

The case of the missing professor

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On Sept. 14 2012, Omar Khaleefa, a distinguished Sudanese psychology professor, told his family he was going for a walk and would be back for lunch. He left his home in El Safia at 4:30p.m. for his regular exercise routine on Shambat Bridge – a popular jogger’s destination. Khaleefa’s young son asked to accompany him on the walk but when he came down a few minutes later, he found his father had already left.

Ali Haroon Khaleefa, his younger brother, sits in his educational toy store which his brother helped curate as an expert in children’s education and intelligence. He tells his brother’s story in a quiet yet determined voice. Khaleefa has been missing for over 16 months and Ali has decided to end his silence.

He describes his brother’s state of mind in the weeks leading to his disappearance as agitated. Khaleefa continuously voiced concern over the deteriorating state of Sudan, with specialists leaving the country in droves and those that stayed remained marginalized and underappreciated. Khaleefa was also a vocal advocate for the rights of the South Sudanese people and colleagues report that he was visibly shaken after the death of Dr. John Garang.

‘He called me on Wednesday, 12 September 2012 and said he had to meet me regarding something urgent’. The regret in his voice is unmistakable as he recounts how he was unable to meet him that day but promised to catch up soon. He never saw him again.

Omar Khaleefa’s exercise routine involved a walk or jog interjected with a cup of tea prepared by a lady stationed near the bridge. After his disappearance, the tea lady confirmed that he had passed by her for his tea and headed towards the bridge. She is the last person to have seen him to date.

Ali Khaleefa continues his story of finding a missed call on his cell phone when he woke up on the morning of 15 September 2012. A relative had called to inform him that his brother never returned home after his walk. Ali immediately headed to El Safia Police Station to file a missing persons report. He was told that since the professor had not been missing 24 hours, it was too early to file a report.

A few phone calls were made and the police agreed to proceed with a report and investigation, due to the high profile of the missing person in question. The police summoned Khaleefa’s wife and daughter for statements. From the house, they fetched his cell phone, laptop and his official will, which had been in Omar’s car, left parked at home that fateful Friday.

A website and Facebook page call for his release, a prevalent theme among his supporters. These pages reflect the conviction of his sympathizers but have a limited following in a country where social media activism is in its nascent stages.

In Sudan, political detentions and censorship continue even as the government speaks of reform and dialogue, while the reality on the ground is increased press censorship and continuing detentions – most recently political activist Izzeldin Hireika who was detained on 8 February 2014.

According to an article published 10 days after Khaleefa’s disappearance, the police pursued eight avenues in their investigation, two of which were not disclosed. The remaining six theories included:

1. Suicide
2. Meditation (religious retreat)
3. Abduction at the hands of a foreign nation
4. Political or criminal detention
5. Voluntary disappearance
6. Murdered and body disposed of in unknown location

The article states that authorities categorically deny detaining Khaleefa although his family maintains that they have not received any official denial, to this day, from the Sudanese authorities

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regarding his detention.

The article considers the voluntary disappearance the most likely theory, a sentiment echoed by a colleague of Khaleefa that considers the disappearance another attention-seeking stunt from a controversial man who enjoys being the center of attention and courted the limelight.

Directly after his disappearance, concerned family members assembled outside his home were upset when a police officer reported a sighting of Khaleefa walking near the airport in a disheveled state, munching on a grilled ear of maize. The police told the assembly that psychologists were prone to mental episodes, suggesting that Khaleefa had suffered a form of nervous breakdown.

The family was outraged. Khaleefa is considered a tribal leader among his clan and the suggestion was borderline blasphemous to them. Ali Khaleefa believes that this rumor was circulated as a distraction, to disperse the assembled family members.

He urged everyone to stay calm and rejected their idea for demonstrations. He advised everyone to assist in the investigation, in his hope that it would bear fruit. He has lost that hope now and has decided to take matters into his own hands.

He stated that the family had previously avoided escalating matters in light of the tense situation in Sudan but in his opinion, they had shown enough patience and are moving forward now.

Ali Khaleefa began making statements to the press in December 2013, holding the Sudanese authorities responsible for the disappearance of his older brother after the family's continued patience and cooperation.

Ali's frustration shows when he recounts taking a lead he considered viable to the authorities in November 2013. He gave them all the information he had obtained and asked to be kept abreast of the situation and accepted the authorities' request to keep the information confidential, as they followed the lead and processed it - the information which he has now chosen to go public with.

Ali also tells how the officers in charge of the case and designated family liaisons eventually stopped taking his calls and responding to his messages.

After his queries went unacknowledged, Ali Khaleefa informed the authorities that he is going public with his information and appeals, as he has lost confidence in the official investigation and will pursue all available options to find out the truth about what happened to his brother.

In December 2013, over 15 months after the disappearance, Ali Khaleefa began meeting with tribal leaders, human rights lawyers and leaders of the main opposition parties, including Farouq Abu Eissa, Elsadiq Elmahdi and Hassan El Turabi. He has vowed to go public with all the information he has and plans to submit a memorandum to the United Nations.

In addition to these meetings, Ali Khaleefa has made statements to the local press to raise awareness to his family's plight. He believes that his brother has been abducted or is under compulsory detention and holds the authorities responsible for not ascertaining the fate of Prof. Khaleefa and giving his family closure.

Ali Khaleefa says they have no idea if Omar Khaleefa is dead or alive. He severed ties with the authorities after their continued lack of response and, in his words, inefficient handling of the investigation.

'They say the 'Prof.' is a national asset but we have not seen this reflected in the investigation. They tell us they used police dogs and military planes in their search but we have no evidence to support that claim.'

In the first week of February and in light of the recent activity on the part of the family, Sudan National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) summoned Ali Khaleefa and provided him with a progress report regarding the investigation and the tip he had provided. He was assigned new

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liaisons with the authorities in a blatant overture of appeasement.

On Wednesday, 5 February 2014, a meeting was held, attended by approximately 30 family members, friends, colleagues, human rights activists and political leaders to outline the next steps to be undertaken. The first resolution was to unify the efforts of the various committees, to proceed as a single entity. This committee is set to organize a meeting with government officials and a demonstration at the Human Rights Commission in Khartoum.

Ali Khaleefa also took this opportunity to go public with the information he had previously given the authorities.

At 12:16am on 2 November 2013 he received the first of several text messages from a person stating that Prof. Khaleefa was in good health, incarcerated in a nearby state on the authority of a government official. The sender stated that he had participated in the abduction and requested a total of 500,000 Sudanese Pounds (\$85,000 as per official exchange rate) to secure the captor's safe passage to another country after releasing Khaleefa, as he did not believe Khaleefa was an 'infiltrator', as he had been told.

This latest accusation likely stemmed from Khaleefa's interaction with foreigners at professional events abroad, commonly perceived by his colleagues as inappropriate.

The text contained a warning against approaching the authorities, press or telecommunications companies and gave instructions for further communication, concluding with a prayer that the family be reunited soon. In the afternoon of the same day, he received another message to 'forget about it' since he had not responded. A final text message was received on 20 November 2013 that the sender was headed to Darfur, signaling the end of their communication.

At the end of the day, a college professor left his wife and three children in the middle of a Friday afternoon and was never seen again. His family deserves the truth and is now demanding it in a voice that is steadily rising.

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Article-Summary:

Professor Omar Haroon Al Khaleefa left his home in an upscale neighborhood of Khartoum North and was never seen again. His family holds the Sudanese authorities responsible for his disappearance, saying they have failed to investigate new information that has come to light.

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