

Advocacy dossier

Islam Dabbas

إسلام الدباس

Died in custody **Syria**

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The case at a glance

Islam Dabbas was a university student who helped organise peaceful protests in Daraya and was arrested on 22 July 2011. His family learned from civil registry records in July 2018 that he had died in custody in 2013.

Status	Arrested	Country
Died in custody	**22 Jul 2011**	**Syria**

What we ask

We call on the authorities to:

01 Order a full, independent, and impartial investigation into the killing of Islam Dabbas, with timely public reporting on findings.

02 Identify and prosecute those responsible, both the direct perpetrators and any state officials who ordered, enabled, or covered up the killing.

03 Provide effective reparation to the family of Islam Dabbas.

04 Take immediate steps to protect other defenders working in the same field from similar attacks.

02

How the case unfolded

22 July 2011

Arrest

Arrested in Daraya

Security forces arrested Islam Dabbas, a university student who had helped organise peaceful protests in Daraya, shortly after the arrest of his father, Khairo Dabbas. Amnesty International reports that members of Air Force Intelligence detained him together with a cousin, who was released two months later.

June 2012

Transfer between places of detention

Seen by his family in Saydnaya Military Prison

Several months after his arrest he was moved from an Air Force Intelligence branch to Saydnaya Military Prison, where his family was able to visit him in June 2012. The exact date of the transfer is not known.

November 2012

Other act

Last family visit

His family visited him in Saydnaya for the second and last time in November 2012. Later requests for visits were refused, and officials said on more than one occasion that he was no longer in their custody and that they did not know where he was.

2013

Death in custody

Died in custody

Islam Dabbas died in the custody of the Syrian authorities in 2013. Sources differ on the date: The Intercept reports January 2013, while Amnesty International's campaign profile says he died in Saydnaya prison in December 2013. The cause of death was not disclosed to the family.

16 September 2013

Family visit denied

Human Rights Watch reports family denied visits and information

In a fact sheet on Islam Dabbas and his father Khairo Dabbas, Human Rights Watch reported that the family had visited Islam in Saydnaya once, and that since then the government had given no information on his whereabouts or condition and had refused the family's requests to visit. The fact sheet described both men as peaceful activists.

July 2018

Other act

Family learns of his death from civil registry records

In July 2018 the family learned that Islam Dabbas had died in custody, through family records issued by the local civil registry office rather than any direct notification. The authorities did not return his body.

26 July 2018

Other act

Amnesty calls for the return of remains

Amnesty International named Islam Dabbas, together with Yahya and Ma'an Shurbaji, among at least 161 forcibly disappeared people whose deaths had been confirmed in civil registry records. It called on the Syrian government to return the remains to their families and to disclose the circumstances of the disappearances and deaths.

03

The full story

Update, 12 November 2026: Islam Dabbas died in the custody of the Syrian authorities in 2013, after his arrest in July 2011; his family learned of his death from civil registry records in July 2018. No public report was found of his remains being returned or of anyone being held to account.

Background and Work

Islam Dabbas was a university student from Daraya, a suburb south-west of Damascus. Human Rights Watch describes him as a second-year engineering student, aged 23 at the time of his arrest and the eldest of five children; Amnesty International describes him as an architecture student. In the first months of the 2011 uprising he helped organise peaceful protests in Daraya as part of the group known as the Daraya Youth. Residents of the town became known for offering water and flowers to the soldiers and security forces sent to disperse them, and photographs show Islam handing out bottles of water to soldiers and protesters alike.

His father, Khairo Dabbas, also took part in peaceful demonstrations in Daraya. He was arrested in early July 2011, about three weeks before his son. According to Human Rights Watch, his captors said he would be freed if he pledged to stay away from protests and if Islam surrendered; he refused both conditions. He was later tried before the Counter-Terrorism Court in Damascus and sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment for participating in and inciting demonstrations. Human Rights Watch reported that the judge did not examine evidence or call witnesses and did not allow his lawyer to present a defence. After about three months incommunicado at an Air Force Intelligence branch and three months in Saydnaya, he was transferred to Adra Central Prison in Damascus, where he began serving his sentence in January 2013.

The Arrest

On 22 July 2011, security forces arrested Islam Dabbas in Daraya. Amnesty International reports that members of Air Force Intelligence detained him together with a cousin, who was released two months later. He was first held at an Air Force Intelligence branch and, several months after his arrest, transferred to Saydnaya Military Prison north of Damascus.

Detention Conditions and Health

His family was able to visit him in Saydnaya in June 2012 and again in November 2012, the last time they saw him. Subsequent requests to visit were refused, and officials told the family on more than one occasion that he was no longer in their custody and that they did not know where he was. In 2013 Human Rights Watch reported that the government had given no information on his location or condition. He was never charged or brought before a court, as far as the available sources show.

The Case

Islam Dabbas died in custody in 2013. The sources differ on the date: The Intercept reports that he died in a government prison in January 2013, while Amnesty International's campaign profile says he died in Saydnaya prison in December 2013. The family received no direct notification. In July 2018, when the deaths of many forcibly disappeared

detainees began to appear in civil registry records, the family learned of his death through family records issued by the local civil registry office. His body was not returned.

International Response

Human Rights Watch published a fact sheet on Islam and Khairo Dabbas in September 2013, describing them as peaceful activists and documenting the denial of information and visits. Amnesty International featured Islam Dabbas in its campaign on people forcibly disappeared in Syria. On 26 July 2018, Amnesty named him, together with Yahya Shurbaji and Ma'an Shurbaji, activists from the same town, among at least 161 forcibly disappeared people whose deaths had been confirmed in public records, and called on the Syrian government to return their remains and tell relatives how they died.

Latest updates on this case Scan the code or visit: https://humena.org/defenders/islam-dabbas/

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