

EVAP Ep. 19_ Ahmad Helmi

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SPEAKERS

Ahmad Helmi, Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:12

Welcome to Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. I'm Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Research Director at the Global Centre. This podcast features one on one conversations with practitioners from the fields of human rights, conflict prevention and atrocity prevention. These conversations will give us a glimpse of the personal and professional side of how practitioners approach human rights protection and atrocity prevention, allowing us to explore challenges, identify best practices, and share lessons learned on how we can protect populations more effectively. I'm here today with Ahmad Helmi, Co-Founder and Manager of the Ta'afi Initiative. Thank you for joining us today, Ahmad.

A Ahmad Helmi 00:57

Thank you for hosting me.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:59

I just wanted to get started by asking as a Syrian human rights defender, what led you to founding your organization?

A Ahmad Helmi 01:07

That is a long story. I was an activist since the beginning of the Syrian revolution in 2011, and I had a I would call it a brother in arms, even though we were both non-violent people. We used to share every moment, used to cry after every demonstration we organized. I remember one of the demonstrations we organized when we had over 10,000 participants in that demonstration, we were standing over some car to watch the huge numbers, and we both cried in that moment. He's my best friend, and he was kidnapped, disappeared by the Syrian regime

in July 20, 2011, and I continue fighting for the same cause we were fighting for together: for a democratic Syria that respects human rights. He was taken to the Sinai prison, which is the worst prison on Earth at the moment. After that, I was myself detained or kidnapped and disappeared by the Syrian regime as well due to my non-violence activism, and I spent three years in prison. When I went out, the only concern that I had in mind is the fate of my best friend. His name is Islam, and I kept waiting for him. When I was persecuted again, by the Syrian regime, I had to flee to Turkey and all I had in mind is the moment when my best friend Islam will be released and will be out, and the fact that I need to prepare for his release. I started then I started the Ta'afi Initiative, which supports survivors of forced disappearance and torture to continue their activism, to continue fighting for justice and for human rights for Syria. So, I started this initiative on the premise that someday my best friend will be out and he will find the support that will allow him to peacefully continue fighting for Justice and Accountability.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 04:15

Your initiative describes itself as being survivor led and survivor centered, which you know, its sort of origins as you've explained are very personal to you. Can you tell us more about the mission and work of Ta'afi Initiative?

A Ahmad Helmi 04:34

Actually, myself, our team, our board , and all of our members are survivors of detention, forced disappearance and torture and you will hear me repeating those three crimes over and over again during this episode. Because in Syria, those crimes are interlinked inter-related, and they all happen together. So, almost every detainee has been disappeared or is going to be disappeared and a victim of of torture. So, our mission is to at some point, to achieve justice and accountability for Syria, to build a future for Syria that is built on the values of democracy and human rights, where no one will be subjected to enforced disappearance and torture to make sure that whatever happened to us, is not going to happen to anyone else in the future of Syria, and to give a meaning to the meaningless torture and atrocities that we have gone through.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 06:08

What does survivor centered justice look like to you?

A Ahmad Helmi 06:13

Generally speaking, in Syria, since the beginning of the revolution, whenever we hear the word justice, we always get referred to criminal accountability. Justice has always been for us a criminal accountability. But when we organize ourselves as a survivors movement, and when we initiated a movement of Families Association, we called ourselves the Truth and Justice Charter Group, which includes 10 Syrian families and survivors associations. When we started to think what justice is for us, we came up with a definition, different than only criminal accountability based on priorities that we see fits our satisfaction to build up toward justice and

toward a transitional justice. It's not one thing for us. Victims centered or survivors centered justice is something based on what those who need justice, those who who are the direct victims of the atrocities, how do they define justice? For us, the definition of justice is something like the battery on your phone, that you charge it, and you build it 1% by 1%, until you achieve the 100% right? So for us, justice constitutes many steps that starts with the first priority as in Syria to reveal the fate and whereabouts of the missing to stop torture, to stop the extrajudicial courts. While on the long-term, the changes in laws and practices and their guarantees of known reoccurrences and criminal accountability, reparation and remedy for victims. But it is all together to build the satisfaction of victims and for the Syrian society to move from conflict to a sustainable peace for Syria. And for me personally, justice, is to give a meaning to whatever I have gone through because if you think about it, you can't find the meaning of how can a human being torture another human being in this way, for that long of time, looking at them in the eyes, it doesn't make sense. You can't find an answer to why did this happen to me? Why is this happening for us as victims of torture, but when you know that your journey will lead to to guarantees that what happened to you will never happen to others, it will have a meaning. Whatever I have been through will have a meaning and I will be fine with it.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 09:54

You know it's so moving how you frame it as being not just about criminal accountability, it's about something much bigger and accountability looks like something that goes beyond just punishment of someone who committed a crime. Since you just mentioned the Truth and Justice Charter, I know that Ta'afi is one of the founding members, could you explain the background of the charter and how it was written and what it calls for?

A Ahmad Helmi 10:23

In 2019, Ta'afi and three other organizations, or families associations from the founders of the Truth and Justice charter, who were doing a campaign in Brussels and we were meeting the UN Syria Special Envoy, at the beginning of his mandate, Mr.Geir Pedersen and we found that there is a kind of synergy between us, we kind of finish each other's sentences. So, for example, when I talk about what is happening inside the prisons, Maryam Hallaq, from Caesar Families Association, she finishes my sentences talking about what the families are facing outside the prison. So, we draw a holistic picture of what is happening in those dungeons in Syria, and since that campaign, we started to coordinate with each other and to communicate with each other even more. We came to a point that we said we don't need to discuss our asks and our priorities period to each campaign and each meeting, why not set our vision for justice or our demands, you know, we started to assemble our demands paper. It evolved during fights, conflicts, arguments, discussions, and the document evolved into what we call now the Truth and Justice Charter, and our relationships evolved into becoming one kind of family, you know. We started as five associations of families and survivors and now we are 10. We have this kind of bond, you know, we have this unbreakable bond, because we share the same hopes, we share the same pain. I can relate to whatever a mother in one of the associations is feeling toward her disappeared loved one, and she can relate to whatever I have been through. So it evolved and we came up with this final form of the Truth and Justice Charter, which is our vision for future justice and accountability, and a transitional justice process for Syria. What we knew we brought in that charter is we set our priorities for Justice and Accountability. We said that

our first and main priority is to reveal the fate and whereabouts of the disappeared in Syria, and to immediately stop torture. We set a short-term justice, a midterm justice and long-term justice. We know that criminal accountability doesn't happen overnight. Guarantees of non-recurrences, changes in laws and practices, it takes time, you know, and memorialization, it takes time. So that is on the long-term, we work on it while on the short-term and on the medium term, which also doesn't happen overnight, but we want to know the fates and whereabouts of our beloved ones and to stop torture immediately. Yeah, so this is how the Truth and Justice Charter evolved. And now we work on different campaigns on long-term campaigns. Together with together we came up with a proposal on the international community to establish a new institution that will work on revealing the fate and whereabouts of the missing which is our first priority, and we have been campaigning for that for almost three years.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 14:54

I know that the idea for a mechanism like that has been endorsed by the UN Commission of Inquiry, as well, as recently a UN Secretary General's report, are you hopeful now that such an institution will be established? And what do you hope that kind of mechanism will look like and do?

A Ahmad Helmi 15:16

I mean, hope is a dangerous concept. Because I don't know, like, you feel like hope will keep you waiting and hoping maybe I'm wrong, but for us, it's not a hope. It's a mandatory thing and we will not stop until we get there. There is something known about families and victim's associations: that we are hard headed, and we are annoying, and we like for a mother who kept fighting to find the fate of her son, she will never stop like, Fadwa Mahmood she have been waiting to know any answer about her son and her husband for 10 years now, or 11 years now, and she never lost hope. So, for her it's not hope, it's a fight that will end by us getting what we want. So yeah, it's not hope it's going to happen sooner or later, we have the international interest and the attention and we have the momentum now, and we have paved the road towards building this institution. What we are still waiting for is only the technicalities of UN member states to have to come together and to table a resolution that will create such an institution. When it comes to what we're going to have to do, to be honest, after 12 years of the Syrian conflict, there is almost zero effort that has been done on the search. The Syrian civil society have made a huge effort and advancement on the criminal accountability front, and we have seen that in practice and test within the Koblenz trials where the German court sentenced a mid-range Syrian official, a general who used to torture people and used to commit crimes against humanity. That proves that we will not we can not only hold the biggest criminals accountable for their crimes, not only the smallest ranks, but we have enough evidences to hold the whole system accountable to their crimes. Yet, on the front of the search, there is almost zero effort that have been done, and we hope or we are willing to make this institution to start the search to start the process of the search to provide answers to the families, to track those disappeared and to provide answers to the families in the coming years. It is not going to happen also overnight, nothing in the mentality of justice happens overnight, we know it takes time, but we needed to start at least.



J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 18:59

You made reference to you know, the fact that you've joined together many groups of families and with this need for a search, I'm wondering if for those who aren't familiar with the many layers of the conflict in Syria, can you give us a sense of the scope of how many people are missing and detained and potentially being subjected to torture?

A Ahmad Helmi 19:27

I mean, there is a very shy number, but it was based on documentation by the Syrian Network for Human Rights documentation organization. They have documented 120,000 disappeared in Syria and this is the number of the disappeared at the moment that they could document. We know that the numbers are even more than that, way more than that. But on the answer to question of the number have disappeared, not the number of the those who have been subjected to torture, because there are also 1000s of survivors who have been subjected to torture. So the numbers skyrockets with that question, and this scale of disappearance is unprecedented worldwide since, the World War II, and it's the most complicated issue in Syria. It's the biggest barrier to any future peace talks or the current peace talks in Syria.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 21:02

As we enter the 13th, year of the crisis in Syria, what are your reflections on the past 12 years, and particularly the role of the international community in the Syrian conflict?

A Ahmad Helmi 21:18

12 years is long time, and if you measure it with the conflict time, it's even longer. You know, I've spent three years of my life in prison, for me, it feels like 10 years. So if you asked me about my age, now, I feel like I'm 40, and I think I have the wisdom of a 20 years old person. But 12 years is a long time, and the international community, to be honest, have done nothing but financial support. We haven't seen any real political willingness to end the conflict, and we know that the international community have made the lots of donations and funding programs to Syria. But you know, funds without political will doesn't end a conflict, and at some point, I thought that this is the capacity of the international community. You know, this is their limitation. But when the Russian invasion of Ukraine happened, we saw that this is not the real limitation. We saw what the best practice is, and we were shocked by the reaction of the international community. I'm very happy with the reaction on the Russian Ukrainian conflict, but it is disappointing to see that is not the common practice, yeah, it's devastating.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 23:34

Absolutely. I mean, it's incredibly frustrating to see everything that you've been told for a decade can't happen suddenly, magically, like moving mountains over the course of, you know, two months when Ukraine first started. I can say that it's frustrating to us from the perspective of an atrocity prevention organization, and I can't even imagine what it's like as a survivor of atrocities, and someone who's actually, you know, living through a situation where atrocities are still ongoing, your family and friends are still affected and still, there's no movement. You

know, I think one thing we've seen a lot throughout the Syrian conflict, which maybe speaks to what you're saying about there's been a lot of funding but no political will, to actually do much is this sort of great power politics play out the Syrian conflict. You know, a lot of what we've witnessed from the international community and the lack of action often comes from these tensions within the Security Council, and I think one of the problems with that perspective is that there aren't a lot of voices of survivors in Security Council conversations. So I'm wondering how can the international community better support Syrian survivors from your perspective and the actual Syrian populations who are most affected by this conflict?

A

Ahmad Helmi 25:18

I mean, we need to real political will to end the conflict, and we need the international community to see the Syrian conflict, not as a conflict a way, way far, far away, you know, not a conflict in the Middle East, where the conflicts always happens. The devastating outcomes of the Syrian conflict have directly influenced the whole world, you know, because the impunity that Russia has enjoyed after the atrocities it did in Ukraine in 2014 and in Syria, since 2015 have helped spread the culture of impunity in the region, and around the world, and that made it easy for Russia to know that they can invade Ukraine, and they can commit crimes against humanity, and nothing would happen. Now we see the results in every single household, you know, no one is not affected by the gas prices, by the food crisis by every outcome of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and you can't de-link it from the Syrian conflict. It's the same mentality and it's just a 123 equation. So how would they support? To be honest, on a short-term, the support of the new international institution that we've been calling for is essential, it will provide a short-term and long-term contribution to satisfaction to justice, to end the conflict in Syria. While on the long-term, criminals should know that impunity does not exist, accountability will happen someday. At the moment, that is not the case. You remember how I started when I told you why I started this Ta'afi Initiative to support my friend and those who I have left behind in prison, we call it Ta'afi because it means recovery, because those who are still in prison, the chances for Syria to recover from the 12 years of conflict. My best friend Islam, who I started the Ta'afi Initiative to support him when he is out, and in 2017 I met my girlfriend, and we were planning a wedding and I was postponing my wedding waiting for him to get out. In 2018, we received the call saying that the Syrian regime have issued a certificate for Islam, and he didn't get out, and we still don't have his remains. After seven years of waiting for him, it appeared that he died in 2013 and we only knew by chance, by coincidence after 5 years after his execution. So, the establishment of the new institution is not a luxury, it's essential for Syria.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 29:44

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