Disappeared for 10 Years in Syria

written by Stanley Heller | March 11, 2023

Everyone you see in the photo above was kidnapped by Assad forces on March 9-11 in 2013. Exactly 10 years ago. The mother depicted, Rania Alabbasi, was a dentist and Syria's most famous chess champion. In addition to her husband and their 6 children, the secretary of Ms. Alabbasi was also taken. Nothing has been heard about any of these people since they were arrested.

Years ago Amnesty International wrote this about the kidnapping, "The Syrian authorities have refused to give Rania's relatives any information about what has happened, or where they are now. Her sister Naila can only guess why they were arrested: 'She didn't belong to any opposition party or go to any demonstrations. She was always there to help others.'"

On 9 March 2013, members of the Military Intelligence arrived at the home of dentist Rania al-Abbasi, her husband Abdulrahman Yasin and their six children, Dima, Entisar, Najah, Alaa, Ahmed and Layan. On the security forces' first visit to the home, which is located in the Damascus suburb of Mashroua Dummer, they arrested Abdulrahman. The same security forces came back the next day and looted property, and the paperwork for their properties and Rania's clinic. The following day, they returned again and arrested Rania, the six children, and Rania's secretary, Magdoleen Alkade. At the time of their arrest, Dima, Entisar, Najah, Alaa, Ahmed and Layan were respectively 14, 13, 11, eight, six and two years old.

It's natural to ask what that did that angered the regime and lead to their arrest. That is to misunderstand Assad's Syria. People are arrested randomly just to keep the level of terror high. Perhaps someone wanted to steal their possessions or were angry for a personal slight. Or maybe there was a cruel rationality. Some relative may have said something years ago that was written down in a file and out of an "abundance of caution" a family gets swept up. Usually, families are too afraid to ask for the reason for an arrest. Asking questions can get you arrested yourself.

Why the children? What happened to them? None of the Syrian activists know. Are they in a prison or have they been given away as booty to a regime favorite who wanted a child? Syria's situation is reminiscent of Argentina in the 1970s when an estimated 500 babies of prisoners were given to families favored the by military dictatorship.

Hassan Alabbasi, Rania's brother lives in Canada. He has not forgotten Magdoleen Alkade, Rania's secretary. He writes, "Whenever we spoke to Magdoleen's mom to see if there was any news about Majdoleen, her voice would fade and choke on her tears. Magdoleen's mother was grieving for the apple of her eye. Sadly her mom passed away a few years ago due to grief and pain of not knowing where her daughter is after she was arrested by the regime. Magdoleen is today in her late thirties. If she is still alive that means she spent half of her life in Assad's prisons"

I interviewed Hassan a year ago. He described the first arrest that the of father of the family. The National Security Forces and the police came to the house. Hassan said, "They brought with him[sic] some young man, his age around 15, evidence of torture appeared on his face and he said [pointing to Abdulrahman] This guy gave me the money." Abdulrahman was taken away. They next day they brought him back, visibly shaken, He told his wife, "Please do what they ask you." They took all the family's assets, three cars, money, gold, jewelry, digital devices, legal documents and removed Abdulrahman. The next day Magdoleen came for a visit to comfort her employer and to try to figure out what to tell patients. The police raided and took Rania, Magdoleen and all the children.

What happened to the Alabassi family and Magdoleen Alkade is just one story of thousands. Another is that of Dr. Majd KamAlmaz is a Syria-American psychotherapist taken at a checkpoint in Syria in 2017. CNN reported on his case in 2020. Six years on and there is no word.

Maybe we can't do much for the prisoners right now, but at least we can remember them and talk about them to others. We should remember the hideous Saydnaya prison. We should educate ourselves about the case of Raghee al-Tatari, the longest-held Syrian political prisoner, imprisoned for 41 years, and about Mazen Al Hamada who was terribly tortured, eventually freed and who returned to Syria under a guarantee of safety and who has been disappeared for over 1,000 days.

The Alabassi family case is most on our minds this week because of the ten-year mark. Let all the cases of Assad's prisoners be remembered!

#FreeRania #SaveTheRest #Syrian_Prisoners_Matter #SaveTheSyrianDetainees