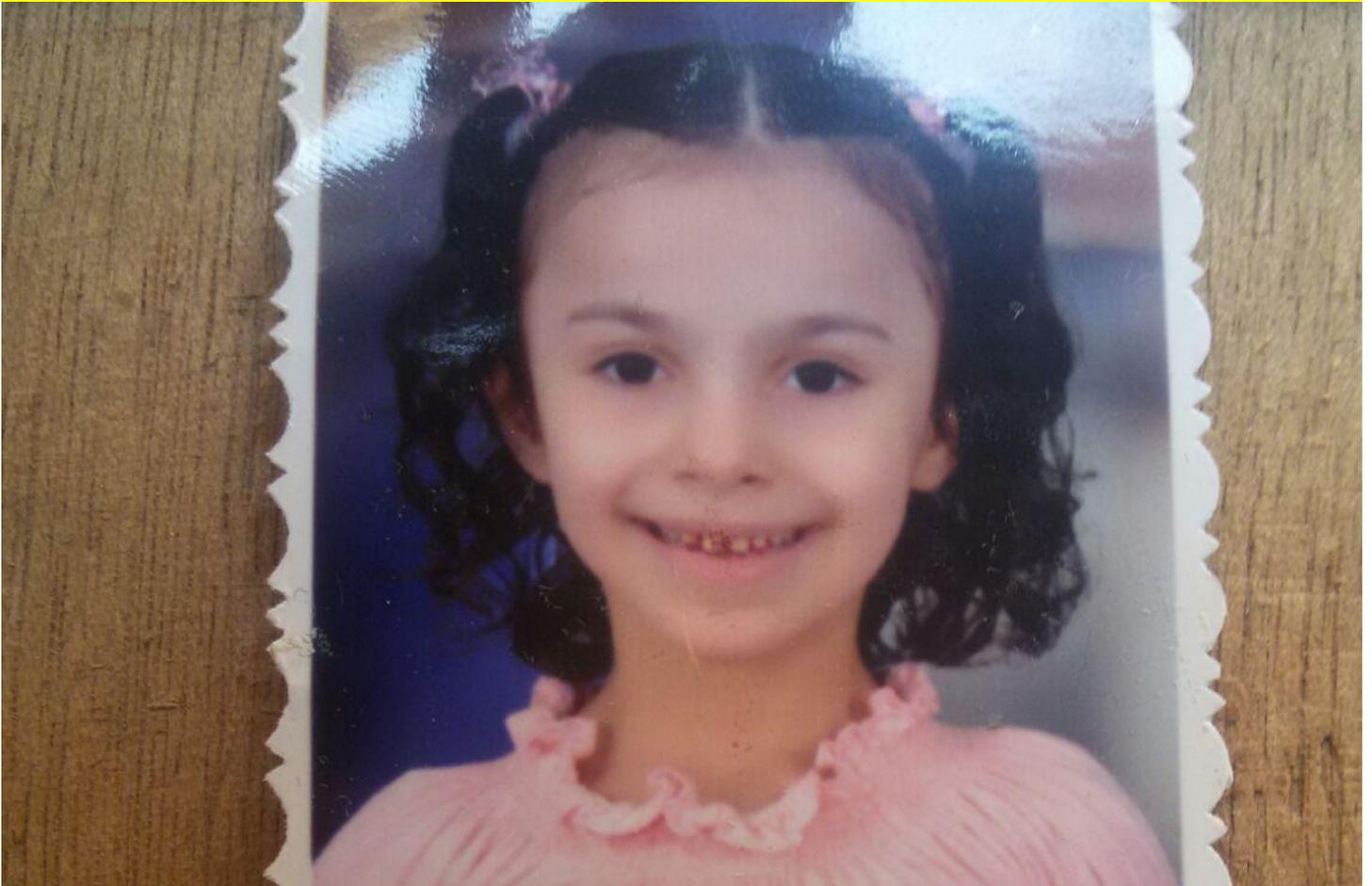


AUGUST 2015

# **SYRIA: VOICES IN CRISIS**

A MONTHLY INSIGHT INTO THE HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS IN SYRIA.



## **“MY DAUGHTER WAS BLEEDING TO DEATH BUT THEY WOULDN’T CALL AN AMBULANCE”**

**A REFUGEE FROM SYRIA IN EGYPT TALKS TO AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL’S EGYPT RESEARCHER MOHAMED ELMESSIRY ABOUT SEEING HIS DAUGHTER SHOT AND KILLED BY EGYPTIAN SECURITY FORCES**

Around 300,000 Syrians are currently living in Egypt. They fled from their own, war-torn country with the hope of finding safety for themselves and their families. But over the past two years, the situation in Egypt has become increasingly precarious and refugees from Syria have faced discrimination and human rights violations. They have been subjected to verbal attacks and threats in the media and by public figures, to arbitrary arrests and detention and, in some

cases, to forcible deportation to Syria or other neighbouring countries in the region. Their situation in Egypt has become so desperate that some take the huge risk involved in an irregular sea crossing to Europe.

The father of one such family told Amnesty International of their tragic attempt to leave Egypt:

A photo of eight-year-old Safaa, who died after being shot by Egyptian soldiers.  
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"I am a Syrian and I have been living in Alexandria, Egypt, for almost three years. My family is registered with UNHCR [the UN refugee agency] here. Life in Egypt is unbearable. There are nine of us: myself, my wife and seven children aged between two and 16 years. I cannot afford to live in Egypt with almost no employment and limited access to education and health care. So I paid smugglers to take me and my family to Europe.

"On the evening of 6 August 2015 I took my family and headed to Balteem [a coastal resort town in Egypt], where we met the smugglers. We were a group of 96 refugees and migrants including Syrians, Sudanese and Eritreans. There were also Egyptians among us. All of us were supposed to be taken to a boat that would transport us to Italy. However, this was on the same day that the Egyptian authorities were celebrating the opening of a new extension of the Suez Canal with intense security presence all over Egyptian coastal borders. No insect could have crossed the Mediterranean on that day; the police and army were everywhere.

"The smugglers took us to a highway from Balteem in cars and then dropped us near the shore in Borg El-Borolos at around 2am. We walked for around 30-45 minutes to reach the shore. Once we were close to the shore, around five military soldiers showed up from the right-hand side and shouted 'stop or we will shoot you'. We stopped and lay down on the ground but the soldiers shot several times in the air and towards us. Some people ran away then and escaped.

"Once the shooting stopped, I heard my eight-year-old girl, Safaa, screaming 'my heart, my heart'. I did not know what was happening. I removed the life jacket she was wearing. She had been shot through her stomach from the right side and [the bullet] came out her other side. I screamed and begged the soldiers to bring an ambulance to help my daughter. The soldiers did not call an ambulance and my daughter kept bleeding. They only called military officers on the radio to come to the scene. I begged the soldiers again and again but, instead of bringing an ambulance, one soldier kicked me.

"My wife stood up and shouted in the face of the soldiers for help and an ambulance. One soldier pointed a gun in her face and told her to sit on the

floor and started to shoot in the air to scare us. My two-year-old daughter panicked and started crying and trembling from the sound of shooting. The soldiers kept cursing us, insulting the children and women with words like 'whores'.

"I continued to scream for help while holding my child, and one soldier approached me and prodded her with his foot to see whether she was alive or dead. My daughter was dying and yet he was prodding her with his foot!"

The father was crying at this point and the conversation was stopped until he was able to continue.

"The soldier then told me 'you should thank Allah that you are all alive, you could have been dead now'. The soldiers called the military officers on radios to come to the scene once we were arrested, but it took them around three hours to arrive. During this time, my daughter was bleeding and rolling in pain in the sand. I wanted to stop her pain but I could not; at some point I thought of telling the soldiers to shoot her just to stop her pain. At around 5.30am, military officers arrived and took me and my daughter and another two injured people in a car to the hospital in Balteem, where my child passed away.

"Those of us who did not manage to escape were taken to police detention centres in Balteem. I was detained for 11 days alongside 48 others taken to police stations in Balteem. I was detained for 11 days alongside 48 others in Borg El-Borolos police station, including at least 15 children between the ages of six months and 18 years. Three days after my arrest I was questioned by the public prosecutor on irregular migration. The public prosecutor then ordered our release, but we remained in detention for another eight days pending clearance from the National Security Department within the Ministry of the Interior. I was released with the other Syrians on the evening of 17 August.

"On 13 August, the police took me out of prison to receive the body of my daughter and bury her. A police officer escorted me in public transport to the morgue where I received her body. There was no one from the military present to help with her burial or at least to mourn with me after they had killed her.

The police officer was kind and told me ‘don’t worry if there is no one to help us bury her, we will bury her ourselves with our own hands and I will do it with you’. We went to the mosque to say prayers for my daughter. People in the mosque were kind enough to help me take my daughter to the Muslim cemetery in Balteem, where we buried her. Her body was buried after six days in the morgue, contrary to what Islam says.

“The forensic authority conducted an autopsy. I have not seen the report of the forensic authority. I hear that the soldiers are being investigated and two of them are detained.

“Now my wife is either crying or sleeping all the time. She is traumatized and cannot face the reality of having lost her daughter. I cannot remove from my mind the image of my daughter dying in my hands while the soldiers left her bleeding for three hours without bringing an ambulance. I will never forget it.

“My children tremble whenever they see soldiers. My two-year-old daughter screams and trembles if she sees a soldier. She cannot forget the incident and is traumatized. My children do not even want to go to school. I cannot describe how we feel. Now I only want one thing from this world: to get out of this country. Life is unbearable.”

“I tried to reach many Egyptian TV channels and other Egyptian news outlets to raise my case but I was told that criticizing the Egyptian military is a red line that cannot be crossed.”

Amnesty International was informed that the Tanta Military Prosecutor has opened an investigation into the killing of Safaa, but was unable to obtain further details. The father told Amnesty International that he and his lawyer were denied access to the casefile. However they were told that the two soldiers were charged with “involuntary manslaughter”, rather than “murder or “voluntary manslaughter”. The offence of “involuntary manslaughter” is punishable under Egyptian law by a sentence of up to one year in prison. In some cases, judges issue a suspended prison sentence only.

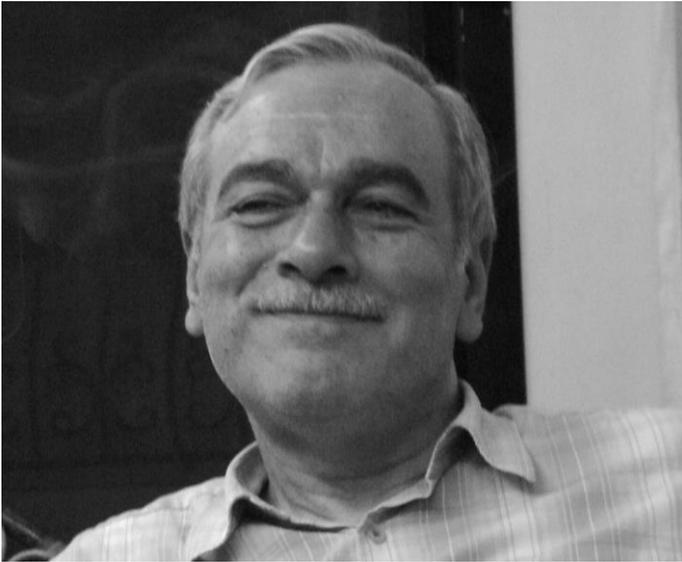
Amnesty International calls on the Egyptian authorities to conduct a prompt, thorough, independent, and impartial investigation by an ordinary civilian tribunal established by law, and bring those suspected of criminal responsibility to justice in a fair trial without recourse to the death penalty. The outcome of the investigations must be made public. Victims and society have the right to know the truth regarding the circumstances of the killing and the progress and results of the investigation.

Amnesty International is calling for over 380,000 of Syria’s most vulnerable refugees to be provided with safety and security through resettlement, humanitarian admission or other safe and legal routes in the world’s wealthiest countries by the end of 2016 in accordance with the principle of responsibility and burden sharing.

For updates on Amnesty International’s work on the situation in Egypt for refugees from Syria, Mohamed Elmessiry is on Twitter: @M\_Elmessiry

# CASE FOCUS: ABD AL-AZIZ AL-KHAYYIR, IYAS AYASH AND MAHER TAHAN

“WE WANT ABD AL-AZIZ, MAHER AND IYAS TO BE FREE, HEALTHY AND SAFE.”



Abd al-Aziz al-Khayyir ©Private

Abd al-Aziz al-Khayyir is a doctor, and was the head of the Foreign Affairs Office of the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB), a coalition of non-armed political groups and activists, including leftists and Arab nationalists, that was founded in 2011 and advocates a peaceful transition of power. Iyas Ayash and Maher Tahan also worked with the NCB.

All three men live in Syria's capital, Damascus. On 20 September 2012, Abd al-Aziz al-Khayyir and Iyas Ayash were on their way home from the airport having just arrived from a trip to China, where they had formed part of the NCB delegation, and Maher Tahan met them at the airport to take them back to their homes. The area surrounding the airport was under the control of the Syrian authorities, and there were a number of checkpoints. The delegation had been split into three cars, and while the first car proceeded through a checkpoint operated by Syria Air Force Intelligence, the car transporting Abd al-Aziz al-Khayyir, Iyas Ayash and Maher Tahan was stopped and the three men were taken away. Their families have not seen them since. They had been scheduled to participate in a political conference three days later.

Although SANA, the Syrian state news agency, reported that the men had been “kidnapped by members of a terrorist group”, they were seen at the Air Force Intelligence branch at al-Mezzeh, Damascus, shortly after their arrest. Nearly three years later, however, there has been no information about their whereabouts or health and the authorities continue to deny their arrest.

This is not the first time that Abd al-Aziz al-Khayyir has been arrested. He was previously detained by the Syrian authorities in 1992 during a mass arrest of leading members of the unauthorized Party for

Communist Labour, after spending a number of years in hiding from the security forces. He was sentenced to 22 years' imprisonment following a grossly unfair trial before being released in 2005.

Anwar al-Bunni, a Syrian lawyer and long-term friend of Abd al-Aziz al-Khayyir told Amnesty International:

“When we talk about Abd al-Aziz al-Khayyir, who are we talking about? Are we speaking of Abd al-Aziz the physician, whose major concern was the treatment of patients? He performed his job throughout the 10-year period he was in hiding and on the run from the security service and never stopped offering his services in spite of the danger to his freedom and his life if he were arrested. He performed his duties even during his time of detention and after he left prison and in spite of all his political responsibilities.

“Or are we speaking of Abd al-Aziz the political activist and leader in the Party for Communist Labour who dedicated his whole life to helping build the party, its ideals and work; or should we talk of Abd al-Aziz the detainee who spent 10 years of his life behind bars in Saydnaya Military prison where he left his mark on both prison life and the prisoners with his dedication and commitment in helping inmates improve their detention conditions and providing them with medical services with very simple medical instruments.

“Or should we talk about Abd al-Aziz the father who was unable to afford his family much time, though they were always on his mind. Or should we talk about Abd al-Aziz the son of the venerable Alawite family? He was a political activist from a community on which the al-Assad rulers have depended for much of their support.

“Dr. Abd al-Aziz al-Khayyir is all of these people. He has always been targeted by the regime and now he has been forcibly disappeared for the whole period since his arrest. He has never appeared in court, and has not been allowed any visitors or contact with his family and his fate is unknown. He has been hidden because the presence of a man like Abd al-Aziz al-Khayyir, with all his qualities, might be considered by some to constitute a threat.

“We are extremely worried for the life of Abd al-Aziz al-Khayyir, because the Syrian regime, which has had no compunction about committing heinous crimes, would not hesitate for a moment in adding a new crime to its record. We need to raise our voices very loudly saying we want Abd al-Aziz al-Khayyir and his colleagues, Maher Tahan and Iyas Ayash and all the detainees to be free, healthy and safe.”

Amnesty International believes that Abd al-Aziz al-Khayyir, Iyas Ayash and Maher Tahan are prisoners of conscience and calls for their immediate and unconditional release.

CAMPAIGNING

To join Amnesty International's campaign against enforced disappearances, please visit:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/get-involved/take-action/detention-in-syria>

For more information, please visit:  
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/010/2013/en/>

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