

MAY 2015

SYRIA: VOICES IN CRISIS

A MONTHLY INSIGHT INTO THE HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS IN SYRIA.



“I WILL RAISE MY VOICE AND MAKE MY SONG FLY, SO THAT THE ENTIRE WORLD WILL HEAR ME.”

A member loyal to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is waving an ISIL flag in Raqqa.
© Reuters/Stringer

ACTIVISTS AND WITNESSES SPEAK TO AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL ABOUT VIOLATIONS BY THE ARMED GROUP CALLING ITSELF ISLAMIC STATE (IS) IN THE HASAKAH AREA OF SYRIA.

“Early morning on 23 February 2015, the inhabitants of the villages along the Khabour River, north-eastern Syria, were sleeping peacefully. Little did they know that they would wake up to the sound of bombs, machine-guns and screams.

Confusion ensued until the word spread that IS fighters had entered the villages from Tel Shamiram, east of the river. With only the clothes on their backs, the residents fled. However, IS fighters managed to capture some 250 civilian

hostages.

“Thirty of the villages around the Khabour River were mostly inhabited by Assyrians, a Christian minority, also called Chaldeans and Syriacs. The area had been a refuge for Assyrians since a massacre in Simele by Iraqi forces in 1933. And now, once again, they have lost their homes after the latest attacks by IS.” Izla Rhawi, a London-based activist with A Demand for Action (ADFA), a global initiative which seeks protection for Assyrians and other minorities in the Middle East.

Following the attacks on Assyrian villages along the Khabour River, Amnesty International spoke with witnesses who had fled to Qamishly, fearful of IS’s reputation for killing and abducting members of other minorities. Ishtar, 25, told Amnesty International:

“On 23 February, around 4.30am, we woke up to the sound of gunshots and heavy shelling, which continued for hours. My family and I decided to leave our village, Tel Tal, after local security guards told us that IS was advancing towards us. We took a boat towards another village and then drove to Qamishly. We were terrified that IS would do to us what they did to Yezidis in Iraq.”

Marina, a resident from Tel Tamer, told Amnesty International that in the morning

of 23 February she also woke up to the sound of shelling and gunshots echoing from Tel Tamas, a nearby village:

“The Syriac Military Council, a group of local fighters, told us that it would be better to leave because IS was attacking the villages. I called my aunt and my cousins living in Tel Shamiram because we received news that the village was under attack from IS. My aunt said that IS was advancing quickly, but that they could not leave because it wasn’t safe. I called them again a few hours later but there was no response. I continued calling for more than four days but nobody answered. We searched for them in Derbassyeh, Hasakah and Qamishly but we did not find them. We later found out that almost all Tel Shamiram residents had been abducted by IS.”

Kinan told Amnesty International that he left Tel Tamer on 23 February after the sounds of shelling and gunshots intensified:

“I heard gunshots and shelling around 4.30am. I thought it was coming from Tel Tamer but we found out later that IS and the Military Council were clashing in Tel Goran on the other side of the river. We decided to stay in Tel Tamer until we were sure we knew what was happening. My daughter lives in Tel Jazira with her husband and three-month-old son. She called me in the afternoon saying that IS

was advancing towards their village and they did not know what to do. Before leaving Tel Tamer that night, I called her again but she did not pick up. I called her again when I arrived in Qamishly the next day but again she did not pick up. I searched for her everywhere. I checked with the church and other people I know. We later found out that people were abducted from Tel Jazira. She was not among the 23 people released. We are very worried and scared.”

Izla Rhawi of A Demand for Action continues:

“We were told that all the hostages were taken to the nearby mountains and women and children were separated from the men.

“A few weeks later, IS released 23 of the hostages. It isn’t clear why they were released. There is a lack of information on the whereabouts of the remaining 230 hostages; however, negotiations were progressing between church leaders and IS for their release. After weeks of negotiations, IS finally asked for US\$100,000 in exchange for each hostage. That’s US\$23 million in total. Although church leaders tried to negotiate the release it became abundantly clear that there was never any intention to release them. For the families of those captives this is yet

another form of brutal terror.

“I am extremely concerned about the fate of the hostages. Many of them are women and children. Church leaders are concerned that some of them have been taken to al-Raqqa to face trial for crimes against Islam. I have seen reports that women have been sold, abused and raped by IS fighters, and, although we have no confirmation, I fear the same may have happened to the Assyrian women being held hostage.

“For me, being part of the Assyrian community, I have the sense that we have been abandoned once again. The lack of international support, effort or willingness to work for the release of the hostages is disappointing.

“One of the hostages is a poet and songwriter called Ramina. She and her three-year-old daughter are still missing. In one of her poems, she wrote: ‘I will raise my voice and I will make my song fly, so that the entire world will hear me.’ I urge all of us to use our voices to call out against grave human rights abuses committed by IS, both against the Assyrian community and the Syrian people more broadly.”

CASE FOCUS: JUWAN ABD RAHMAN KHALED

“I ALWAYS PRAY FOR DADDY’S RETURN”



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Juwan Abd Rahman Khaled is a house painter, father of three and a peaceful activist. Until his arrest in 2012, his activism was focused on promoting the human rights of Kurdish people in Syria and he worked with the Union of Young Kurds, a group of Kurdish activists.

A close friend of his family told Amnesty International: “Juwan left his family and his home in the city of Qamishly behind at a young age to work in Damascus for economic reasons. But he always hoped to return to his home town. He became a peaceful activist because he believes that Kurdish people have the right to enjoy the same freedoms as all Syrian citizens, have the right to speak their own language and live in a democratic homeland where they are recognized as partners in the country.

“He is good-hearted, sincerely loyal to his friends and his country, and loves to help anyone in need. He sees humanity above all religious and national affiliations and

defends anyone who is oppressed, regardless of their religion or their nationality. He is passionate about fighting injustice.”

Juwan Abd Rahman Khaled was arrested on 3 September 2012 when people believed to be from the Syrian government’s State Security force carried out a raid in Wadi al-Mashari’a, a north-western suburb of Damascus, in the early hours of the morning. The security forces did not provide any reasons for his arrest or inform anyone as to where they were taking him.

Since his arrest, his family has continuously tried to uncover his whereabouts. They visited ‘Adra prison, north-east of Damascus, but were told that Juwan Abd Rahman Khaled was not detained there. A released detainee later claimed that he saw Juwan Abd Rahman Khaled at a State Security branch. Juwan Abd Rahman Khaled remains subject to enforced disappearance.

His youngest child, Raman, was born in 2013 after his father’s arrest. The family friend told Amnesty International:

“His disappearance is hard on his children. He loves them very much. I remember when his daughter, who is now six years old, told her mother one day, ‘Mummy, I always pray for daddy’s return, but so many months have passed and I’m tired of praying prayers which do not come true. Tell him I miss him so much and I want him back and when he comes back, I promise that I will not cry any more when he goes to work!’”

Amnesty International calls for Juwan Abd Rahman Khaled’s whereabouts to be urgently revealed and for him to be granted immediate access to his family and lawyer. He should be released unless he is promptly charged with a recognizable criminal offence and tried in accordance with international fair trial standards.

CAMPAIGNING

For information about campaigning on this case, please visit:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/055/2013/en/>

For further information, please visit:

<http://free-syrian-voices.org/juwan-abd-al-rahman-khaled/>

MORE INFORMATION