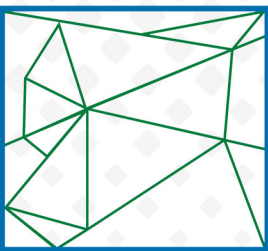


Syria/Kobani: Drowning and Missing Refugees off the Algerian Coast



سوريون
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For Truth
& Justice



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Syria/Kobani: Drowning and Missing Refugees off the Algerian Coast

On 3 and 4 October 2022, two boats carrying asylum seekers, including Syrians, sank. At least 18 refugees died while six others remain missing

In Kobani/Ayn al-Arab, in Aleppo's eastern countryside, 12 Kurdish families are anxiously waiting for the bodies of their loved ones to arrive home. The victims lost their lives in two refugee boat-drowning incidents off the Algerian coast on 3 and 4 October 2022.

Gripped by equal concern and anticipation, other families continue to seek information about six relatives, who went missing on the first day and whose fate remains unknown.

While reporting the drownings, media outlets presented contested information about the two tragic trips. This contested information has led families to suspect the situation, and question if there are criminal motives behind the deaths of their sons – and even whether the boats that carried their relatives to presumably safer areas were deliberately sunk.

These doubts and questions stem from the silence of Algerian authorities, which have yet to make a statement regarding the drowning cases, and so far have only authorized the relocation of one out of the 12 bodies recovered.

In this brief report, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) investigates the drownings through the stories of victims and accounts of survivors. STJ reached out to the families of two victims, and two refugees. One of the surviving refugees arrived in Spain. The second clang to life during the 4 October boat sinking.

Doubts Amidst Algerian Silence

Both from Shiran village, in rural Kobani, Ahmad Ramou, 41 and a father of four, and Khalil Aladdin Suleiman, a father of two and the husband of Ramou's cousin, drowned off the Algerian shores.

In mid-October, STJ spoke to Ahmad's sister, Barwin Muhammad Ramou. She narrated the details of her brother's journey and his death:

“Ahmed left his home on 29 June 2022 for Damascus. From there, he traveled to Lebanon, next to Libya, and then to Algeria. He spent over three months there. During his stay, he contracted a kidney disease, which prevented him from joining fellow immigrants, several of whom have already reached their destinations in the European continent. The fiancée of my Norway-based brother accompanied Ahmad. She reached [Europe] two months after she arrived in Algeria, but Ahmad was held back by his health condition. He went to hospitals secretly for treatment. In October, Ahmad called his family at about 6 P.M. He said that they were going to set off this night. We have not been able to reach him since then.”

Barwin also narrated the story of their relative, Khalil. She recounted that Khalil arrived in Algeria sometime after Ahmad. There, Khalil took care of Ahmad, and they agreed to travel together. Khalil called his family the same day Ahmad contacted his and also told them they were traveling that night. Barwin added:

“To travel with Ahmad, [Khalil] had to pay an extra 500 euros, on top of the 7,500 euros the rest of the immigrants paid on the same trip. For the smugglers, Khalil had just arrived in Algeria [and was not intending to wait for his turn]. We have not heard from both since then. It was not until Wednesday, October 5, that we learned that a

drowning accident had occurred off the Algerian coast. We contacted the smugglers and everyone we knew was there. One smuggler said that he knew nothing and that he had lost contact with them. We continued contacting people and reached out to several, including people who crossed [the sea] and arrived. However, all the communication was to no avail. Upon asking people for information, they gave us contradicting answers. Some told us that Ahmad and Khalil were onboard a boat that left in the morning, while they personally told their families that they were leaving in the evening. Later, we learned that two boats sank off the coast of Oran. Now, we are still waiting for a person called [Azdishir]. He survived one of the two accidents and is detained by the Algerian authorities. We are waiting for him to tell us the truth, were Ahmad and Khalil with him on the same boat that sank or not?"

At about 2:00 P.M., on Thursday, nearly two days after the drownings, people from Shiran village, who live in Algeria, told Barwin that Ahmad and Khalil drowned. She narrated:

"Nearly 20 days before the drownings, Ahmad and Khalil boarded another boat. They were already far from the coast when the Algerian Coast Guard boats intercepted them and returned them. When they returned, a gang attacked Ahmad and Khalil and took all their personal belongings and the money they had. They survived the attack [, but did not survive the second crossing]. Ahmad has but one brother, who is abroad. His wife has become a widow and his four children orphans. Khalil left behind a child and a pregnant widow."

Barwin added:

"Several people from Kobanî city traveled to Algeria, seeking to migrate through the sea. Some of these people told us that only one boat sank; others said they were two boats. We could not yet confirm this information. However, the majority of those we contacted told us that smugglers do not usually bring migrants of the same nationality on the boat. They tend to mix multiple nationalities. Therefore, we started wondering if there is a reason why [the smugglers] allocated a boat to immigrants from Kobanî. We questioned the issue especially since a murder followed a quarrel between a person from Kobanî and one from Algeria during Ahmad's stay there. Additionally, after major disputes between smugglers and immigrants, Ahmad and Khalil were forced to hide for several days. This incident raised our doubts about the smuggler's reasons for not diversifying the nationalities of the boat passengers and limiting them to people from Kobanî only. We are a nervous wreck, all of us. There is information that the papers of the dead bodies' transfer are finalized . . . The bodies will supposedly arrive soon, but for now, there is no confirmed information."

The anticipation and suspicions of the families are met with official and media silence in Algeria. The authorities have not yet commented on the drownings, nor did the media publish any news.

The only coverage available addresses government efforts to limit illegal immigration. On 5 October 2022, the website of the Algerian Naval Forces published a brief [news](#) saying: "In the

framework of fighting illegal immigration, Coast Guard units of Western /2nd MR, Central/1st MR and Eastern/5th MR Maritime Facades, had intercepted, from 28 September to 4 October 2022, many home-made boats, which resulted in the rescue of 159 persons.”

STJ monitored similar reports on the website and learned that boat interceptions happen at a rate of three to four operations a month. Additionally, the majority of the boats stopped are rudimentary, while website photos showed that arrested immigrants were often not offered life jackets.

Notably, immigration through Algerian waters is not a new phenomenon. The coast of [Oran](#) city has been a major transit point for smuggling routes toward Spain for at least two decades.

Waiting Families

From Tal Ghazal village, south of Kobani, Basel Abdulqader Issa also died in one of the boat-sinking incidents. Basel had two daughters and taught chemistry at schools in the area.

Basel's family like the other relatives of victims still struggles with the lack of information. None of the families managed to obtain the full account of the tragedy, even though they contacted dozens of relatives who have been in Algeria for over 20 years.

Following leads on the drownings, STJ managed to speak to Basel's cousin, Seifeddin Qader. He narrated:

"[Basel] escaped the dire living conditions. He was dreaming of reaching Europe in pursuit of a better life for his family. He traveled to Lebanon first. From there, he was smuggled to Libya and then Algeria. He arrived there nearly 20 days before his death. In Algeria, he made an agreement with smugglers in Oran city to help him reach Spain. He was among a group that set off on 3 October. They were out of reach one hour later after they left the shore. We tracked their status through our relatives, who have been in Algeria for over 20 years, including cousins, uncles and aunts. They started searching for Basel. Later, they learned that [the group's] boat sank in the sea. The next day, our relatives identified his body after it was recovered with the other 18 dead bodies of people from Kobani. 12 other bodies were identified. So far, there are no indications that their death was induced because other boats left around the same time and even after, and they included immigrants from Kobani. These boats reached their destinations."

Commenting on the measures of returning the dead bodies to Syria, Seifeddin narrated:

"Our relatives completed the Algerian authorities' procedures for transferring the bodies. There has been a delay on the part of the authorities in issuing authorizations for the release of the bodies. Our relatives obtained permission to transport the dead body of one young man only. Supposedly, the remaining authorizations will be obtained soon to return the bodies to Syria. However, it is still unclear whether the bodies will arrive through Damascus or Erbil airport. Even though an agreement has been made with a Lebanese Air Carrier to transport the bodies, there are speculations if the transfer will take place through the Kurdistan Region."

Locally, the Syrian government (SG) did not make any statements regarding the drownings. However, several Kurdish bodies addressed the deaths and the bodies' transfer to Syria.

On its [website](#), the Kurdish National Council in Syria reported that the Syrian embassy in Algeria refused to oversee the process of returning the bodies of the victims home, adding that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) will handle the process instead.

Additionally, the Office of National Relations of the Kurdistan Democratic Party - Syria also made a [statement](#). The office said the party pledges to invest all needed efforts to transfer the bodies of the victims in coordination with the Iraqi KRG.

Moreover, the local media outlet *North Press* quoted the Co-chair of the Executive Council in the Euphrates Region, Mohammed Shaheen, as [saying](#) that “[The Autonomous Administration] is using diplomatic channels to retrieve the bodies of the victims, who died off the Algerian coast. However, there are legal challenges on the Algerian side that are hampering their efforts.”

He added that they “have dedicated all their energy to returning the dead bodies to their families, regardless of the means and the expense to the administration.”

The drownings are yet another tragedy of the Syrian refugee crisis, described as the “the world’s largest displacement crisis” by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in a 2022 [briefing](#).

The UNHCR has reported that “More than 13 million people have either fled [Syria] or are displaced within its borders”, adding that dozens of immigrants have died in the Mediterranean Sea since January 2022.

Lives Taken for Granted

Investigating the incidents, STJ obtained the first-hand account of one of the Kobani immigrants. On the condition of his anonymity for security reasons, the witness narrated how he miraculously survived the boat sinking on 4 October:

“A boat left on 3 October. On that day, 14 persons from Kobani and one from Latakia died. Only one young man survived. His name is Azdishir, and he is currently detained by the Algerian authorities. Our boat left on 4 October, at around 8:00 P.M. It carried seven Syrians and seven Algerians. Our boat sank. Three Syrians and two Algerians survived. Our boat was wrecked after it crashed into a rock, not very far from the shore. Those who knew how to swim managed to emerge from the water. Later, they found the dead bodies of some of the people who were on our boat. No one would have drowned had we had life jackets. The driver of our boat was Algerian. However, the driver of the other boat was Syrian. Smuggling through Algeria is horrifying, and people are better not risking taking this route.”

The witness provided STJ with the names of the passengers who died in their boat crash and whose dead bodies were retrieved later. The four victims are from various villages across the Kobani area:

1. Rinas Muslim Sheikho (1992) from Minas village, in the area’s countryside.
2. Baker Muhammad Mustafa Ali from Jum `Ali village.

3. Muhammad Mahmoud Osman from Koushkar village.
4. Riber Bouzan Abdi from Minas village.

STJ reached out to a second eyewitness, journalist Baran Mesko, from Kobani city. Mesko arrived to his destination only a few hours after the two drownings were reported. He narrated:

“Two boats sank. The first carried 15 Syrian immigrants, among them 14 from Kobani. The remaining passenger was from Latakia. The captain of the boat was a Syrian immigrant, and he was supposed to take the trip for free. The smuggler that arranged for their transport is called Abu Adi, from Manbij. However, his real name remains unknown. According to Azdishir, who survived this boat’s sinking and who was later detained, a wave hit their boat and made it capsize nearly 15 Kilometers away from the shore. The immigrants drowned and had no life jackets or any other means to help them swim. The second boat carried seven Syrians from Kobani and seven Algerians. This boat was sabotaged after the kickoff, nearly 200 to 300 meters away from the coast. Nearby fishermen rescued a few of the passengers. However, nine drowned, including four Syrians.”

He added:

“After these two boats sunk, the smugglers started to allow immigrants to have life jackets, which they banned before, alleging that jackets and balloons could alert the Coast Guard or disclose the trip and thus ruin their plans.”

Asked about the smugglers, he narrated:

“There are 10 to 15 smuggling brokers, both Arabs and Kurds. The smugglers are, however, exclusively Algerian. They own the boats and the ships that transport immigrants to Spain. The brokers are only entrusted with the immigrants’ smuggling payments, which they keep until the passengers had reached their destinations. Additionally, the brokers rent apartments to house the immigrants. They then sublet the apartments to immigrants until they leave.”

Dead and Missing Immigrants

Deriving cues from the accounts of the witnesses and the relatives of the victims, STJ tracked related information in local Kurdish media outlets and collected the names of identified victims and the immigrants who went missing on October 3.

Dead Refugees

1. Ahmad Muhammad Ramou (1981) from Shiran village, rural Kobani.
2. Khalil Aladdin Suleiman (1997) from Shiran village, rural Kobani.
3. Basel Issa (1994) from Tal Ghazal village, rural Kobani.
4. Khalil Sheikh Nabi Muhammad (2004) from Halanjah village.

5. Qahraman Muhammad (1991) from Aleppo.
6. Ahmad Zakaraya (1995) from Latakia.
7. Bakri Bouzan (1975) from Tal Jurn, in Tal Abyaf area.
8. Jumaa Farhan (1997) from Kobani.

Missing Refugees

1. Mustafa Fathi Shukri from Sharan village, rural Knobani.
2. Muhammad Zlaim Muhammad from Kobani city.
3. Abdulrazzaq Mahmoud al-Dawoud from Um al-Housh village, in Kobani.
4. Shourash Izzat al-Ahmad from Sharan village, rural Kobani.
5. An unidentified person.

Only one, Azdishir al-Kurdi, survived the drowning on 3 October. He is from the Kaniya Mashadeh neighborhood, in Kobani, and is currently in the custody of the Algerian authorities.

Notably, the bodies recovered after the two incidents will be held in the National Hospital in Algeria City until their transfer to Syria is finalized.

Deportation Threats

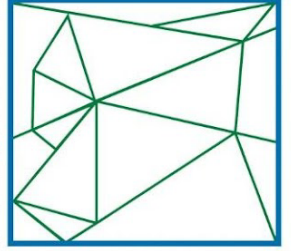
On 19 October 2022, the Kurdish *Rudaw TV* reported that it received a call from Kobani immigrants who were arrested by the Algerian authorities. The refugees were detained from the coast of Mostaganem after they failed to cross the sea to the Spanish coasts.

The channel added that the Algerian authorities informed the detained refugees that they were in the process of deporting them either to Niger or returning them to Damascus. This prompted the detainees to go on a hunger strike, protesting the threat to their lives in both scenarios. Instead, the detainees demanded that they be returned either to Lebanon or to Iraqi Kurdistan.

Additionally, the channel broadcasted a voice note, saying it was sent by refugee Masoud Qadder Muhammad. In the recording, the refugee asked the UN to respond to their calls from the prison, because the Algerian authorities refuse to treat them as refugees, adding that their total number is 30, including 25 from Kobani, two from Daraa, and three Palestinians.

Illegal crossings to Europe through Algerian and Lebanese waters are among the alternative routes that desperate Syrians are [increasingly](#) taking as regular portals pose growing risks to their lives. Earlier, refugees used to cross the borders into Turkey, their first stop to Europe, through Iraqi Kurdistan territories and points across the [areas controlled](#) by the Syrian National Army, also known as the “Peace Spring” strip.

The sea journey has proven to be a no less a fatal endeavor. Only recently, at least 94 persons [died](#) off the Syrian shore, in Tartous city, on 22 September 2022. The boat was carrying Syrian, Palestinian, and Lebanese asylum seekers.



About Us:

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) is a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization monitoring human rights violations in Syria. Founded in 2015, STJ has been based in France since 2019.

STJ is an impartial and independent Syrian human rights organization operating across Syria. Our network of field researchers monitor and report human rights violations occurring on the ground in Syria, while our international team of human rights experts, lawyers, and journalists gather evidence, examine emerging patterns of violations, and analyze how violations break domestic Syrian and international law.

We are committed to documenting violations of human rights committed by all parties in the Syrian conflict and elevating the voices of all Syrians victimized by human rights violations, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, class, and/or gender. Our commitment to human rights monitoring is founded on the idea that professional human rights documentation meeting international standards is the first step to uncovering the truth and achieving justice in Syria.



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