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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Saydnaya is the end of life – the end of humanity.”

“Abu Muhammed”, former guard at Saydnaya

Saydnaya Military Prison is where the Syrian state quietly slaughters its own people. The victims are overwhelmingly ordinary civilians who are thought to oppose the government. Since 2011, thousands of people have been extrajudicially executed in mass hangings, carried out at night and in the utmost secrecy. Many other detainees at Saydnaya Military Prison have been killed after being repeatedly tortured and systematically deprived of food, water, medicine and medical care. The bodies of those who are killed at Saydnaya are buried in mass graves. It is inconceivable that these large-scale and systematic practices have not been authorized at the highest levels of the Syrian government.

From December 2015 to December 2016, Amnesty International researched the patterns, sequence and scale of violations carried out at Saydnaya Military Prison (Saydnaya). In the course of this investigation, the organization interviewed 31 men who were detained at Saydnaya, four prison officials or guards who previously worked at Saydnaya, three former Syrian judges, three doctors who worked at Tishreen Military Hospital, four Syrian lawyers, 17 international and national experts on detention in Syria and 22 family members of people who were or still are detained at Saydnaya.

Given that Amnesty International has been barred by the Syrian authorities from entering the country and has consequently not had access to government-controlled areas since 2011, the majority of these interviews were carried out in southern Turkey. The remaining interviews were conducted by telephone or through other remote means with interviewees in Syria, or with individuals based in Lebanon, Jordan, European countries and the USA.

In total, Amnesty International interviewed 84 people for this report. In many cases, two or more interviews were conducted with key witnesses to evaluate the consistency and veracity of the information they provided. In all but two cases, interviews with witnesses were conducted separately. Several interviewees shared their testimonies with Amnesty International at significant personal risk.

Amnesty International has attempted to engage with the Syrian authorities on human rights concerns, including torture and other ill-treatment, enforced disappearances and deaths in custody, though various means since 2011, in particular by submitting to them cases via communications from its Urgent Action network and by sending letters in advance of the release of public reports. On 12 January 2017, Amnesty International sent a letter to the Syrian authorities requesting clarifications regarding the allegations raised in this report and reiterated Amnesty International’s request for access to persons deprived

of their liberty in Syria. Amnesty International has received no response to this letter or to its other requests for information.

The Syrian government has used torture and enforced disappearance as a means to crush dissent for decades. As early as 1987, Amnesty International documented the government's systematic use of 35 torture techniques in its prisons. Since 2011, however, the Syrian government's violations against detainees have increased drastically in magnitude and severity. According to the Human Rights Data Analysis Group, at least 17,723 people were killed in government custody between March 2011 and December 2015, an average of 300 deaths each month. The people at greatest risk of arrest, torture and death at Saydnaya and in other government-run prisons are those who are perceived to oppose the government in some way. They come from all sectors of Syrian society. Many are demonstrators, long-time political dissidents, human rights defenders, journalists, doctors, humanitarian aid workers and students.

Such has been the inhuman treatment of detainees held at Saydnaya that Amnesty International has concluded that they and detainees held in other government-run detention centres have been subjected to "extermination", defined by the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court as the "intentional infliction of conditions of life, inter alia the deprivation of access to food and medicine, calculated to bring about the destruction of part of a population".

Based on its investigation, Amnesty International's assessment is that the murder, torture, enforced disappearances and extermination carried out at Saydnaya since 2011 have been perpetrated as part of an attack against the civilian population that has been widespread, as well as systematic, and carried out in furtherance of state policy. It therefore concludes that the Syrian authorities' violations at Saydnaya amount to crimes against humanity.

MASS HANGINGS

There are two detention centres at Saydnaya Military Prison, which may hold between 10,000 and 20,000 people. In the "red building", the majority of detainees are civilians who have been arrested since the beginning of the crisis in 2011. In the "white building", the majority of detainees are officers and soldiers in the Syrian military who have also been arrested since 2011.

Thousands of people detained in the red building have been killed in secret extrajudicial executions, after being held in conditions amounting to enforced disappearance. The killings have taken the form of mass hangings. Before they are hanged, the victims are condemned to death in "trials" at the Military Field Court located in the al-Qaboun neighbourhood of Damascus, which last between one and three minutes. On the day the prison authorities carry out the hangings, which they refer to as "the party", they collect the victims from their cells in the afternoon. The listed detainees are told that they will be transferred to a civilian prison. Instead, they are brought to a cell in the basement of the red building, where they are severely beaten over the course of two or three hours. In the middle of the night, they are blindfolded and transferred in delivery trucks or minibuses to the white building. There, they are taken into a room in the basement and hanged. This takes place once or twice a week, and on each occasion between 20 and 50 people are hanged to death.

Throughout this process, the victims remain blindfolded. They are only told that they have been sentenced to death minutes before the executions are carried out; they are never told when their execution will be carried out; and they do not know how they will die until the nooses are placed around their necks.

After the execution is carried out, the victims' bodies are loaded into a truck, transferred to Tishreen Hospital for registration and buried in mass graves. These graves are located on military land near Damascus, including in Najha, a village on the main road between Sweida and Damascus, and in Qatana, a small town in the western suburbs of Damascus.

On the basis of evidence from people who worked within the prison authorities at Saydnaya and witness testimony from detainees, Amnesty International estimates that between 5,000 and 13,000 people were extrajudicially executed at Saydnaya between September 2011 and December 2015. Amnesty International does not have evidence of executions after December 2015. However, detainees are still transferred to Saydnaya,

“trials” at the Military Field Court in al-Qaboun have continued, and there is no reason to believe that executions have stopped. Therefore, since December 2015, thousands more people are likely to have been executed.

The execution process at Saydnaya is secret and only known to the guards and officials who are directly involved, as well as high-level Syrian officials. Even the guards who oversee the collection process and beatings at the red building are usually unaware of what happens to the detainees after they are transferred to the white building in the middle of the night.

The process of the hangings is authorized by officials at the highest levels of government. Death sentences are approved by the Grand Mufti of Syria and by either the Minister of Defence or the Chief of Staff of the Army, who are deputized to act on behalf of President Bashar al-Assad. The sentences are also signed by the head and the Military Prosecutor of the Military Field Court and a representative of the security forces. The hangings are physically overseen by an execution panel, which includes military officers, as well as prison and medical officials.

Amnesty International has collected information on the members of the execution panel as well as other officers and officials who it believes, based on its research, should be investigated for their involvement in crimes at Saydnaya. Amnesty International has also been provided with the names of 36 detainees who have been extrajudicially executed at Saydnaya since 2011, which will not be released publicly due to privacy and security concerns. The organization has shared this information on alleged perpetrators and victims with bodies capable of undertaking credible investigations into crimes committed at Saydnaya.

EXTERMINATION POLICIES

Detainees held in the red building at Saydnaya are subjected to an established programme of abuse. They are regularly tortured, usually through severe beatings and sexual violence. They are denied adequate food, water, medicine, medical care and sanitation, which has led to the rampant spread of infection and disease. Silence is enforced, even during torture sessions. Many detainees develop serious mental illnesses such as psychosis.

The authorities’ treatment of detainees in Saydnaya seems designed to inflict maximal physical and psychological suffering. Their apparent goal is to humiliate, degrade, dehumanize and to destroy any sense of dignity or hope. Omar, a high-school student when he was arrested, told Amnesty International, “You will struggle to find a former Saydnaya prisoner who will tell you what really happened there, because it is so humiliating.” He shared one of his experiences:

I don’t even know what term to use to describe what I saw. The guard would ask everyone to take off all their clothes and go to the bathroom one by one. As we walked to the bathroom, they would select one of the boys, someone petite or young or fair. They would ask him to stand with his face to the door and close his eyes. They would then ask a bigger prisoner to rape him... No one will admit this happened to them, but it happened so often... Sometimes psychological pain is worse than physical pain, and the people who were forced to do this were never the same again.

Former detainee “Sameer” described one of the beatings he received at Saydnaya:

The beating was so intense. It was as if you had a nail, and you were trying again and again to beat it into a rock. It was impossible, but they just kept going. I was wishing they would just cut off my legs instead of beating them any more.

These extermination policies, which have been inflicted on detainees at Saydnaya since 2011, have resulted in the deaths of hundreds – probably thousands – of detainees. Procedures have been developed to deal with such high death rates. The bodies of deceased detainees are collected from the cells in the morning and taken to Tishreen Military Hospital. There the deaths are registered in medical reports and death certificates stipulating the cause of death as heart or respiratory failure. The bodies are then transported by truck to mass graves on military land near Damascus, including in the locations mentioned above.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Amnesty International demands that the Syrian authorities immediately cease extrajudicial executions and torture and inhuman treatment at Saydnaya Military Prison and in all other government-run detention centres across Syria. It further demands that they grant international monitors unhindered access to all persons deprived of their liberty and to all places of detention in Syria. The Syrian authorities must inform families of the whereabouts and legal status of all detainees in their custody. They must also inform families of the fate of those who have died in their custody.

Amnesty International urgently calls for an independent and impartial investigation into extrajudicial executions and extermination policies at Saydnaya Military Prison. To this end, the UN Human Rights Council should require the UN-mandated Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic to undertake such an investigation without delay.

Amnesty International calls on the members of the International Syria Support Group and the UN Special Envoy for Syria to raise the issue of extrajudicial executions and torture in detention in discussions with the Syrian authorities and with states that support the Syrian government, most notably Russia and Iran.

The families of the tens of thousands of prisoners who have been forcibly disappeared, tortured and killed in the custody of the Syrian authorities have a right to know the fate of their loved ones. Those responsible for these crimes against humanity and war crimes must be brought to justice. Accountability for these crimes is also required to prevent renewed cycles of violence: only an end to impunity for mass atrocities can foster the conditions for a just and sustainable end to the bloodshed in Syria. A new mechanism established by the UN General Assembly on 21 December 2016 provides an opportunity for the collection and analysis of evidence of violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law, which could facilitate and expedite fair and independent criminal proceedings against those responsible. Amnesty International calls on the international community to ensure the mechanism is set up promptly with international co-operation, support and adequate resources, both financial and human, and has the necessary safeguards to establish its legitimacy, independence and transparency, in order to gain the trust of Syrians as well as the civil society organizations that have been documenting grave violations since the outset of the conflict. It further calls on the international community to accept the shared responsibility to investigate and prosecute extrajudicial executions, torture, enforced disappearance and other crimes under international law committed in Syria since 2011, in particular by exercising universal jurisdiction and other applicable domestic legislation to bring suspected perpetrators to justice.

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HUMAN SLAUGHTERHOUSE

MASS HANGINGS AND EXTERMINATION AT SAYDNAYA PRISON, SYRIA

At Saydnaya Military Prison, the Syrian authorities have quietly and methodically organized the killing of thousands of people in their custody. The victims are overwhelmingly ordinary civilians who are thought to oppose the government. Many have been extrajudicially executed in mass hangings, carried out in the middle of the night and in the utmost secrecy. Others have been killed by extermination polices, including routine torture and the systematic deprivation of food, water, medicine and medical care. The bodies of Saydnaya's victims are taken away by the truckload and buried in mass graves.

Amnesty International's research shows that the murder, torture, enforced disappearance and extermination carried out at Saydnaya since 2011 have been perpetrated as part of an attack against the civilian population that has been widespread, as well as systematic, and carried out in furtherance of state policy. We therefore conclude that the Syrian authorities' violations at Saydnaya amount to crimes against humanity.

Amnesty International urgently calls for an independent and impartial investigation into crimes committed at Saydnaya. The Syrian authorities should grant international monitors unhindered access to all places of detention in Syria. UN Security Council members, including Syria's ally Russia, should act immediately to make this happen.