

**Syrian government targeting dissenter's followers**  
**By Amnesty International**  
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As the international community continues to vacillate over meaningful action to stop the crisis in Syria and to provide justice for victims of human rights violations, new information concerning methods used by the authorities to crush any form of dissent continues to emerge.

Not only are protestors shot at, villages attacked and houses of activists burned, but other repressive, if less visible, tools are used to discourage anyone from showing opposition to the government.

More than 20 followers of a Damascus imam, Saria al-Refa'i - who publicly criticised violations by the government in his Friday prayer sermons - have reportedly been detained, some for more than ten months.

Among them is a Damascus doctor, Mohamed Hamzeh, a face and jaw surgeon who was arrested on 21 August last year in front of the Zaid bin Thabit al-Ansari mosque, where Saria al-Refa'i had criticised the leadership of the country in his sermons .

Earlier that month, Saria al-Refa'i had warned the Syrian leadership "that all of Syria will rise up unless the army withdraws, unless they release all the prisoners and cease hostilities".

He added: "We do not want to hear about armed gangs" and that "the leadership is responsible for every drop of blood that is shed".

Dr Mohamed Hamzeh was, and perhaps still is, held by Air Force Intelligence at Harasta, a suburb north-east of Damascus, without charge, although there are rumours that he has been transferred to the nearby Saydnaya Military Prison.

Amnesty International has learnt from a source close to the doctor that he has been subjected to torture and other ill-treatment while in detention, including suffering a broken jaw in a beating.

The same source described him as "a kind man, a pacifist, who used to treat poor patients for little or no money".

In further attempts to intimidate Saria al-Refa'i and his followers, the source said that a "sound bomb" – which creates a deafening noise - was detonated near the mosque, and that Saria al-Refa'i was threatened that his family would be harmed.

It is difficult to assess the extent to which this tactic of silencing dissenters by targeting their relatives or followers may be working.

There were news reports that Saria al-Refa'i had changed his tune, including by stating that protesting is "haram" (forbidden under Islamic law). However, in a videoed Friday sermon later that month he denied having said that, but rather that "protesting with arms is forbidden".

Nevertheless, it seems that Saria al-Refa'i has been less critical in public of the Syrian authorities since his followers were targeted.

Families of individuals perceived to be opponents of the government have also been targeted by the authorities.

One family, which includes two young children and a pregnant woman, have been held incommunicado for more than a month at the Air Force Intelligence branch in al-Mezzeh, Damascus.

Mahmoud Hamada, aged 10, and Osama Hamada, aged 8, were arrested from their home in Aqraba, in the suburbs of Damascus on 15 May 2012, along with their mother Malika al-Khateeb who is six months pregnant.

According to Amnesty International's information, they are being held in an attempt to place pressure on Said Mahmoud Hamada, the father of the two children and Malika al-Khateeb's husband, who is wanted by the authorities, to surrender himself. As such they are prisoners of conscience and should be released immediately and unconditionally.

Amnesty International recently spoke to one Syrian man in Lebanon. He said the security forces captured his mother and brought her to the detention centre in which he was being held, after which he 'confessed' to what they wanted him to confess to, fearing that she would be harmed if he did not do so.

There are also many reports that families of members of the security forces who flee to join the opposition have been attacked, and sometimes killed in what appears to have been extrajudicial executions. .

The families of Syrian activists living abroad also have been targeted. After US-based musician Malek Jandali performed at a pro-reform demonstration in front of the White House in July, his mother and father, aged 66 and 73 respectively, were attacked in their home in Homs.

Malek told Amnesty International his parents were beaten and locked in a bathroom while their flat was looted. The men, who did not identify themselves but who his parents believe were either plain-clothes security or intelligence agents or members of the pro-governmental militias known as the shabiha, told his parents: "This is what happens when your son mocks the government." The couple have since fled the country.

"This pattern of attacks - not only on activists themselves, but also their supporters and relatives - is yet more evidence that the Syrian government will not tolerate any dissent and is prepared to go to great lengths to muzzle those who challenge it publicly," said Ann Harrison, Amnesty International's Deputy Programme Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"Anyone held by the authorities solely for the purpose of pressuring their relatives to do or not do something is in effect a hostage. They should be released immediately and unconditionally and the Syrian authorities should allow peaceful dissent instead of carrying out reprisals which in many cases amount to crimes against humanity or war crimes."

Amnesty International is also investigating reports that relatives of members of the Syrian security forces have been killed or abducted by members of opposition armed groups which, if true, are deeply disturbing. The organization condemns without reservation serious abuses by armed groups, including attacks which target civilians, indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks, torture and other ill-treatment, abduction of civilians and the killing of captives.