


Saddam's House of Horrors

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Asharq Al-Awsat photo by Jamal Penjweny 

Sulaymaniyah, Asharq Al-Awsat- Despite the passage of 17 years since the liberation of the city of Sulaymaniyeh and the whole Iraqi Kurdistan region following the 1990-1991 uprisings against the former Iraqi Baathist regime, the traces of terror and suffering still remain in attestation of the brutality of the deposed regime.

The residents of Sulaymaniyeh still recall a dark time in which Saddam's Red Prison existed; a compound of cinderblock buildings, ranging over 3,000 square meters, in which the Red Security intelligence was based.

The torture chambers and solitary confinement cells in this 'red' compound have earned their name by virtue of the red paint that coats the facade of the buildings – a living testimony of the bloody legacy it left behind.

Today the site has been converted into a museum; a torture museum which is known as "The National Museum of the Kurdish Revolution and Victims (So That We May Not Forget)".

Visiting the museum is like entering army barracks from Saddam's bygone era; walls are lined with tanks, armored vehicles and various types of artillery evoking the days when this fortress was monitored and surrounded by a powerful and brutal security force.

To the left of these barracks lies a wing in which there is a display of photographs of the Kurdish Peshmerga victims who have fallen in the armed resistance, revolts and wars against the former oppressive Iraqi regime. One particularly poignant and chilling photograph shows a four-year-old child with amputated arms and legs, as a result of one of many mines that were responsible for displacing the city's one million residents when the former Iraqi Baathist force invaded it following its defeat in the

Kuwait liberation war. Other pictures show youth lined up against the wall awaiting the bullets of the Red Security's firing squad.

This compound, which was constructed 30 September 1979 over three stages and once had four floors, has outer walls that are pockmarked with thousands of bullet holes in all shapes and sizes. Underground, below these four levels lie three chambers in which political prisoners and many families of the Peshmerga forces were kept. The residents of Halabja were detained for long periods of time in these dark and rotten vaults after they surrendered to the former Iraqi regime's forces when their city was razed and gassed.

The director of the museum, Amira Mohamed Amin, said that the museum's administration had renovated various sections and wings within the building, one of which has been converted into a hall to screen documentary films and another to hold lectures, in addition to a virtual library displaying the catalogue of military weapons that were used and the types of landmines, as well as the lists of names and photographs of the victims and all the documented Kurds who had been injured or disabled. The library also features records with detention dates and torture methods in both audio and visual forms.

Horrifying information about some 400 officers of various ranks and disciplines who had been affiliated to Saddam's Red Security intelligence reveals that one element's identity card had the profession "rapist" clearly written on it. Today, harrowing and disturbing stories are recounted by the brave Kurdish prisoners who managed to survive this chilling experience.

Kamran Aziz, 53 years old, talks about his experience after being detained by the Red Security in 1990 after being accused of being a member of the Kurdish opposition party after he was betrayed by a friend.

"I was arrested in my workplace and violently assaulted and taken to the red building. I thought about escaping before they led me to the torture chambers of which I had heard horror stories. I said to myself, 'either I save myself or die immediately; either way is better than dying while being tortured.' Unfortunately after I broke from the investigator's grip and managed to get past the security elements in the interrogation room I was suddenly confronted by approximately 20 men who physically assaulted me with their rifles' butts and the base of their guns until I lost consciousness. Then they dumped me in a dark chamber with over 30 other people who were all members of the party. They had been detained as part of a sweeping arrest campaign and five of them had been executed while others were sentenced to terms ranging from 10-25 years imprisonment," recalled Aziz.

He continued: "After I regained consciousness, they took me to the interrogation room again and sat me down semi-naked on a rock in front of two security men. One was burning my chest and neck with a cigarette every so often to rouse me so I could answer the other interrogator's questions. I was bleeding from numerous wounds and my head was bleeding into my eyes but still I refused to confess to any of the accusations that they had charged me with even though they continued to torture me. I was subjected to a variety of bodily torture over 23 days in solitary confinement torture chambers."

Aziz added, "The worst form of torture is electrocution. The victim is stripped fully naked and both hands are shackled behind his back. He is then lifted from his hands and hung from a hook in the ceiling and connected to high-voltage electrical wires either around the ears, toes or genitals so that he feels that his insides are churning out. This is intended to get a confession out of him."

Mohamed Abdel Karim al Mufi, 39 years old, was arrested in 1985 at the young age of 16. He was detained in a humid chamber with 35 other teenagers and children, along with 23 men, for a year and a

few months. He recounts being beaten on the soles of his feet with a thick cane or being flogged for long periods of time with sticks that were wrapped with metal wires. The youth were flogged all over their bodies and then the torturers would pour salty water on their wounds as they bled.

He added that they used to make prisoners sit naked on glass bottles and then the torturers would sit forcibly on their shoulders or hang them from the ceiling and flog them in sensitive areas. Al Mufi recalls how four young men, all under 18 years of age, were executed in public without a trial or an explanation after being charged as members of the Kurdish oppositional party when they did not understand the meaning of politics.

But these sickening practices were not only confined to the men; Kurdish women too suffered horrendous forms of torture. Nesrine Omar Rashid, 44 years old, was arrested with her husband and 12-year-old son after being turned in by an informant who had infiltrated their circles. Rashid remembers how she repeatedly suffered severe blows to her head since her detention in September 1990 after one of the security men heard her whispering reassuring words to her son and trying to calm him down.

She describes the process as beginning with interrogation and then progressing to indiscriminate and severe physical assault and electrocution if they did not get the responses and confessions they sought. "One time I was electrocuted so intensely that I became unconscious. I woke up to find myself locked in a solitary cell. I remained there for six months and was then joined by a woman in her twenties called Kajal who was detained because her brother had assassinated one of the Baath party members. She was subjected to unspeakable forms of psychological torture with her brother present as they threatened to rape his sister if he did not tell them the names of the people who were involved with him in the secret organization," she said.

Nesrine also recounted an incident in which a security officer grabbed her by the hair and kept slamming her head against the wall. She said that all she remembers after that was waking up bleeding and suffering a blinding headache in Sulaymaniyeh hospital on 6 March 1991 – a day before the Kurdish uprising. She was then taken into custody by two security officials who had fled after the city fell at the hands of the Kurdish rebels. This is how she was saved but to this day Nesrine says that whenever she sees the red security building her body weakens and she physically trembles. Today she suffers from near blindness in one eye and persistent headaches.

Hajja Amna Ibrahim Hassan, 76 years old, who was detained with her two young daughters, an infant daughter and a son who was twelve while she was three-months pregnant retold some of the torture methods that the women endured at the Red Prison and said, "They hung me from my feet from my cell ceiling for 24 hours and electrocuted me for hours on end throughout my six-month stay. This led to the right-side paralysis that I now suffer."

"We were over 500 women and girls whose families were members of the Peshmarga in an underground chamber being tortured and humiliated. They stripped our clothes off and hung us from our feet and electrocuted our sensitive areas," she said.

However, Hajja Amna said that it was a miracle from God when after the atrocious torture she endured; she remained pregnant and gave birth to her child in 1981, a few weeks following her release.