

SYRIA: VOICES IN CRISIS

A MONTHLY INSIGHT INTO THE HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS IN SYRIA.



“THEY WERE DISCUSSING HOW TO EXECUTE ME.”

A PEACEFUL ACTIVIST DESCRIBES HIS DETENTION AND TORTURE BY THE ISLAMIC STATE ARMED GROUP

The armed group that calls itself the Islamic State (IS) controls large areas of Syria and Iraq and is believed to be holding hundreds, if not thousands, of prisoners, many in secret detention facilities. Some of those held are suspected of theft or other crimes; others are accused of “crimes” against Islam, such as smoking cigarettes or *zina*, sex outside marriage. Others appear to have been detained because of their work as human rights or political activists,

humanitarian workers and journalists. The IS has also captured and detained many fighters from rival armed groups, some of whom it has subsequently killed summarily. It is commonly reported to torture those it captures or detains.

One peaceful activist detained by the IS, who wishes to remain anonymous, has described to Amnesty International his experience in detention in 2014:

The flag of the Islamic State armed group in Mosul, Iraq, June 2014.
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“For the first 20 days of my imprisonment [by the IS], I was held in an underground cell. Depending on the day, there would be between 50 and 90 other prisoners in the cell. The men who were held with me came from different backgrounds, some were fighters with groups like Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham or the Free Syrian Army. Others were civilians who were accused of being regime supporters or spies. There was also another activist held with us.

“The general conditions were not too bad. You live day to day in relative normality, but in extreme terror because of the constant threats you hear, and because of what others tell you about the torture they endured. For example, there were a number of men whose arms became completely paralysed from being hung by the *ballanco* [a stress position where the victim is hung by the wrists, which are tied behind their back]. These men were hung for six or seven hours before their arms became paralysed.

“This torture usually happened in another room, but we heard the screams. People tended to describe what they had been through when they came back to the cell.

“Those who were tortured the most were civilians accused of being supporters of the regime. One of the men whose arms were paralysed from torture was only arrested because someone heard him shout ‘how can you do this to your own supporters, Bashar?’ after his house was bombed. Those accused of being members of Jabhat al-Nusra and other fighters were treated better than the civilians.

“The conditions inside the cell were not bad; they were hygienic and the food was good. But under interrogations, the conditions are indescribable. Completely indescribable. My first week of interrogation was very horrific. Then they found out that I did not have any links to armed

groups and that my activities were not political so the torture reduced after the first week. I still have scars on my body from the first three days of torture. I was hung by the *ballanco* for 15 minutes. In those 15 minutes of pain I was prepared to ‘confess’ to whatever [my torturer] wanted.

“Other than the physical torture, there were lots of threats and psychological terrorism. We were all threatened with being taken to the ‘butcher’ [executioner] on a daily basis.

“After these 20 days, I was moved to another location. The investigator there wanted to get another ‘confession’ out of me because the previous accusations against me were not holding up. They put me in solitary confinement for 24 hours and told me ‘you either change your story or we will execute you’. I did not change my story; I had no other story to tell.

“The next day they came in. I was sitting on the floor with my eyes blindfolded, I could hear them loading a weapon – maybe some sort of gun – near my head, another form of terror. The investigator told the other men ‘take him and execute him’. They walked me out of the room with my eyes blindfolded. God gave me strength in that moment. The men walking with me were discussing how to execute me, one told the other ‘don’t get a gun, bring a rifle, it’s better’. They then opened the door and took me into another room.

“When I opened my eyes I found that they had just taken me back to my cell. The whole execution act was a way of terrorizing me, a way to break me so that I would ‘confess’ to whatever they wanted.

“I was held by IS for a further few weeks before they released me. I fled Syria shortly after. As an activist I was never going to be safe for very long.”

CASE FOCUS: AL-AMMAR FAMILY

GREENGROCER AND THREE NEPHEWS SUBJECTED TO ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE



Suhaib al-Ammar ©Private

Brothers Suhaib and Iqbal al-Ammar, their cousin Bilal Koushan and Youssef al-Ammar, an uncle of all three of them, were arrested on 24 November 2012. Suhaib, Iqbal and Bilal are originally from Dera'a in southern Syria. They were staying with their uncle, a greengrocer, while studying in Damascus. Suhaib and Iqbal both studied literature – English and French respectively – while Bilal was a student of religious studies.

According to a close friend of the brothers: “Suhaib spent a lot of his time at university writing poetry, while Iqbal was really into football. His favourite team was Real Madrid.”

Suhaib, Iqbal, Bilal and Youssef were arrested in the early morning of 24 November 2012 at Youssef's home by a group of men witnesses recognized as members of the Syrian security forces. The four have not been heard of since their arrest. Their relatives have repeatedly asked the

security forces for information on their whereabouts, but to date have received no response.

A friend of Youssef al-Ammar gave Amnesty International this message for the four men: “Our hearts are with you. Every day you are not here, images of you don't leave our minds and we dream about you. Youssef's children have been waiting for him to come home since his arrest. Close to three years now, but their determination is not lost. And who would think they can defeat the determination of children? Only a fool would think that. Iqbal's cat is also waiting for him; she has not been the same since he has been gone.”

It is unclear why the men were arrested. Suhaib and Iqbal al-Ammar had been detained previously. After his first release in April 2011, Suhaib said that he had been beaten by the security forces. During the second detention, he said he was accused of insulting the Syrian president and attending illegal demonstrations. He also said that he and other detainees had been tortured and otherwise ill-treated, and described the poor conditions in his overcrowded cell.

Suhaib and Iqbal's father, Dr Mohammed al-Ammar, is a peaceful advocate for democratic reform in Syria. He, too, has been arrested on several occasions since the beginning of the crisis in Syria.

Suhaib and Iqbal's friend said: “I worry about Suhaib. I fear he has lost his strength and the brightness in his face, which is what happens to all the detainees in prisons that do not know the meaning of humanity. But I know he won't lose the brightness in his heart, which has grown with him since he was a child and follows him wherever he goes.”

Amnesty International is calling for the authorities to release the four men if they are not promptly charged with an internationally recognizable offence and tried according to fair trial standards and to immediately disclose their whereabouts and give them access to their families, lawyers and medical care.