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Coming to Mourn Tahrir Square's Dead, and Joining Them Instead

Killing of Shaimaa el-Sabbagh in Cairo Angers Egyptians

By **DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK** FEB. 3, 2015

CAIRO — Her friends wanted to lay a wreath in Tahrir Square as a memorial, but Shaimaa el-Sabbagh urged them to reconsider. She feared that the police might attack, mistaking them for supporters of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, said her cousin, Sami Mohamed Ibrahim.

But how, her friends asked, could the police attack a few dozen civilians who were armed only with flowers? So she kissed her 5-year-old son, Bilal, goodbye, left him in the care of a friend near her home in Alexandria and, a day before the anniversary of the start of the Arab Spring revolt here, boarded a train for Cairo.

By midafternoon, Ms. Sabbagh, 31, lay dead on a crowded street downtown, a potent symbol of the lethal force the Egyptian authorities have deployed to silence the cacophony of protest and dissent unleashed here four years ago. Human rights advocates say the cold brutality of her killing shows how far the military-backed government is willing to go to enforce a return to the old authoritarian order, and the muted response at home and abroad is evidence of its initial success.

Photographers and videographers captured Ms. Sabbagh's death moment by moment. As soon as the procession begins and without any warning, masked riot police officers blast the crowd with tear gas and birdshot from across a narrow street. A shotgun cracks. A kneeling friend holds Ms. Sabbagh by the waist to keep her upright, blood streaking down her cheeks and his head against her abdomen. Then another friend carries her limp frame cradled in his arms through the tear gas in a vain attempt to save her.

Seldom has a needless death by police gunfire been so thoroughly and so movingly documented, rights advocates say, citing both the photographic evidence and multiple witnesses.

But what has made Ms. Sabbagh's killing resonate widely here, and may thwart the attempts of the Egyptian police to evade responsibility, is her profile. She was a mother, a left-leaning activist who supported the military ouster of the Islamist president and an accomplished poet who once described a vision of the crucifixion in a similar street of downtown Cairo.

"A woman who went out to lay a wreath of flowers on Tahrir Square — we see her taking her last breath," said Ghada Shahbandar, an Egyptian rights advocate. "How much more explicit can an image be?"

"It is a disgrace," she said, lamenting the surreal attempts of the government's supporters to deflect the blame from the police to a shadowy conspiracy as elaborate as a Hollywood thriller. "We have lost the appreciation of human life. We have lost the value of human blood, and we call for more and more killing as though we have not had enough!"

Ms. Sabbagh is just one name on a roster of thousands killed by police gunfire since the Arab Spring began. More than 800 were killed during the original 18-day uprising against President Hosni Mubarak. About 1,000 more, according to the most credible counts, were killed on one day, Aug. 14, 2013, when soldiers and police officers broke up a sit-in by supporters of the ousted President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood. Hundreds more died in other mass shootings that summer.

Since then the killing of protesters — mostly Islamists but also leftists or liberals, and mostly unarmed — has become an almost weekly occurrence. Sondos Reda, a 17-year-old girl attending an Islamist rally, was killed in clashes with the police in Alexandria on the same day that Ms. Sabbagh died in Cairo. At least 20 others were killed the next day, Jan. 25, on the anniversary of the uprising. Another student was killed five days later in clashes with the police at a demonstration in the province of Sharqiya, north of Cairo, and others were reportedly killed since then in Giza.

But in "a moment of collapsing freedoms," Ms. Sabbagh has become "a symbol

of the revolution,” said Sayed Abu Elela, 31, the friend who held her by the waist in the moments after she was shot.

Even President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in a televised appearance Monday offered condolences, declaring that he saw Ms. Sabbagh as “my own daughter.”

Ms. Sabbagh grew up in a conservative Muslim household but rebelled against its traditions, her friends said, and her father, a Muslim preacher who died a few years ago, grew resigned to her independence.

He used to tell her, “For the likes of you, wearing pants is a ‘covering,’” or modesty, her friend, Mr. Abu Elela, 31, recalled.

As a teenager in the late 1990s, she drifted into a circle of poets who used to meet at cafes around Alexandria, said Khaled Hegazzi, a friend who first met her there. Her activism, he said, seemed to grow out of their cafe debates. “That is where it came from,” he said.

She became one of a small group of accomplished Egyptian poets working in the avant-garde style of free verse but using popular, colloquial Arabic. Rejecting the grand and overtly political themes favored by the previous generations, she focused instead on the details of everyday life. Her generation “stopped doing noisy politics,” said Maged Zaher, an Egyptian-American poet who has translated some of Ms. Sabbagh’s work. “There is politics, but it is not sloganeering.”

Her poem, “A Letter in My Purse,” was about a lost handbag. “Anyway, she has the house keys,” Ms. Sabbagh wrote, “and I am waiting for her.”

In another poem, Ms. Sabbagh wrote as a Muslim girl who witnessed the crucifixion on a Cairo clock tower, hearing the voices of “the people who love God as they damn this moment where the creatures of God approved/Of crucifying Jesus naked in the crowded square on the clock arms as it declared one in the afternoon.”

She married a painter, Osama el-Sehely, earned a master’s degree in folklore at the Academy of Arts in Cairo and developed a passion for documenting the fading traditions of daily life in Egypt. She once spent months visiting towns across the Nile Delta to record the variations in the ways residents baked and served flatbread, said Delphine Blondet, who runs a dance school in Alexandria and recruited Ms. Sabbagh to research traditional birth celebrations for an educational

project.

Ms. Sabbagh refused payment. “She just loved Egyptian people,” Ms. Blondet said, “Not the country as it is now, for sure, but really the people.”

After the uprising in 2011, she became a regular at almost every demonstration, and her friends in Alexandria called her “the voice of the revolution” because of her talent for leading chants. When a television interviewer in late 2012 asked her to look back at the period “after the revolution,” she rejected the question: “We are still ‘after the revolution,’” she said. “I have not left the 17 days,” the heady time of the Tahrir Square sit-in that preceded Mr. Mubarak’s ouster.

The Egyptian authorities quickly pledged a full investigation into her death. But several witnesses who reported the killing to the police said they were immediately detained for questioning as suspects — including Mr. Abu Elela, who had held her in her final moments and was detained overnight.

And by the next day an Interior Ministry spokesman made clear that the ministry had essentially ruled out police responsibility. Gen. Gamal Mokhtar of the ministry said at a gathering of international correspondents last Thursday that it was implausible the police would resort to such force for such a small crowd. “What is the need for the police to shoot bullets?” he asked. The photographs and videos were “no proof at all,” he said.

“There is a faction of the Muslim Brotherhood whose entire job and concern is to fabricate photos and videos that tell people that the police are assaulting protesters — that this one is bleeding, that one is injured,” he said.

Last weekend, the police detained one of Ms. Sabbagh’s fellow demonstrators, Zohdy al-Shamy, deputy chairman of her party, holding him overnight for questioning about whether he might have had used a concealed a weapon fired through his jacket pocket to shoot down his colleague.

“Madness,” said Medhat el-Za’ed, a party spokesman.

Ms. Sabbagh’s history, though, has also made it unusually difficult for the authorities to explain away the killing by accusing her of treason or violence. Last week, even the flagship state newspaper, Al Ahram, published a front-page editorial expressing rare, officially sanctioned criticism of the Egyptian police.

“Peaceful Shaimaa only dreamed of a free country,” wrote Ahmed el-Sayed al-Naggar, the chairman of the state-run news organization, but “she was killed in cold blood by the same person who killed the martyrs she was going to honor.”

In the television appearance Monday, President Sisi urged the interior minister to track down the killer, offering reassurances that even if a police officer shot Ms. Sabbagh, the ministry itself would not bear the blame. “We will not tear down that institution, never,” Mr. Sisi vowed.

“I don’t know, in all sincerity and truth, who is behind the killing of Shaimaa el-Sabbagh,” Mr. Sisi insisted, placing a hand on his heart.

In Alexandria, a friend and her cousin said, no one has yet told Ms. Sabbagh’s son, Bilal, that his mother is not coming home.
Merna Thomas contributed reporting from Cairo.