

# Ex-prisoners back in Syria's cells 'of despair'

AFP- This time he was there by choice. Mohammed Darwish was back in a jail that was run by Syria's feared intelligence services – and Bashar al-Assad was no longer president.

Cell number nine reeks of putrefaction. It is an underground windowless room with blackened dripping walls where the 34-year-old journalist was held with around 100 others.

Darwish was detained for months by one of the most feared branches of the former government's many-tentacled intelligence services.

It was to the so-called Palestine Branch in Damascus, also known as Branch 235, that he was taken for interrogation, suspected by the authorities of supplying information to "terrorist" groups.

Many people who ended up there never saw the light of day again.

"I was one of those they interrogated the most," Darwish told AFP of his ordeal in 2018. "Every day, morning and night" for the 120 days he was detained.

He said people were held after "arbitrary arrests and with no charges ever laid" against them.

Darwish recalled being kept in the cell which held some 50 prisoners with tuberculosis. He also remembered a young Turkish inmate he said was driven mad by the lashes that rained down upon him.

"When the door closed behind us, we were plunged into the depths of despair. This cell was witness to so much tragedy," he said.

– Abandoned ID cards –

When Damascus was taken last Sunday by an Islamist coalition led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which was formerly linked to Al-Qaeda, those who worked at Assad's Palestine Branch simply melted away.

In one dark room, AFP saw a woman whose face was covered with a grey scarf rummage desperately through a pile of abandoned ID cards.

Thousands like her have swarmed the country's notorious houses of detention over the past week, looking for evidence that might lead them to loved ones who had disappeared under Assad's rule.

And some former prisoners, like Darwish, are also returning as free men to where they were once incarcerated, trying to find closure.

Adham Bajbouj, 32, is another former prisoner.

"They told us our stay at the Palestine Branch was just for a question and answer session," he said.

"But I was in there for 35 days. Or maybe it was 32, I no longer remember very well," Bajbouj said.

His brother, who was accompanying him, did remember one key detail.

"He weighed 85 kilos (187 pounds) when he arrived, and was just 50 when he got out," he said.

– Constant humiliation –

As well as being questioned, prisoners were subject to constant humiliation.

"We had to scrub clean the torture areas and toilets, and drag the dead from the cells," said Bajbouj, who is still frail and

said that this was his first time near the building since his release.

What the former detainees call the “torture rooms” are on the top floor. The smell of smoke still lingered from the offices of some of those who had been in charge.

Before these officials left, they burned thousands of documents on the shelves of one room, many of which were presumably stamped “Secret”.

One letter dating to 2022 that escaped the flames was addressed by the army’s high command to those “charged with dealing with terrorism affairs”.

It described the arrest of a soldier who was accused of maintaining relations with “armed terrorist organisations”.

Another former inmate of cell number nine seemed unable to come to terms with the new reality in Syria.

“They charged me with terrorism,” 42-year-old Wael Saleh said. “I’m still charged with terrorism.”

“I will never forget what I went through here. I remember there were 103 of us crammed into this cell. We stayed standing up so the older ones could lie down.”

AFP