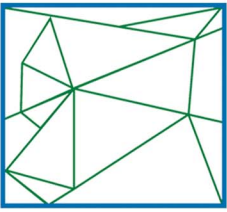


سوريون
من أجل
الحقيقة
والعدالة
Syrians
For Truth
& Justice



Masoud Akeel

Aegean Sea is “ISIS”, too

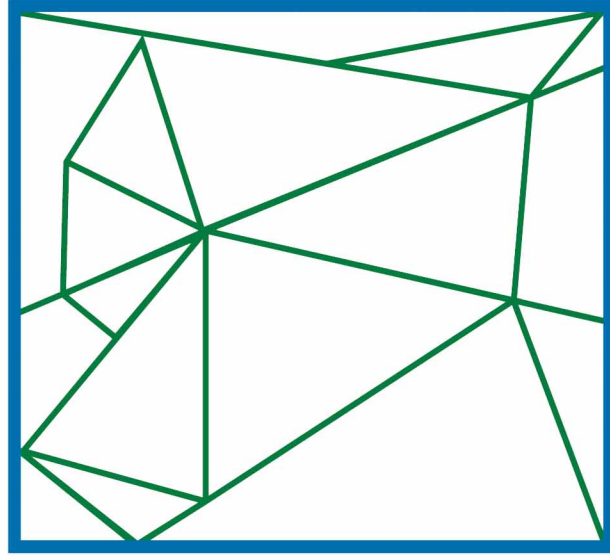
**Survivor of Islamic State (ISIS) Prisons
Journalist “Masoud Akeel”**

About the organization

“Syrians for Truth and Justice” (STJ) is an independent, non-governmental non-profit Syrian organization. It involves a number of Syrian human rights defenders, both men and women, from different backgrounds and affiliations. The founding team also includes academics from different nationalities.

STJ works for a Syria where all citizens, males and females, enjoy dignity, justice and equal human rights

سوريون
من أجل
الحقيقة
والعدالة
Syrians
For Truth
& Justice



Contents

I	Introduction	3
II	Masoud Akeel's life	4
III	The first detention center in Tal Hamees	5
IV	The Second detention center in Shaddadah	6
V	Point '11' in Raqqa	10
VI	In detention centers Tabaka and al-Bab	14
VII	Manbej and freedom	15
VIII	Conclusion: Aegean Sea is ISIS, too	17

I Introduction

Immediate deportation from “Islamic State territories” and not returning thereafter either in Iraq or Levant (Syria) in addition to pledging never to practice journalism again; these were the conditions that journalist Masoud Akeel had to agree to before a prisoner swap agreement was concluded between the Islamic State (ISIS) and the YPG units affiliated to the ‘self-government’ which led to his release after 280 days of detention in ISIS prisons

The last sentence Masoud heard from an ISIS member before the swap was completed

Prisoners are swapped only once here. So if you happen to fall into custody again, you will be executed immediately because this would indicate that you have returned to “apostasy” which is tantamount to infidelity which entails punishment by death

Mosoud says summarizing his long experience in custody and his eventual survival

Survival from death in prison does not always mean life because survival crams the memory with harsh scenes, images of dead bodies and blood stains creating a heavier burden. I yearn to get rid of this legacy that is a mixture of the happiness of liberation from prison and the hope to be liberated from the shackles of this distorted memory. I would always pass my fingers on the walls and doors of the narrow cells to entrust them with my sighs... I would distract myself often by leaving those fingerprints



Right: image of Masoud Akeel in November 2014, about a month before his abduction. Left: Masoud Akeel a day after his release by ISIS members

II Masoud Akeel's life

Masoud Akeel was born in Qamishli city, which is administratively under Hasakeh governorate since 1993. He lived there for six years before moving with his family to Damascus, the capital, where he mastered Arabic in addition to his Kurdish mother tongue. He enrolled in primary, preparatory and secondary school in Qudsayya city in rural Damascus. Masoud showed interest in media issues and worked as an editor in a Kurdish publication that was named 'Jeen,' which is Kurdish for 'Life,' prior to it being banned

Masoud's family went back to their hometown of Qamishli while he went in 2011 to Aleppo where he enrolled in the Faculty of Letters and Humanities to study English literature. Then he opted to return to Qamishli and later to Kurdistan in Iraq where he was contracted for a Kurdish satellite channel, 'Rudaw News Network'. He worked for them as a correspondent and a photographer in Kurdish areas in northern Syria since the beginning of 2013 until 15 December 2014, the day on which his life took a dramatic turn

Masoud describes the day of his arrest and his memory as he says struggles with the horrific things he witnessed later

I had taken an appointment to interview the co-president of al-Jazirah province, Sheikh Dahham al-Hadi al-Jarba'. That morning, I went with my friend, journalist Farhad Hammou, in his car to reach the village of Tal Alo that lies on the highway linking Hasakeh and Yarobiya (Tal Kojer) also known as the international highway. The village was home to Sheikh Dahham's palace. It was early morning when we left Qamishli and I was so tired that I told Farhad I would sleep during the drive. I was fast asleep in no time because I was so tired. But after about an hour, Farhad woke me up scared and asked: What are these checkpoints before us and who are those manning them? I looked at them and answered in surprise, "I believe they are from ISIS!" That was my guess because of their attire, long beards appearing under their masks, explosive belts and the M16 rifles on their shoulders. There were six of them. One of them approached us and asked with a Bedouin accent "Where are you going?" All the while, his eyes were inspecting the interior of our car. We told him about our destination. In the meanwhile, he had noticed our 'journalist tools'. "What do you do?" he asked. When we said that we were journalists, he quickly opened the back door and sat inside the car. As he laid his hand on his explosive belt, he said, "Any move and I will blow myself up with you." He asked the other car to move towards the desert and ordered Farhad to drive behind it. Farhad panicked as he was driving and the man said in the local dialect "Drive well!" When we asked him "Who are you?", he said We are the Islamic State

About 20 minutes later, we were surprised to see hundreds of ISIS members of different nationalities in the area we arrived at. They were unmasked. We were put immediately in a school that was transformed into a security investigation center. They took all our personal belongings and interrogated us. Then we were taken to a detention center in the town of Tal Hamees

1-The abduction of Masoud and Farhad on the highway between Hasakeh and Yarobiya (Tal Kojer) was not the first of its kind. Dozens of abductions took place on that road even before the emergence of ISIS. Many abductions took place on that road under the control of Jabhat al-Nusra, too

III The first detention center in Tal Hamees

A regular house that was equipped from the inside to be a security detention center: ISIS members closed all its doors and windows with iron bars. Stains of blood covered most of its walls and handcuffs were attached to the windows suggesting that detainees were put in a 'Shabeh' position or crucifixion as it has become to be known

I wouldn't have known I was in Tal Hamees had it not been for ISIS members conversations I overheard on hand-held radios. When I first entered I was so shocked I couldn't even speak. An ISIS member put me along with Farhad in a dark room that we later realized was the kitchen. After around an hour, an ISIS member with seemingly a Gulf accent said that we were "apostates and infidels" and that we would be killed and our bodies sent to our families. "So their hearts ache," he said mockingly

On the next day, we were interrogated and all personal information about us and our families and relatives was collected. Throughout the interrogation, an ISIS member held a knife to my neck

ISIS is like a black snowball, it grows bigger as it rolls but the sun would one day shine to melt it away once and for all

This was the tweet that enraged one of the interrogators after he took my twitter account password and read my tweets. I was brutally beaten and tortured for this tweet

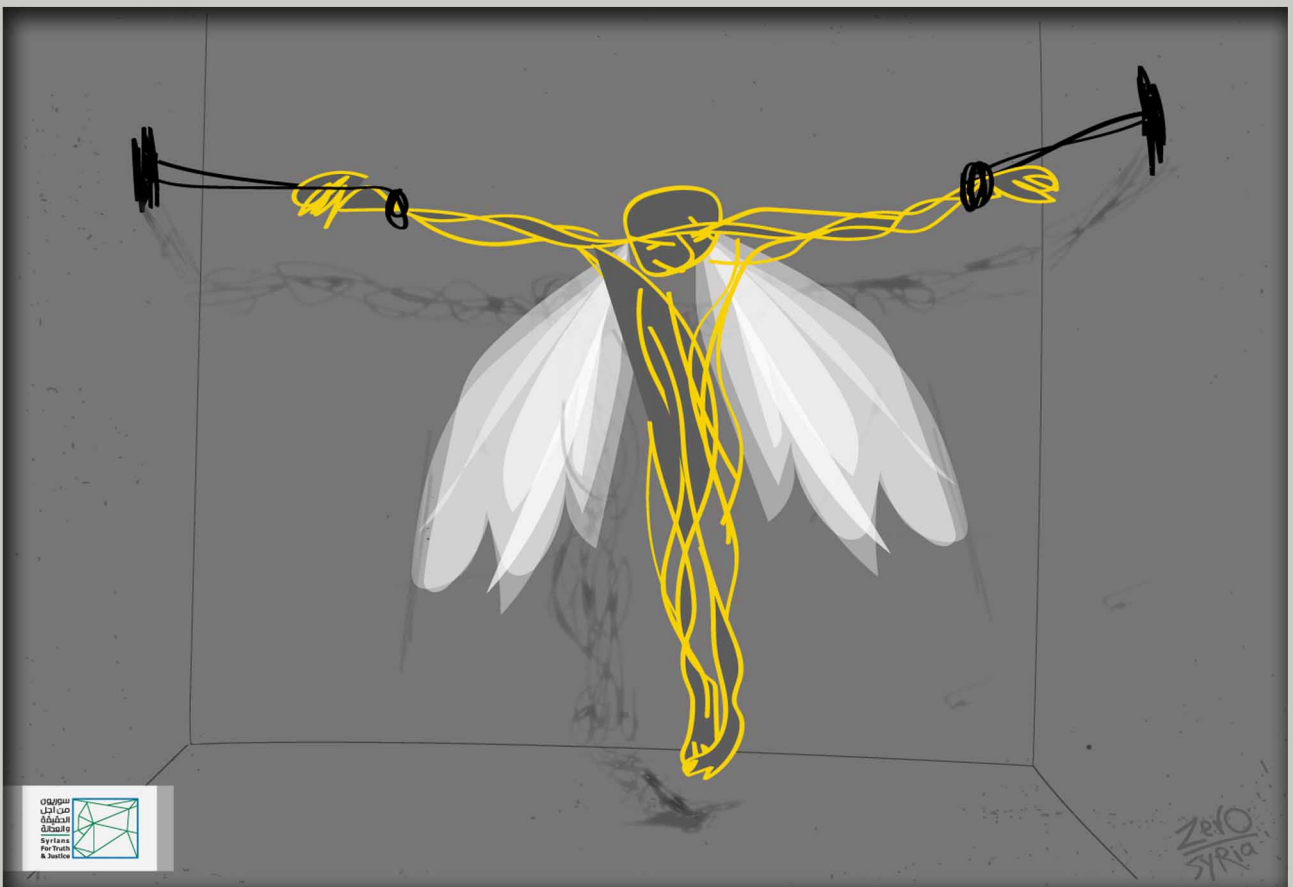
2-Whoever has the title "Abu --- al-Jazrawi" (Arabia) comes from Yemen or the Arab Gulf as ISIS does not recognize the names of those countries

IV Second detention center in Shaddadah

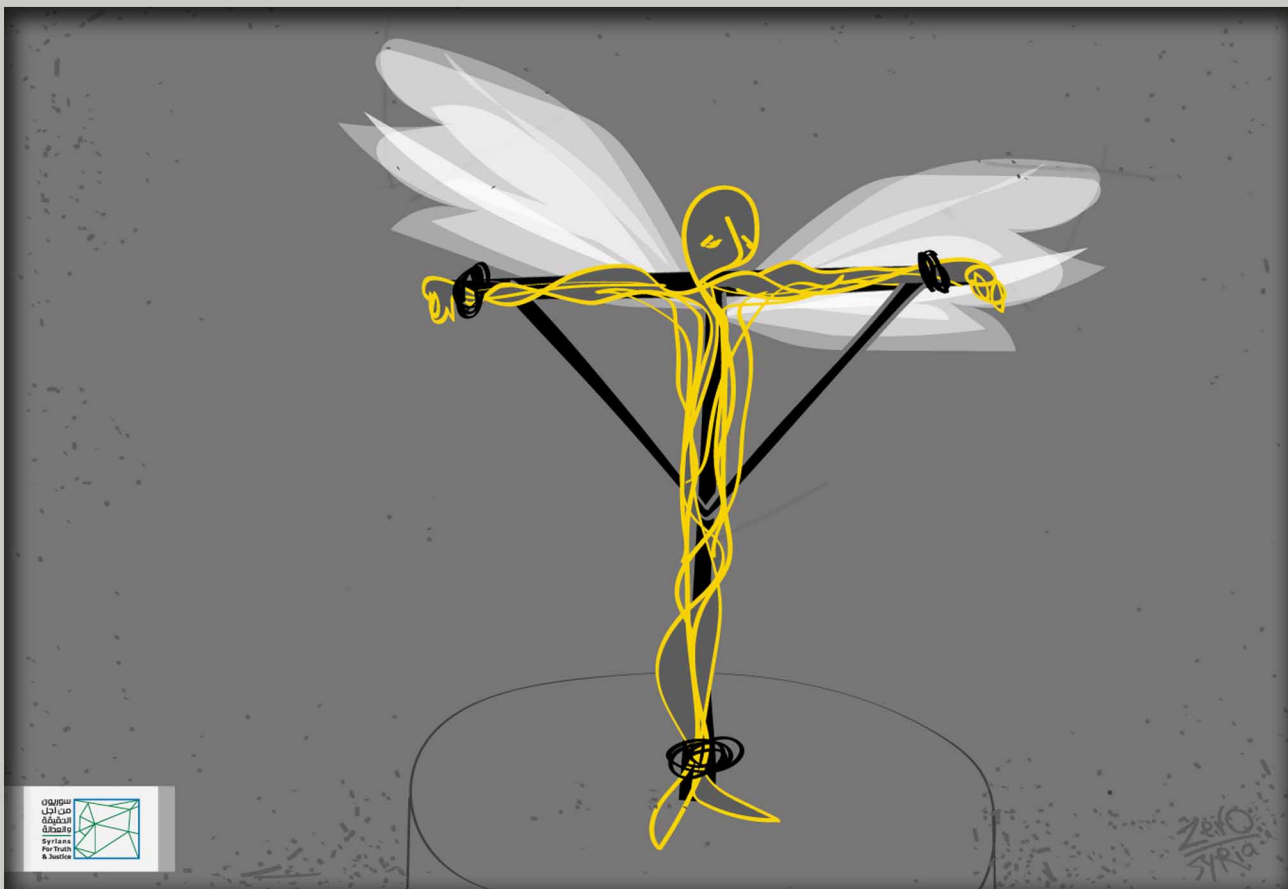
We were held in custody in Tal Hamees for three days after which we were taken to a place we later learned was Al-Shaddadah village. We were blindfolded and both our arms and legs were tied. This center, too, was a traditional Arab house with an iron fence equipped to be a detention center. But this time, Farhad was not with me as we were separated. I was put in a small room no bigger than 3*2 m2 with six other detainees. After that they started interrogating me again and repeated the same torture methods, but more brutally. I was beaten, among other things, with an 'electric cable', a 'thick wooden baton', a plastic stick. In addition, I was whipped as I was 'crucified' by being cuffed to the wall with my arms wide open and my toes hardly touching the floor



An image of the detention center entrance in Shaddadah. It was taken after Democratic Syria Forces(SDF) took over the city in February 2016. Source: Journalist Akram al-Saleh



Method 1: Crucifixion (hanging from wrists). This is one of the torture methods used by the Islamic State (Daesh), where the feet of the tortured could barely touch the ground or they could be hanging over the ground, without touching it



Method 2: This type of crucifixion used by the Islamic State (Daesh) is usually used in cases of execution and slaughtering in public places and squares, such as the case in Manbej

After ten days I was put in the same cell with Farhad. It was a terrible room with terrible hygiene. The ceiling was completely covered with flies and insects, especially pubic lice which were spread all over. We were not allowed to bathe and the time allowed for us to use the WC was no more than ten seconds

I was detained in this place for forty days during which I met many other detainees including civilians and military personnel. The charges varied but the gravest was 'dealing with the People's Protection Units' and 'dealing with the regime forces'. Most of those charged with either of these charges were immediately executed

There were also detainees from ISIS itself. Some were released later and others were executed. Some of the names I recall

- 1- A relative of 'Mohammad al-Fares' the head of the national defense forces in Qamishli. He was an old man, with white hair and a long white beard, known as 'Abo Mosab al-Taei'. He used to be the 'emir of public relations' in ISIS. He was released 15 days after his arrest. His punishment was 'tazir', i.e. warning
- 2- Faisal al-Ghannam, who also held a position in the 'public relations commission' in ISIS. He was accused of 'Ihtitab', i.e. taking possession of Muslims' property without evidence to prove their apostasy
- 3- Abo al-Waleed who was the 'emir of security personnel in Tal Hamees'. He was from Qamishli, Arbawiyah area, and was born in 1988
- 4- Ali Abo Jihad, a civilian detainee from al-Tarikiya village near area 47
- 5- Abdullatif al-Jouhar, a civilian detainee, married to two wives and had 12 children. He was from Tal Barak area. He worked as a farmer. He was executed for charges of being a 'Shabih' loyal to the regime
- 6- Ibrahim Al-Khaled, a civilian detainee and father of five children. He was executed for charges of dealing with the regime. He was from al-Bawab village in the countryside of Tal Barak, Hasakeh governorate. ISIS members made us watch the video of his execution. They did this every time an execution was carried out. On the day Ibrahim al-Khaled was executed, two other people were executed by firing squad for charges of 'dealing with People's Protection Units' in Haddadiya area. Ibrahim's execution was carried out sixty days after his arrest

Executions would usually be carried out on Friday. ISIS made use of the time when people leave mosques after prayer so that the largest number would witness the execution. Friday was the worst day for me. It had become associated with death and execution. I was willing to remain in custody in this terrible place forever provided that they would open my cell before Friday prayer

On Friday, 23 January 2015, right before prayer time, they called on me and my friend Farhad. There were two prison guards, 'Abo Hafs' and 'Abo al-Jahjah al-Ansari'. Their accent suggested they were from Hasakeh. Abo Hafs shouted in his hoarse voice "Come on to your retribution". They handcuffed us and took us out of the room and put us in a vehicle

After around ten minutes and as the car sped, we were sure that we were on a highway on our way to some new place. At least we would not be executed in this place

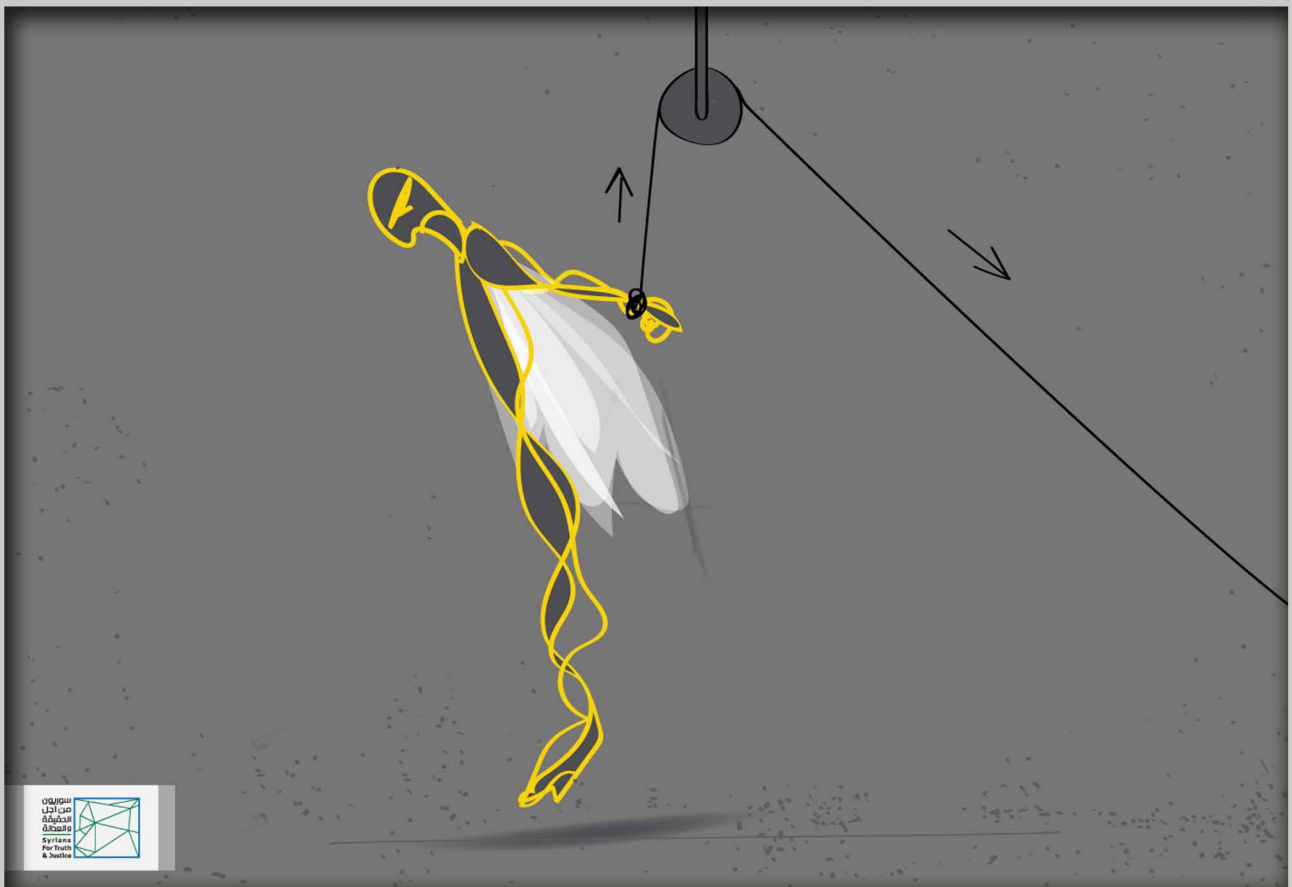
V Point '11' in Raqqa

After forty-five days since my arrest, ISIS members finally allowed me to bathe in a detention center located in a football field in Raqqa known as 'point 11.' It was also known as the 'Black court.' The name was later changed to 'point 3'. This place used to have a celebrations hall and a sport club. ISIS built 15 solitary confinement cells in the celebrations hall, 2*1.5m² each. I was put in cell no 2 and my friend Farhad in cell no.11

Treatment there was no different from what we know about interrogation methods used by security forces of the Syrian regime except for using an Islamic tone during interrogation. We were always accused of being traitors, infidels and atheists. We would be asked about how much we had memorized of the Holy Quran while in custody. For me, I read Quran forty-five times with interpretation while in detention

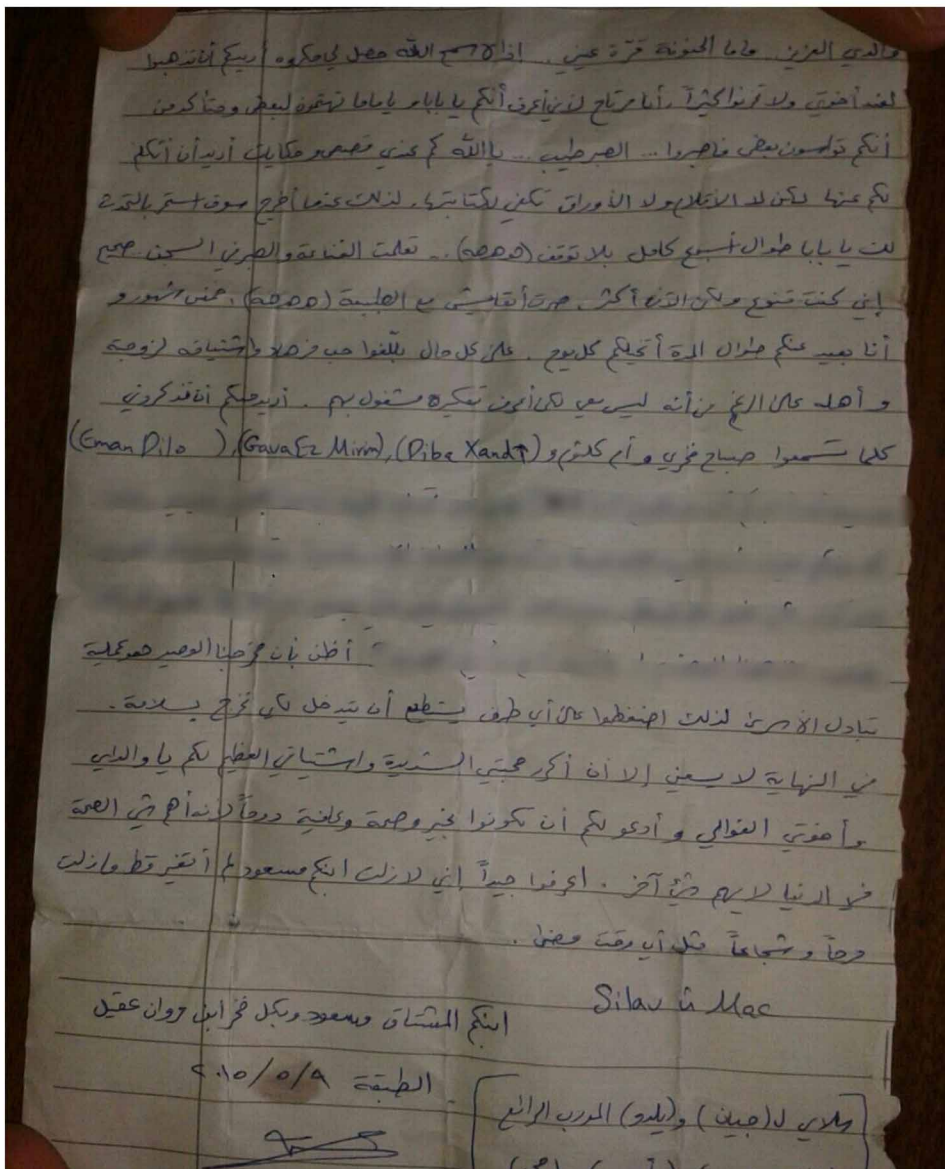
After thirty three days in solitary confinement, I was reunited with Farhad in the same cell. A week later, on 9 March 2015, a large number of ISIS members came and took Farhad to a destination that remained unknown for me. They were not the prison staff in that place. They were in uniform and wore masks on their faces. I never met Farhad or heard of him again throughout my detention

In total, I spent a 100 days in solitary confinement. The most commonly used method of torture was hanging using the 'Balanco' method. During my detention there, no less than ten ISIS members were executed for different charges in addition to some civilians, including journalist Beshr Abdulazim al-Sado and an ISIS member called 'Mohammad Saeed Moslim' (also known as 'Abo Yosef al-Falastini', who was twenty years old and from Jerusalem). Moslim was accused for spying for the Israeli Mossad. He was executed in March 2015, sixty days after his arrest



Method 3: The method illustrated in the drawing is called the "Balango." It is one of the torture methods used by the Islamic State (Daesh). It is similar to the Shabeh position. However, in this method, there is a metal piece that allows the interrogator to raise the detainee to the level he wants. The detainee, in this method of torture, could be suspended by the wrist in a "normal way," or by tying the hands to the back (as illustrated in the drawing). The latter position causes terrible pain and shoulder dislocation in most cases

During my stay in Raqqa, I managed to write four letters to my family and was happy that ISIS members did not find out about them. It was very risky and could lead to a disaster if they found out



In a courageous step, Masoud Akeel managed to send a hand-written letter from the detention center in Tabaka, Raqqa. He asked his family to be patient and steadfast until he and his friend Farhad Hamo were released. The letter shows the date, 9 March 2015



Mohammad Saleem Moslim, from Jerusalem, Palestine. Masoud Akeel met him in the detention center in Raqqa for two days before ISIS executed him for charges of spying for Mossad. Picture source: Internet



Chinese journalist Fan Jinghui entered Raqqa through the Tal Abyad border crossing and was then arrested by ISIS, who also forced him to convert to Islam. Masoud Akeel met him for one day in solitary confinement. Picture source: Internet

VI In detention centers Tabaka and al-Bab

After a hundred days, I was taken to a detention center in Tabaka city. I knew that from the 'educational leaflets' they used to bring us. I stayed there for six days in solitary confinement and fourteen days in a 'commoncell' with a number of detainees. I was then transferred to a detention center in al-Bab city near the 'court' building. After around seventy days, specifically after Ramadan of 2015, the detention center came under bombardment and a large part of the building was destroyed. According to ISIS members, a barrel bomb was dropped on the building allowed around ninety detainees to flee. Forty of them survived, while fifty were re-arrested. I learned later that two detainees ran towards Qamishli and reached it intact. Eight ISIS members died in that bombardment in addition to no less than twenty civilian detainees



Masoud Akeel after about 5 months of his arrest, in May 2015. He is dressed in orange which is the color used for prisoner uniforms by ISIS security prisons

3-Solitary confinement refers to the cell that is usually used for one person
4-Common cell is a term used for cells for a number of people

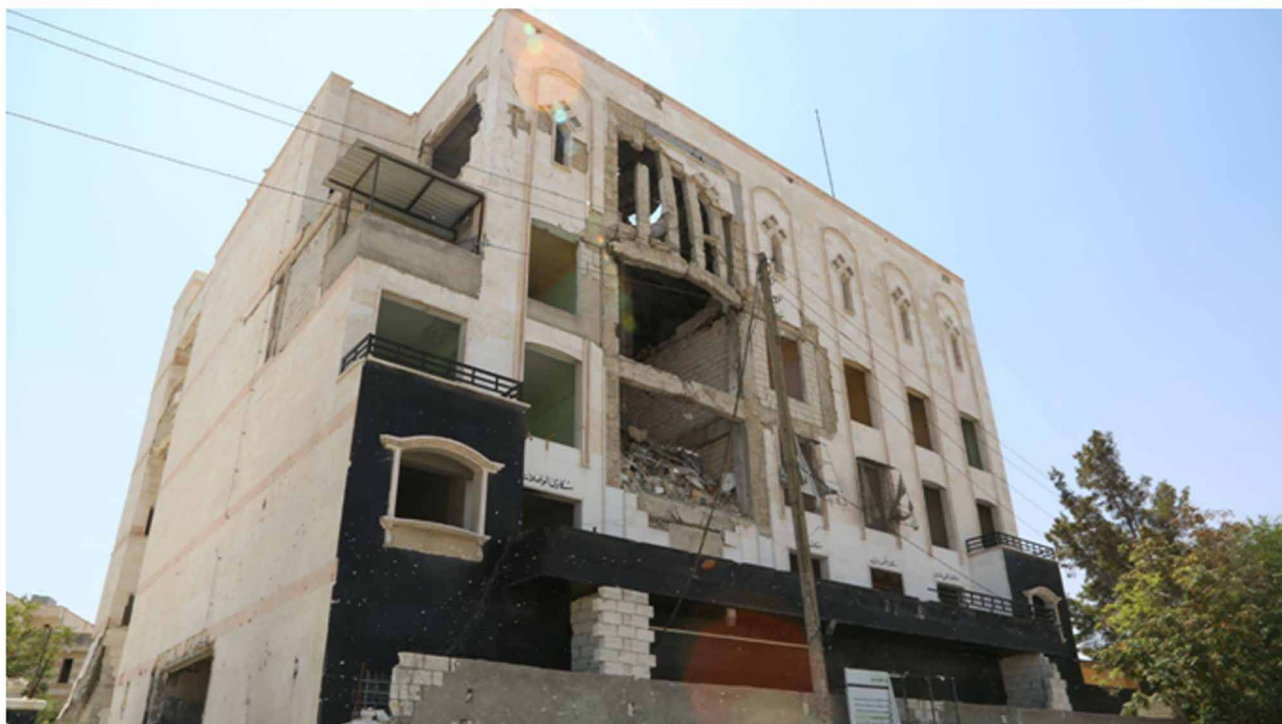
VII Manbej and freedom

Immediately after the bombardment, we were all taken to Manbej. The detention center there was known as the 'hotel prison' because it used to be a hotel in the city center and was transformed into a secret detention center. I stayed there between July and September 2015. Afterwards, I was taken with a number of People's Protection Unit members to Tabaka again, dressed in orange which was the case throughout my detention. I was then taken to Raqqa, then al-Shaddadah, and then to a desert area 'south of al-Rad' where a swap operation between ISIS and People's Protection Units took place. It was 21 September 2015

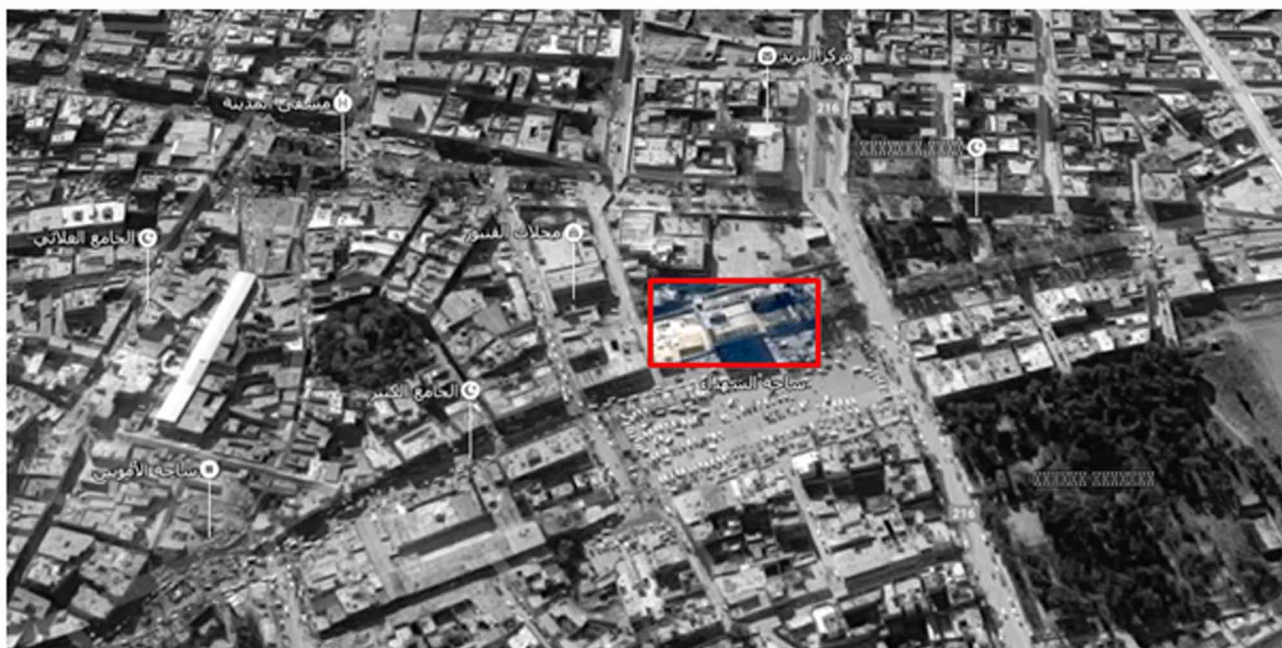
The moment of arrest is very similar to the moment of release. In both cases, you are lost for words. At this point I was deeply frustrated because I expected to meet Farhad there. At least we would have experienced that similarity together



To the right Masoud Akeel, to the left Farhad Hamo
Picture source: Rudaw channel



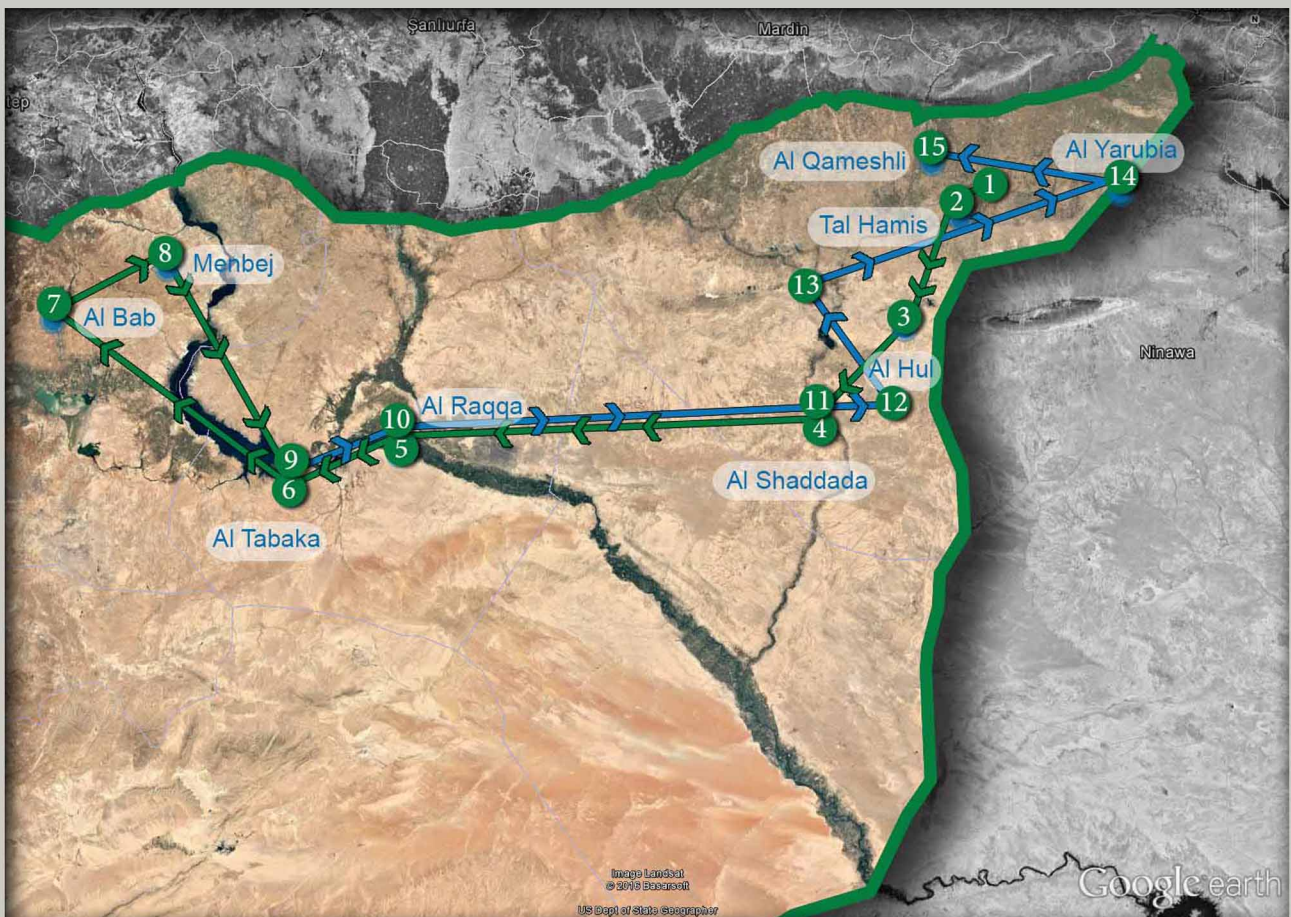
The "Hotel Prison" is a hotel located downtown that was turned into a secret detention center by the Islamic State (Daesh). The above photo was taken recently after the Syrian Democratic Forces took control of the city in August 2016
Photo credit: Journalist Ibrahim Iessa



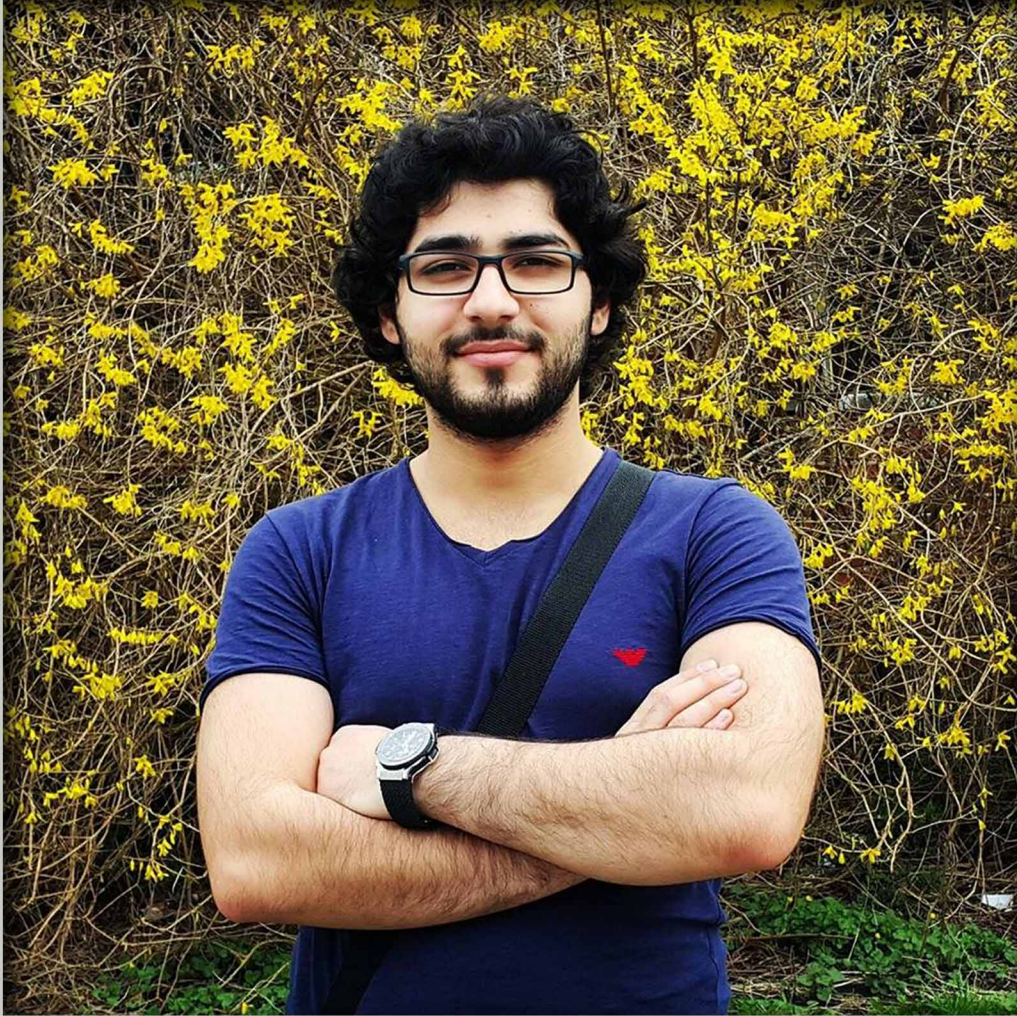
A satellite image illustrates the location of "The Hotel Prison" in Manbij city

VIII Conclusion: Aegean Sea is ISIS, too

I thought I survived imminent death after my release from ISIS prisons. However, my sea journey towards Europe made me approach death again along with 150 other people looking for life and safety. For hours, we had no means of survival in the middle of the sea until the coastguards rescued us



A map illustrating the places where Masoud Akeel was detained



The interview was conducted on 20 May 2015