



Nora Abdullah: Syrian torture and chaos hit close to home for SMU student

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It was two years ago this month that the world watched in horror as news reports showed the battered body of a young boy, burned and mutilated, delivered to his parents. That young boy, Hamza Al-Khatib, was my relative.

While the Syrian government thought this ungodly act of violence would quell the rebellion, it only fueled the fire. Now the latest cruelty inflicted on children and their families is chemical weapons. And I wonder: Is the world actually *seeing* what is happening?

Torture and inhumane treatment of Syrian citizens is not unique to the recent revolution. Torture did not begin when children arrested in the last few years for spray painting the word "freedom" on school walls had their fingernails pulled and were beaten relentlessly. Systematic imprisonment and torture has been the regime's preferred method of demoralizing the population for more than 40 years.

With torture the main form of interrogation by Syrian intelligence agencies, the police state maintains social order through unrelenting violence. Such abhorrent treatment is used in every facet of bureaucracy, from the judicial process to prisons. Everyone you speak with has a story about a relative who was arrested and tortured.

My cousin, an interrogator indoctrinated by the Syrian regime, always said: "No one is innocent. If they managed to make it to my office, then we will do whatever it takes until they confess." At the time, I thought he was exaggerating his stories of electrocution, beating and burning prisoners, but now, horrified, I believe they were true. The fact that torture is so normalized has allowed it to be used effortlessly as a weapon of war against supporters of the revolution to dishearten their opposition.

With a diverse ethnic population, the people of Syria have never been sectarian; however, the Assad regime has been trying to incite sectarian violence since its inception. It is becoming common to see videos of Alawites torturing and cursing Sunnis or of Sunnis decapitating Alawites.

This is troubling on two fronts: the sectarianism itself and the fact that the regime's culture of torture has become ingrained in its people. The regime frames the opposition by killing people from different sects and dumping their bodies in areas populated by an opposite sect. These efforts, coupled with the 40 years that Syrians have witnessed Alawites receive preferred treatment in all facets of government, have sectarian tensions at a high.

The regime has had an iron grip on Syrian society for the entirety of its rule. It never foresaw that instead of brutality creating obedience through fear, it would begin creating disobedience through rage. Nor did the opposition believe that the disobedience to tyranny would turn into bitter pockets of sectarianism.

Again, I pose my original question: Two years after my adolescent relative was tortured beyond recognition, has the world actually been watching? As the situation spirals out of control and the culture of torture is further reinforced through mass rape and the disembowelment of children, it is easier for me to believe that the world is not watching than to believe that those watching remain unaffected by our suffering.

As if torture were not enough, the Assad regime now uses chemical weapons to collectively punish the Syrian people. Whereas the regime may end one day, the eternal pain that the surviving Syrians have endured cannot be erased from the pages of history — regardless of whether or not the world turns a blind eye on the situation. The bravery of its citizens will forever serve as a reminder that torture and sectarianism no longer belong in a free Syria.

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