**Syria: Secret campaign of mass hangings and extermination at Saydnaya Prison**

February 7, 2017

Amnesty International

https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/02/syria-investigation-uncovers-governments-secret-campaign-of-mass-hangings-and-extermination-at-saydnaya-prison/

A chilling new report by Amnesty International exposes the Syrian government’s calculated campaign of extrajudicial executions by mass hangings at Saydnaya Prison. Between 2011 and 2015, every week and often twice a week, groups of up to 50 people were taken out of their prison cells and hanged to death. In five years, as many as 13,000 people, most of them civilians believed to be opposed to the government, were hanged in secret at Saydnaya.

[*Human slaughterhouse: Mass hangings and extermination at Saydnaya prison, Syria*](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/5415/2017/en/) also shows that the government is deliberately inflicting inhuman conditions on detainees at Saydnaya Prison through repeated torture and the systematic deprivation of food, water, medicine and medical care. The report documents how these extermination policies have killed massive numbers of detainees.

These practices, which amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, are authorized at the highest levels of the Syrian government.

“The horrors depicted in this report reveal a hidden, monstrous campaign, authorized at the highest levels of the Syrian government, aimed at crushing any form of dissent within the Syrian population,” said Lynn Maalouf, Deputy Director for Research at Amnesty International’s regional office in Beirut.

“We demand that the Syrian authorities immediately cease extrajudicial executions and torture and inhuman treatment at Saydnaya Prison and in all other government prisons across Syria. Russia and Iran, the government’s closest allies, must press for an end to these murderous detention policies.

“The upcoming Syria peace talks in Geneva cannot ignore these findings. Ending these atrocities in Syrian government prisons must be put on the agenda. The UN must immediately carry out an independent investigation into the crimes being committed at Saydnaya and demand access for independent monitors to all places of detention.”

The report reveals a routine of mass extrajudicial executions by hanging inside Saydnaya prison that was in place between 2011 and 2015. Every week – and often twice a week – victims were hanged in groups of up to 50 people, in the middle of the night and in total secrecy. There are strong reasons to believe that this routine is still ongoing today. Large numbers of detainees have also been killed as a result of the authorities’ extermination policies, which include repeated torture and the systematic deprivation of food, water, medicine and medical care. In addition, detainees at Saydnaya Prison are forced to obey a set of sadistic and dehumanizing rules.

 The findings of the report are based on an intensive investigation, which was carried out over the course of one year, from December 2015 to December 2016. It involved first-hand interviews with 84 witnesses that included former Saydnaya guards and officials, detainees, judges and lawyers, as well as national and international experts on detention in Syria.

A previous [report](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/08/harrowing-accounts-of-torture-inhuman-conditions-and-mass-deaths-in-Syrias-prisons/) published in August 2016, forwhich Amnesty International partnered with a team of specialists at Forensic Architecture, University of Goldsmiths to create a [virtual 3D reconstruction of Saydnaya](https://saydnaya.amnesty.org/) prison, estimated that more than 17,000 people have died in prisons across Syria as a result of the inhuman conditions and torture since the Syrian crisis began in 2011. This figure does not include the estimated 13,000 additional deaths as a result of the extrajudicial executions exposed in this report.

 The role of the Military Field Court

Not one of the detainees condemned to hang at Saydnaya Prison is given anything that resembles an actual trial. Before they are hanged, victims undergo a perfunctory, one or two-minute procedure at a so-called Military Field Court. These proceedings are so summary and arbitrary that they cannot be considered to constitute a judicial process. Testimonies from former government officials, guards, judges and detainees helped Amnesty International shape a detailed picture of the farcical procedures that lead up to the hangings.

One former judge from a Syrian military court told Amnesty International the “court” operates outside the rules of the Syrian legal system. “The judge will ask the name of the detainee and whether he committed the crime. Whether the answer is yes or no, he will be convicted… This court has no relation with the rule of law. This is not a court,” he said.

The convictions issued by this so-called court are based on false confessions extracted from detainees under torture. Detainees are not allowed access to a lawyer or given an opportunity to defend themselves – most have been subjected to enforced disappearance, held in secret and cut off from the outside world. Those who are condemned to death do not find out about their sentences until minutes before they are hanged.

 Mass hangings

Hangings at Saydnaya are carried out once or twice a week, usually on Monday and Wednesday, in the middle of the night. Those whose names are called out were told they would be transferred to civilian prisons in Syria. Instead, they are moved to a cell in the basement of the prison and beaten severely. They are then transported to another prison building on the grounds of Saydnaya, where they are hanged. Throughout this process, they remain blindfolded. They do not know when or how they will die until the noose was placed around their necks.

“They kept them [hanging] there for 10 to 15 minutes. Some didn’t die because they are light. For the young ones, their weight wouldn’t kill them. The officers’ assistants would pull them down and break their necks,” said a former judge who witnessed the hangings.

Detainees held in the building in the floors above the “execution room” reported that they sometimes heard the sounds of these hangings.

“If you put your ears on the floor, you could hear the sound of a kind of gurgling. This would last around 10 minutes… We were sleeping on top of the sound of people choking to death. This was normal for me then,” said “Hamid”, a former military officer arrested in 2011.

As many as 50 people can be hanged in one night. Their bodies are taken away by the truckload to be secretly buried in mass graves. Their families are given no information about their fate.

**Policy of extermination**

Survivors of Saydnaya also provided spine-chilling and shocking testimonies about life inside the prison. They evoke a world carefully designed to humiliate, degrade, sicken, starve and ultimately kill those trapped inside.

These harrowing accounts have led Amnesty International to conclude that the suffering and appalling conditions at Saydnaya have been deliberately inflicted on detainees as a policy of extermination.

Many of the prisoners said they were raped or in some cases forced to rape other prisoners. Torture and beatings are used as a regular form of punishment and degradation, often leading to life-long damage, disability or even death. The cell floors are covered with blood and puss from prisoners’ wounds. The bodies of dead detainees are collected by the prison guards each morning, around 9am.

“Every day there would be two or three dead people in our wing… I remember the guard would ask how many we had. He would say, ‘Room number one – how many? Room number two – how many?’ and on and on... There was one time that… the guards came to us, room by room, and beat us on the head, chest and neck. Thirteen people from our wing died that day,” said “Nader”, a former Saydnaya detainee.

Food and water are regularly cut off. When food is delivered, it is often scattered over the cell floors by the guards, where it mixes with blood and dirt. The very few who leave Saydnaya often do so weighing half the body weight they had when they arrived.

Saydnaya also has its own set of “special rules”. Prisoners are not allowed to make any sounds, speak or even whisper. They are forced to assume certain positions when the guards come into the cells and merely looking at the guards is punishable by death.

The international community, notably the UN Security Council, must take immediate and urgent action, to put an end to this suffering.

“A firm decision must be made by the UN Security Council. It cannot turn a blind eye to these horrible crimes and must pass a resolution demanding that the Syrian government opens up its prisons for international monitors. The UN Human Rights Council must immediately demand an independent investigation into these grave violations of international law,” said Lynn Maalouf.

“The cold blooded killing of thousands of defenceless prisoners, along with the carefully crafted and systematic programmes of psychological and physical torture that are in place inside Saydnaya Prison cannot be allowed to continue. Those responsible for these heinous crimes must be brought to justice.”