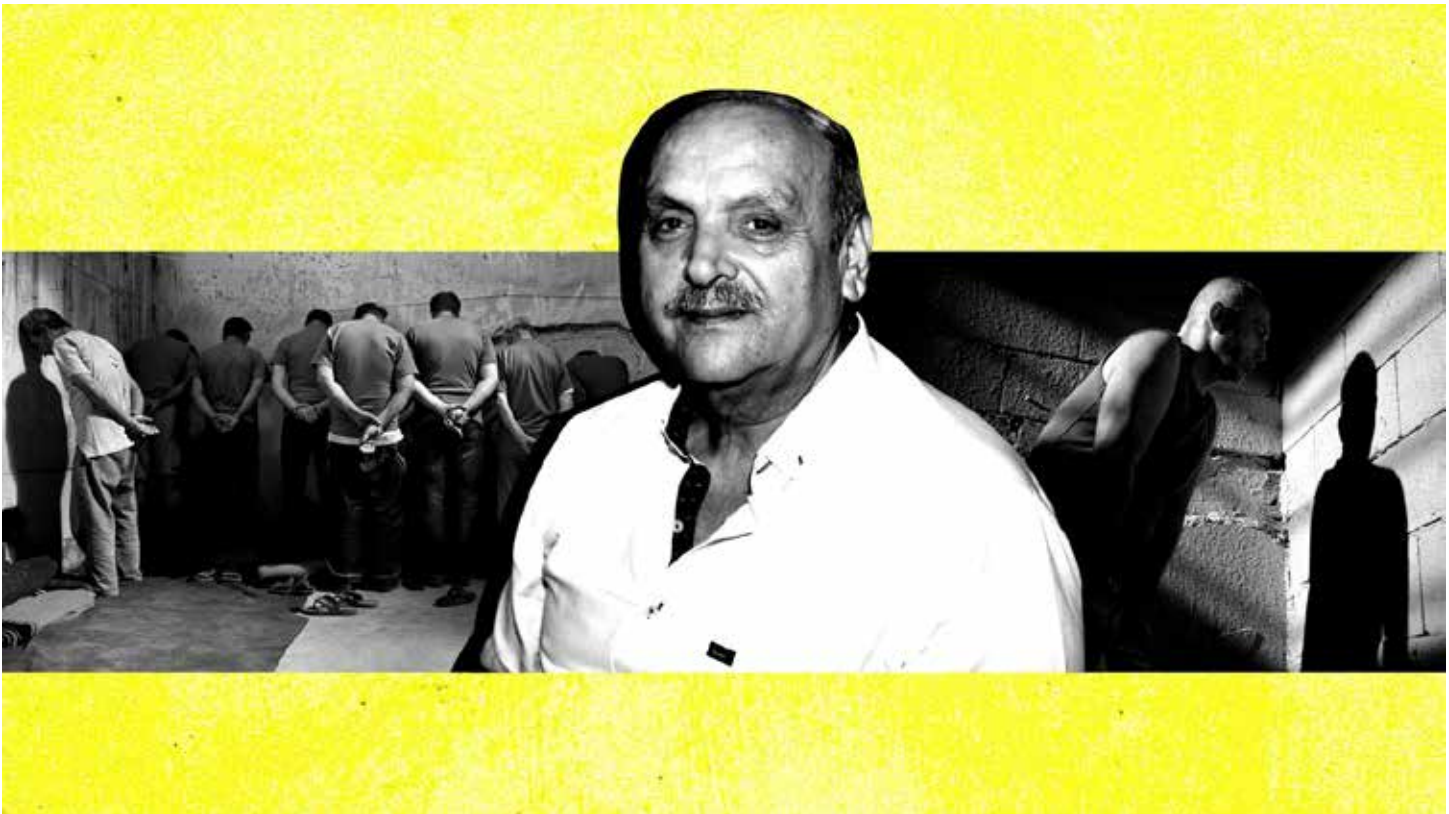


# He's Bringing the Horrors of Syrian Prisons to the Stage

## WHY YOU SHOULD CARE



Because the world could use more empathy.

When Ali Abou Dehn peeked through the crack in the iron door, he saw buckets of chicken and rice waiting to be served to him and [his fellow prisoners](#). On most days, he was forced to survive by splitting an egg with five people. But on this day, March 8, 1988, prisoners were fed well to honor the 35th anniversary of the coup d'état that brought the Syrian Baathist regime to power.

Abou Dehn couldn't wait to eat, until he took a second look through the door. This time, he saw a guard unzip his pants and piss on the food. Rather than warn the others, he told his cellmates he wasn't hungry because of a stomachache. The Lebanese national stopped himself from sobbing. He knew guards would kill him if he said something. "A cockroach had more value than a human in that prison," laments Abou Dehn, now 69.



Abou Dehn, a member of the ethnoreligious Druze community and the father of six children, speaks softly and without reservation. In 2005, he founded the Association of Former Lebanese Political Detainees in Syria to lobby the Lebanese government to track down thousands of nationals who disappeared into the labyrinth of Syria's prisons during Lebanon's 15-year civil war (1975-90).

But since the Syrian uprising in 2011, the association has embraced a broader mission. With [thousands of Syrians dying](#) from torture behind bars, Abou Dehn and other Lebanese former detainees have reenacted their own harrowing memories — in a film and two plays — to expose the unfathomable brutality inside Syria's prisons. And with a choir growing in Lebanon to send all 1.5 million Syrian refugees home, Abou Dehn says it is essential to raise awareness about the horror Syrians might face if they return now.

*Nobody believed us until the Syrian civil war.  
Only then did people finally understand how  
horrifying the torture was.*

## *Ali Abou Dehn*

Abou Dehn has been a vocal critic of the Syrian regime since deceased dictator Hafez al-Assad intervened in Lebanon's civil war in 1976. But he wasn't abducted until his house in Damascus was raided in 1987. The only reason he went to Syria, he says, was to apply for a visa to Australia. At the time, there was nowhere else he could go to reach the embassy.

During his first five years in captivity, Abou Dehn languished in Tadmor prison, a place he calls hell on earth. He says five of his friends died in prison, including a fellow inmate who was stomped to death. Abou Dehn was then transferred to Sednayah, a notorious prison where thousands of activists have died from torture and been executed throughout the Syrian War. That's where Abou Dehn stayed for eight years before he was released as part of a general amnesty in December 2000.

When he returned home, he had lost any sense of intimacy with his wife, and he didn't recognize his children.

As he grew older, Abou Dehn told his story to whoever would listen. In 2008, he met German researcher Monika Borgmann and her Lebanese husband, Lokman Slim, both of whom were eager to listen. They were working on an exhibition about people still missing from Lebanon's civil war. By then, Abou Dehn's association represented 45 ex-detainees that the Syrian military abducted from Lebanese soil. "The more we started talking to Dehn's group, the more they imitated what happened to them because they couldn't find the words to describe the torture," Borgmann says. "That's when we had the idea to create a play."



The play told the story of the torture that seven former Lebanese detainees experienced in Syria. Some of the detainees played the guards, while the others reenacted their roles as prisoners. The play, titled *The German Chair*, was named after an infamous torture technique in Syria called the German Chair, a method where a detainee's limbs are bolted to a metal chair before the back of the chair is pulled down toward the ground. Often times, the spine snaps from the stress of the position.

The torture method most likely got its name from the former Nazi officer Alois Brunner, who helped advise Syrian intelligence on the most painful forms of torture. The play brought back echoes of the Holocaust when it was performed in five German cities in 2013. Abou Dehn was moved by people's reactions, but he didn't act in the play. He merely traveled to Germany to represent the association.

"I think he regretted not partaking," reflects Borgmann.

"I just wasn't in the mood," Abou Dehn says.

Whatever the reason, Abou Dehn didn't miss the opportunity to play a central role in the 2014 film *Tadmor*, which Borgmann and Slim co-directed. It combines the testimonies of several former Lebanese detainees with a reenactment of their prison experiences.





During the making of the film, a former military policeman leaked photos of more than 11,000 corpses to the public, revealing the ongoing carnage in Syrian prisons. The mutilated bodies of men, women and children were exhibited in New York, Washington, London and Brussels, provoking an international outcry. “Nobody believed us until the Syrian civil war,” says Abou Dehn, with resignation. “Only then did people finally understand how horrifying the torture was.”

*Tadmor* has been screened in festivals in Lebanon, Germany, Switzerland and France. The latter two countries also released *Tadmor* in theaters, where it earned film festival awards. It’s available online through the U.S. distributor Icarus Films. Syrian refugees have shared stills from the movie on social media to illustrate the harrowing confines where many of their friends and relatives remain locked up.

Following the success of the film, Abou Dehn and members in his group performed another play last June in Germany called *Untitled*. Co-director Omar Abi Azar says they didn’t want to come up with another name since no title could capture the horror of their experience. Unlike *The German Chair*, the play takes place around a dinner table, with each former

prisoner reflecting on how he survived. “I think they all better understood the violence they endured after witnessing the reaction from the audience,” Azar says, weeks after returning from Germany.

The play was performed three times in Beirut at the end of 2018. More than 450 people saw the performance, with mixed reactions. While Azar stressed that the play didn’t convey a direct political message, he did anticipate that people would reflect on the debate surrounding refugees in Lebanon. Many did, with some asking why the play only broached the ordeal of former Lebanese detainees, and not that of the tens of thousands of Syrians still in prison.

But Abou Dehn believes that sharing his experience doesn’t overshadow the experience of others. Many Lebanese citizens collectively blame refugees for Syria’s 29-year military occupation of Lebanon, which ended in 2005. Abou Dehn, for one, doesn’t subscribe to this view and hopes that his story of survival can change the attitudes of his peers.

“We all shared our pain with each other,” he says, leaning forward. “We shared our screams.”