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OP-ED

## THE COMING CATASTROPHE IN SYRIA'S PRISONS

By Karim Khalifeh and Karam Alhamad

**A**s the novel coronavirus spreads across the world, health organizations are predicting a humanitarian catastrophe in war-torn Syria. In the absence of adequate health infrastructure, Syria's political detainees – who are among the country's most vulnerable population – face an impending humanitarian disaster. To avert this disaster, policymakers must push the Syrian regime to release these detainees immediately.

Nine years of nonstop war have left the Syrian medical system in ruins. In the country's northeast, there are only ten adult ventilators for a region of two million people.<sup>1</sup> In northwestern Syria, which has a population of four million – including one million who were internally displaced recently – there are only three fully-equipped hospitals.<sup>2</sup> As a result, doctors estimate that over 100,000 people could die of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in the northwestern province of Idlib province alone.<sup>3</sup>

While humanitarian organizations scramble to protect displaced Syrians living in refugee camps, few have voiced concern over Syria's political prisoners who are languishing in Assad's detention centers. Syria's detention centers currently hold an estimated 128,000 detainees, many of whom are prisoners of conscience, political activists, human rights defenders, and peaceful protestors arbitrarily detained by the Assad regime.<sup>4</sup> If the Syrian government does not release political prisoners immediately, they will once again have the blood of innocent lives on their hands.

Regularly subjected to torture, the prisoners will soon face something that may prove even more lethal: COVID-19. The squalid conditions in the re-

Two people walk down a bombed street in DeirEzzor, Syria in 2013. Seven years later, prisoners from DeirEzzor and the rest of Syria still sit in prison cells, subjected to torture and susceptible to diseases like COVID-19. Photo by Karam Alhamad.

gime's detention centers are ideal for spreading coronavirus. Social distancing is impossible in the overcrowded prisons, which often keep up to 50 people in a single 4-by-6-meter cell.<sup>5</sup> Prisoners have no access to clean water and cannot wash themselves or sanitize their cells. Furthermore, most detainees, already in poor health, have no access to medical care. These cold, dark, and damp prisons are likely to be epicenters of massive outbreaks of COVID-19. In Assad's prisons, there are no hand sanitizers or surgical masks, no ventilators or intensive care units. In Assad's prisons, if you get sick, you die.

Mohammad Badran, a former prisoner of the Military Intelligence's notoriously horrific Branch 291 Center, knows first-hand the toll that a disease like COVID-19 could wreak on Syria's prisons.<sup>6</sup> He told us that detainees will not survive an outbreak of coronavirus—even a minor illness can spell death in a Syrian prison. Recalling the conditions of his cell, he lamented, "We were left to die. Many people who just got diarrhea died from it."<sup>7</sup> The inmates' dead bodies were often left to rot for days in the overcrowded cell. He added, "If the coronavirus had entered the cell that I was in, not a single person would have survived, whether young or old."<sup>8</sup>

Some Syrians worry that Assad will purposely use the pandemic to rid himself of political problems. Samar Allouni, a refugee, joined her children in the Netherlands four weeks ago after fleeing Syria. However, her newfound safety is bittersweet. Her husband remains in a Syrian prison, where he has been since the Syrian regime threw him in a detention center on Christmas Eve almost six years ago. Samar hasn't seen him since, and she isn't even sure if he is still alive. Now she worries the regime is planning to use COVID-19 to get rid of detainees, including her husband. "Who would stop Assad if he used [the virus] as another weapon for the mass killing of the political detainees? Don't tell me he can't."<sup>9</sup> Choking up, Samar reflected on COVID-19 lockdowns in European countries, observing that "people feel dead after being locked in for a few weeks, but my husband has been locked up for years now."<sup>10</sup> Even after almost six years, Samar still

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hopes that her children will get to see their father alive again, but she is not counting on the international community to step in. She ended our interview despondently, saying, "Don't bother telling the world's governments to stop [Assad]. They've all failed us."<sup>11</sup>

Despite Samar's cynicism, the international community should seize on this moment to push the Assad regime to release these prisoners. The Syrian conflict is finally starting to wind down, with the key parties involved in the conflict moving towards a political solution.<sup>12</sup> Any eventual solution, as the UN Security Council unanimously declared when it adopted Resolution 2254 in 2015, must include the release of detainees.<sup>13</sup> Though little progress has been made since 2015, recent shifts in the political landscape make a peace deal more likely today than ever before. For example, Moscow—one of the only players with enough leverage over the Syrian regime to advocate the release of detainees—recently signaled its strong desire to accelerate the peace process.<sup>14</sup>

As the major players in Syria shift towards a political solution, a strategic window of opportunity to secure prisoner releases is opening. However, to ensure the moment isn't wasted, the international community must immediately mount a pressure campaign. Russia has little incentive to push Assad without a concerted effort from the United States, European Union, and United Nations to demand the release of detainees. A release would not only avert a humanitarian catastrophe but could also serve as a confidence-building measure in the fragile peacemaking process. As Geir Pederson, the UN Special Envoy for Syria, noted in October 2019, a release of prisoners would "send a very powerful signal that we are indeed serious about making a new beginning for Syria."<sup>15</sup> Such a confidence-building gesture should be attractive to Russia, which seeks a political resolution to the conflict.<sup>16</sup> Now, with a humanitarian catastrophe looming, the time is riper than ever to push the Assad regime to release the thousands of political prisoners that it is currently holding in its detention centers.

As of publication, there have only been nineteen COVID-19 cases and two deaths in Syria.<sup>17</sup> But the reality on the ground is likely much worse. Some humanitarian organizations are already scaling back their presence on the ground and closing offices, and soon there might be no one left to help one of Syria's most vulnerable populations. It is only a matter of time before Syria is overrun with the virus and its overburdened medical infrastructure collapses.

If the international community does nothing, thousands of political prisoners, activists, and dissidents in Syria's prisons will almost certainly be among the first to die. ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Karim Khalifeh** graduated from Yale University in 2019 with an MA in Global Affairs. He was awarded the Fulbright Scholarship in 2017 and the Davis Fellowship for Peace in 2018. Currently, Karim works on advocacy campaigns for civilian protection in conflict areas, particularly in the MENA region. Before Yale, Karim worked at a Beirut-based bank.

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