

‘Why did I forgive?’

When I was released from my jail in that April afternoon, the last thing that could have crossed my mind was to share one day in a public domain what happened to me inside. For a long time, I could not discuss this experience publicly. While the period I spent in jail is significantly shorter than many who spent months, years and even decades, sharing my experience of torture was limited to a very narrow circle of friends and family members.

Like many countries that are ruled by totalitarian regimes, torture in Syria has been conducted and carried out systematically in the security departments across the country during the last 6 decades, resulting in hundreds of thousands of deceased men and women and a similar number of both physical and mental disabilities. It has been the main instrument to terrorize Syrians and seal the lips of those who show any minimal signs of dissatisfaction with the status quo.

When the reason for which I was tortured is known, that is forcefully admitting to the security department something I did not do, the common question I am often asked is: was it worth it? Couldn't I have agreed to what they asked me to do and gone home?

Unfortunately, the situation is not that simple.

Reflecting now on how I felt and what I thought back then, I probably would have agreed and confirmed all they wanted if the interrogation methods had revolved around starvation or solitary confinement. However, in the process of physical torture (i.e. electric shocks, the German chair, false execution), you lose any kind of sense of your surrounding and to some degree of yourself. The ‘no’ you say (or scream) and the constant and firm denial of the false charges you may show during the torture process are probably what maintain your identity which they (the torturers) are trying to eradicate. They are what sustain your ability to realize that you are still a human being, able to challenge and consequently feel the pain. Hence you are still alive. For a long period of my life thereafter, I literally could not determine whether I was still alive or dead.

After a decade and so of that experience, a close friend asked me: why and how did you forgive?

By treating you like an object, usually by using a swearword or a number to call you, progressively transferring it to be your name, and by torturing you, the torturer's main object is to dehumanize his victim and separate him from his human capabilities to sense and feel. Seeking revenge for the way he treated me would be the evidence of his success in dehumanizing me. Forgiveness is a sublime human attribute. Genuinely forgiving him is my ultimate victory over his hatred, the failure of his torture techniques and its prospective results. I do not claim, not for one moment, that this was an easy conclusion to reach. I was trapped for a long time with anger and deep bitterness. Coming to England, my second home, availed many options to me, including counselling, which should not be underestimated and I highly recommend it to those who have undergone similar experiences.

Further, I came to the realization that my torturer was a victim himself. No sane or normal human being could subject another to what he subjected me to, and what other hundreds of thousands of Syrians have had to endure. Therefore, the torturer himself is someone in need of help.

In Syria, there is a tendency to separate ourselves from the regime's patterns. However, we must admit that we did not import Assad's regime, his army generals and security officers from Mars or Jupiter. They are Syrians. They were born to Syrian parents in Syrian hospitals. They studied and grew up with us and among us. We shared the same schools, clubs, desks, mosques and churches. Observing them impartially and understanding the reasons behind what they did and do are what would lead us to a successful diagnosis of long term ignored symptoms, and subsequently seeking effective remedies. Treating them merely on revengeful and punitive grounds will plant the seeds of hatred and further the production of revengeful generations. Someone must have the courage to forgive and break this chain. Therefore, I forgive.

I cannot deny that ousting Assad will be a significant moment in the Syrian history. However, reducing the problem to one with Assad and his regime on an individual basis will not be an effective solution on a permanent basis nor respond to the spirit of our revolution. By repetitive, persistent and irrational callings to revenge and collective punishment, I am afraid that our revolution is losing its moral compass. Our emancipation should begin in our minds and conscience. Unless we realize that our problem is not with individuals but with a long history of oppressive and suppressive rituals and legacies, nothing will change and we would demonstrate that we learned nothing from history and just replaced one oppressive regime with another one.

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