

NEWS

Syrian government defies principle of medical neutrality by targeting underground clinics

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A prominent Syrian doctor who helped treat wounded protestors involved in the uprising against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad was found dead on 10 December, apparently shot by state security forces according to opposition sources.

Ibrahim Othman was a third year resident in orthopaedic surgery at Al-Mouassat University Hospital in Damascus. Originally from Hama—one of the centres of opposition activity—he graduated from Damascus University Medical School in 2009.

The 26 year old was a founder of Damascus Doctors, a network of doctors that secretly treats wounded protestors who are afraid to go to government run hospitals. He coordinated activities using Facebook working out of a clandestine treatment centre in the capital with only the most basic of equipment.

Interviewed by television channel CNN in July 2011 Dr Othman gave viewers an insight into the underground medical system that has sprouted up in response to the government's crackdown on the opposition. But the move might have made him a target of the regime.

Dr Othman's death was announced by the Syrian British Medical Society just days before the government signed an accord with the Arab League that will allow 500 observers to be deployed nationwide to ensure compliance with commitments to halt the violence.

According to the Syrian British Medical Society Dr Othman's murder is the latest of several incidents in which doctors and other healthcare professionals have been targeted by the Syrian authorities.

The US based Physicians for Human Rights released a report on 16 December noting new and alarming evidence that Syrian government forces deny wounded civilians impartial medical treatment; invade, attack, and misuse hospitals; attack and

impede medical transport; and detain and torture doctors for treating wounded civilians.

"They are using hospitals as a dragnet or collection point at which the military officials can easily identify people who have been participating in demonstrations [because they] often bear the tell tale signs of participating such as gunshot wounds," says Richard Sollom, deputy director of Physicians for Human Rights.

"Hospitals are supposed to be a place of healing, but instead patients are being dragged away by security forces for interrogation and torture. As a result, the medical personnel who treat these individuals risk not only their career, but also their lives."

An estimated 250 doctors have been arrested or interrogated for treating injured protestors in Syria, said the group. Hospitals have become unsafe as patients identified by their wounds are dragged away by security forces for interrogation and torture.

Rami Hussein, a consultant orthopaedic surgeon in Basildon, Essex, and a member of the Syrian British Medical Society, said, "The problem is that the wounded and their families don't go to hospitals any more as they know what's waiting for them. They go to underground clinic where if it's a straightforward wound they can generally treat it, but with major gunshot injuries they don't stand a chance."

Syrian Forces Launched Assault on Country's Medical System is at <http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/press/press-releases/new-report-syrian-forces-launched-assault-on-countrys-medical-system.html>.

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