



Damascus Road

The plight of political detainees in Syria
through their portraits



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Following the Taif Agreement, a Lebanese journalist who was deeply involved in the country's politics and had played a pivotal role in the "civil war" offered some opinions about the characteristics of Lebanese-Syrian relations.¹ He could not have found a better title for his book than "The Hardship of Brotherhood." In every respect, the description of those relations was so accurate that not only did the title become something of a "trademark" for those affairs, but it also became an integral part of the Lebanese patois.

While there are certainly many examples of hardships to be found among those relations, the sheer volume of those difficulties pales in comparison to the associated human toll. For instance, nothing can mitigate the fact that hundreds, possibly thousands of Lebanese citizens suffered terribly as political prisoners in Syrian prisons, many of whom are still presumed to be prisoners there.



UMAM Documentation and Research and the Association of Former Lebanese Political Detainees in Syria have established an enduring and cooperative agreement, an outcome of which was evident in their joint, multifaceted project, ***Passionate of Darkness – Carceral Experiences in Syria's Prisons***. As part of that broad project, and in an effort to shed new and brighter light on this excruciating aspect of Lebanese-Syrian relations by personifying at least some of its victims, the two organizations have collected scores of photographs of Lebanese who were either detained and released or may remain political prisoners in Syrian prisons. Since these photographs tell a much more compelling story than words alone, they will be the focal point of ***Damascus Road: The plight of political detainees in Syria through their portraits***, an exhibition that will

hopefully travel throughout Lebanon.

This photographic presentation, which focuses on a number of Lebanese whose presence in Syrian prisons is based on incontrovertible evidence, seeks to reiterate that the human factor associated with the chaos in Syria is by far its most serious consideration.² More specifically, the exhibition is intended to exhort every effort by the Lebanese State and others to discover the fate of those who vanished and secure their prompt return home. Further, the photographs of those who were fortunate enough to have been released should prompt Lebanese authorities to discharge their responsibilities. In doing so, moral and material reparations should be offered to these citizens in view of the mistreatment they experienced during their many years of detention. Clearly, the debasement they suffered at the hands of their captors was by no means less dangerous or long lasting than that visited upon their fellow citizens in Israeli prisons.

Injustice cannot be contained forever within the walls of a prison or within the hearts of the guards. The future of Lebanese-Syrian relations will indeed be impacted by vital considerations including good-neighborliness, a shared respect for sovereignty and non-interference in the affairs of the neighboring state. Yet the quality and durability of those relations are also linked inextricably to the fate of the Lebanese men and women who continue to pay unbelievably high prices—in terms that include personal security, physical and psychological health and family and community relations—for the hardship of brotherhood.

¹ Joseph Abou Khalil, *Lebanon and Syria: The Hardship of Brotherhood*. First edition. Beirut, 1991.

² This includes non-Lebanese detainees, whose similar fate vis-à-vis territorial sovereignty should be assumed by Lebanese authorities.