

JANUARY 2015

SYRIA: VOICES IN CRISIS

A MONTHLY INSIGHT INTO THE HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS IN SYRIA.



“THE CURSE OF THE WAR FOLLOWS ME...”

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL SPEAKS TO A SYRIAN MAN WHO WAS RESETTLED IN THE NETHERLANDS AFTER FLEEING SYRIA IN 2012.

"I have believed in peaceful Syrian activism since its inception, and am myself a peaceful activist and defender of the rights of social minorities. When the crisis started in Syria in 2011, I sympathized with the peaceful Syrian demonstrators and their calls for freedom and an end to all forms of corruption and political and social tyranny.

"We soon learnt however that the repressive Syrian government does not face crowds of peaceful demonstrators with debate or dialogue, but chooses to use repression and excessive violence against them. As a result of my involvement in the Syrian revolution from its very beginning,

Shatila, Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut, housing an unknown number of refugees from Syria, September 2014. © Amnesty International

"I faced problems and dangers that eventually led to the arrest of my boyfriend, Shirko*, by the Syrian security forces. Nearly one month later, I, too, was arrested. We were subjected to torture, including rape, by members of the security forces.

"I was released first, then Shirko after he had been detained for almost six months. We decided that we had to flee, as we both feared we would be arrested again if we stayed.

"While we were still in Syria, we faced more challenges; they still affect me to this day. I still remember those terrible weeks in Dayr al-Zor and I witnessed the humanitarian situation when the security forces and the Syrian army attacked the city. It was systematically bombed and destroyed. I can still smell death and hear the sounds of women and children fleeing from the shelling, from death.

"Later, I was able to leave the stricken city and escape to the city of Qamishly to meet Shirko, who is of Kurdish origin. We wanted to get to Lebanon to start a new life, but we faced different troubles in Lebanon, where all levels of society seemed to dislike and distrust Syrian people.

"My boyfriend Shirko and I suffered doubly due to the high cost of living in Lebanon and our difficulties finding employment, because we are Syrian, and because we are gay. Being gay has added to our difficulties and increased the harassment from some people in Lebanon. Looking

back, we experienced some of our worst moments in Lebanon, especially before we registered with the UN refugee agency, UNHCR.

"We waited a long time during the registration procedure until we finally received the UNHCR papers that gave us the right to stay in Lebanon. Then we were accepted for resettlement in the Netherlands. But still we waited. We ended up staying in Lebanon for nearly 14 months, all the time waiting to leave, to begin our journey to a new life.

"I still remember the final hours before our flight to Istanbul and then Amsterdam. I remember we cried a lot. We were happy and sad at the same time and we were very emotional at that moment. Even today as I write these words, I still can't believe that Shirko and I came to the Netherlands a year and a few months ago.

"I can't deny that my life has changed in a big way since the moment we arrived here, especially because we are gay. Our presence in a country like this, which respects gay rights, is very important for me. But despite all of these positive and emotional developments, not least in terms of security and stability, the curse of the Syrian war follows us and the ugly experiences of prison that my boyfriend and I faced still haunt us.

"I have the same ugly nightmares with the faces of those members of the security forces who raped me. This is our biggest problem here in the Netherlands: feeling

the effects of the shock and the painful horrible memories that still torture us. What also pains me sometimes is feeling guilty because I am still alive while so many of my friends and relatives have lost their lives in Syria. The fact that I live a normal life in the Netherlands with no bombings, no mortars, no explosions, increases those feelings that reproach my conscience. I am able to eat and drink whereas thousands of Syrians live in hunger and poverty and homelessness in refugee camps in countries neighbouring Syria. My family still lives in Syria and this only worsens my fear for them and their well-being.

"I feel that half of me lives here in the Netherlands and the other half of my body and soul lives there in Syria with my friends and family and relatives and with the thousands of starving and homeless Syrians and the refugees in the neighbouring countries."

* Name has been changed.

Amnesty International's #OpenToSyria campaign will be urging the world's richest countries to open up to Syria's most vulnerable refugees – more information is available on Storify from 4 February:

<https://storify.com/amnestyonline/open-to-syria>

CASE FOCUS – SALAHEDDIN AL-TABBAA

“ABOVE ALL, PLEASE HELP US GET SALAH BACK TO HIS FAMILY, FRIENDS AND HIS LIFE.”



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Salaheddin al-Tabbaa is a 22-year-old Syrian student who prior to his arrest lived in Damascus with his family. He was studying to be a dental technician. In his free time, he was volunteering with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, where he provided assistance to people in need.

On 5 September 2014, he was planning to visit Beirut, Lebanon, and was travelling in a taxi to the Syrian / Lebanese border. He was stopped by Syrian border officials, who told him that Military Intelligence Branch 227 had a warrant of arrest against him and that he would have to wait for officers from that branch to arrive. The following day, he was transferred from the border to Military Intelligence Branch 227. He has not been heard of since.



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A relative who lives outside of Syria told Amnesty International that Salaheddin al-Tabbaa's family have tried to obtain clarification about where he is held and what the reasons for his arrest are from Military Intelligence, other security forces and judicial authorities, but, until now, have not received any official information.

May*, a friend of Salaheddin al-Tabbaa, who lives outside of Syria has told Amnesty International:

"Salah is a people person – he likes everyone and everyone likes him. Since he was a teenager, he has volunteered for the Syrian Arab Red Crescent because of his passion to help others, regardless of who they are and whether they are his close

friends or he barely knows them. If he can assist someone, he will.

"He is ambitious but still social and considerate – he cares for his friends' feelings. He likes to have fun, he enjoys nights out and travelling. He is also part of the Ana al-Suuri [I am the Syrian] Association, which is part of the Syrian Exploration and Documentation Society, and organizes hikes and other outdoor adventure group activities.

"Salah is compassionate, he has a pure heart. Salah loves his family and he is a loyal and wonderful friend.

"Above all, please help us to get Salah back to his family, friends and his life."

* Name has been changed.



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CAMPAIGNING

For information about campaigning on this case, please visit:
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE24/053/2014/en>

For further information, please visit:
<http://free-syrian-voices.org/salaheddin-al-tabbaa/>

MORE INFORMATION