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Subject: Apparent torture of boy reinvigorates Syria's protest movement (Washington Post)

BEIRUT (Washington Post) - The boy's head was swollen, purple and disfigured. His body was a mess of welts, cigarette burns and wounds from bullets fired to injure, not kill. His kneecaps had been smashed, his neck broken, his jaw shattered and his penis cut off.

What finally killed him was not clear, but it appeared painfully, shockingly clear that he had suffered terribly during the month he spent in Syrian custody.

Hamza Ali al-Khateeb was 13 years old.

And since a video portraying the torture inflicted upon him was broadcast on the al-Jazeera television network Friday, he has rapidly emerged as the new symbol of the protest movement in Syria. His childish features have put a face to the largely faceless and leaderless opposition to President Bashar al-Assad's regime that has roiled the country for nine weeks, reinvigorating a movement that had seemed in danger of drifting.

It is too early to tell whether the boy's death will trigger the kind of critical mass that brought down the regimes in Egypt and Tunisia earlier this year and that the Syrian protests have lacked. But it would not be the first time that the suffering of an individual had motivated ordinary people who might not otherwise have taken to the streets to rise against their governments.

The revolt in Tunisia was inspired by a street vendor who set himself on fire after being insulted by a local policewoman. In Egypt, the 2010 beating death of Khaled Said, an ordinary Alexandria resident, kindled the opposition movement that eventually led the uprising against the rule of Hosni Mubarak.

Activists believe Hamza will become the Khaled Said of Syria, said Wissam Tarif of the human rights monitoring group Insan. "This boy is already a symbol," Tarif said. "It has provoked people, and the protests are increasing."

Throughout the weekend, demonstrations erupted in towns and cities across Syria to denounce the torture of Hamza, marking an escalation in a movement that had until now focused its protests around Friday prayers. In Hama, a city 116 miles north of Damascus, the capital, thousands swarmed a central square holding pictures of the boy and chanting "Hamza, Hamza." In a neighborhood of Aleppo, Syria's largest city, which until now had not participated in protests on any significant scale, people climbed onto rooftops overnight Saturday, chanting, "God is great, Hamza, Hamza." In Darayya, a suburb of Damascus, children took to the streets Sunday to denounce his torture.

A Facebook page, "We are all Hamza Ali al-Khateeb, the Child Martyr," has drawn more than 40,000 members since it was created Saturday. "There is no place left here for the regime after what they did to Hamza," read one comment on the page. An English version has more than 3,000 followers.

"Torture is usual in Syria. It's not something new or strange. What is special about Hamza is that he was only 13 years old. He really is a child," said Razan Zeitouneh, a human rights lawyer who is in hiding in Damascus, in an interview conducted on Skype. "That's why it shocked all Syrians, even those who haven't decided

whether they want to participate or not in the protests.”

The details of exactly what happened to Hamza are sketchy and cannot be independently confirmed because most foreign journalists have been denied visas to enter Syria, and the few who are there cannot operate freely. But according to the accounts of family members interviewed by Arabic news channels and by human rights activists, the boy had been among a group of people detained when his father took him to an anti-regime rally April 29 in their home town of Jiza, a small southern farming community near the protest flash point of Daraa. The family members heard no news of Hamza until Wednesday, when Syrian government officials arrived at their home and asked them to sign a document agreeing to accept the boy's body on the condition that they not show it to anyone or discuss the circumstances of his death. They complied but were shocked by the extent of the injuries and invited an activist to make a video, which was posted on YouTube.

The camera pans over the boy's body, showing bruises, scars and a gaping hole where his penis should be. An unidentified male offers a commentary, describing the injuries and proclaiming, “Look at the reforms of Bashar the perfidious!”

Since Saturday, amid reports that Hamza's father and possibly his brother had been taken into custody, the family has stopped taking phone calls. Calls to family members went unanswered, and a Syrian government spokesman did not answer the phone.

A private, pro-regime television station, al-Dunya, cast doubt on the veracity of the video. A doctor invited to appear on the channel said the injuries were not consistent with torture and could have been faked.

Yet, regardless of the details, it appears that Hamza's death has injected new energy into a protest movement that has proved resilient yet unable to garner the kind of numbers on the streets that brought down the presidents of Egypt and Tunisia. “Everyone in Damascus is talking about it,” said an activist in the Syrian capital, which has not witnessed significant protests, speaking on Skype on the condition that he not be identified because of safety concerns.

There were still no signs, however, that Syria's regime is preparing to give ground and pursue the reforms that the international community is seeking. On Sunday, tanks rolled into two more communities in which demonstrations have occurred, Rastan and Talbisah, which are on the highway linking the protest flash point towns of Hama and Homs.

There were conflicting accounts of the circumstances of the incursion, however. Activists said the military was acting to suppress the protests there, and they reported several deaths and injuries.

But pro-government news agencies and a resident of nearby Homs, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said the government moved against the towns after armed rebels staged an ambush against the Syrian army, in which an officer was killed and 40 soldiers and police officers injured.

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