**Shattered humanity inside Syria's security apparatus**  
The young man was dangling upside down, white, foaming saliva dripping from his mouth. His groans sounded more bestial than human.  
It was one of many fleeting images of human degradation I witnessed during four days as an unwilling guest of Syrian intelligence, when I was detained in Damascus after reporting on protests in the southern Syrian city of Deraa.  
Within minutes of my arrest I was inside a building of the intelligence services -- known, as elsewhere in the Arab world, simply as the "Mukhabarat." I was still in the heart of bustling Damascus, but had been transported into a macabre parallel world of darkness, beatings and intimidation.  
I caught sight of the man hanging by his feet as one of the jailers escorted me to the interrogation room for questioning.  
"Look down," the jailer shouted as I took in the scene.  
Inside an interrogation room, they made me kneel and pulled what I could just make out as a car tyre over my arms.  
My reporting from Deraa, where protests against President Bashar al-Assad had broken out in March, had apparently not endeared me to my hosts, who accused me of being a spy.  
The formal reason Syrian authorities gave Reuters for my detention was that I lacked the proper work permits.  
That I was an established journalist working for Reuters, going about my professional business, was not an argument to men whose livelihood depends on breaking human dignity.  
"So, you cheap American agent!" the interrogator shouted. "You have come to report destruction and mayhem. You animal, you are coming to insult Syria, you dog."  
From outside the room I could hear the rattling of chains and hysterical cries that echo in my mind to this day. My interrogators worked professionally and tirelessly to keep me on edge at every step of the questioning process over several days.  
"Shut up, you bastard. You and your types are vultures who want to turn Syria into another Libya," said another interrogator, who kept yelling: "Confess, liar!"  
Arrest in the street I had crossed the border from Jordan, where I have reported for Reuters for nearly two decades, on March 18, as unrest was first breaking out in Deraa. I spent most of the next 10 days  
reporting from that city. Inspired by the fall of Arab dictators in Tunisia and Egypt, the protests rapidly escalated into a grave challenge to the Assad family's 40-year rule.  
I was arrested on March 29 in Damascus as I went to meet someone in an old district of the capital. Two plain clothes security men approached me and told me not to resist as they held my arms and then marched me into a hairdresser's until an ordinary-looking white car came to take me to the Mukhabarat.  
Interrogators showed particular interest in two aspects of my reporting – the fact that I had written about watching protesters burn images of late President Hafez al-Assad, father of the incumbent, and hearing chants attacking Maher al-Assad, brother of Bashar and commander of the Republican Guard.  
Iron busts of Assad the father and portraits of the current president adorn the corridors and offices in buildings of the state security apparatus, part of a family personality cult recognizable to students of authoritarian rule the world over.  
 **Demonstration of methods**I felt my hosts wanted to give me, as a foreign journalist, a demonstration of the methods they use on Syrians. To brace myself for what might yet come and save myself from total breakdown, I tried to fix my mind on old childhood memories.  
These mental games helped me avoid thinking of my young twins and wife back home in Amman, who had no way of knowing where I was, or even whether I was still alive.  
The questioning lasted eight hours until midnight on my first day of detention. Mostly I was blindfolded, but the blindfold was removed for a few minutes.  
That allowed me -- despite orders to keep my head down so that my interrogators should remain out of view -- to see a hooded man screaming in pain in front of me.  
When they told him to take down his pants, I could see his swollen genitals, tied tight with a plastic cable.  
"I have nothing to tell, but I am neither a traitor and activist. I am just a trader," said the man, who said he was from Idlib province in the north west of Syria.  
To my horror, a masked man took a pair of wires from a household power socket and gave him electric shocks to the head.  
At other moments, my questioners could be charming, but would quickly switch to ruthless mode in what looked like an orchestrated performance to wear me down.  
"We will make you forget who you are," one of them threatened as I was beaten for the sixth time on my face.  
I could not see what hit me. It felt like fists.  
Twice in detention I was whipped on the shoulder, leaving bruises that stayed a week.  
During intervals in the corridor, with my back against the wall and my hands in the air, I stood on display as at least a dozen security men jostled me and hurled abuse.  
And yet humanity could appear at the unlikeliest moments.  
At one point, the interrogator who was screaming at me that I was a dog (a particular insult to Arabs) took a call on his mobile phone. His tone became immediately warm and affectionate: "Of course, my dear, I'll get you whatever you want," he said, switching from professional torturer to indulgent father.  
   
**Screams and cockroaches**For long periods, I lay on a mattress in a windowless cell, lit by a small neon light, as cockroaches scurried around.  
Occasional screams reminded me of where I was and what might happen. I was kept in solitary confinement and my jailers gave me a piece of dry bread or a potato and a tomato twice a day.  
When I wanted to go to the toilet, I would knock on the door of my cell. A jailer would then appear, though it could take over an hour to have my request met.  
I thought of the thousands of people in Syrian prisons, and how they endured solitary confinement and constant degradation, many for decades. I thought of Russians I had read about in Siberian exile, and about the meaning of freedom, for Syrians and for other Arabs living under autocrats across the region.  
I was not the first person there in the cell, of course. One of my unknown predecessors had carved an inscription on the wall, apparently with his fingernails.  
"God against the oppressor," it read.  
My mind went back to the events in Deraa -- the thousands of youngsters clapping in unison, shouting "Freedom," and the expressions on the faces of the women, children and old men who came out to the streets to watch in a mixture of disbelief and euphoria, an electrifying spirit of defiance.  
I saw how decades of fear sown in the hearts and minds of people was crumbling as hundreds of bare-chested young men braved bullets fired by security men and snipers from rooftops. I will never forget the bodies of men shot in the head or chest, carried through the bloodspattered streets of Deraa, and dozens of shoes left on the streets by youths running from gunfire.  
   
**Expelled**Then on the fourth day of detention, my hosts came to move me, putting me in a car that whisked me to what turned out to be the intelligence headquarters several blocks away in Damascus.  
It was a huge complex, with hundreds of plain-clothes security men in the courtyard outside, all with grim faces.  
"Search every inch of him," said one man as two others dragged me toward the basement.  
I spent two hours in a cell where I reflected on how I would cope with imprisonment in the months ahead.  
Then I was brought into a room nearby. To my bewilderment an urbane man with an air of authority told me: "We are sending you back to Jordan."  
I realised later, from looking at pictures in the media that this had been Major General Ali Mamluk, the director of Syrian State Security himself, a man whose subordinates hold thousands of Syrians in similar jails across the country.  
He said my reporting from Deraa had been inaccurate and had damaged the image of Syria.  
Within hours I crossed the border and was back home, where I learned that Jordan's royal family had worked for my release and spared me from a longer and more grueling fate. Other Reuters journalists were also expelled, some also after detention, and now Syria is effectively barred to most foreign media.  
Nearly two months later, time has helped me absorb the impact of those four days, to the extent that I can record the experiences in writing. But I am haunted by the human cost of the Arab uprisings for people seeking the sort of freedoms, which others elsewhere in the world take for granted.