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SYRIA: VOICES IN CRISIS

A MONTHLY INSIGHT INTO THE HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS IN SYRIA.



“THE CONDITIONS ARE MISERABLE, IT’S A DISASTER” AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL SPEAKS WITH DISPLACED CIVILIANS FROM KOBANI NEAR THE SYRIAN-TURKISH BORDER

The mainly Kurdish city of Kobani, located near the Turkish border in Syria’s Aleppo governorate, has been under the control of the Kurdish People’s Defence Units (YPG), the armed group linked to the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), since July 2012. Clashes in the area between the YPG and the armed group calling itself the Islamic State (IS) date back to July 2013 but have drastically intensified in scale since July this year. Advances by IS have forced large numbers of civilians to flee their homes – mostly to Turkey, where as many as 200,000

refugees from Kobani sought sanctuary.

With the Turkish border now partially closed, hundreds of civilians from Kobani are stuck in the desolate areas near the border, some because they have been denied entry to Turkey. One such person is Shorash*, who told Amnesty International on 20 October: “I am in no-man’s land. We tried to enter Turkey, but I am not allowed. I don’t know why. I asked a Turkish border guard and still I am not allowed to cross into Turkey.”

Displaced Kobani residents stuck near the Turkish border. © Amnesty International

Shorash continued: “We have been here for 35 days. I left my village Tel Ghazal on the outskirts of Kobani when shelling by IS intensified. We fled looking for refuge at the border. Only some elderly people are believed to have stayed, those who cannot undertake the journey.

“The number of people who are at this point of the border is now between 300 and 400. Of the 700 that were here previously in this particular area, most have crossed into Turkey irregularly by paying the Turkish border guards. The humanitarian situation is very difficult, winter has started and we have nowhere to go. We are surrounded from the south, east and west by IS and in the north is the Turkish border.

“We do not have tents and people sleep without shelter. Some have cars in which they sleep. In the past few days, it rained and we suffered a lot. Many who left Kobani at the beginning of the clashes did not bring blankets because the weather was hot at the time. They thought they would return home soon, but now we cannot go back.

“We do not have access to medical support here. Last night a boy was injured from a landmine; we called an ambulance, which took two hours to come and take him to hospital inside Turkey. The same happened to another boy who waited for an ambulance for three hours.”

Others, such as Abu Ali*, do not want to enter Turkey as they would be forced to leave behind their car, one of the few possessions they have left. He told Amnesty International on 19 October: “I have been in no-man’s land with my wife and eight of my children for 35 days. The situation is terrible, there is no food and we are all hungry. I do not want to take my family to Turkey; that is why I have not tried to cross the border – because I cannot afford it and I do not know what will become of us there.

“If I go to Turkey I will have to leave my car and this is all I own at the moment.



Smoke rises over Kobani following US air strikes. © Amnesty International

We are poor. If we go to Turkey we will only end up living on the streets. We get some food sometimes but there is not enough and our children are freezing. Recently some Kurdish volunteers bought us blankets, but what use is one blanket in the cold and the rain? We mostly sleep in our cars; each family sleeps in their car. We need more support; we need food and basic medical care. We do not want to be refugees in Turkey; we want support for our people here and in Kobani, so that we can all go back home.”

Amnesty International also spoke to a Syrian humanitarian worker on 17 October, assisting people stranded at the border. He said: “We distribute any aid we have by hand; we take it to the border and there we give it to a team on the other side, composed of displaced people themselves, and they distribute it between themselves. The conditions are miserable, it is a complete disaster.

“The weather has changed and the rain has started. These people are living in the open air. This week we distributed 3,000 blankets but it is not enough; they are still completely exposed, they need a regular aid programme that meets their nutrition and health needs, and that is just not available. There are cases of children getting colds and fever; some have diarrhea, but what can we do?

“We hope to get financial support so we can start taking in medicine. Even with funding, it takes a very long time to get permission every time we want to distribute something; there is a lot of bureaucracy. The situation is desperate and people are risking their lives running across the border at night; if they get caught by the border guards they risk humiliation and beatings.”

*Names have been changed



Displaced Kobani residents stuck near the Turkish border. © Amnesty International

CASE FOCUS – KHALIL MA'TOUQ

“HIS ABSENCE IS INHUMAN, THE REGIME COULD NOT BEAR HIS COMPOSURE, THEY COULD NOT BEAR HIS SMILE.”



© Amnesty International

Human rights lawyer Khalil Ma'touq and his friend and colleague Mohamed Thatha were forcibly disappeared on 2 October 2012 while driving to their office in Damascus. Neither has been seen since and the authorities have provided no information on their fate or whereabouts. It is believed that they were arrested at a government checkpoint by members of the Syrian security forces. Fragments of information, including from released detainees,

suggest that Khalil Ma'touq was held at various government-run detention centres, including the notorious Palestine Branch of the Military Intelligence.

It seems that Khalil Ma'touq is being held due to his human rights work, and Mohamed Thatha due to his association with Khalil Ma'touq. Amnesty International therefore believes that both men are prisoners of conscience, who should be released immediately and unconditionally. There are particular fears for Khalil Ma'touq's wellbeing as he suffers from advanced lung disease and severe breathing difficulties.

One of Khalil Ma'touq's closest friends, Anwar al-Bunni, told Amnesty International:

“We were mates as lawyers. We spent time together on a daily basis for 25 years. He is a friend, colleague and brother, who has been defending political prisoners in Syria since the beginning of the 1990s. He is known for his smiley face, whatever the circumstances, and often it was his composure and smile that saved me from getting into trouble when working on the cases of

detainees. For me, he was a security wall to protect me from the often offensive behaviour of the authorities and we formed a stunning team.

“He supported me through my own long period of my imprisonment, he never stopped visiting me and we were in constant contact, continuing our work. He did not hesitate a minute if there was anything he could do for me or my family.

“His absence is inhuman, the regime could not bear his composure and could not bear his smile. My friend, your smile is still with me, you never left me.”

The sister of a former prisoner of conscience recalls how Khalil Ma'touq helped her family:

“Khalil Ma'touq supported us when he was working on the case of my brother... He defended my brother when many others lost interest in his case. Now Khalil himself is in prison, he who has always defended human rights. He deserves to be free.”

International human rights worker Maha Abushama agrees:

“No words could ever do Khalil Ma'touq justice. He is the selfless veteran human rights lawyer who defended Syrian prisoners of conscience from across the political, ideological, religious and sectarian spectrum without hesitation or prejudice. His genuine and admirable commitment to human rights work and beliefs, however, is only a fraction of what makes him outstanding. It is Khalil's unassuming humanity, warm smile, steady cheerfulness and witty sense of humour, even when the going gets tough, that engulfs and deeply touches whoever is lucky enough to have met him. I used to look forward to [our] conversations, despite their gloomy purpose, as often they evolved around documenting yet another human rights

violation. The warmth of his voice and the jokes he always managed to crack were such a source of comfort... Khalil, you are sorely missed.”

Journalist and political activist Ali al-Abdullah recalls meeting Mohamed Thatha for the first time: “[I saw] a man with long grey hair, with a small smile, a friend and neighbour of Khalil's who had volunteered to drive him from the suburbs to the centre of the city.”

He goes on to describe his friend Khalil as somebody who “deserves the solidarity of all of us because he has shown solidarity with arbitrarily detained people for years without discrimination. He was arrested because he sought the release of thousands of arbitrarily detained persons, arrested for his graceful smile and laughter. Freedom for Khalil Ma'touq and Mohamed Thatha and all prisoners of conscience. And freedom is coming.”



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CAMPAIGNING

To campaign for the release of all detainees held for the peaceful exercise of their human rights, please visit: <https://campaigns.amnesty.org/campaigns/conflict-in-syria>

For more information on the case, please visit:

<http://free-syrian-voices.org/khalil-matouq/>

MORE INFORMATION