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## Tales of horror inside Syrian jails

A review of The Passionate of Darkness, a performance, exhibition and a book signing organized by UMAM



Sometimes, man's inhumanity to man is so great it defies comprehension. Seeing men bending backwards while being beaten mercilessly with a meter-long whipping was one of those moments.

Luckily, this was only a re-enactment by former prisoners to show how they were **treated** on a daily basis in Syria's infamous Tadmor prison. The display was part of an event called "The Passionate of Darkness," which was organized by UMAM Center for human rights documentation

and research and which took place at Solea V on Thursday evening.

Another harrowing sight was the re-enactment of torture during which a prisoner contorts his body into a car tire, with the back of his thighs and head against the rubber. The tire is then turned upside down by the guards, with the prisoner's feet shooting up into the air. With little respite, pretend whips repeatedly cracked against his feet, leaving an eerie echo in the room. The methods employed are barbaric, seemingly belonging to a bygone era.

After the performance, the former detainees were keen to stress one thing: "What we are showing you is just what happened in the mornings at Tadmor. We haven't shown you what happens in the afternoons and at night," says Raymond Bouban, a former detainee who was apprehended during the Lebanese civil war on charges he maintains were unfounded.

UMAM Founder and Director Loqman Slim tells NOW Extra that the rehearsals were more harrowing than Thursday's event. "During the rehearsals, there were very tough moments. Some moments [the detainees] were facing for the first time what they've lived through," he says, adding that the event was just the first of a number of events UMAM hopes to hold on the topic.

But while the event was rooted in horror, it was laden with a strong sense of human spirit and dignity.

On display, adjacent to the stage, was a vast array of objects created by some of the detainees during their years in Syrian jails, which numbered between nine and 15 years.

"I created this football using a kitchen glove and several pairs of trousers," says Bouban to NOW Extra, demonstrating his handiwork and sharing a broad smile. In just two hours, Bouban explains proudly, he can cut fabric into perfectly measured hexagonal shapes and sew them together into the shape of a classic football. Then, a plastic washing glove is inserted, which, when inflated, forms a perfectly round football with as much bounce as a basketball. Deflated, it can fit in one's pocket, away from the eyes of guards.

The craftsmanship of some of the other items on display was impeccable. For instance, wire coppers and other filaments were applied to wooden slabs to create an impressive range of pictures as well as religious and romantic writings. Ingenuity was also applied to the more practical creations, such a water bottle cooler and a home-made urinal.

The water bottle coolers consisted of a fabric soaked in water, which was then used to cover the

bottle that needed cooling. Just like the thermos, contents cooled by evaporation. However, the urinal was a simpler contraption: a halved water container acted as a funnel to a large, thick, plastic bag. These were particularly used in large prison dorms with only one restroom.

But none of these objects could be made in Tadmor. As Rayan Majed details for [NOW Arabic](#), prisoners were forced to keep their eyes on the floor at all times. Those who failed to do so feared further beatings - or worse.

The tales get more horrific. Prisoners in solitary confinement were housed in what looked like boxes, measuring approximately two meters in length and height, with a width of one meter. Replicas of these cells as well as replica whips were on display, which were used to “discipline” prisoners. According to the display, “Many of the whips...were engine belts recycled from military vehicles. Sometimes they were studded with sharp metal objects to make the torture even bloodier.”

Faced with such circumstances, it’s difficult to imagine what sustained the detainees through their years of abuse. For Ali al-Kadiri, his love to a woman is what “kept him alive to resist,” says Monika Borgmann, co-founder of UMAM.

According to Borgmann, Kadiri had no contact with the woman he loved for five years when he was in Tadmor. After moving to different prisons, however, he was able to send her letters and created ornaments to express his feeling. These too were exhibited at Thursday’s event. Fourteen years after he was first imprisoned, Kadiri rekindled the romance with the woman he loved. Today, they are married and have four children.

For Borgmann, “The Passionate of Darkness” event is not only important for remembering the past, but also doubles as a frightening reflection of the present. “What you just saw is a window into Syrian prisons. This is not a thing of the past. It is taking place right now,” she tells [NOW Extra](#), estimating that hundreds if not thousands of Lebanese are still suffering in Syrian jails.

*The Passionate for Darkness is sponsored by the German Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations. For more information on related UMAM events, please visit the official UMAM [website](#).*