



Rethink Rebuild Society

The voice of the Syrian Community of Manchester

PRESS RELEASE

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Is It My Father-In-Law? Dr Alhamwi speculates as to whether a body in one of the Caesar photographs is that of his father-in-law.

Since the Syrian Association For Missing And Conscience Detainees began publishing pictures of over 11,000 detainees tortured to death in Syria (also known as Caesar's files) about a week ago, Rethink Rebuild Society's director Dr. Haytham Alhamwi has been receiving uninterrupted communications from friends and family speculating as to the identity of those photographed. So far, he has already identified 12 of the bodies. Most despairingly, however, Alhamwi received a phone call on Tuesday from a contact asking him whether a certain picture within these files could be that of his 71-year-old father-in-law who was imprisoned by the Syrian regime in 2011 and has not been heard from since.

Because of the severe degree of torture and mutilation undergone by many of the detainees depicted in the photographs, it has been extremely difficult to make a determinate identification of them. In this case, Alhamwi did not believe that the man in the picture was his father-in-law, although he could not say for certain. Even his brother-in-law in Syria could not make a determinate decision.

Once home, Alhamwi showed his wife Asmaa the picture, but, so as not to alarm her, asked her if she thought it resembled another acquaintance of theirs. Asmaa stared long into the picture without commenting, finally pronouncing that it was 'probably not' him, but maintained a long silence after that. It was as if she understood that her husband was in fact asking her to identify whether this man was her father.

Over 55,000 photos of detainees - with visible signs of torture and mutilation - were smuggled out of Syria in 2014 by a man who goes by the name Caesar. Caesar presented these photos to the FBI, which began a process of checking them against facial recognition software to determine their identities. In publishing these photos, however, the human rights group is hoping that friends and family all over the world can help in identifying these individuals.

As Syrians across the world have been poring through these published photos, Alhamwi claims that the grief and anxiety is two-fold. 'First,' he says, 'there's the pain that you go through when you identify a family member or friend. It's natural to hold onto a tiny strand of hope that your father, brother, or son is still alive, even if they've been missing for years. Second, though, there is the anxiety and pain that you go through when you're not sure whether one of the pictures is of a family member or friend because of how distorted the body is. That uncertainty of not knowing whether your relative is alive or dead is torture in itself.'

Alhamwi was himself a political prisoner under the Syrian regime between 2003 and 2005. Reflecting upon his experience as a political prisoner, and in light of the recent disseminated pictures of the thousands of detainee deaths, he claims: 'Those photos remind me of the tens of horrible stories I heard when I was in prison from other political prisoners about torture to death in Assad's prisons in 1980s and 1990s.'

Information and pictures of 12 individuals both before and after are available through the Rethink Rebuild Society.

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For further information and press enquiries, please contact 07769704656, or email: advocacy@rrsoc.org

Rethink Rebuild Society has established itself as a non-profit organisation that acts as an umbrella for the Syrian community in Manchester, and endeavours to clarify the Syrian cause to its audience in the UK and the wider public.