## Escaping Assad’s Rape Prisons: A Survivor Tells Her Story

## October 28, 2014

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## The Daily Beast

http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/10/28/escaping-assad-s-rape-prisons-a-survivor-tells-her-story.html

*GAZIANTEP, Turkey*—She wrestles with demons. The memories of her nine-month imprisonment and the beatings and abuse she suffered at the hands of a Syrian interrogator still burn inside her. Now that she’s in southern Turkey, she works as a journalist under an assumed name. And she prefers living with other women who understand the humiliation she went through. Others, as she knows only too well, suffered worse than she did under the harsh regime of Bashar al-Assad’s prisons and secret detention centers.

Rowaida Yousef, as she calls herself, used to be a math teacher and citizen journalist in Damascus. She has worked for the independent Syrian media outlet Radio Rozana since her release from Assad’s jails in March. The transition has been surreal.

When she was in prison, she says, “I was always trying to remember what I had told them during the interrogations so my lies would remain consistent.”

Now, she’s trying to extract truths from people who are too frightened to speak it—afraid not only of the regime that imprisoned them, but for their families when they are released.

Drawing on her own horrific firsthand experiences and what she witnessed, much of Yousef’s reporting has been focused on the impact on women of the four-year-long Syrian civil war—and especially on what happens to women inside Assad’s prisons.

Yousef is trying to map the sexual abuse and rape of women detainees, which she believes has happened more in the cities of Homs and Aleppo and less in the detention centers of Damascus. In the capital, the Assad regime has been more cautious. It may be afraid it will lose the support of urban, middle-class Sunni Muslims if its henchmen there in the capital are allowed to rape at will.

Rights groups can only estimate the overall number of detainees since the war started. The Syrian government has refused to give independent monitors access to detention sites, but over the summer the Violations Documentation Center, a Syrian monitoring group, recorded 52,674 detentions, of whom 1,477 were women and 55 were girls under the age of 18. More than 40,000 people still are being held.

Most observers suspect the numbers are higher and don’t include, for example, those who have been picked up by the thuggish pro-Assad militia, called Shabiha, the regime’s ultra-loyal enforcers. Some rights groups suspect the numbers exceed 200,000 prisoners, including women and children.

Statistics are one thing, enduring the jailhouse ordeal another. Numbers don’t bring out the squalor and brutality of Assad’s detention centers, the inhumanity and abuse meted out to rebels and those suspected of being foes of the regime.

Sitting in Radio Rozana’s makeshift studio in a nondescript office block in the southern Turkish town of Gaziantep, Yousef recalls her own imprisonment, and at first deals almost mechanically with basic questions of when and why she was detained.

Her arrest came at a checkpoint in Damascus in June 2013, when soldiers spotted an audio recorder in her bag. That was enough to cast suspicion on her and have her thrust into the custody of a Syrian air force intelligence officer known to her as Commander Firas. His brother and cousin had been killed a week earlier, he told her. “He felt he was gaining revenge as he beat me,” she recalls haltingly, the mechanical responses long gone as she re-lives that first week at the Mazza military airport.

Yousef, a stocky 35-year-old woman with long black hair, looks away from me most of the time when she is describing the beatings. And she pauses as she remembers. The commander wanted to know where she got the audio recorder and what she used it for, and she lied, until the beatings got worse. “I felt like my head would explode.” During one session, the commander tied her legs apart and they beat a male detainee viciously in front of her with his head jammed between her spread legs.

Most of the time Commander Faris wouldn’t wait for her to respond to screamed questions and angry accusations. The week with him was meant to break her for others in *Idarat al-Mukhabarat al-Jawiyya*, or air force intelligence, so they could get the detailed information they wanted.

Yousef was transferred to the investigations branch at Mazza airport. She suffered no more beatings—just solitary confinement in an underground cell always dark and dank and cockroach-infested. “Their attitude was I would stay there forever until I told them the information they wanted to hear.”

And eventually she gave up, providing the password to her Facebook account that gave them details of her citizen journalism, friends and networks and provided the meat for the hours-long interrogations over two weeks. Sucked dry—or so her interrogators thought—Yousef was transferred to Adraa Prison, a military-police-run facility in the Damascus suburbs where she learned, as she puts it, “how fortunate I was compared to other girls.”

Syrian air force intelligence isn’t the most brutal agency in Assad’s sprawling state security apparatus. Its operatives see themselves as a cut above *Idarat al-Amn al-Siyasi*, the political security directorate, *Idarat al-Amn al-Amm*, general security, or *Shu'bat al-Mukhabarat al-'Askariyya*, military intelligence. The others can be even more vicious. And then there are the pro-regime militias, the Shabiha.

In Adraa prison, Yousef had the opportunity to hear the stories of more than a hundred women. “I heard many accounts of women being raped in Damascus by Shabiha after they had been picked up at checkpoints or at buildings they controlled, and before they were handed over to the security branches,” says Yousef. “But I didn’t hear accounts of rapes in the official security detention centers in Damascus.” The picture is different in Homs and Aleppo, she says.

Now she is using what she learned in her time in Adraa prison to piece together stories of abuse and sexual abuse of women, trying to unearth the stories of atrocity and rape that are buried. These are not easy stories to dig out. The stigma of sexual assault runs deep in Syrian culture as it does across the Middle East; rape is shaming and casts dishonor.

For human-rights organizations, rape allegations always pose a challenge. Combatants—from rebels to governments—often accuse opponents of rape, seeking to demonize their adversaries and gain a propaganda edge.

Assessing rape allegations gets still more challenging in the Middle East, where even the suspicion of rape can break families.

A psychologist from the Syrian town of Latakia recently told me she had counseled 15 women who had been released from detention. Three had been raped and all had been sexually abused to one degree or another. Four of the released detainees committed suicide, unable to cope with the severe depression prompted by their ordeals and the shame they felt.

“The families can often be very unsympathetic and some are getting divorced—their husbands demand it, blaming their wives for the dishonor and not believing them even when they have not been raped,” she told me.

For Yousef her mission is clear. She lived the experience of detention in Assad’s prisons and she is determined to give voice to as many stories as she can of the jailhouse experience of Syrian women. The dishonor should be for their captors, not for them.