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SYRIA: VOICES IN CRISIS

A MONTHLY INSIGHT INTO THE HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS IN SYRIA.



“REACHING FOR LIFE ON THE BOAT OF DEATH”

AHMED*, A PALESTINIAN REFUGEE FROM SYRIA, FLED PERSECUTION TO REACH SAFETY IN EUROPE

Life in the beehive

“Clashes between the government forces and armed groups turned my neighbourhood of Yarmouk, in Damascus, into a beehive. It was so busy. Yarmouk became a shelter for people fleeing from other neighbourhoods. I worked in humanitarian assistance and as a media activist, but the masked men working with the government didn’t differentiate between humanitarian workers and armed opposition fighters. I went into hiding when more and more of

my friends were arrested.

Time to escape

“I decided it was time to get out, and packed my bags. But where could I go? Palestinian refugees from Syria are not allowed to enter any country without a visa. I thought maybe Lebanon would be the least difficult option, but I heard that Palestinian refugees in Lebanon face discrimination and are deprived of many of their rights.

Italian navy vessel performing search and rescue activities in the central Mediterranean in August 2014. © Amnesty International

“Eventually, after consulting with some friends, I decided to travel to Egypt. With the help of a friend I got accepted at a university in Egypt. I left within days and all I could think about on my way to Damascus airport was my fear of being arrested.

“At the airport, an officer took my travel documents. I tried to look confident. The several minutes it took him to check my papers and let me through felt like years. I did not stop being afraid until the plane was in the air.

Egypt after the uprising

“When I arrived in Egypt, I started to have a sense of comfort. The country had gone through an uprising a year earlier, and I felt surrounded by activists who had successfully removed a dictatorship that symbolized oppression in the Arab world. In my mind were paintings of optimism and hope: ‘Here I can speak as I please, I can move around as I want, I can say no to injustice’. But my dreams quickly evaporated when I was faced with the new reality in Egypt.

“On the first day I arrived at university, I requested some paperwork to legalize my status in Egypt and get residency. I got the paper a few days later, and went to the Egyptian immigration office in Cairo to obtain my residency permit. After six officers had reviewed my papers, I went to the officer in charge and asked him why the process was taking so long. He gave me an unpleasant look and asked for my passport. I told him I do not have passport but an identity document because I’m a Palestinian refugee. He laughed and said “Palestinian Syrian! And you want residency!” He threw my documents on the floor and told me to come back in a month or two. This process was repeated throughout my stay in Egypt.

A ball of fire

“The Egyptian authorities treated us differently to Syrian refugees. The UN agencies dealing with refugees and Palestinian refugees specifically in

Egypt, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), could not help us. We were passed from one NGO to the next. Being a Palestinian refugee from Syria was like being ball of fire that everyone wanted to throw away.

“Despite living in poor conditions in Egypt, I felt a margin of freedom. I began to follow the problems that Palestinian refugees from Syria face in Egypt, and got in touch with various people and organizations to shed light on these. Palestinian refugees from Syria began being imprisoned, others had no way of supporting themselves and became homeless, and the deadly boat trips to Europe began.

“The margin of freedom narrowed further after the ousting of former president Mohamed Morsi on 3 July 2013. I was contacted by one official whom I had criticized, and I became concerned about my security. The situation became increasingly tense with curfews across the country and police everywhere. I was afraid that the official might take advantage of my situation, and realized that I had to leave Egypt.

“After several attempts, I obtained a visa to Turkey. It felt like I was leaving Egypt just as the country started to burn. Burning with it were all the human rights activists. The Turkish Embassy was full of peaceful activists hoping to flee.



Italian navy vessel rescued 1.004 refugees and migrants on 14 August 2014. © Amnesty International

“While I felt safe in Turkey, it was difficult to obtain a residence permit. It seemed that every doors was shut on me. My travel document was expiring, and the Syrian consulate refused to renew it.

Only the sea welcomed me

“After every country closed its doors to us Palestinian Syrians, the sea was our only option. I got on one of the boats of death. I had nothing left to gamble with except for my life. The first attempt failed, myself and a group of others fell victim to a smuggler. The boat was too small, and the captain and smugglers were armed. We refused to board the boat and they left with our money.

“I made another attempt to leave Turkey about a month later. They put us in a locked truck for about seven hours. We were standing on our feet, there was no place to move or to rest. After sunset, we got to a dirt road. It was long and bumpy, and we got off at an area between some trees. The smuggler told us that we had to wait here for a few hours, but a few hours stretched into days. Within two days, we had consumed most of our strength and our food.

“Eventually, in the middle of the night, we moved. Another small boat was waiting for us. Fatigued and fearful of returning, we got on board. We were about 140 people in a boat about 14m long. There was no place to move or lie down and no toilet. It took six days – I do not know how they passed. The drinking water finished on the fourth night. I did not eat anything, I felt very low.

The journey's end

“We arrived at a beach in Italy and got off the boat. By now we could not differentiate between land and sea, it seemed to us that the rocks were moving. We moved quickly for fear of being arrested, but the Italian police were a few steps



Refugees and migrants, rescued in the central Mediterranean by an Italian naval vessel prepare to disembark in Sicily in August 2014. © Amnesty International

ahead of us. We were arrested and the police insisted on taking our finger prints to register our first port of arrival as Italy, in order to register our asylum applications. Those who were unwilling were pressured harshly, some of us were hit.

“We spent three or four days in detention in Italy and then the nightmare ended. I was able to communicate with a number of journalists, human rights activists and friends. We were reunited with our families. Times are still tough but finally my many adventures have ended.

Yet Palestinians from Syria continue to experience injustice. Turkey routinely turns Palestinians without visas away from its borders, in violation of its own law, while Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq have generally closed their borders to Palestinian refugees from Syria, and Egypt denies them residency. Palestinian refugee camps in Syria are still vulnerable to bombardment. The siege of Yarmouk by the Syrian authorities continues, and the young and active are being targeted by parties to the conflict.

*Name has been changed

CASE FOCUS – RAZAN ZAITOUNEH AND COLLEAGUES

“WE APPEAL TO EVERYONE, EVERYWHERE, TO HELP US DISCOVER THEIR FATE AND FREE THEM FROM THEIR DARK PRISON”

Human rights lawyer Razan Zaitouneh, her husband and two colleagues have been missing since their abduction by unknown armed men in December 2013.

Razan Zaitouneh has defended political prisoners in Syria since 2001. She also worked with the Committee to Support Families of Political Prisoners in Syria and helped set up several organizations to document human rights abuses, including the Violation Documentation Centre (VDC).

Soon after the beginning of the crisis in Syria in 2011, Razan and her husband, peaceful activist Wa’el Hamada, were forced into hiding out of fear that they would be arrested by the Syrian authorities because of Razan’s activities as a human rights defender. Despite their precautions, Wa’el Hamada was detained by members of Syrian Air Force Intelligence in May 2011.

After Wa’el Hamada’s release in August 2011, he and Razan Zaitouneh relocated to Eastern Ghouta, near Damascus, under the control of armed opposition groups, where they continued to document human rights violations. Here, Razan Zaitouneh co-founded the Local Development and Small Projects Support Office to support civil society organizations in the area.

Razan Zaitouneh began to receive threats from armed groups in Eastern Ghouta. On the evening of 9 December 2013, a group of armed men arrived at the VDC office in Duma and abducted Razan Zaitouneh, Wa’el Hamada and their colleagues Samira Khalil, a peaceful activist, and lawyer Nazem Hamadi. Since the night of their abduction, no information about their wellbeing or whereabouts has surfaced.

Razan’s sister Reem Zaitouneh, told Amnesty International:

“Razan represents justice and called for it years before the revolution. She stuck with the hard choice to stay in her homeland, live in difficult circumstances and hide in constant fear of being arrested. When she moved to live

in one of the “liberated areas”, she helped to establish peaceful projects and services and address the difficult conditions created by the harsh siege imposed on Eastern Ghouta by the Syrian authorities. She did not want to abandon the people of Duma, and so she documented human rights violations by all parties to the conflict and wrote field reports under difficult and stressful conditions. In spite of all the opportunities Razan had to leave the country, she chose to stay and speak out against injustice and oppression.

“We don’t know where she is detained, with her husband and her colleagues who shared her struggle; none of our appeals have succeeded. To everyone everywhere, at home and abroad, please help us to discover their fate and free them from the dark prisons.”

Amnesty International believes that Razan Zaitouneh and her colleagues were abducted and arbitrarily deprived of their liberty as punishment for their legitimate activities as human rights defenders. Such conduct is prohibited by international humanitarian law and contrary to international human rights standards. We reiterate our call on the armed groups in control of the area and on the governments who support them to do everything within their power to ensure the release of Razan Zaitouneh, Wa’el Hamada, Samira Khalil and Nazem Hamadi.



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CAMPAIGNING

To join a Twitter action on 9 December calling for their release, please visit:
<http://free-syrian-voices.org/take-action/>

For more information on the case, please visit:
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE24/021/2014/en>

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