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Middle East

Solidarity with the resistance of political prisoners in Syria, Iran and throughout the Middle East

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The repressive policies and actions of authoritarian regimes to crush popular movements and any forms of resistance have increased the number of political prisoners throughout the region during the past few years. The activists and revolutionaries imprisoned nevertheless do not kneel in front their jailers despite the torture and repressive conditions of detention. From their cells, when they can, they continue their struggle for democracy, social justice and equality. In this article, I want to show our solidarity with ALL the political prisoners throughout the region and affirm once again that their struggle is our struggle as well; that the destinies of the people of the region is linked and it's only through increasing collaboration between the people of the region that we can challenge the authoritarian regimes and their international and regional backers.

Syria

In Syria, an insurrection began in early May in the Hama prison and prisoners took control of the prison. The revolt began after an attempt by the police to transfer five prisoners sentenced to death by a extra judiciary military court from Hama's prison to Sadnaya's prison, which is known for its extreme violence against detainees. The prisoners in the "terrorism" wing refused to hand the five detainees, and took in hostage nine police officers who had come to take them. The revolt started from there. The rest of the prison joined the insurrection and the prisoners removed the doors of the quarters and opened them for each other, taking control of the whole prison. The prison has about 1,200 prisoners, including 850 political prisoners arrested for their opposition to the regime. The regime tried to storm the prison Friday, May 6, using tear gas and rubber bullets to try to end the rebellion, but without success. Negotiations then resumed with the prisoners who are demanding the release of political prisoners. Thirty have already been released by the regime last week. The latest news (Monday May 9), a tentative deal has been reached to end the strike in the Hama that would eventually lead to the pardon and release of those held without charges, in other words the political prisoners.

This resistance is particularly impressive as regime's prisons are well known for their violent and repressive actions. We don't forget as well the hunger strike in 2013 launched by a group of female detainees in the prison of Adra, located in the outskirts of Damascus,, Syria, in response to the negligence of their cases and the absence of approval of their respective trials. In their open letter they demanded "a solution to their situation, six months after their cases were neglected, against the regime's own counterterrorism tribunal rules. Detainees are denied the right to see their families. They are now being punished and forced to eat. As Syrian citizens, we hold the regime and its judicial and security institutions accountable for the life of the female prisoners of Adra and all prisoners of conscience in Assad's jails and demand their immediate release".

Security forces actually systematically tortured and otherwise ill-treated detainees with impunity; thousands of detainees died as a result of torture and other ill-treatment since 2011. Regime forces held thousands of detainees without trial, often in conditions that amounted to enforced disappearance. Tens of thousands of people remained subjected to enforced disappearance, some since the outbreak of the popular uprising in 2011. They included activists of the regime as well as family members detained in place of relatives wanted by the regime.

At the same time, we also demand of course the release of all political prisoners in the jails of religious fundamentalist forces and others, such as figures of the democratic revolution in Syria Samira al-Khalil, Razan Zaitouneh, Wael Hamadeh and Nazem Hammadi who were abducted in Douma, Eastern Ghouta by most probably

the Army of Islam or Father Paolo and Firas al-Haj Saleh abducted by Daech.

It has been estimated that 65,000 people were forcibly disappeared in Syria between March 2011 and August 2015, many either killed or detained in appalling conditions, mainly security prisons established by the Assad regime in Damascus.

The release of all the political prisoners in Syria is a key demand of the popular movement for any possible political transition.

Iran

On April 29, 2016, Jafar Azimzadeh, a leader of the Free Union of Iranian Workers, and Esmail Abdi, a leader of the Iranian Teachers Trade Association, started a hunger strike to protest their imprisonment and long sentences on the charge of sedition, and to call attention to the plight of workers and school teachers. In June 2015 Abdi was held while attempting to travel to attend the World Congress of Education International, a body that links together education unions in 171 countries. Subsequently he started serving a six-year sentence on the charges of “organising and participating in illegal gatherings” and “propaganda against the system.” Azimzadeh was arrested in the course of his trade union activity and sentenced to six years’ imprisonment “with a further two-year ban on all political and media activity. They concluded in an open letter :“The exploiters are putting us in prison by pretending that their security is the same as the country’s national security. Therefore, we declare that, in protest against below poverty line wages and salaries, prohibition of right to strike, the lack of transparency by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) regarding the infringement of our rights by the Iranian regime and the absence of legitimate reasons for incarcerating protesters, we are beginning an unlimited hunger strike on April 29”. On May 14, Abdi was released on a \$100,000 bail.

Mahmoud Beheshti Langroudi, the imprisoned spokesman of the Iranian Teachers’ Trade Association, who had also started a hunger strike on April 20, was hospitalized on May 8, 2016 after falling seriously ill. He was released on May 12. Beheshti Langroudi was sentenced to five years in prison in June 2013 for “colluding against national security” and “propaganda against the state”.

The Iranian regime and the bosses have been attacking and imprisoning workers who have been trying to establish independent trade unions. They systematically dismiss spokesperson of strikers and arrest them for “economic sabotage crimes.”

In addition, the regime curtails freedom of expression, association and assembly. It arrests and imprisons journalists, human rights defenders, women’s rights activists, student youth, members of national minorities such as Kurds, Azaris, and Arabs, members of the Baha’i faith (a religion that is banned in Iran), people who convert to Christianity and others who voice dissent. Torture and other types of ill-treatment of detainees are also common and are committed with impunity.

There is no accurate estimate of the number of political prisoners in Iranian jails but there are thousands.

Palestine

The resistance of the Palestinian people have remained steadfast despite the continuing war of the Apartheid, settler colonial and racist state of Israel. At the end of February 2016, 6,204 Palestinian security detainees and prisoners, including more than 422 Palestinian minors, were held in Israeli prisons, which constitute the highest number since the end of July 2010.

Against the Israeli authoritarian state and repressive prisons system, many Palestinian prisoners have adopted the tactic of hunger strikes, which has a long history in Palestinian resistance, despite many attempts by the Israelis to try to put an end to this strategy.

Few recent examples: on February 26, after completing 94 days of hunger strike, Palestinian journalist Mohammed al-Qeeq suspended his strike following an agreement in which al-Qeeq's administrative detention will end on 21 May 2016. He will be treated in Israeli hospitals before that time, and he will receive family visits that have been denied up to this point. Recently, it was Sami Janazreh, who after 69 days of refusing food, suspended his hunger strike on May 11, for one week, following an Israeli military court's decision to postpone his appeal hearing for another week. For the next seven days, Janazreh will relax his hunger strike to ingest liquids. Many other cases exist.

The steadfastness, known as "sumud", continues to prevail among Palestinians.

Egypt

For the past several weeks, with the new increase in popular protests from various sectors of the society, hundreds of activists were arrested and imprisoned, including lawyer and activist Haitham Mohamedain, member of the Socialist Revolutionary Movement, by the Sissi dictatorship. On Saturday the 14th of May, 152 protesters were handed sentences of two to five years in prison for participating in protests on April 25. The activists arrested recently joined the tens of thousands of political prisoners and the hundreds of victims of "enforced disappearances" in recent years, not to mention the massacre of the Rabia square (August 2013) that killed more than a thousand victims linked to the Muslim Brotherhood. Security forces arrested actually 11,877 members of "terrorist groups" between January and the end of September in 2015, according to the Assistant Minister for Public Security at the Ministry of the Interior. The crackdown targeted mainly members of or perceived supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, but also regime critics and leftist and liberal opposition activists. The authorities had previously stated that they had arrested at least 22,000 people on such grounds in 2014. In some cases, detainees in political cases were held in prolonged detention without charge or trial. By the end of the year 2015, at least 700 people had been held in preventive detention for more than two years without being sentenced by a court.

At least 3,000 civilians stood trial before unfair military courts on "terrorism" and other charges alleging political violence. Many, including leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, were tried in mass trials. Military trials of civilians are fundamentally unfair.

Numerous campaigns of hunger strikes and different forms of resistance were nevertheless launched by the political prisoners to protest against their detentions and its conditions such as in March 2016 when dozens of detainees at the Aqrab maximum security prison in Egypt were on hunger strike.

Bahrain

In an interview with RT Arabic, Bahrain's Foreign Affairs Minister denied media reports stating there are political prisoners in Bahrain. He declared that Bahrain does not have a policy of "silencing voices" and that "there are no

prisoners of conscience in Bahrain.” Foreign Affairs Minister Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa asserted, “Those who have been imprisoned are individuals involved in the murder of policemen and terrorist bombings”. Well this is quite far from the reality as opposition leaders and human rights activists remained imprisoned, while hundreds of people were convicted in unfair trials on charges of rioting, illegal gathering or committing terrorism-related offences. Many defendants in terrorism cases were convicted largely on the basis of “confessions” that they said interrogators had forced them to make under torture; some received death sentences.. Torture and other ill-treatment remained common. Scores were sentenced to long prison terms after unfair trials. Authorities stripped at least 208 people of their Bahraini nationality.

Ibrahim Sharif, former secretary general of National Democratic Action Society, was imprisoned recently once again for a speech made in July 2015, just a month after being freed after serving over four years in prison for his role in 2011 protests, in which he said that opponents of the government engaged in peaceful protests while authorities used violence to put down demonstrations. ?In our case, there is no going back to building a wall of fear.

Zainab al-Khawaja, an activist since the first days of the Bahraini popular uprising was sent to prison in March 2016, once again, with her 17-month-old son, and faces up to three years for tearing up a picture of King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, the country’s dictator. She was on hunger strike in previous detention. Recently in a letter, she wrote “if nothing changes for the people of Bahrain, then my staying in jail or release is not of great consequence,” while adding that “I am the daughter of a political prisoner and the mother of a political prisoner. But my story was never about my family, and the pain I carry is not the pain of a family but the pain of a people”. Al Khawaja is the daughter of Abdulhadi Al Khawaja, former president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, subjected to life imprisonment for his leading role in the 2011 protests advocating for peaceful and democratic change. Before her imprisonment, Zainab drew attention to the condition of her father’s hunger strike and attempted to visit him in Jaw Prison in August 2014. Her sister, Maryam Al Khawaja, has been sentenced in absentia on politicized charges and advocates for democracy and human rights in Bahrain from abroad.

Political prisoners used the hunger strike arm on many occasions since the beginning of the uprising in 2011. In February 2012, 14 leading political prisoners began refusing food after reporting systematic abuses in Bahrain’s jails, including beatings, torture and the use of tear gas. The number of strikers then increased to nearly 250, with detainees demanding fair access to legal proceedings and respect for human rights.

Last year, blogger and human rights activist Dr Abduljalil Al-Singace, who has been in prison in Bahrain since 2010, went on hunger strike to protest the treatment of prisoners in Bahrain. Al-Singace, suffers from polio in his left leg and various other health issues, was held in solitary confinement in a windowless room in Al-Qalaa hospital and has denied any form of media or writing materials. Al-Singace’s hunger strike lasted for 313 days.

Saudi Arabia

The Saudi kingdom continues to arrest, prosecute and imprison political activists (such as bloggers and other online commentators, political activists, members of the Shi’a minority, and human rights activists and defenders, including women’s rights defenders), including under the 2014 anti-terror law, often after unfair trials. Torture and other ill-treatment of detainees remained common. Unfair trials continued before the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC), a special court for hearing terrorism-related cases, with some trials resulting in death sentences.

Blogger Raif Badawi continued to serve a 10-year prison sentence following his conviction in 2014 for “insulting Islam” and violating the cybercrime law, including through the creation and management of the Free Saudi Liberal Network website. He was also sentenced to be flogged. He was on a hunger strike in December after being

transferred to a new, isolated prison.

Human rights defenders are still the targets of Saudi repression. They are arrested and prosecuted under anti-terrorism legislation and other laws. Those detained, on trial or serving prison sentences included members and activists of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), a group founded in 2009, which the authorities never licensed and then banned in 2013. At the end of the year, seven members of ACPRA, which campaigned for the release or fair trial of long-term political detainees, were serving prison sentences of up to 15 years imposed on vague, overly broad charges. Two were free pending the outcome of their trial, one was still detained without any charge or trial, and one had served his sentence but was yet to be released.

The monarchy does not permit as well the existence of political parties, trade unions or independent human rights groups, and the authorities continues to arrest, prosecute and imprison those who set up or participated in unlicensed organizations.

This is without forgetting the execution in January of Shi'a Muslim cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, a leader of the popular demonstrations against the Saudi kingdom started in 2011 in the eastern regions of the country populated in its great majority of Shi'a population.

18,000 foreign migrants are also currently in detention in Saudi Arabia

Turkey

The AKP government has engaged a war against the Kurdish popular resistance and all democrats and members of the civil society, including journalists, activists, human rights lawyers, etc... in the country opposing its authoritarian practices.

According to data released by the Association of Human Rights and the Foundation of Human Rights in Turkey, 173 civilians were victims of arbitrary executions and 226 others injured by the police or the army in Turkey during the year 2015. In addition to these civilian massacres, the Turkish authorities are trying to stifle the political will of the Kurdish people by arresting activists and political representatives. A recent report from the Association of Human Rights in Turkey stated that this political repression resulted in over 6,000 arrests of Kurdish activists in 2015, of which nearly 1,300 were imprisoned.

From these 1,300, 17 included mayors and many other local elected officials. More than 10,000 political prisoners, including more than 9,000 Kurds, exist in Turkish jails,

Images also circulated on the internet showing the naked and disfigured body of female PKK member Kevser Eltürk (Ekin Wan) being paraded in the streets of Varto in the eastern province of Muş, after clashes with state forces in August. Another photograph showed the body of Hacî Lokman Birlik being dragged behind an armoured police vehicle in the southeastern province of Diyarbakır in October. The reported autopsy indicated that the man had been shot 28 times.

Hunger strikes in the Turkish prisons has been used often by Kurdish political prisoners, but also other democrats and progressists.

Conclusion

We could continue with our unfortunately long list of political prisoners in the region and their resistance from their prison cells. Hunger strikes unite the prisoners across the borders in refusing to submit to their detentions conditions or and act in solidarity with other prisoners.

We have also seen in the past solidarity campaigns between political prisoners across countries such as in 2014 when the Palestinian Prisoners' Club announced the decision of Palestinian prisoners from Israeli Gilboa prison to participate in the relief campaign for the population of Yarmouk refugee camp in Syria starved by the Assad regime forces, by paying a sum of 500 Israeli Shekel taken from their pay, which account to nearly \$ 140.

Zeinab Al-Khawaja wrote: "As for people who are trying to help anyone who is oppressed, I send my love and gratitude from behind bars."

We say that we send our solidarity and love to all political prisoners in the Middle East and the world struggling for democracy, social justice and equality, in other words a better future for all. Your resistance is an inspiration for all of us...

Freedom for all political prisoners!

May 15, 2016

[Syria Freedom Forever](#)