writing the book and for your relentless efforts in excavating that knowledge, making it public and also contributing, I think, to the stamina and the efforts of so many people who are still detained and people who are just fighting for justice in Syria. Thank you both.

Jaber and Uğur: Thank you.

Artino: That was so impressive. It's the first time I have heard such a clear, to-the-point introduction about Assad's prison system, even if it's not too unfamiliar to us Syrians, to be honest.

Brigitte: It is really outstanding publication indeed. It show how the prison lies at the heart of the polity in Syria, not only affecting only the prisoners but the whole society. It also goes against the denialism of the Assad regime and its backers.

Artino: Yes exactly, it expands the knowledge about the regime's killing machine. Academic publications and also literature, prevent the erasure of these crimes and contribute to resistance. On this issue you also spoke to Anne-Marie McManus. She is a literary scholar who leads the [ERC research project SYRASP](#) on Syria's prison narratives. So if we can listen to that conversation, please.

Brigitte: Hello, Anne-Marie. Lovely to have you for our podcast on the Syria prison narratives and the Syrian prison gulag more generally, to also have you as a guest, because we're very eager to hear more about your project firstly and also about Syrian prison narratives in particular. Maybe I'll just ask you first about your project, SYRASP Prison Narratives of Assad's Syria, which you are leading in Berlin, in Germany. Can you tell us a bit more about the project?

Anne-Marie: Yes. Thank you so much for asking me to be part of this conversation. I'm really glad to be here. So SYRASP stands for the prison narratives of Assad's Syria. It's a

five year research project on Syrian prison narratives. The work has really undergone some changes in the past two years. I planned it back in 2018 and at that time I was still living in the United States. Back then, I had imagined that I would gather interviews with former prisoners and read that alongside prison literature, because I really wanted to widen the concept of what we consider prison narrative, to be, so including but expanding beyond things like memoirs, poetry and novels, to include film, social media engagements with prison narratives as well as ordinary speech in interviews. And I wanted to do that because, well, first, I really wanted to capture a plurality of Syrian voices. For example, there are a few Syrian women who've written prison literature, but the genre does tend to be dominated by male secular intellectuals. And one of the things we know about what happened since 2011, but even before, is that many different classes, both genders, people with varying engagements, even non-engagement with politics, have been caught up in the prison system. And so I wanted to make space for that. And second, one of the other big outcomes of 2011 was democratisation of cultural production. So in the revolution, there was a real widening in who was able to produce cultural narratives, and so I wanted my research to reflect that democratisation. But once I arrived in Berlin, I was really amazed to discover there were so many projects going on to interview former prisoners already underway, not just in Germany but within the EU more broadly. And so SYRASP now collaborates with one of those, which is led by the Syrian activist and writer Jaber Baker, who I believe is also on this programme. But it was also through observing these kinds of interviewing initiatives that I came to see this kind of research, right? Documenting and archiving prison narratives is actually a key activity in the prison field, but it's something that I would place alongside the production of narratives and knowledge about detention in Syria.

Brigitte: Yeah, it's so interesting. Because often when we think of Syrian prison narratives, we restrict it to prison literature. Or at least I did in the past, because that's, of course, a genre that is more known. So it's very interesting that you're broadening that definition, let's say, to prison narratives. So you've already touched upon cinema. How would you define it more broadly, the field of Syrian prison narratives?

Anne-Marie: Yeah, well, one thing you just said it's definitely a multi-genre field. It comprises a lot of different activities. These include literary writing, whether it's self-published or published through a traditional publishing house. There's filmmaking, theatre, poetry, activism and advocacy, I definitely see as part of this field that is overlapping often with these cultural and artistic endeavours, the arts, especially public installations, and then research on prison, those are the main genres that come to mind. I think it's also important to say this field is multigenerational, so it includes people who were arrested in the 1980s, as well as people who are usually of a younger generation but not always who are arrested after 2011 or whose family members or loved ones were disappeared. And so it's interesting to me that some of the 1980s generation of former detainees have been active for years in writing and producing thought on imprisonment in Syria. But others wrote for the first time after 2011, which is a really interesting historical phenomenon. And when I say things, I just want to be clear that when I say the prison field, I should really be clear that this is a term I'm bringing, right. I wouldn't say that there's a sort of self-definition, or unification of the field. People who are participating in this work are definitely aware of one another, but it doesn't have a sort of a central institution or a single leader. And there's also a lot of diversity, right. And even some disagreement about how people should write about or talk about prison. What is the best way to advocate for this cause? And to me, this comes from the diversity, the

field, but also the immense urgency of the prison cause, right? And the cause of forced disappearance in Syria.

Brigitte: Yeah, definitely. And it's so innovative how you bring the term 'the field'. Another thing that you also bring, of course, is the classification. And I just wanted you to briefly elaborate on the different functions of prison narratives. Could you briefly elaborate on these functions?

Anne-Marie: Yeah, sure. So I was I mean, this is a sort of a working paradigm thinking through what prison narratives do. And so I was thinking about the different verbs. One is knowing, - like knowing about human rights violations and disappearance - remembering and feeling. And so something like documentation most obviously relates to memory, right, what it means to remember this. But it's also part of sort of ongoing forms of political contestation around imprisonment in Syria. And I'll come to that in a second. One things that I am trying to name is something that's an indexical engagement with prison narrative, which I think is really important and valuable in the human rights field, where the literature on narratives is usually published literature, though of former prisoners, it is a form of evidence of the existence of human rights violations. And a very famous case of this in the Syrian context is the poet Faraj Barayqdar whose poetry was smuggled out of Syria in the 1990s while he was at that time in prison.

Brigitte: Yeah. We asked Jaber, by the way, to read a poem.

Anne-Marie: How wonderful. That's really wonderful. And so this poetry, right, it was an international campaign, but it was really his poetry that sort of was at the sort of the forefront of the campaign that eventually led to his release. And I find this a really interesting and influential function for prison literature, because it actually doesn't really rely on what that poem says. It's something that you don't necessarily need to read in order to understand the power of this text as it's circulating in the world and drawing attention to the play, not just of the poet, but to many others like him. So I think this is really valuable. But in the present, one of the things I have a concern about is if we if we just assume we already know what prison narratives say and we already we assume we already know what their meaning is, well, we don't read them, or listen to them. And then there might not be a chance for Syrian writers, filmmakers, activists to actually transform their narratives, to really get their voices out to the world. Because I think actually one of the major goals of the prison field today is to articulate a new meaning or set of meanings around imprisonment, enforced disappearance. And it's you can hear this in the statements of activists like Wafa Mustafa and Fadwa Mahmoud, who are women activists who are super prominent in advocacy on forced disappearances or around forced disappearance through the organisation Families for Freedom. And for them, this advocacy is really a continuation of the revolutionary practices that began in 2011. And I think that this statement, right, this understanding of what it means to narrate disappearance, to narrate incarceration, can actually be applied to the prison field today as a whole, right in its stance against dictatorship and it demands for justice, and also in the effort to create new narratives about the self, politics and memory in Syria.

Brigitte: It's amazing and it's so rich. And then maybe as a last question, I would just like to ask you to very briefly, maybe to apply that to Ayouni the film, the documentary about Father Paolo and Basel Safadi, because we also had Yasmin Fedda as a speaker on a previous episode of the podcast, and she's the filmmaker. So why did you want to talk

about Ayouni, in a previous talk I heard. Why is that important for you as a prison narrative?

Anne-Marie: Well, first, I recommend everyone watch the film. It's a really wonderful one. I think it's extremely expressive and important in the way it makes the struggle for accountability around forced disappearance visible, not only as a political struggle, which it definitely is, but also as an effective transformation for the people who are the people who've been impacted by forced disappearance and the communities where they find support, where they find care. So, yeah, as you mentioned, *Ayouni* is about two disappearances in Syria, Basil Safadi and Father Paolo, but it tracks the women who advocate for them, especially Basil's wife and then widow and father Paolo's sister. And I think there's a very good reason to talk about this film making the traces of the disappeared visible, right. That in itself is an act of resistance against the forces that were trying to annihilate them and others without a trace. But in the film, my attention really stayed with the women, right, and how they learnt to live with these absences and these enduring, really searing uncertainties that forced disappearance produces, right. It sort of transforms them as individuals. They have to cohabitate with the pain that has no resolution in sight for now, right. But it also shows how the women are forging communities, of activism, care and nurturing. And it was just a profoundly dignified expression of what it means for Syrian activists to choose, and these circumstances that nobody would ever freely choose. But in these impossible circumstances, they're fighting to even see the corpse of a loved one who committed no crime. But they're choosing to make this pain that they're experiencing a political tool. And I see this really is continuing revolutionary practice. The film roots its narrative in the 2011 revolution. And it's so clear that the women can't stop fighting. Right? That their pain won't end until they have accountability for their loved ones. Which is the same thing really, I think is saying that the pain and the fight will continue until justice is achieved. And that's not just for these individuals, right. It's really a question for Syrians about justice in Syria and what that would mean for collective healing.

Brigitte: That was so touching Anne-Marie, thanks a lot! It's wonderful how you bring to bear the ongoing resistance, which is a central element of the prison narratives that links up to justice efforts. We look forward to reading more about your research outcomes. Thanks a lot!

Anne-Marie: That's really kind. Thank you for having me on the podcast and thanks for all the work you're doing.

Artino: This interview was right up your alley, wasn't it, Brigitte?

Brigitte: Yeah, very much so. It relates, of course, strongly to my own research on the potential of Syrian artistic practices to open up the justice imagination and Anne-Marie spoke very, I think, passionately and impressively about the link between prison narratives and ongoing resistance and how that feeds into justice efforts. And that was very inspiring.

Artino: Yes, it was. And next time we are going to explore one of the key components of that ongoing resistance: victims' agency. We are talking to Yasmine al-Masan, Riyad Avlar, Hiba al-Hamed and Bassem Mahmoud about justice initiatives that are meaningful to victims and survivors.

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Brigitte: Yes. And I'm really looking forward to these different conversations as well, because I think they're also very timely when we look into the issue of the study on the mechanism for the forcibly disappeared and the missing. These conversations are really key to address these efforts of victims groups and also, of course, their agency. But for now, I would like to thank our guests, and Amr Assaid for the voice-over and our sound engineer, Katoo Delanghe.

Artino: Thank you to our listeners and stay tuned!